



EDUCATION
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**Exploring the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in
Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase**

By

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2017498391

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF**

MASTER OF EDUCATION

WITH SPECIALISATION IN CURRICULUM STUDIES

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

QWAQWA

July 2024

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DECLARATION

I, Sithembiso Mlambo, hereby certify that the dissertation which I handed in for the Master of Education degree at the University of the Free State, titled "Exploring the Opportunities and Challenges of Teaching Controversial Topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase," is entirely original to me and that I haven't submitted in the same work for credit at any other institution.

Furthermore, I affirm that no other scholar's work has been used without proper citation, and that every source that has been cited or used has been stated and acknowledged with full references.

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the challenges and opportunities that teachers face when teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase. Controversial topics, which involve conflicting interests and perspectives, can be emotionally charged and challenging because they arouse emotions among learners. However, teaching such topics can empower learners, foster diversity, enhance subject knowledge, and promote a deeper understanding of justice and inclusivity. This study utilised critical social theory to explore the influence of power dynamics, ideology, and societal structures on knowledge creation. Its goal was to challenge existing norms and promote equity by encouraging critical thinking and open dialogue among learners.

A qualitative approach was employed, utilising open-ended interviews and focus group discussions, to investigate teachers' experiences in teaching controversial topics. A narrative research design was used to explore the complexity and perspectives surrounding the teaching of contentious topics in Social Science classrooms. By comparing and contrasting different narratives, a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges encountered by Intermediate Phase teachers when engaging learners on controversial topics was achieved. Thematic analysis was used to generate themes and sub-themes from the transcribed data.

Findings revealed that topics like racism, tribal discrimination, gender roles, and religious diversity spark debate and opposing views within communities and the classroom. During interviews teachers explained that inclusive learning settings and critical social theory are essential for transformative learning. By teaching controversial topics, teachers play a crucial role in fostering social awareness, critical thinking and active citizenship skills which expose conscious and unconscious biases among learners. Controversial topics align with curriculum guidelines, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and South Africa's Social Sciences curriculum, encouraging critical citizenship and understanding of social justice concerns.

Teachers in this study acknowledged the impact of cultural origins on teaching contentious subjects such as gender norms, religious diversity, racial and tribal discrimination, and xenophobia. Teachers emphasised the importance of promoting

tolerance and diversity in their teaching methods by using case studies, role-playing and multimedia content. They used these techniques to develop empathy and a sense of diversity among learners. They also employed coping strategies, active learning techniques, debates, and multimodal approaches to address systematic disparities and promote inclusivity among learners.

The study recommended six strategies for teaching controversial topics in the Intermediate Phase. These are facilitating structured debates, examining the causes of intolerance, community involvement, fostering a culture of trust in teachers, and using case studies. These strategies promote self-reflection, critical thinking and effective communication by exposing learners to diverse perspectives.

Keywords: controversial topics, diversity, empathy, Intermediate Phase teachers, Social Sciences

DEDICATION

To my family, I dedicate this thesis. I am incredibly grateful for your unwavering support and cannot adequately express my appreciation. You have served as my guiding light, providing motivation, stability, and invaluable mentorship. Through your influence, I have come to cherish individualism, tenacity, self-belief, and uniqueness. I am profoundly grateful and privileged to consider you my family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Above all, I am thankful to God for giving me the courage, fortitude, and protection to embark on a journey of learning over the years. I owe Him my life and existence. I say, "Thank you" for bringing me this far. His everlasting devotion is evident in the opportunities He has given me to succeed in whatever I do, and for that, I am grateful.

I would like to sincerely and deeply thank my supervisors, Dr. GT Chimbi and Dr. ICE Ogbonnaya, for their support throughout my master's program. When the road seemed too difficult to complete, they have been a source of support.

I am appreciative of everyone's assistance and collaboration in the research field. I want to thank all the teachers of the Social Sciences Intermediate Phase for their support, collaboration, and help throughout my fieldwork. Their interest in my work and willingness to participate and cooperate made the fieldwork possible.

I would also like to thank my Special Interest Group (ILCIS) for their unwavering love and support throughout my academic journey. My sister Nontobeko Mlambo equally deserves appreciation for her affection and assistance. She did everything in her power to help me. When most people doubted my abilities, she stood behind me.

I express my heartfelt gratitude to my sisters, Thandeka and Cebo Khumalo for their steadfast assistance and guidance throughout my academic career. Their unwavering support, understanding, and presence have been invaluable in helping me navigate academic challenges while maintaining a healthy social life. Their willingness to check on me, offer guidance, and provide a listening ear has been a source of strength and motivation.

I feel deeply blessed to have such remarkable sisters who have stood by me with unwavering love and belief, driving my accomplishments. They have significantly contributed to both my intellectual and personal development, and for that, I am grateful. Their steadfast support has been invaluable.

Thank you Thandeka, and Cebo, for being my pillars of strength, for your endless support, and for always being there when I needed you the most. Your presence in my life has been truly transformative, and I am forever thankful for the bond we share. I am grateful for your assistance and ongoing motivation throughout my years of

education, as well as during the research and dissertation writing processes. This would never have been possible without you.

With much appreciation, I would like to thank Bongane Mphuthi, Thando Bhengu, and Noxolo Dlamini for their essential contributions to my academic career. Their advice and encouragement have greatly influenced my development and accomplishments. Having such a strong support system of people who have encouraged and believed in me along this journey makes me feel quite fortunate. They have always believed in me, supported me, and encouraged me, and for that I am grateful.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Exploring contentious subjects can trigger intense emotional responses in fragmented societies with a history of oppression and violent conflict, resulting in vigorous engagement and debates (Conklin, 2021). Controversial topics are characterised by the absence of clear delineation between facts, knowledge, values, and opinions and are marked by conflicting interests and perspectives based on divergent approaches to resolving them (McPherson, Forster, & Kerr, 2023; White & Raphael, 2023). Communities and classrooms often give rise to strong emotions and conflicting viewpoints (White & Raphael, 2023). A controversial topic is inherently complex and lacks a singular, straightforward solution. Larsson and Lindström (2020) contend that controversial topics foster discourse precisely because they do not possess a universally endorsed viewpoint. Practically any subject can become contentious when individuals hold divergent opinions, perspectives, or values (Glazer, 2018). Teaching controversial topics raises the possibility that teachers may struggle to maintain the desired level of classroom discipline necessary for effective instruction (Pace, 2021a). In a study conducted in the United States, Carter Andrews, Richmond, Warren, Petchauer, and Floden (2018) found that their participants exhibited a strong inclination towards avoiding the teaching of controversial topics during their teaching placements, instead suppressing classroom discussions.

Engaging in discussions about controversial topics can also lead to intolerant discourse that may offend, alienate, or intimidate learners (Pace, 2021b). As noted by Conklin (2021), learners may steer the conversation off track or expose teachers' vulnerabilities. Experienced teachers encounter challenges when attempting to facilitate open discussions about divisive subjects. Establishing a supportive and inclusive learning environment in the classroom, coupled with the ability to facilitate inquiry-based learning, is crucial for skillfully navigating such discussions (Pace, 2019a). Teachers frequently experience discouragement when faced with unfamiliar

topics, such as the sudden emergence of human rights issues for which they lack a deep understanding. For instance, while an urban teacher teaching in a rural school might have a teacher in a school with only one culture (monocultural) tried to explain the European Common Agro Policy (CAP) to learners. in a small town might have to discuss Islamic extremism. (Jesnet, Klette, & Hammerness, 2018). Nevertheless, teaching controversial topics also presents opportunities that can benefit learners.

In the Swedish context, learners who engage in discussions regarding contentious subjects are positioned well to become catalysts for change. They can acknowledge, value, and embrace diversity within and between groups, thereby enriching their understanding of the subject matter by considering alternative perspectives. These discussions also foster an understanding of justice and the benefits that can accrue to all individuals (Kaarkoski and Häkkinen, 2022). The ideal scenario involves exploring conflicts to divert learner attention away from authoritative narratives and viewpoints. Instead, learners are encouraged to consider and question various micro-narratives that draw on and challenge local and individual knowledge. By challenging local traditions, education can facilitate the construction of knowledge and the development of solutions without submitting to the imposition of meaning. Teaching controversial topics can thus provide learners with a broader range of experiences, considering the normativity of topics themselves as well as the range of viewpoints that teachers and other learners must give.

In the Turkish context, Handang (2022) highlights the role of discussing controversial topics in schools in fostering the development of learner abilities to coexist and collaborate peacefully and respectfully with people from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles. Additionally, Qarshiyevna (2022) argues that engaging in these discussions encourages learners to actively listen to one another and discuss their differences with sensitivity. Yuksel, Soruç, Altay, and Curle (2023) contend that teaching controversial subjects prompts learners to reflect critically on their own opinions and values while also fostering confidence and public speaking skills. The examination of controversial topics not only offers personal and social benefits but also provides educational advantages. By exploring some of the fundamental fault lines in contemporary society encompassing social, political, economic, and moral issues, these themes promote academic learning.

For American schools, by encouraging civic involvement, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, content understanding, and political engagement, the discussion of contentious issues benefits learner-citizens in a democratic way (Gusacov, 2022). These discussions also foster an increased interest in current events, Social Sciences, and societal issues while promoting the cultivation of tolerance (Iyer, 2022). Learners tend to internalise democratic values such as open-mindedness, dissent, scepticism, and the acceptance of diversity (Adamczyk, 2022).

Krishnamurthy (2022) emphasises that in Namibia, promoting discussions on controversial topics enables learners to critically evaluate the information presented. Learners are encouraged to "pause and wait," withholding judgment until all relevant information has been presented. This approach fosters scepticism towards claims of objectivity and enables learners to cultivate comfort with uncertainty.

For Zambian schools, teaching controversial topics is widely recognised as having significant advantages. Firstly, it helps learners develop an understanding that controversy is an integral aspect of democracy and not merely a negative consequence (Oliver, Gistered, and Liberty, 2020). Secondly, Muleya, Sihubwa, Simwatachela, Hamainza and Simui (2020) emphasise that teaching controversial topics serves as an effective tool for equipping learners with essential knowledge and skills to effectively handle disputes and actively seek solutions. Moreover, providing learners with opportunities to practice speaking, listening, and writing enhances their ability to discern between acceptable and deceptive language in human discourse (Mambwe and Lufungulo, 2022). In general, the provision of spaces for young learners to engage in classroom debates on current affairs fosters interest in political issues, enhances critical thinking abilities, improves communication skills, promotes civic empowerment, and stimulates a continued interest in tackling controversial topics both inside and outside the classroom.

To promote comprehension, empathy, and reconciliation among learners, it is crucial to approach the teaching of contentious subjects in South Africa, such as apartheid, with sensitivity and caution (Keenan & Zinsstag, 2023). Regardless of any misunderstandings or misinterpretations, ensuring inclusive learning environments and cultural responsiveness is vital to ensuring that all learners feel valued and represented.

Lastly, in South Africa, classroom conversations have been identified as the most effective means for learners to engage with and learn about controversial topics. These conversations encourage open-mindedness, encourage learners to consider their viewpoints critically and force them to develop their skills in public speaking and interpersonal communication (Van Le & Chong, 2024). During class discussions, learners are required to actively listen to, accept, and appreciate viewpoints that differ from their own (Low, Baum, and Sovacool, 2022). This study is unique in that it explores the opportunities and challenges faced by teachers in teaching controversial topics within the Social Sciences curriculum at the Intermediate Phase schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district in the Free State. While some studies have examined other aspects of the Social Sciences curriculum at the Intermediate Phase, there has been limited research specifically focused on the handling of controversial topics within Intermediate Phase classrooms (Mariati, Abbas & Mutiani, 2021; Lahiri, 2018). Therefore, the aim of this study is to contribute new insights on how Social Sciences teachers approach the teaching of controversial topics at the Grade 6 level.

1.2 Problem statement

Many [Social Science](#) topics deal with sensitive and sometimes controversial issues (Hilário & Augusto, 2020). These topics can easily provoke arguments in the classroom because they often have political, social, and personal implications and arouse strong emotions or involve questions of values and beliefs. Therefore, it is important for teachers to maintain control of the class when teaching controversial topics, as pointed out by Glazer (2018). Topics such as slavery, apartheid, and colonialism, frequently lead to heated debates in [History](#) classes. Given that Social Science is a subject that relates to everyday life, Social Science teachers have a responsibility to ensure order in the classroom due to the emergence of many controversial topics during lessons (Thiranagama, Kelly, & Forment, 2018).

Teaching controversial topics in Social Science classrooms requires acknowledging their nature and the varying opinions of different social groups and individuals (Barzilai & Chinn, 2018). Diverse values among learners and teachers can create challenges in discussing controversial topics, leading to conflicts, misunderstandings, and bias. Teachers may unintentionally favor their own values, while learners may feel marginalized. Clashes between values can create a tense learning environment, impeding open discussions and hampering critical thinking and open-mindedness

(Cofré, Nez, Santibáez, Pavez, Valencia & Vergara, 2019). Through the application of reason and logic to resolve controversial topics, learners can investigate complicated issues in an organised and coherent way. Using reason, logic, or experiments to settle controversial topics is not always effective (Bago & De Neys, 2019). Controversial topics may be resolved as more information becomes available (Abercrombie & Batista-Navarro, 2020). New teachers in an environment of teacher education require room and time to express their concerns and come to their own understanding of the nature of controversial topics (Bago & De Neys, 2019). For instance, many aspiring teachers in the Finnish context feel concerned about the relationship between parents and teachers (Campbell-Barr, 2019).

Studies from countries with a long history of conflict, such as Northern Ireland and Cyprus, emphasise the need to address teachers' emotional complexities while tackling controversial topics (Ron & Gindi, 2023). Due to the interplay between social memory, identity, and narratives about the past, history instruction in divided societies is often emotionally charged and tense (Teeger, 2023). Giving learners the knowledge and critical-thinking skills necessary to make decisions about public policy, contribute to society, create consensus, and learn how to negotiate and handle conflict has been a challenge in the [Social Science](#) discipline.

Teaching learners' facts and concepts is more complex than assisting them in analysing views, moral challenges, and debating social concerns (Levstik & Tyson, 2018). Some teachers believe Social Sciences should focus on objective facts, while others believe constructive debate is essential for democracy. Discussing contentious topics fosters coexistence, respect, and critical thinking skills, while also fostering democratic competencies like tolerance, patience, and openness to diverse cultures (Dee and Cohodes, 2018).

The historical background of South Africa makes it difficult to teach contentious subjects like colonialism, apartheid, and racial relations in social science classes. In order to solve these problems, teachers need to provide safe places, gain self-assurance while speaking about touchy subjects, incorporate inclusive frameworks into the CAPS, and strike a balance between the emotional dynamics of citizenship and the content covered in the curriculum.

To address these problems, there was a need to explore the opportunities and challenges teachers face in teaching controversial topics in the Intermediate Phase. It sought to address better ways the teachers of Social Sciences curriculum can handle controversial topics in Intermediate Phase classrooms.

1.3 Research Questions

Main research question

What are the opportunities and challenges in the teaching of controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate phase?

Sub-research questions

1. Which topics are identified by Intermediate Phase teachers as controversial in Social Sciences?
2. How are controversial topics taught in the Social Sciences curriculum in the Intermediate Phase?
3. What opportunities and challenges are encountered by Social Sciences teachers when teaching controversial topics in the Intermediate Phase?
4. What lessons can be learnt from the teaching of controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum in the Intermediate Phase?

1.4 Research aim

The study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences in the Intermediate Phase.

1.5 Research objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

1. examine topics Intermediate Phase teachers identify as controversial in Social Sciences.
2. investigate how controversial topics are taught in the Social Sciences curriculum in the Intermediate Phase.
3. explore opportunities and challenges Social Science teachers encounter when teaching controversial topics in the Intermediate Phase.

4. discover lessons that can be learnt from the teaching of controversial topics in Social Sciences.

1.6 Significance of the study

The study investigated how Social Science teachers approach the discussion of contentious topics in Intermediate Phase classes, with the aim of identifying the opportunities and challenges they encounter. Additionally, the study aimed to assist teachers in preparing learners to engage with controversial themes in the Social Sciences curriculum, fostering respect and appreciation for individuals from diverse backgrounds. It also aimed to develop the capacity of both teachers and learners to adapt to the dynamic classroom environment. Furthermore, the study aimed to support teachers in effectively managing their own conflicting emotions when addressing these topics in the classroom. The findings of this study can provide policymakers with a better understanding of the difficulties faced by teachers, thereby empowering them to implement supportive measures such as networks, resources, and training. Ultimately, the study seeks to create an inclusive learning environment in which teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to address such topics.

1.7 Limitations of the study

The research reported here had some limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the study only focused on how Social Sciences teachers' classroom teaching on contentious topics in the Intermediate Phase. Secondly, the data was collected from local schools within one district. Furthermore, it is important to note that the researcher is not claiming that the issues and opportunities identified in this study are universal across all schools in South Africa. Therefore, these aspects should be viewed as limitations of this study.

1.8 Definition of key concepts

In this study, the key concepts were Social Sciences, controversial topics, and Intermediate Phase teachers.

Social Sciences

Social Science is a collection of academic disciplines that examine human behaviour in society (Christensen, Wang, Levy Paluck, E., Swanson, Birke, Miguel & Littman, 2020). It seeks to understand how society functions and explores a range of topics,

such as the causes of economic growth and unemployment, as well as factors that contribute to people's happiness. Additionally, it investigates how individuals interact and communicate with one another. Through the study of Social Science, we gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. Political studies, economics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology are all part of the field of Social Science (Desch, 2019). By studying controversial subjects within the Social Sciences, learners can better comprehend the world around them (Hope, 2019). They acquire knowledge about different places, cultures, and historical events, gaining insights into their origins and how they impact the rest of the world. In my research, Social Science specifically refers to the combination of history and geography disciplines taught in Grade six classes during the Intermediate Phase.

Controversial topics

Controversial topics can generate strong emotions and divide social groups and opinions (Flensner, 2020). When learners strongly disagree with statements, assertions, or actions, or when they have conflicting beliefs and interests, topics become controversial (Campbell, 2019). Furthermore, topics become controversial when they elicit an emotional response or touch on sensitive areas such as politics or religion. These subjects can be related to historical events, current situations, or desired future conditions (Petley, 2019). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that every historical issue is likely to cause controversy, some topics have the power to divide a sizable number of people, whether they are intended for specific individuals or groups. Additionally, contentious issues in history evolve over time and are influenced by various factors. This means that a subject that was controversial forty years ago may no longer be, and vice versa. The purpose of this study is to examine the opportunities and challenges that teachers face when teaching Social Science classes in the Intermediate Phase, particularly in relation to controversial topics.

Intermediate Phase teachers

The Intermediate Phase of education covers grades 4 to 6, with a focus on technical and academic skills. Teachers in this phase plan and conduct activities that provide opportunities for learners to observe, question, and investigate. They possess competencies in reading, writing, and speaking, as well as knowledge of the subjects they teach. They are adept at creating learning plans suited for learners and modifying

their instruction methods to fit the situation. The study will use Intermediate Phase teachers as participants to explore the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in grade 6 classrooms.

1.9 Theoretical framework

This study utilised Critical Social Theory as the theoretical framework. Critical Social Theory originated from the Frankfurt School and was developed by scholars such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. It focuses on the analysis and deconstruction of fascism and the media (Head, 2008). This theory places a strong emphasis on self-reflection and explains how knowledge is shaped by and situated within specific contexts (De Souza Lima, Otero Quezada & Roth, 2023). The Critical Theory from the Frankfurt School seeks to understand the fundamental elements of modern society by examining its historical and social development and by identifying present-day contradictions that may offer a path to transcending its inherent pathologies and forms of dominance (Elliott & Lemert, 2022). Immanent critique is used as a method to analyse modern social and political reality within the concept of Critical Theory (Elliott & Lemert, 2022).

This theory aids in identifying the diverse interests of learners in schools and supports democracy and equality to reform and transform individuals as well as social structures. I chose this theory because it removes barriers to teaching controversial topics in Social Science classes.

Furthermore, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds have used this theory to overcome educational obstacles. I found it relevant to the study because it asserts that "providing a balanced, fair education can lead a person to a better position in society" (Roach, 2019). Moreover, it recognizes that the world has become increasingly complex, and that a broader and deeper understanding of knowledge is required to navigate it. This aligns with the need to address controversial topics in Social Sciences, as the world has become divided along various cultural and ideological fault lines.

Another reason why this theory is relevant to the study is its connection to my research. It helps us comprehend how power and social structures shape our experiences and perceptions within society and culture. It strives to create a more just and equitable society, regardless of the breadth of the Social Sciences curriculum and the

controversial topics within it. It encourages critical thinking about Social Science issues by allowing us to question assumptions and understand how power and privilege influence our world. The theory was pertinent to the study as it effectively explained social problems within societies through the Social Sciences curriculum and provided sensible suggestions for addressing controversial topics. Lastly, it incorporated knowledge from the Social Sciences to offer a comprehensive review.

1.11 The synopsis of research methodology

Research paradigm

A transformative paradigm was used for this study. This paradigm views knowledge as a socially constructed aspect designed by the knower's personal experiences, traits, and affiliations with the community (Loud, 2021). This paradigm is rooted in recognizing pervasive inequalities and injustices and believing that evaluation and research are vital in addressing social ills or challenges (Loud, 2021). Because it permits societal transformation—which also happens because of controversial topics covered in the Social Sciences curriculum in Intermediate Phase classrooms—the transformative paradigm was pertinent to the research. It further indicates that we should understand the world differently, changing how we experience it and act daily. It was related to the idea that teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences during the Intermediate Phase is crucial.

Research approach

This research was conducted using a qualitative research approach. According to Evans and Lewis (2018), Social Science disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and anthropology provide the foundation for qualitative research. With this approach, participants were questioned in-depth, and their answers were examined. The researcher also aimed to understand their feelings and intentions (Dalkin, Forster, Hodgson, Lhussier & Carr, 2021). You may draw inferences from research results more successfully if you know how your audience arrives at those conclusions.

The researcher chose the qualitative research approach because it allowed me to ask questions related to the study in order to understand how teachers experience teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences in the Intermediate Phase. Implementing a qualitative design was useful and relevant to the study because it

investigated the in-depth knowledge of the challenges and opportunities teachers face in teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum in the Intermediate Phase.

Research design

I used narrative analysis as a research design for this study. According to De Fina (2021), narrative analysis is a technique that helps people comprehend how they create their own life stories through storytelling. The in-depth narratives of teachers were recorded during focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The analysis provided an enhanced understanding of culture, identity, historical experiences, lived experiences of individuals or small groups, and the experiences of Social Science teachers teaching controversial topics. It also assisted in interpreting the structure, content, and meaning of these narratives.

1.12 Sampling

This study utilised purposive sampling to select participants. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, was chosen because relevant participants were intentionally selected rather than randomly chosen (Nguyen, Lasa & Iriarte, 2022). Specifically, only Social Sciences teachers with a Bachelor of Education degree in intermediate phase teaching were selected for this study. These teachers were chosen because they are trained to teach Social Sciences in the Intermediate Phase. One male or female teacher was selected from each school, and the study was conducted in township schools that have two or more grade six classes. Furthermore, the selected teachers had a minimum of five years of experience in teaching Social Sciences. This sampling method allowed for the collection of qualitative responses, which contributed to producing more accurate study results and gaining greater insights. Additionally, it helped exclude unrelated comments that did not pertain to the topic of the study. The intentional selection of Intermediate Phase teachers with knowledge and experience in teaching controversial Social Science topics was an advantage of this sampling approach.

Sampling size

The study consisted of ten participants from five primary schools. I selected two teachers per school. These ten teachers had at least five years of experience teaching Social Sciences in Grade 6.

1.13 Research instruments

According to Marshall (2016), a research instrument is a tool used to collect, measure, and analyse data relevant to your study objectives. I used face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions to collect data for this study. The reason for selecting these research instruments was that they can be used to obtain in-depth information from the participants relevant to the study.

Face-to-face interviews

This research utilised interviews and focus group discussions to investigate the difficulties that teachers encounter when teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase. The data was collected through direct interaction between the teachers and the researcher. Face-to-face interviews are a well-established method of data collection in Social Science research (Kühne, 2023). This technique allowed the interviewer to establish rapport with the participants, gather comprehensive data, and observe nonverbal cues that may be missed in other methods, such as surveys or focus groups (Kühne, 2023).

As the interviewer was responsible for the process, he ensured that the interviewees remained focused (Portigal, 2023). In instances where there was a suggestion that a respondent might have additional valuable information on a specific topic, the use of face-to-face interview questions also enabled the interviewer to delve deeper by interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues (Park, 2023). At times, audiotapes were utilised to facilitate accurate transcription (Wollin-Giering, Hoffmann, Hötting & Ventzke, 2024). The researcher often transcribed and typed the information into a computer or notebook and analysed it upon completion of the interview (Point & Baruch, 2023).

During my interviews, I inquired about the opportunities available to teachers to address the challenges they encounter when teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase.

Focus groups discussions

A focus group discussion is a research technique that gathers a small group of participants in a supervised setting to respond to questions, as described by Bennett et al. (2017). In the context of my research, focus group discussions were employed. The purpose of the questions was to shed light on the opportunities and challenges encountered by teachers when implementing Social Science curricula in the Intermediate Phase. The selection of participants was based on predetermined demographic characteristics. Focus groups, unlike group interviews, which are often used for efficient data collection from multiple participants simultaneously (Hennink et al., 2019), specifically incorporated group interaction as a methodological approach. Rather than asking each participant to respond to questions individually, participants were encouraged to engage in dialogue with one another, posing questions, sharing personal anecdotes, and offering commentary on each other's experiences and perspectives. This approach was utilised to investigate individuals' knowledge, experiences, and beliefs, including the reasons underlying their perspectives (Saunders, Sim, Kignstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, Burroughs & Jinks, 2018). Furthermore, it allowed researchers to tap into various forms of interpersonal communication, such as teasing, anecdotes, jokes, and arguments (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020). For this study, a group of teachers was assembled, and they were asked to provide their perceptions, opinions, and ideas regarding the challenges they encounter when teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences, as well as the difficulties they face in the classroom.

1.14 Data presentation and analysis

In this study, I used thematic analysis to present and analyse data (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Since my study collected qualitative data, I found thematic analysis relevant as it helped me identify, analyse, define, and arrange data into broader themes. This method has seven steps to follow, namely: coding, familiarisation, generating themes, reviewing themes, describing and naming themes, and writing up (Frazer, Orr & Thielking, 2023).

Step one:

Read and re-read the collected data: In this study, I will read and re-read the collected data from the interviews and focus group discussion on challenges teachers face in teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase.

Step two:

Drawing up a preceding list of themes arising from the data: I will identify the challenges provided to obtain themes that align with the research questions.

Step three:

Re-reading the data collected: I will further examine the themes to determine whether they correspond with the questions and what the participants have said.

Step four:

Linking the themes to quotations and notes: I will link the theme (challenge) mentioned by the participants with other scholars who say that the challenge supports the participants' views.

Step five:

Examine the categories of the themes to interpret the data. When analysing the data, I will check whether the answers do not derail from what the research question seeks to answer.

Step six:

Constructs a tool to help recognise patterns in the data: the researcher examines the data to determine how to analyse the patterns.

Step seven:

Interprets the data and the arising meaning: I identified themes(challenges) to construct subheadings corresponding to the research questions.

1.15 Trustworthiness and credibility

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of study findings are all components of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Taherdoost, 2018). According to Taherdoost (2018), confirmability reduces bias to maintain impartiality, dependability displays consistency across time, transferability relates findings to

similar contexts, and credibility certifies the veracity of the data. The study ensured member checks by gathering varied perspectives through the use of reputable methodologies such as Focus Group Discussions and semi-structured interviews. For ease of understanding, contextual descriptions were provided. Consistency was ensured throughout the study process by keeping a clear audit trail. Minimizing researcher bias and concentrating on participant experiences allowed for the achievement of confirmability. The participants received the interview transcript so they could verify (check) that everything was presented correctly and make any necessary corrections (Rowlands, 2021).

1.16 Outline of chapters

Chapter 1: Synopsis of the Study

The chapter presented the teaching of controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase: Challenges and opportunities. The research questions and objectives of the study have been stated, as well as the background and introduction concerning the teaching of controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase. The challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences and the related literature have been outlined. The theoretical framework of critical social theory and the research area has been introduced. The limitations of the study and the ethical considerations were also outlined.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presented the literature related to the study, focusing on critical social theory as the theoretical framework. The goal of this theory is to uncover various interests at school and promote equality and democracy to transform and change individuals. The research problem was addressed through the use of social systems. The chapter discussed the origin of critical social theory, its objectives, and limitations. Keywords that are important to the study were explained. Lastly, the literature review focused on teachers' challenges and opportunities in teaching controversial Social Sciences topics in Intermediate Phase classrooms.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter 3 presented the research methodology, discussing the transformative paradigm and the relevance of a qualitative design for this study. A qualitative design

was chosen because it generated non-numerical data and provided in-depth reasoning and understanding of teachers' challenges in teaching controversial Social Sciences topics in the Intermediate Phase. The selection of participants, data analysis, and ethical considerations were clarified to thoroughly conceptualize the study.

Chapter 4: Data presentation, interpretation and discussion

This chapter focused on the presentation of data and the analysis of results. The presentation of results reflected the aim and objectives of the study, which included exploring the challenges and opportunities in teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences in the Intermediate Phase. The data obtained was analysed using the seven-step thematic analysis method recommended by Laws et al. (2003). The research findings were categorized and discussed based on their themes. The data presented in this chapter supported teachers in teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase.

Chapter 5: Summary, conclusions and recommendations

This chapter concludes the study by providing a summary, conclusions, and recommendations for how controversial topics can be taught in Social Sciences in the Intermediate Phase.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the literature review. The review is divided into two sections. The first section centres on Critical Social Theory as the theoretical framework that underpins the study. In this framework, the origin of critical social theory is discussed. The second section reviews related literature. It goes further to discuss how controversial topics are taught in some international countries and the benefits of teaching controversial topics. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

2.2. Controversial topics: A conceptual analysis

Major conflicts of interest and values are present in controversial topics, along with contested assertions on underlying facts. They usually have no simple solutions and are complicated (Van Boxtel & Van Drie, 2018). Controversial topics, such as slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, tend to stir up strong emotions and divide individuals, which breeds mistrust and suspicion (Van Sledright & Burkholdt, 2019). The teaching of controversial topics in schools presents challenging pedagogical issues, such as how to safeguard learners' cultural and ethnic sensitivity (Wansink, Akkerman, Zuiker, & Wubbels, 2018). Additionally, it poses issues like how to defuse conflict in the classroom and impart controversial knowledge impartially while averting accusations of prejudice (Segall, Trofanenko, & Schmitt, 2018).

Furthermore, it calls into question the role of the instructor's personal values and beliefs as well as academic freedom (Milligan, Gibson & Peck, 2018). Levstik & Thornton (2018) contend that contentious subjects present policy-related issues for school administration and leadership, such as how to assist teachers in presenting contentious subjects to their learners and how to create more avenues for community discussion. For example, how would democratic school governance foster a positive school climate, keep an eye on the general calibre of classroom interactions, and allay the concerns of parents and other external stakeholders over the teaching and learning of contentious subjects.

2.3 Theoretical framework

2.3.1 Critical social theory

This study on the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase is informed by critical social theory. Bagheri & Heidary (2022) define critical social theory as one that seeks to analyse and alter society. The underlying purpose of this theory's multidisciplinary knowledge base is to further the emancipatory function of knowledge. To do this, it emphasises the value of criticism in the pursuit of equality and excellence in education.

2.3.2 Origins of Critical social theory

With a specific focus on the analysis and deconstruction of fascism and its relationship with the media, critical social theory emerged within the Frankfurt School, led by prominent academics such as Horkheimer, Habermas, and Adorno (Schmid, 2018). A key aspect of critical social theory is its emphasis on self-reflection, which involves elucidating how knowledge is shaped by specific contexts (Lima and Nunez, 2021). The Frankfurt School's fundamental concerns revolved around comprehending the critical dimensions of contemporary society by examining its social and historical development and identifying existing contradictions that could pave the way towards liberation from the domination and inherent pathologies of the modern world (Bolton, 2019). Building upon this foundation, critical theory extends its scope to encompass ethics, political philosophy, and the philosophy of history (Weiss, 2020). Habermas, in particular, continued the tradition of Critical Theory by introducing concepts such as the lifeworld and the public sphere. He argued that political and economic institutions had encroached upon public life, resulting in a lack of nuanced discourse and inhibiting true democratic participation (Moyn, 2018, 13). Furthermore, critical social theory evolved into critical legal theory in the latter half of the 20th century, giving rise to branches such as critical race theory and critical gender theory (Adorno, 2020).

2.3.3 Why use critical social theory?

Critical social theory is highly relevant to my study due to its ability to address barriers to teaching contentious Social Science topics in educational settings. Moreover, it has the potential to benefit individuals from marginalized backgrounds by removing obstacles to education. This line of inquiry is applicable to my research as it asserts that a fair and balanced education can lead to improved social standing (Roach, 2019:

3). Additionally, it recognizes the increasing complexity of the world and the need for comprehensive knowledge to navigate it effectively.

Furthermore, critical social theory supports the accommodation of controversial topics within the field of Social Sciences, considering the current fractured nature of the world along cultural and ideological fault lines (Malm, 2018). It serves as a framework for uncovering diverse interests held by different social groups and promotes equality and democracy to foster transformation at both individual and societal levels (Elliott & Lemert, 2022). This theory was chosen because it helps learners understand that controversial topics do not have a singular answer and that different perspectives are inevitable. Consequently, learners are encouraged to cultivate tolerance for differing and conflicting viewpoints.

Moreover, critical social theory argues that societal issues primarily stem from cultural assumptions and social structures rather than specific individuals (Michelsen, 2020). It seeks to identify underlying presumptions that hinder a true understanding of social functioning during interpersonal interactions. By employing immanent critique, critical theory facilitates the interrogation of contemporary social and political existence (Elliott & Lemert, 2022). Importantly, critical theory not only conceptualizes and critiques societal power structures but also establishes an empirically grounded model that links society to the human subject (Morgan, 2022). By engaging in the teaching of controversial topics, learners become active co-creators of knowledge (Norrie and Morgan, 2021). Critical theory rejects the notion that the teacher holds exclusive knowledge and instead positions the teacher as a participant in a dialogue with learners, facilitating mutual learning (Sayer, 2019). Consequently, it liberates learners from an oppressive teacher-versus-learners construct. Critical social theory empowers learners to critically reflect on and challenge oppressive social norms (Vasquez, 2018). Overall, this theory effectively explains current societal issues and offers practical ideas for addressing them.

In the teaching of contentious subject matter, the application of critical social theory is pertinent as it enables learners to engage in inquiry-based learning. This approach commences with posing questions that emerge from the study of controversial topics within the classroom, which learners then explore as they acquire knowledge (View, Kaul, & Guiden, 2018). Subsequently, they collect evidence from diverse sources and

peers to aid in addressing these questions. In this context, critical social theory posits that when learners undertake investigations, they are not merely passive recipients of information but rather assume the role of social scientists who seek to comprehend the world and share that understanding with others (Bolton, 2019). While learners engage in the investigation of controversial topics, they develop profound and enduring knowledge since their learning connects with their personal curiosities and interests, as well as possesses a real-world purpose. As a result, they employ this knowledge to inform others and contribute to the betterment of their community (Weiss, 2020).

The application of critical social theory fosters the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills through the instruction of contentious subjects within the classroom (Maurissen, Claes, & Barber, 2018). By participating in the inquiry process, learners learn to analyse and evaluate information, construct their own conclusions, and defend their reasoning. Critical social theory also supports active learning and learners' engagement, as learners take ownership of their learning by engaging with controversial topics and become more invested in the educational process (Moreira et al., 2022). This approach equips learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to meet the academic standards applicable to their grade level.

Furthermore, critical social theory facilitates a deeper comprehension of contentious within the Social Sciences and encourages learners to become active and engaged citizens. It can be implemented in any classroom setting and can be adapted to suit various grade levels in Social Science education. This perspective considers learners not merely as passive learners, but rather as historians and researchers (Harms & Reiss, 2019). By granting learners greater agency in their education, critical social theory heightens their level of engagement, fostering a passion for advanced research and learning. Furthermore, critical social theory promotes human liberation, thereby unveiling various forms of domination and oppression (Milligan, Gibson, & Peck, 2018).

2.4 Controversies and benefits of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences

2.4.1 Teaching controversial topics in Sweden

In Sweden, the teaching of controversial topics in the Social Sciences has led to a lot of conflicting debates and controversies. Flensner (2020) points out an element of political bias, in which he assumes that teachers probably introduce their personal biases when teaching controversial topics in Sweden's politically diverse landscape. In a study by Larsson & Larsson (2021), it is indicated that there is a great concern and worries from parents about some topics taught in the curriculum that might influence the beliefs or values of their children in ways that they as parents disagree with. This leads to debates over the balance between academic freedom and parental rights. Flensner (2020) further adds that controversial topics like culture, religion, and identity have cultural sensitivity, and there is a lot of disagreement on how teachers can teach and discuss these issues in the classroom context, especially in Sweden as a multicultural society.

On the other hand, Arneback & Jämte (2022) argue that certain controversial topics might revolve around freedom of speech, which leads to debates on whether teachers should be allowed to discuss those topics that may be offensive and potentially harmful. There is also a debate on determining the age at which some controversial topics should be introduced, as teachers have to create a balance when teaching learners and ensure that they are emotionally prepared for the material. Some parents advocate for a more inclusive approach to the teaching of controversial topics, while others seek to eliminate or limit certain discussions regarding the content and emphasis placed on the teaching of these topics within the curriculum.

Benefits of teaching controversial topics in Sweden

Scholars have suggested that learners are encouraged to construct new knowledge that challenges established ways of thinking, a process that Ping, Halam & Osman (2020) called counter-socialisation. Thus, it is also suggested that teaching contentious subjects help learners strengthen their critical thinking skills. African learners acquire cognitive abilities including formulating hypotheses and gathering and assessing data through the discussion of contentious subjects (Reiss, 2019). By teaching contentious subjects, learners learn how to build mutual trust and share

knowledge with one another (Reiss, 2020). Once more, it is unnecessary to overstate how crucial it is for issue/topic-centred education in African classrooms to support the growth of democratic citizenship, interpersonal and communication skills, and political efficacy (Rushton, Charters & Reiss, 2021).

2.4.2 Teaching controversial topics in Nordic countries

Teachers in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland) report that learners feel threatened by their identity when discussing contentious issues in class, especially if their opinions and feelings are linked to their identity or race (Sund and Gericke, 2020). Experiences that pose a risk to the significance, enactment, or worth of an identity are called identity threats (Craig, Thatcher & Grover, 2019). Individuals typically work hard to maintain a positive self-concept, perceiving themselves as competent, morally superior, and good individuals. When someone challenges their self-concept, they frequently experience intimidation and go defensive. Therefore, it can be intimidating to encounter someone with a different worldview. Discussions of controversial topics sometimes openly address identity, particularly when racial or ethnic identity is brought up (Saetra, 2021).

According to Froehlich, Brokjøb, Nikitin, and Martiny (2023), learners' willingness to participate in debates may be affected when they feel threatened by their identity. Learners may exhibit various defensive behaviours, such as disparaging and excluding those who hold viewpoints perceived as a threat to their identity and resisting making changes in their own lives (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). In a qualitative study, Huhtala, Fadjukoff, and Kroger (2021) found that learners disengaged from contentious topic debates to shield their identities and sense of self from harsh introspection. Research on learners' propensity for vocal participation in the classroom suggests that learners may either speak up to defend their identity or remain silent to preserve it (Tribukait, 2021). McManus and Falkenbach (2022) argue that teaching controversial topics in the Nordic region can lead to discussions and raise issues. They further state that striking a balance between the freedom to discuss contentious subjects and the need to be sensitive to cultural differences and avoid offending people is a major challenge in these countries. In the Nordic region, there have been discussions and debates on where to draw the line between cultural norms

and academic independence, and conflicts may arise regarding the extent to which certain historical issues, such as colonialism and the Second World War, should be taught because they are included in the curriculum (Löfström & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2022).

According to Storm, Nessler, Holum, Nygaard, and Jakobsen (2023), ensuring ensure teachers are fully equipped to confront challenges in the school setting is difficult because political influence on curriculum material can arise at any time. Teachers are concerned because interest groups and the government have a significant influence on how controversies are taught. Race, gender, and sexuality are among the controversial topics in Social Science education. These concerns often lead to debates about the role of education in promoting inclusion and diversity in these countries. Finally, there has been much discussion about the impact of educating challenging global issues on national identity and values in the aforementioned countries.

Benefits of teaching controversial topics in Nordic countries

In the Nordic region, having open discussions on controversial topics teaches learners from all backgrounds and lifestyles how to coexist and collaborate in a respectful and peaceful manner (Johansson, 2023). Teachers argue that covering these subjects with learners helps them to listen to each other and navigate disagreements with sensitivity. It also encourages them to critically examine their own views and principles and equips them with the courage and skills to express them. Collaborating on contentious issues fosters the development of several important democratic competencies, such as tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility and adaptability, openness to different cultures and beliefs, and analytical and critical thinking abilities.

Teachers also stated that when handled skillfully, these topics break down barriers and alleviate social tensions between rival groups in the community and at school. Investigating controversial topics has social, personal, and educational benefits. These themes support academic learning in various subjects and help to define some of the main social, political, economic, and moral divides in modern life (Low, 2023). In reality, there is no avoiding contentious topics, which is the strongest argument for addressing them directly. If teachers do not bring up these concerns, learners will. Thanks to training in the teaching of controversial topics, teachers have gained the

confidence to openly discuss subjects with learners that they never would have thought possible to broach in class, such as sexual abuse.

Furthermore, learners gain a great deal from debating controversial issues: they enhance their political knowledge, strengthen their commitment to democracy, prepare for life in a diverse society, and develop their own beliefs (Bezalel, 2023). Research on controversial topics has led to two main conclusions (Parker, 2023). First, learners benefit from exposure to these topics, even in small doses. Second, very few teachers actually expose learners to them. There are two key areas of preparation for a discussion on a controversial topic (Shasha-Sharf & Tal, 2023): the structure of the conversation and the supportive atmosphere teachers aim to create. One-way teachers can be supported in realising the benefits of engaging learners in contentious topics and in building the competence and confidence to incorporate them into their daily practice is by creating "safe spaces" in a school setting where learners are allowed to explore sensitive topics without fear.

2.4.3 Teaching Controversial Topics in Turkey

Controversial topics in Social Sciences education in Turkey are used to analyse and engage in contemporary debates on which topics are significant to understanding the social and political dynamics of Turkish society and culture (AKAY ŞAHİN & Acikalin, 2021). Some of these topics are covered in the Turkish curriculum and are generally handled on a global scale, including human rights, migration, terrorism, democracy, and conflict. Teachers, as implementers of educational programs, play a crucial role in teaching these contentious themes (Ozturk & Kus, 2019). It is up to teachers to decide whether or not to discuss a controversial topic in class. There are several reasons why teachers are hesitant to discuss these subjects with their learners. These reasons can be related to learners, teachers, the educational system, parents, or school management. Additionally, due to the socio-cultural and polarizing nature of these difficult themes, teachers may choose to avoid discussing them, as stated by Uygun & Arslan (2020). Another important aspect to consider is the impact of controversial topics on the learners themselves. These topics can have personal relevance and significance in learners' lives (Meral, Kayaalp & Basci Namli, 2022). Even at a young age, children today may come across controversial issues through the media and other forms of communication. However, when it comes to discussing

controversial topics, learners should not be forced to engage with one another if they do not feel appreciated and safe in doing so.

Benefits of teaching controversial topics in Turkey

According to the Australian Journal of Education (2019), it is crucial that controversial topics are allowed to be discussed in Turkish classrooms. The primary justifications for incorporating controversial topics in a Turkish curriculum are outlined in the list below: Maurissen, Claes, and Barber (2018) state that the goals of the program are to raise learners' self-confidence, develop their social and interpersonal communication skills, sharpen their critical thinking abilities, and expand their interests and beliefs. Furthermore, controversial topics are taught in Turkish curricula to promote active participation, assist learners in internalizing democratic values, and help learners transform democratic values into behaviour (Matthes, Knoll & von Sikorski, 2018). Given that schools have a wider range of ideologies than homes, mosques, or social clubs, one could even argue that they are the ideal settings for having contentious discussions (Mainhard, Oudman, Hornstra, Bosker & Goetz, 2018). Because of the range of opinions, schools can be the most effective setting for promoting reasoned debates (Segall, 2018).

It can also be argued that a robust democracy depends on debating controversial topics in a setting where learners and teachers are allowed to voice differing opinions (Springer, 2019). Controversial subjects are incorporated into Turkish curricula for a variety of reasons. The three most frequently cited reasons are to strengthen critical thinking abilities, develop interpersonal communication skills, and prepare learners for their roles as citizens in a pluralistic democracy. Teaching learners to be citizens who can address social issues in a variety of contexts is essential to preparing them for their citizenship obligations in a pluralistic democracy (Van Boxtel, 2018). Using controversial topics as a teaching technique to help learners develop their critical thinking abilities is implied by improving critical thinking skills. Ultimately, developing critical abilities and dispositions, including attentive listening, sympathetic response, persuasive speech, and teamwork, are all part of strengthening learners' interpersonal communication (Zuiker & Wubbels, 2018). Since teachers implement educational programs, they have a significant influence on the teaching of controversial topics.

2.4.4 Teaching Controversial Topics in Scotland, Wales, and England

Speaking the Gaelic language remains one of the controversial topics in Scotland (Dymock & Mathis, 2023). What makes this surprising is that, for many, learning Gaelic is the most difficult element; it's a language that requires effort, so it's normal if you find it difficult. However, it's crucial to keep your mind engaged at all ages, and bilingualism—speaking both English and Gaelic—brings advantages for enhancing abilities like literacy. Many more opportunities can arise for you if you are a Gaelic learner. Having Gaelic will open up new career options for you, but it will also look good on your resume when applying for other employment because multilingualism is an impressive skill (Armstrong, McLeod, Dunbar, Dunmore, O'Rourke & Macleod, 2022).

Gaelic is not controversial to those who speak it. The only ones stirring any controversy about the language are those who perceive it as a threat—primarily for reasons of exclusion, cost, belonging, and identity (McLeod, Dunbar, Macleod, O'Rourke, Dunmore & Armstrong, 2022). The vehemence and vitriol sometimes directed towards the language, once ruthlessly suppressed by the state, can be extremely brutal and hateful. Those who spout hostility have never been in the unenviable position of being in a minority situation with their language (Morris, 2022), traditions, and culture facing existential threat. In an interpersonal relationship, such demeaning attitudes would be considered severe abuse. Indeed, such attitudes can adversely affect the mental well-being of some Gaelic speakers and reduce their willingness to acknowledge and use their language, thus contributing to the decline of the language and its transmission to new generations (Lake, 2023). The reasons for the 'controversy' are the majority's general insecurity for their own welfare, the 'otherness' of Gaelic which they mistakenly perceive as a threat to their own linguistic, cultural, and identity's existence (Alhaisony, 2022).

In British schools, this is what passes for sex education and relationships: Children are being taught teachings that are inappropriate, extreme, sexualizing, and inaccurate for their age all around the nation. These classes frequently make use of materials from unaffiliated organisations that deliberately work to discredit parents (Bond & Phippen, 2022). Teaching unions have criticized a "politically motivated" review of the way sex education is taught in schools after Conservative Member of Parliament voiced concern that children were being exposed to "graphic" material,

including "lessons on oral sex." Rishi Sunak has asked the Department for Education to ensure schools are not teaching inappropriate or contested content on the subject of relationships, sex, and health education (RSHE) (Thomas, 2022). Parents still have the option to take their kids out of sex education. Children are getting closer to being able to "opt-in." Schools can continue to take a flexible stance. This includes allowing faith-based schools to impart knowledge in line with their beliefs (Tutt & Williams, 2023).

The issue of whether to teach in Welsh or English in Welsh classrooms has remained a controversial topic. (Özerk & Williams, 2023). "We bring up our children to speak Welsh, not for the sake of the language, but for the sake of our children and not in the main for them to enjoy literature – however unreasonably superb that literature may be, considering we are such a small tribe" (Davies, 2023;6). The Welsh language has come to represent things more significant than language to the Welsh people, who believe it could be their only hope for survival. Welsh has come to represent equality, fraternity, and neighbourliness. Fundamentally, the right to think differently, to express that diversity, and to be unique and free is represented by every minority language.

Nonetheless, 76% of learners in Wales are currently enrolled in English-medium schools, maintaining their dominance in the country. Welsh is limited to a few hours in the schedule each fortnight and is only taught as a subject in some institutions rather than being the primary language used in all subjects. Though some British wanted to ban the teaching and talking of the Welsh language, they couldn't succeed as this language was just heavily discouraged (presumably because of cultural prejudices that portrayed Welsh-speakers as backward) (Price, 2022). Thankfully, nowadays, things are a lot better for Welsh-speaking people in Wales; they can even watch a mainly Welsh-medium TV channel (S4C). The Welsh language was first suppressed by Henry VIII of England when he tried to Anglicise it.

Fifty years ago, many Welsh schools forbade children from speaking Welsh on the premises (Morgan, 2022). Any child caught doing so had the Welsh Not hung around their neck, and the only way they could get rid of it was by dobbing on another Welsh-speaking child. The child with the Not at the end of the day was given a thrashing. The general idea was that the English establishment wanted to impose English culture on the whole of Britain (Rudoe & Ponsford, 2023).

Benefits of teaching controversial topics in Scotland, Wales, and England

The Scottish curriculum incorporates the idea of global citizenship permeates all of its experiences and outcomes. (Kang and McIntosh, 2022). Additionally, all learners have the right to learn about sustainability, which is characterized as a dedication to the values of social justice, human rights, global citizenship, democratic engagement, and existing within the planet's ecological bounds. (Mifsud, 2023). In Wales, the Personal and Social Education Framework (PSE) addresses controversial topics. The PSE curriculum empowers learners to engage as engaged, responsible citizens locally, nationally, and worldwide in their schools and communities by fostering self-respect, respect for others, and celebration of diversity (Smith, Seargeant & Moore, 2022). It also seeks to recognize, honor, and demonstrate compassion for diversity on all fronts. According to Holmes-Henderson, Žmavc, and Kaldahl (2022) the Citizenship curriculum in England mandates that teachers provide learners with the knowledge and abilities to critically examine political and social issues, evaluate the evidence, engage in discussion, and present well-reasoned arguments. Therefore, teaching controversial topics can significantly contribute to delivering spiritual, moral, social, and cultural education.

For instance, social development gives learners the chance to acquire and exhibit the attitudes and abilities that will allow them to fully engage in and make a constructive contribution to modern British society. Learning about and valuing empathy and respect will equip learners to act as global citizens and affect social change. Even while learners may find life difficult on a personal and global level, they shouldn't be kept away from controversial topics. It's critical that they develop autonomous thought processes and make sense of their feelings and ideals.

Studies reveal that people's values are a major factor in their decision to voice their concerns about social and environmental issues including poverty and climate change (Weckroth and Ala-Mantila, 2022). Therefore, developing and strengthening values of empathy and respect will enable young people to contribute to social change as global citizens. Ignoring controversial topics means ignoring the realities many young people face. Learners in classrooms may feel marginalized for various reasons, including poverty, social group, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity. Many learners, regardless of age, will inevitably encounter the ramifications of contentious subjects in their own lives and communities, in addition to being exposed to national

and international issues via the media. According to recent research by Childline, increased concerns about world affairs seen on social media may have contributed to the 35% annual increase in learners seeking help for anxiety.

Curricula based on controversial issues help prepare learners to become citizens of a democratic society beyond the school in these neighbouring countries (Pennerman, 2023). Furthermore, controversial topics motivate and engage learners in ways that non-controversial or safe topics cannot achieve (Mansfield, 2023). Controversial topics have intrinsic value and importance as they encompass concepts vital to the development of responsible citizens (Hammer, 2023).

2.4.5 Teaching Controversial Topics in Singapore

Ofori and George (2023) found that the government has a significant role in regulating and determining the curriculum taught by teachers. He discovered that government policies often clash with certain issues, leading to restrictions on teaching controversial topics such as economic inequalities, environmental challenges, censorship, LGBVTQ+ rights, and the school system.

In Singapore, the education system plays a crucial role in fostering racial harmony among individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. Teachers are key influencers in shaping the attitudes, values, and beliefs of young people. It is vital for learners to be aware of ethnocentric attitudes and stereotypes, especially in schools with a strong emphasis on Chinese culture. The influence of teachers is significant, as their relationships with learners can predict both prosocial and antisocial behaviours (Soininen, Pakarinen & Lerkkanen, 2023). Teachers who are unaware of their own ethnic attitudes and stereotypes may unknowingly perpetuate such biases, leading to prejudice, discrimination, or racism. Saberi, Radzi, and Loy (2023) conducted a study highlighting the importance of meaningful interaction among learners from different ethnic backgrounds. They recommended that teachers facilitate mixed-ability grouping in the classroom to encourage increased interaction, promote understanding, and enhance self-confidence through collaborative activities and projects. Low & Yang (2022) further emphasised the need for teachers to be more sensitive to cultures other than their own, including speaking English when interacting with individuals from different ethnicities.

The concept of salience discussed earlier, has implications for institutional efforts like Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs) and National Education (NE). When individuals perceive each other as individuals rather than members of a group, social interaction highlighting ethnic and religious differences can foster tolerance, acceptance, understanding, and empathy (Antonopolis & John, 2022). Additionally, Chua, Tan & Mathews (2023) found that when national identity is salient, people tend to view each other as members of a nation rather than distinct ethnic groups, reducing ethnic differences and enhancing patriotism. Similar to other parts of the world, educational inequality is a complicated and ongoing problem in Singapore. In Singapore's contemporary education reforms, teacher quality has been a focal point for addressing educational disparities and needs (Chang, 2022). However, discussing the role of teachers the concepts of multiculturalism and meritocracy that are promoted by the state's discourse and required school curricula make tackling injustice, inequity, and culture even more difficult (Yenn, 2022). Even with Singapore's remarkable economic growth and educational achievements, social and educational inequality is still a contentious issue. Furthermore, concerns of inclusion and exclusion in the multicultural society are brought to light by inquiries into social mobility and difficulties pertaining to recent migration (Ho & Kathiravelu, 2022).

Researchers from various fields, including history (Jafri, 2022), sociology (Kathiravelu & Dorairajoo, 2022), and language and literature (Mauro et al., 2022), have examined racism in Singapore. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, covert forms of racism are argued to have replaced overt racism in the country. Covert forms of racism, including ambivalent racism, aversive racism, modern racism, and symbolic racism, prevail (Imuentinyan Jr, 2023; Durrheim, 2023; Arslan, 2023). Despite their differences, there is a common trend throughout various varieties of racism: those who discriminate against others in covert, socially acceptable ways are more likely to identify as non-racists. There is additional evidence linking racism to less job possibilities. According to field tests, fake resumes with a White name had a higher chance of getting called for an interview by employers than resumes with a Black name (Obenauer, 2023). According to a review of field trials, when responding to job adverts, Black job seekers have a 50–500% lower chance of being regarded by employers as equally qualified White applicants (Obenauer, 2023; Klink, 2022).

To address the constraints faced by teachers in teaching controversial topics, Ho & Lee (2022) indicate that Singapore truly believes in the democratic and educative value of discussing controversial topics. Therefore, they have ensured that Singapore teachers receive high levels of explicit support from school administrators and the Ministry of Education, even though some of the topics they address may be unpalatable or difficult to discuss. Teachers are provided with more curricular resources and professional development opportunities so that they can create thoughtful and meaningful lessons for their learners and learn to manage the overtones of such difficult discussions (Layne & Teng, 2022). Additionally, research by Kraatz, von Spiegel, Sayers, and Brady (2022) shows that one of the most effective ways teachers can teach these topics is by providing learners with the chance to discuss controversial public issues in depth.

According to the literature, Singapore is a varied society with a range of ethnic and religious groupings. Therefore, teaching controversial topics, particularly those relating to religion, race, or culture, might provoke conflicts among different communities (Yeung and Li, 2023). Research by Gaines, Macdonald, Smith, Diefenbach, & Paduch (2022) demonstrates that discussing Singapore's past could generate problems regarding national identity and historical viewpoints, as diverse perspectives may call the official narrative into question. There have been reports from teachers teaching controversial topics in Singapore that they feel restricted in their capacity to teach and debate controversial topics, perceiving it as a restriction on academic freedom. Teaching controversial topics in Singapore also has the potential to create media attention and public debate, making it difficult for teachers to deal with challenges (Xu, Hu, & Cameron, 2023). Furthermore, building trust and fostering a supportive classroom climate that permits a free exchange of ideas and viewpoints in a secure and non-threatening setting are only two of the many tasks demanded of teachers while teaching controversial topics (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). Teachers need to push learners to think critically about their own beliefs and presumptions and weigh the consequences while doing so in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers must remain attentive to the reactions of learners, recognizing rising tension and developing strategies for when and how to intervene.

Benefits of teaching controversial topics in Singapore

Teachers agree that learners experience cognitive dissonance when presented with assertions of value and expertise that conflict with their own. When learners experience cognitive dissonance, they become more aware of the shortcomings of their previous beliefs and the need for change (So-San Lim, 2020). Considering conflicting perspectives also enhances learners' content knowledge by exposing them to information and judgments beyond their own social position and personal experiences (Ro, 2020). Moreover, encountering different interpretations of current social conditions increases learners' awareness of how membership in social groups both expands and restricts people's experiences and viewpoints. Talking about contentious issues with people who have opposing views, interpretations, or preferences also helps people develop important social and civic skills (Hong and Li, 2022). Through these conversations, learners can develop "communicative virtues" like patience, the ability to suspend judgment, and the fortitude to modify their opinions in light of new information, in addition to skills like respectful disagreement and careful listening (Reiss & Torrance, 2018). Learners may also learn that when trying to persuade those with differing opinions, it is more effective to provide reasons and appeal to common values like fairness and the greater good as opposed to just stating their own preferences or self-interest (Srinivasa, Kurni, and Saritha, 2022). As conflicts inevitably arise in pluralistic societies These commitments and abilities are seen as fundamental civic talents that enable learners to engage more completely, effectively, and justly in democratic public life in light of individual and group differences (Turner and Richardson, 2023).

2.4.6 Teaching Controversial Topics in France

Stankiewicz (2022) points out that one of the elements that teachers are afraid to teach is secularism because it leads to confrontation in the classroom when they teach religious or cultural topics in Social Sciences courses, such as the role of Islam in society. Teachers become trapped when trying to combine free expression with the norms of *laïcité* (the French constitutional principle of secularism). Additionally, addressing France's colonial history in Africa and Southeast Asia is contentious due to the legacy of colonialism, which includes exploitation and human rights violations.

In France, teaching subjects like immigration and identity sparks arguments about integration, multiculturalism, and the contradictions between preserving French culture and accepting diversity (Bourke & Skinner, 2022). According to the literature, themes such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and LGBTQ+ rights can be contentious, as some groups choose more progressive methods while others adhere to conventional norms (Patterson, 2022). The French government is officially prohibited from recognizing any religion, except for legacy regulations such as those of military chaplains and Alsace-Moselle municipal law.

When teachers teach about France's participation in WWII and the Holocaust, these themes are sensitive and raise considerations about national identity and historical accountability (Varga, Helmsing, van Kessel, and Christ, 2023). James (2023) reveals that many teachers are already struggling to manage classroom discussions on controversial topics such as the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo's publication of controversial caricatures, with some fearing for their personal safety. In French schools, there has been a renewed focus on promoting the Republican values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, egalitarianism, fraternity) and the secular value of *laïcité* (secularism) – which limits the expression of religious beliefs in public institutions such as schools – since the January 2015 attacks. Other policies in the country target learners who may be at risk of radicalisation and teachers are expected to report concerns about radicalization to school leadership or outside agencies. Education professionals are also being trained to spot the signs of radicalisation, although this approach is more widely employed in the United Kingdom than in France (James & Janmaat, 2019).

In the case of France, the attacks on Charlie Hebdo highlighted the difficulties that some teachers already faced in managing discussions around issues such as *laïcité* and freedom of speech (Steel & Petley, 2023). Teachers, school leaders, and policy officials in France frequently state that some teachers lack in-depth knowledge of the issues they are increasingly called on to address in class (Morgan, 2022). Furthermore, many are afraid of being unable to manage the emotional responses from learners that sensitive subjects sometimes generate and ultimately losing control of the situation. James (2023) suggests that teachers need to be better prepared for these difficult conversations, and this preparation should occur through initial teacher training and continuing professional development. This training already exists in some

areas of France. In some parts of the country, teacher trainers work closely with teams of teachers over extended periods of time on themes such as discussion and debate, learners' religious beliefs, and talking to young people about terrorism.

Benefits of teaching controversial topics in France

French teachers are in agreement that teaching controversial topics in classrooms is important. These topics engage learners and are relevant and interesting to them (Bennett, Dunlop, Knox, Reiss & Torrance-Jenkins, 2018). Educational research has shown that despite the difficulties, teaching controversial topics has a positive effect on learners' self-confidence and interest in civic participation (McEachan & Sheard, 2020). Discussing controversial topics in the classroom stimulates meaningful discussions and expands learners' knowledge of the ever-changing world we live in. It is possible for children younger than five to encounter complex and distressing situations at home or on the playground.

It is important for schools to provide a safe and supportive space for learners to process these topics. Failing to do so puts learners at risk of isolation and exposes them to potentially incorrect or biased information. A study by Parra, Wansink, Bakker, and van Liere (2022) found that learners are motivated to address controversial topics like discrimination and believe they should do more to unite society, but they might not know how to start.

By giving learners, the tools to promote social cohesion and confront social injustice in their communities, global citizenship education in France gives them a sense of empowerment (Pace, 2022). Learners connect with people outside of their nation and reflect on their place in the world. This is hardly shocking, given that the expanding globalization of media, trade, communications, and travel has made this generation the most linked in history. Teachers play a critical role in helping young people develop critical awareness about how the media shapes their perceptions of places and world events in this digital age where information and images about contentious world events are easily accessible (Carretero, Rodriguez-Moneo, Cantabrana, and Parellada, 2022).

2.4.7 Teaching Controversial Topics in West Africa

According to Kohnert (2022), the governments of many West African nations have taken control of the curriculum, restricting teachers' ability to address sensitive topics that could undermine their authority or policies. Religion plays a crucial role in West African communities, so teaching subjects that contradict religious beliefs creates tension in the learning environment. This may be linked to the region's colonial history, a sensitive topic due to historical injustices and power dynamics. Ethnic or tribal conflicts, which are particularly sensitive in West Africa, may also pose challenges (Taddese Bekele & Abebaw Degu, 2023). Resource constraints in many educational institutions in the region make it difficult to provide extensive training on controversial issues. Teachers may lack the necessary training to facilitate difficult dialogues, leading to biased or incomplete perspectives (Shinn, 2023). Learners may be reluctant to engage in debates on these sensitive issues due to fear of reprisal, societal pressure, or a lack of critical thinking skills. Balancing the need for critical thinking and open conversation with the cultural, political, and social sensitivities of West African nations is a complex challenge that requires careful navigation by teachers and politicians in the region (Modise & Modise, 2023). Access to various instructional materials and tools for addressing contentious topics may be restricted, hindering effective education. Governments may pressure educational institutions to avoid controversial issues, limiting critical thinking and freedom of expression (Blell, Liu, & Verma, 2022). In some cases, teachers and scholars who attempt to discuss contentious problems may face suppression, threats, or legal consequences.

Controversies in Ghana's education system include the neglect of indigenous values in curriculum design and the marginalization of Ghanaian languages and literacies in the teaching and learning process (Crawford & Botchwey, 2020). Another concern is the quality of teachers and the professionalism of teaching, as well as the inadequate framework and curriculum for aspiring teachers. The influence of religion on education is also a contentious topic, with challenges to academic and religious freedom in educational settings. In addition, Ghana's language policy, which mandates the use of a child's first language as the medium of instruction only up to Grade Three, violates Linguistic Human Rights (Osei-Boateng, 2022). These issues emphasise the need for a more inclusive and culturally relevant education system in Ghana.

The recent increase in small-scale mining in Ghana has led to a decline in school enrollment, raising concerns about the involvement of children and young people in mining activities (Copestake & Wellard, 2023). The participation of children and young people in gold mining is also seen as hindering efforts to improve education, prompting the government to take action to abolish such practices. As a result, tension has emerged between the government and its officials on one side and young workers and their families on the other.

In rural Ghana, work is seen as an integral part of children's upbringing (Adonteng-Kissi, 2023). The belief is that a good child is one who contributes. Boys and girls are expected to undertake tasks appropriate to their age and gender, and those who do not assume these responsibilities are considered lazy, spoiled, or burdensome (Jonah & Abebe, 2019). However, national policy increasingly views children's work as "child labour" and deems it inappropriate, as it is seen as belonging to the realm of adults driven by monetary motives. Furthermore, formal schooling, rather than work, is seen as the primary responsibility and contribution of children to society (Anlimachie, Badu & Acheampong, 2022).

While civil law grants men and women equal rights, gender disparities persist in customary law, which still holds considerable influence in Liberia and disadvantages women in areas such as inheritance and child custody. Violence against women and children, including rape, is widespread.

One of the worst practices that is eating away at the subsistence or fabric of the current Liberian School System and promoting "mess" is the introduction and practice of a syndicate called "Flexibility Fee" which is collected from learners before or during the administration of the West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (King, 2022). This practice is in some cases accompanied or preceded by "taking examinees on camp" to await the examinations, where test copies are smuggled and surreptitiously responded to. Any teacher refusing to "go on camp" is considered a renegade. He or she may face suspension, dismissal, or experience salary deduction and so on. Furthermore, during the administration of the examinations, subject specialists are hired and confined to facilities nearby and provided with copies of the examinations, wherein they extract the correct responses, send them to the proctors who distribute them to the examinees (Karngebae, 2023). These practices are

common among public, private, and faith-based institutions in Liberia that are competing for academic excellence or, rather, academic dishonesty.

Disappointingly, the "Flexibility" beneficiaries, the learners, that is, enter institutions of higher learning with very weak backgrounds, especially in English and Mathematics, not to mention the Natural Sciences. Performing poorly in their academic pursuit and frustrated, they drop out or sell themselves to "vote-seeking or vote-ragging politicians," thereby making wrong political decisions in their quest for "immediate gratification." Lamenting such a situation, the Nobel Prize Winner, Professor Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka decries: "Only in Africa will thieves be regrouping to loot again and the youths whose future is being stolen will be celebrating it" (Karngbeae, 2023: 46). Controversial topics in Gambian education, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, women's rights, gender equality, culture, religion, democracy, and the treatment of ethnic minority groups like the Jola and the Mandeka, are of major concern (Ilugbami & Tayo-Ladega, 2023). Child marriage is defined as a formal or informal union before the age of eighteen (Huzaimah, Abdillah, Laila, Tamudin & Astuti, 2023). This practice still exists in many developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia. Approximately twenty-one per cent of young women worldwide are married before the age of 18, which means around 650 million girls and women are currently married as children (World Health Organisation, 2023). About half of these marriages occur in developing countries (Renyonet, C.C., Suryanti, M.S.D. and Muttaqin, M.Z., 2023). Each year, twelve million girls get married before reaching the age of 18, which is equivalent to 23 marriages per minute or one marriage every two seconds (Barrow, Bah, & Sanneh, 2022). United Nations member states, through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have committed to ending child marriage through laws and legislation by 2030.

Despite international and national efforts to limit or outlaw the practice, child marriage has been a long-standing problem in the Gambia, especially in rural areas. Because most Asian and African civilisations, like the Gambia, have a patriarchal society, it disproportionately affects girls (Sosseh, Barrow & Lu, 2023). Gambian parents typically pull their fourteen-year-old children out of school to prepare them for marriage, depriving them of the chance to pursue an education. According to Obah-Akpowoghaha and Ojakorotu (2023), these learners are sometimes pressured or forced into marriage by their parents, relatives, and occasionally even acquaintances.

Hemmeda, Anwer, Abbas, Elfaki, Omer, Khalid, Hassan, Mostafa, Hamza, Mahmoud & Osman (2024) state that although some young girls may choose to marry early rather than being coerced or misled, it is still an abusive practice that violates their human rights.

In certain rural Gambian communities, child marriage is considered a cultural norm due to its widespread practice. Girls are indoctrinated to believe that it is their duty to obey their parents' decisions regarding marriage, regardless of their age (Zoubir, 2023). According to a 2015 assessment by UNICEF, women in rural areas of Gambia have limited access to education. This practice persists because it is believed that education is not important for females, who are expected to solely fulfil domestic roles. As a result, their constitutional rights to education are denied (UNICEF, 2023).

Section 30 of the Gambian constitution states that all persons shall have the right to equal educational opportunities and facilities, and to achieve the full realization of that right. Subsection (a) indicates that primary education shall be free, compulsory, and available to all, irrespective of age, gender, or religion. Subsection (b) states that secondary education, including technical and vocational education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education. Subsection (c) further states that higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, based on every appropriate means, and in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education (Omasanjuwa, 2023).

Child marriage affects both girls and boys, with girls in Gambia experiencing more negative impacts. In rural Gambia, women with higher degrees often marry first due to the perceived difficulty in controlling them. Cultural and religious norms, ethnicity, fear of premarital sex, and lack of resources limit girls' choices (Barrow, Bah, and Sanneh, 2022). Early marriages increase the likelihood of illiteracy and violate the individual's right to free and informed consent. Programs focusing on education, poverty, and economic opportunities are being added to the global campaign to prevent child marriage (Rose, 2023).

Female circumcision, a widespread socio-cultural practice in many countries, is facing criticism for its potential harm to women's health and sexual and reproductive rights (Wondimu, Melkamu, and Dejene, 2023). The World Health Organisation defines it as

procedures involving the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or injury to female organs for non-medical reasons (Albert, 2023). Over 200 million girls and women have undergone FGM, with 92 million girls aged 10 years and older in Gambia (Ayenew, 2023). The procedure is classified into two main types: clitoridectomy or excision, which constitutes 90% of cases, and infibulation, which carries long-term health risks. International conventions and declarations have been instrumental in protecting and promoting women's rights, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Ayenew, 2023).

Many African countries have criminalized the practice of female circumcision (FGM), with some countries like Ghana, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Djibouti, and Togo implementing laws to enforce compliance (Adebayo, Map, and Prevalence, 2023). However, the effectiveness of legal punishment in eradicating FGM remains unclear. Some countries, like Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya, have successfully criminalized FGM, while others like Chad, Sierra Leone, Mali, and The Gambia continue to have high rates of FGM (Adebayo, 2023). The Gambia, a signatory to international conventions, has not taken concrete steps in banning FGM, but in 2015, a law was passed making it a criminal offence (Marković, 2023). The practice is attributed to religious obligations, increased marriageability prospects, and protection of virginity. However, some religious scholars (OLUWASANMI, FALUSI, ISHOLA, IGBEKOYI and OGBORU, 2023; Rashid, Iguchi, and Afiqah, 2023; Khalifa, 2023) argue that FGM is against Islamic beliefs and that it is a cultural practice that predates Islam. Traditional and religious leaders have played a crucial role in banning FGM, issuing Fatwas condemning the practice in countries like Egypt, Mauritania, and Senegal (Ghanem, 2023).

FGM is a practice in The Gambia, where it is believed to increase a woman's prospects for marriage and protect her virginity. This belief is supported by both Muslim and Christian groups, with cases being even greater among Christians than the Muslim population in countries like Nigeria and Tanzania (Stark, 2023). However, there is also strong social pressure for women to conform to socially acceptable standards, which are consistent with the beliefs and practices of the host family.

One controversial explanation for FGM is that it protects girls from having premarital sexual relationships, as sex is not only a taboo subject in Gambian society, but also having sex outside of marriage is strongly condemned (Faraca, 2023). Many families in The Gambia resort to extraordinary measures, such as circumcising their girls and performing the most severe procedures of FGM, such as type 2 (closing the opening of the vagina), to prevent sexual intercourse before marriage (Faraca, 2023).

The fight to eradicate FGM in The Gambia is challenging due to changing beliefs associated with the conduct of female circumcision. FGM involves a whole section of collaborators united with a common belief system that is difficult to change. There are two opposing sides on the FGM debates: some regard the practice as a violation of women's rights, while others view it as a form of women's empowerment (Carvalho, 2024).

FGM is practiced through a network of social relationships, and there are socially sanctioned consequences for families, girls, and women who refrain from practicing it (Sanneh, 2022). The shame and stigma associated with a girl who has not undergone Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) by her community is often unbearable, and individuals and families are more likely to consider the social consequences of not participating in FGM to be greater than the physically and mentally traumatizing experience they will face when isolated and stigmatized from the rest of the larger community (Omigbodun, Bella-Awusah, Emma-Echiegu, Abdulmalik, Omigbodun, Doucet and Groleau, 2022).

Female genital mutilation (FGM) in The Gambia is a deeply ingrained tradition, often conducted in secluded areas where women isolate themselves from society to teach young girls about gender roles, family responsibilities, and taboo subjects (González-Timoneda, Sánchez, González-Timoneda, and Ros, 2022). Not all ethnic groups in the Gambia practice FGM, with the majority being the Mandinka, Fula, Jola, and Sarahule. However, cross-cultural intermarriages can change this dynamic, as families may adopt FGM practices that go against their culture due to their place of residence.

Female circumcision is one of the few sacred traditional practices in The Gambia where women have total control without the influence of men. The decision for a girl to undergo FGM is primarily a women's choice, and cultural incorporation is a key

factor in explaining these changing dynamics (Kimani, Kabiru, Muteshi, and Guyo, 2020).

In Benin, the relationship between inequalities in access to resources between men and women and poverty has been a major concern for researchers seeking to improve living conditions and social well-being (Grover, 2022). International development has become strongly intertwined with non-governmental organisations and international institutions such as the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in recent decades, with a focus on reducing poverty in developing countries (Singh and Chudasama, 2020). These organisations have emphasised the importance of gender equality and the inclusion of women in development programs and projects at all stages of implementation to promote the empowerment of women, both in developed and developing countries (Sen, 2019). According to Cheteni, Khamfula, and Mah (2019), poverty has a gender dimension, particularly in Benin where rural and agricultural populations are the poorest and women are disproportionately affected by extreme poverty. This inequality can be attributed in part to growing disparities in developing countries, including the unequal distribution of wealth, limited access to education and healthcare, and a lack of resources and infrastructure (Tzenios, 2019).

However, in Benin, the situation of inequality remains pervasive, with traditional practices, lack of education, and resistance to change in rural areas hindering the empowerment of women (Kwauk & Casey, 2021). Therefore, reducing these inequalities between men and women in rural areas has become a key objective of international development projects in recent years. Ayoo (2022) suggests that efforts to reduce poverty should focus on promoting gender equality in human resource development, healthcare, employment, access to physical infrastructure, agriculture, rural development, trade, public safety, and law and order. Some authors, such as Rola-Rubzen, Paris, Hawkins & Sapkota (2020), argue that improving agricultural productivity among women requires policymakers and development agencies to increase women's access to production resources and technology.

Women's disadvantage in productivity is attributed to a slight advantage when all factors affecting productivity are controlled (Singbo, Njuguna-Mungai, Yila, Sissoko & Tabo, 2021). Gender-based inequalities limit women's ability to participate in efforts to enhance agricultural production, reduce poverty, and address food insecurity (Botreau & Cohen, 2020). Reducing these inequalities is a means of improving living conditions and subsequently reducing poverty (Amar & Pratama, 2020). The link between gender and poverty has been extensively debated in the field of research on the economic and social development of countries in the Global South. Unequal access to land between men and women has also emerged as a significant issue in recent years in the context of poverty alleviation and improving the living conditions of rural populations (Wei et al., 2021). Income inequality, gender inequality in the labour market, disparities in decision-making power, unequal access to resources like land, restricted freedom of expression for women, particularly in rural areas, and inequalities in land rights pose obstacles to economic and social development, and consequently, poverty reduction (Gayathri & Vijayabanu, 2021). Inequality in land rights between men and women is seen as another factor hindering development and poverty reduction.

The inclusion of women in socio-economic activities has become a symbol of international development, poverty reduction, and increased empowerment of women in political decision-making and economic outcomes. Women who are heads of households require special attention due to the burdens of poverty, gender discrimination, and lack of support. Female-headed households are common in sub-Saharan Africa and face gender inequalities in income distribution, access to credit, ownership control, labour markets, and social exclusion (Sasa, Adebayo & Maurice, 2022). Vulnerability to poverty is influenced by productive assets available to individuals, with women and children being the most vulnerable due to traditional practices that give them less decision-making power and control over assets (Mokati, Ncube & Bahta, 2022). Targeting women in credit programs increases household welfare and, as a result, reduces poverty (Rui & NIE, 2021). Access to microfinance contributes to poverty reduction, particularly for women who are beneficiaries, and has effects on poverty reduction at the village level (Khan et al., 2021).

Educated women have the ability to manage their husband's issues of violence and can increase their decision-making power at home and in the community (Banerjee, Alok & George, 2020). However, when women are heavily dependent on their husbands and the household revolves around the man, it limits a woman's ability to take control of her own life (Gilman, 2023). Khursheed, Khan & Mustafa (2021) suggest that in order to increase women's economic power and significantly reduce poverty in the context of privatization, it is necessary to increase women's control over new production processes and provide them with new market opportunities. Agricultural interventions should not only target individual women engaged in agriculture but also aim to form women's communities in agriculture.

Benefits of teaching controversial topics in West Africa

Hill & Cohen (2022) argue that there are social and cognitive benefits to discussing controversial topics in the classroom. Learning to voice an opinion and have it contested makes learners more conscious of the diversity of viewpoints that people have and teaches them to accept and tolerate difference. Learners have a right to a broad knowledge base, to grasp a variety of topics, and to be aware of significant issues that could have an impact on both their own and other people's lives. In some circumstances, such as when taking other people's rights and reputations into consideration, the use of this right to free expression shouldn't be restricted.

The following cognitive abilities can be fostered in learners by using difficult material that encourages discussion of sensitive subjects: information processing, reasoning, inquiry, creative thinking, and evaluation. Information is gathered, sorted, classified, sequenced, compared, contrasted, and linkages between various kinds of information are all part of information processing. Justifying beliefs and behaviours, drawing conclusions and deductions, utilizing suitable language to express points of view, and supporting judgments with facts are all examples of reasoning.

Relevant questions must be asked, research objectives and methods must be planned, results must be predicted, and reactions must be anticipated, theories and problems must be investigated, findings must be tested, and concepts and positions must be refined. Generated and extended ideas, potential hypotheses, imaginative use, and searching for alternate results are all components of creative thinking. According to Kadavath, Conerly, Askell, Henighan, Drain, Perez, Schiefer, Hatfield-

Dodds, DasSarma, Tran-Johnson, & Johnston (2022) evaluation include assessing what they read, hear, and do; determining the worth of their own and other people's work or ideas; and not accepting information at face value.

These skills are fundamental in helping in addition to developing into responsible, engaged global citizens, learners also undoubtedly contribute to the advancement of academic achievement and literacy. When teaching contentious subjects, teachers should push learners to interact critically with the media and consider how it shapes their beliefs and attitudes as well as how it shapes their ideas and thinking (Finefter-Rosenbluh & Power, 2023). Many young people today may have constant access to world news and opinions via a variety of internet venues. Young children are exposed to media and have access to web content even at an early age.

One issue is not knowing how to react appropriately to learners' impromptu comments or contentious questions (Rodríguez, 2018). Since learners always have access to social media and the internet on their laptops and mobile devices, it is hard to know when or what will be brought up next, or how it will affect other learners or the environment in the classroom (Reisman, Enumah & Jay, 2020). According to Knowles' (2018) research, attempts to create a stronger bond between education and enduring customs may encounter resistance from learners who view the use of contentious subjects as a forum for discussion and education.

Jay & Reisman (2019) found that African teachers, in their teaching of controversial topics, encounter challenges such as a fear of political interference, teaching approach, availability of educational resources, shortage of qualified and experienced teachers, and societal beliefs. Due to Africa's varied nature, Kaplan & Garner (2018) found that contentious subjects that genuinely evoke learners' emotions are more likely to be misinterpreted there. They go on to say that this could be because learners are less likely to embrace recently presented ideas that could challenge established beliefs and are more emotionally resistive to thoughts that differ from their own. Teachers of African Social Sciences are inclined to steer clear of sex-related subjects like homosexuality and abortion (Levstik & Thornton, 2018). This is especially true in Africa, where it is customary to keep sex-related matters private and not discuss them in public (Jacobson & Joel, 2018).

It takes expertise and experience to lead productive conversations on contentious issues. However, research by Schwartz, 2021; Segall, Crocco, Halvorsen & Jacobsen, (2019) has demonstrated that, generally speaking, teachers may self-censor to foresee potential backlash and steer clear of contentious conversations. Teachers in Africa might respond in response to notice, criticism, or community pressure (Schwartz, 2021). It takes a significant amount of time and in-depth research to teach contentious subjects. This cannot occur in an environment where assessment outcomes, which typically represent rote memorization of the information in most African Social Science classes, are rewarded for the teachers' and learners' performance (Jacobson, 2018).

2.4.8 Teaching Controversial Topics in East Africa

The issue of induced abortion is highly controversial in most East African countries, including Uganda, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, and Ethiopia (Pebalo, Grace & Henry, 2020). This issue becomes even more contentious as teachers express concern about adolescent girls, who are not expected to be sexually active (Sambaiga, Haukanes, Moland & Blystad, 2019). The early sexual activity of these girls is often attributed to fundamental **socio-economic** change, the erosion of moral codes, the loss of familial control, and the abandonment of rituals like initiation ceremonies that prepared adolescents for their adult roles and responsibilities. Consequently, early sexual activity is viewed as a moral problem in East Africa. In a study conducted by Iglesias, Aceituno, and Toledo (2018), some teachers avoided discussing controversial topics because they feared negative judgment from learners, colleagues, and administration. Teaching controversial topics, therefore, presents a challenging task for teachers who must create safe, supportive, and trusting classroom environments where learners feel comfortable sharing unpopular viewpoints while respectfully listening to and considering differing perspectives (Engebretson, 2018).

In classrooms, young people may feel marginalized due to various factors, such as social group, sexual orientation, gender, poverty, race, or handicap (Pace, 2021). Many young people, regardless of age, are likely to be exposed to national and international issues through the media and to feel the effects of controversial topics in their own lives and communities. Young individuals are exposed to possibly false or biased information and run the risk of becoming isolated if they aren't given the chance

to talk about issues that are important to them. Parkhouse (2018), in focus group discussions, discovered that teachers were greatly concerned about the negativity displayed by learners toward one another when debating opposing viewpoints. The study also revealed that learners often became emotional and perceived classmates' remarks as personally offensive, especially in conversations about religion and cross-cultural issues. Furthermore, learners occasionally felt that their lecturers were attacking them because they included material that they believed poorly reflected them or because their honest beliefs were labeled as improper or "politically incorrect" (Jay & Reisman, 2019).

Strong emotions have the potential to quickly polarize classrooms and incite animosity among learners. This may be dangerous for the discipline and atmosphere in the classroom. There is concern that disputes among learners could intensify and become out of control, eroding the authority of the instructor and harming subsequent interactions between the teacher and learners (Mainhard, Oudman, Hornstra, Bosker & Goetz, 2018). According to Sheppard and Levy (2019), there are also some cases when there is worry that this could harm teachers' reputations, both personally and professionally. For example, it is likely to damage a teacher's authority with that class going forward if they lose control of a discussion. In severe situations, parents, community members, and learners may file complaints against the instructor, which prompts a government investigation. According to Schuitema, Radstake, van de Pol, and Veugelers (2018), this can lead to the instructor receiving public criticism or possibly losing their job. For pre-service teachers or newly certified teachers in the early stages of their employment, managing classroom atmosphere and management can be particularly difficult (Sosa, 2020). Managing learners' conversations appears to be the area where problems with class management are most prevalent.

The difficulties of teaching controversial topics are often exacerbated by the dynamic and intricate nature of these topics (Schols, 2019). They need a level of expertise from teachers that they might not get from other topics in the curriculum. Sutra (2021:23) suggests that a basic understanding of the economic, sociological, political, historical, and psychological aspects of these subjects is necessary to fully appreciate their complexity. When it comes to current controversial topics like gender identity and sexual orientation, this is particularly difficult. Because these topics are always

changing, it's challenging for teachers to completely understand them, keep current, and forecast the outcomes (Savenije, Wansink & Logtenberg, 2022).

Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor (2021) highlight that teachers are discouraged not only because of the intricacy of certain topics, but also because they are unfamiliar with them. For example, a teacher who is unfamiliar with a newly emerging human rights issue in a distant part of the world; an urban teacher in a rural school navigating the complexities of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); or a teacher in a mono-cultural small-town school addressing the topic of Islamic extremism (Gibson & Peck, 2018). This can be unsettling for teachers who are accustomed to being seen as subject matter experts and respected for their knowledge and expertise.

Teachers in Africa face limitations in their ability to teach current issues when they rely heavily on textbooks. This is due to financial constraints and a lack of resources in many schools. Social studies, in particular, has a scarcity of educational materials, including textbooks, visual aids, and other essential resources. When these materials are available, they often focus more on content than problem-solving. It's important to note that this lack of resources extends beyond social studies and affects all areas of education in Africa (Milligan, Gibson, & Peck, 2018).

According to Gronostay (2019), many African parents believe that controversial topics should be kept to a minimum and covered under the 'hidden curriculum'. However, avoiding genuine controversy can lead to negative attitudes towards social studies among learners. Intellectually, the avoidance of controversial topics denies learners a reasonable knowledge of a topic. Suppressing multiple perspectives violates learners' dignity by considering them as means to an aim and ignoring their position as moral actors (Jacobsen, 2019).

Benefits of teaching controversial topics in East African countries

In East African countries, learners understand that conflict is inherent in social interactions and should be viewed as a potential learning space (Hung, 2020). Secondly, they understand that arguments are constructed to influence people's opinions. Conrad (2020) claimed that incorporating learners into discussions and allowing them to contribute to the learning process enhances their capacity for thought, gives them a chance to voice their thoughts, and makes them feel heard by others.

Nganga (2020) acknowledges that through discussion, learners increase their awareness of social, political, and environmental issues. He further states that allowing learners talking about controversial topics makes learners more interested in the material and makes the topics more applicable to their daily life. Furthermore, discussing controversial topics also helps learners develop critical decision-making skills, which are considered the heart of social studies education (Conrad, 2020). Effective teaching of controversial topics is thought to include emotional engagement.

According to Ozturk and Kus (2019), learners should be sufficiently engaged with the topics to pique their curiosity and be eager to work hard and solve problems when answering questions. When history teachers support their learners' sense of self and place in the world, there is a significantly higher chance of personal engagement. Emotional and contentious topics are best taught when learners take into account their own allegiances, diverse interests, and identities; they also learn that everyone is both an insider and an outsider in something, and that their values can be contradictory and changeable (Bleazby, Thornton, Burgh, and Graham, 2023).

Ideally, learning challenges local traditions and unearths controversies that help shift learner focus from authoritative narratives and perspectives to heterogeneous micronarratives that draw on and challenge local and individual knowledge (Morgan, 2022). Discussions of controversial topics can help broaden and expand learners' experiences in terms of both the normativity of topics and the multiple perspectives entertained among teachers and peers, to establish understandings and formulate solutions without succumbing to the tyranny of forced meaning (Kauppi and Drerup, 2021). Discussing controversial topics can overlap with ideological battles outside the school or within it, but it surpasses those given the essential mandate for learners to deliberate about the common good, take a stand on issues, and examine them with multiple sources and perspectives (Pantti, Nelimarkka, Nikunen, and Titley, 2019).

2.4.9 Controversies of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences in South Africa

In South Africa, it is not only the prescribed content topics such as apartheid, slavery, and colonialism that can cause controversy but also the procedural thinking concepts that are advanced through the intended curriculum, such as historical evidence, empathy, and multi-perspectivity (Ogunniyi, 2023). It must be pointed out that

underpinning the South African curriculum in which such concepts are deeply embedded in the Schools Act (Act no. 84 of 1996) and its subsequent amendments, which, in line with the South African constitution, foreground human rights and equality and prohibit any form of discrimination. The perceived opinions of the majority of learners in a class can be used to define the opinion climate in that classroom (Táŭwò, 2022). People are less inclined to voice their opinions if they believe that they conflict with the dominant viewpoint, a phenomenon known as the spiral of silence, which is why the opinion climate and participation are related (Crozier, 2020).

This could be because of the fear of social rejection and loneliness that comes with holding an opinion that is different from the majority. As to Matthews (2018), the spiral of silence theory postulates that this phenomenon results in the gradual amplification of perceived majority opinions and the suppression of perceived minority ideas. According to Wansink, Mol, Kortekaas, and Mainhard (2023), shame is caused by threats resulting from social appraisal or rejection. Shame is also linked to submission, withdrawal, and disengagement, all of which may have an impact on participation. In fact, Crozier (2020) discovered that learners who faced rejection from their peers later on showed inhibitions in vocal class involvement. According to Conrad (2020), learners may become anxious during class discussions because of their peers' opinions, particularly if they are thought to be influential.

Regarding sociocultural divisions in the classroom based on race and class, Geller (2020) showed that minority learners do not want to express their opinions if they are perceived to be different from the classroom majority, especially when the teacher fails to take hierarchies of status and authorities into account. If learners believe their viewpoint differs from that of the majority of the class during discussions of contentious matters, they may feel less comfortable participating (Li, 2022). The presence of sociocultural disparities may also contribute to this perception of difference.

The teacher, in her role as gatekeeper, has to make a snap decision on whether to handle a contentious matter that crops up in class. Studies show that even when contentious topics are included in the curriculum, most teachers steer clear of them. Fear of the responses of learners, parents, and administrators, along with a lack of experience and understanding in the field, are the main causes of this avoidance (Garrett & Alvey, 2021). It is easier for teachers to defend avoiding contentious topics

when they are not mandated to teach them because the same arguments also hold true for contentious topics that naturally come up in the classroom. As a result of criticism directed towards teachers who tackle controversial topics head-on in the classroom, avoidance has become even more apparent.

In a previous exploratory study, the authors (Cassar et al., 2021) examined what teachers define as unexpected, controversial topics in the classroom—the "what" question, if you will, outside of the constraints of time, thought, and lesson planning. We investigate the "why" question in the present work. We make a distinction between addressing ad hoc problematic matters and teaching controversial topics. There is an assumed and purposeful attempt on the part of the instructor to teach or integrate controversial themes in the classroom to develop certain competences within specific courses when doing so is part of a planned instructional activity (Journell, 2018).

Learners may nevertheless bring up controversial topics on their own, even if teachers were able to exclude them from the official curriculum. In these cases, teachers must either accept the concerns as legitimate or ignore them. Teachers take advantage of the unscripted moment when they actively address a contentious subject that comes up naturally in the classroom (Xaba & Akinola, 2023). This allows their pedagogical decisions to align with their sense of social purpose.

Apartheid and its influence on contemporary South Africa have sparked many opinions and discussions because it appears to represent the unjust treatment of whites. Furthermore, teaching about colonialism in the classroom generally generates controversy due to sad recollections of historical events (Carlsson, 2023). Jweid, Abdalqader, and Abdalqader (2022) add that teachers always find it difficult to discuss themes of race, ethnicity, and identity since they are sensitive topics that may raise issues of privilege and discrimination in multi-racial classrooms. Discussing economic disparities may be contentious because it raises questions about wealth distribution and past injustices (Dobuzinskis, 2023). Land redistribution and restitution for past land disposals are currently being debated (Xaba & Akinola, 2023). This is a controversial subject as it involves property rights and economic interests. Meyer (2023) claims that when teachers educate about different political beliefs, it often leads to ideological confrontations, particularly during election years. Teachers struggle to

provide safe spaces for free discourse and present diverse viewpoints to stimulate critical thinking and respectful dialogues in order to address these concerns.

Within the literature, a range of other roles that History teachers should fulfil are identified in order to monitor the effective instruction of controversial topics. Establishing ground rules for behaviour and interaction, modelling respect and tolerance, adopting multiple perspectives on a subject, taking on multiple roles—such as referees and good listeners—and treating every learner with dignity and respect—regardless of what they say or who they are, are a few examples of those that fall under this category.

Balancing free expression with responsible teaching, on the other hand, is a continuing struggle. Teaching controversial topics is difficult in South Africa due to the country's continuing socioeconomic concerns and complicated history (Knott, Rao, Summers, & Teeger, 2022).

Benefits of teaching controversial topics in South Africa

It might be argued that a greater emphasis on issue-based teaching in the classroom is necessary if the aim of Social Science education is to produce intelligent, caring, reasonable, involved, and responsible citizens (Harms, 2019). This argument is especially strong in light of South Africa's diverse, evolving, and ethnically divided societies. The inclusion of controversial themes in the curriculum is necessary because fundamental issues such as ethnicity are difficult to contain inside neat disciplinary lines. Interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and extra-disciplinary subjects that often deal with social, political, cultural, economic, ethical, and scientific facets of existence are considered controversial (Yacek, 2018). Learners will encounter controversy and conflict at some point in their lives, either directly or indirectly. As a result, teachers should give learners the abilities and attitudes they need to handle conflict and come to a reasonable, considerate, and sensitive conclusion (Moreira, Moura, & Teixeira, 2022). According to Craig & Roza (2022), teachers in democracies ought to lead class discussions on contentious issues relating to the curriculum. Manyane makes the case for teaching learners about contentious historical issues, pointing out that in a community that has been split throughout history, this can help foster understanding and provide learners with the knowledge they need to make wise decisions (Parks, 2023). He feels that it's critical to educate oneself on contentious

topics that are both process- and product-based. According to this, becoming knowledgeable about contentious issues is neither a goal in and of itself nor a means to one. The intended results for learners are instead the abilities, processes, and skills acquired during the investigation and study of contentious subjects. Learners acquire knowledge of theories, concepts, and generalizations by means of a process-oriented analysis of particular problems. According to Manyane, critical, democratic, and holistic education in the Social Sciences (history) requires the use of both process- and product-based methods (Mafuya, 2022). This is something they ought to do to improve learners' civic competency.

In this study, I aimed to advance this discussion by examining current curriculum in teacher education and identifying knowledge gaps on contentious issues. I intended to examine programs for teacher preparation and suggests cooperative structures. The goal was to pinpoint areas where teachers are lacking in training and create professional development initiatives that will provide them with the tools they need to lead delicate conversations. As a result, this study enhanced the educational experience of the Intermediate Phase and advanced our understanding of how to teach contentious subjects in the social sciences.

2.4.10 Chapter Summary

Regardless of the controversies and opportunities shown in the literature on the teaching of controversial topics, there is still a need to gain deeper insights into how teachers should handle these topics in the classroom when teaching Social Sciences. Moreover, there is still a challenge in finding the balance between teaching controversial topics and trying to keep the atmosphere neutral to mitigate sensitivities when dealing with these topics. Critical social theory was used as a lens to explore the opportunities The difficulties that teachers encounter when teaching learners on contentious Social Science topics in the Intermediate Phase.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains the methodology [the researcher](#) used to collect evidence related to the main and sub-research questions about the opportunities and challenges faced by teachers when teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at Intermediate Phase schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district in Free State. The research paradigm, research design, study population, sample techniques, and data collection tools are all covered. The selection of these methodologies was justified in light of the study's aim and objectives. Furthermore, concerns of reliability and credibility, data interpretation and analysis, and ethical implications are also examined.

3.2. Research paradigm

A transformative paradigm is utilised in this study, which views knowledge as a socially constructed aspect shaped by the personal experiences, traits, and community affiliations of the knower (Kronenberg, 2024). This paradigm is grounded in the recognition of pervasive inequalities and injustices and emphasises the importance of evaluation and research in addressing social challenges (Loud, 2021). The relevance of the transformative paradigm in this study lies in its capacity to enable social transformation, particularly in the context of teaching controversial topics within the Social Sciences curriculum in Intermediate Phase classrooms. Furthermore, it suggests that we should adopt a different understanding of the world, thereby influencing our daily experiences and actions.

3.3. Research Approach

This study adopted [a](#) qualitative research approach. Qualitative research, as defined by Chalmers & Cowdell (2021), involves gathering and analysing non-numerical data to understand individuals' social reality, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations. This approach is particularly useful in educational research as it allows for the exploration of "how" and "why" research questions and provides deeper insights into experiences, phenomena, and contexts (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). It also allows for the exploration of questions that cannot be easily quantified to understand human experiences. By adopting this approach, the researcher engaged [in](#) detailed and probing questioning

of respondents, seeking to comprehend their intentions and emotions (Dalkin, Forster, Hodgson, Lhussier & Carr, 2021).

This study aimed to investigate Social Sciences History teachers in grade six Intermediate Phase classrooms. The teachers were interviewed about specific controversial topics included in the Intermediate Phase Social Sciences curriculum. Through these interviews, the study sought to identify any cultural variations in the topics and any guidelines or standards for teaching controversial topics. Additionally, the interviews will cover topics such as resources and materials used, teaching methods, the benefits and challenges of discussing controversial topics with learners, and strategies for fostering respect for individual opinions.

The main focus of this qualitative study was to explore the legal and policy implications that teachers face when teaching controversial subjects. The study also examined how teachers create a safe and inclusive learning environment when discussing these topics, ensuring that diverse perspectives are respected. To achieve these objectives, the study employed semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to ensure the reliability and transferability of the findings and conclusions.

3.4. Research design

For this dissertation, the qualitative research design selected is narrative analysis. Macgilchrist (2021) defines narrative analysis as a set of techniques focused on stories from various perspectives, including "storyteller" and "analyst." This method involves examining and interpreting specific viewpoints using narrative analysis forms like thematic or structural narrative analysis. Narrative analysis also enhanced the trustworthiness and transferability of the findings by demonstrating how the opportunities and challenges teachers encounter when teaching controversial topics in Intermediate Phase classrooms vary or remain consistent across different contexts, settings, or situations.

Moreover, narrative analysis will allow me to explore the complexity and diversity of the opportunities and challenges teachers face when teaching learners contentious Social Science issues, while fully encompassing the multiple aspects, dimensions, and viewpoints involved. By comparing and contrasting different perspectives, I gained a deeper and broader understanding of the opportunities and challenges teachers experience when teaching controversial topics. Additionally, narrative analysis had the

potential to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research by providing more evidence and data to support the findings. Narrative analysis increased the transferability and applicability of this research by demonstrating how the findings can be relevant and useful for different audiences, contexts, or scenarios.

3.5 Research site

The data on the opportunities and challenges teachers face when teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at Intermediate Phase schools was collected in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district in the Free State. The schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district, where the data was gathered, present a challenging environment for teaching controversial Social Science topics.

3.6 Target population

Intermediate Phase Social Sciences teachers in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district were the focus of this study. The term "target population" refers to the entire group of people that a researcher is interested in studying and analysing (Schroeder, Bourne, Doyle, Hellard, Stoove, & Pedrana, 2022). For the purpose of this study, I purposefully selected two Social Sciences teachers from each of the five different schools for in-depth examination and analysis.

3.7. Sampling procedures

There are various sampling techniques available for research. However, for this study, the researcher has chosen purposive sampling. This method allows for the intentional selection of schools and Social Sciences Intermediate Phase teachers to directly participate in the research (Hewson, 2024). In this study, I intentionally selected ten Social Sciences teachers from five primary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district. These teachers held qualifications that ranged from an Advanced Certificate in Intermediate Phase teaching with a specialisation in the Social Sciences Education to a Master of Education degree. They were chosen because they are specifically trained to teach Social Sciences at this level. Both male and female teachers were selected from each school. The study took place in township schools, each of which has two or more grade six classes. Only teachers with five or more years of experience in teaching Social Sciences were selected for this study. Through this sampling method, I can collect qualitative responses, which provides better insights and more accurate research results. This type of sampling is advantageous for this study

because it deliberately selects Intermediate Phase teachers who possess knowledge and experience in dealing with the challenges and opportunities of teaching controversial Social Science topics. It is also worth noting that these teachers had five or more years of experience teaching Social Sciences and have voluntarily agreed to participate in the study over a two-month period. I anticipated that these teachers possess adequate subject-matter knowledge for teaching Social Sciences in the Intermediate Phase, considering their professional training and background. The study involved the analysis of narratives from ten Social Sciences Intermediate Phase teachers using a multiple narrative analysis approach.

3.8. Data collection strategies

In this study, data collection was done using two main strategies. These are focus group discussions and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The table below provides an overview of how the study's data was collected.

Table 1: Data collection process in this study (figure 1).

Sub-research questions	Data collection strategy	Data source
1. Which topics are identified by Intermediate Phase teachers as controversial in Social Sciences?	-Semi-structured interviews - Focus Group Discussions (FGD's)	- Intermediate Phase Social Sciences teachers
2. How are controversial topics taught in the Social Sciences curriculum in the Intermediate Phase?	-Semi-structured interviews -Focus group Discussions	-Intermediate Phase Social Sciences teachers
3. What opportunities and challenges are encountered by Social Sciences teachers when teaching controversial	- Semi-structured interviews - Focus Group Discussions	-Intermediate Phase Social Sciences teachers

topics in the Intermediate Phase?		
4. What lessons can be learnt from the teaching of controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum?	-Semi-structured interviews - Focus Group Discussions	-Intermediate Phase Social Sciences teachers

3.9. Semi-structured interviews

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the ten primary school Social Sciences teachers. These interviews were audio-recorded and took place between January and March 2024. The purpose of these interviews was to allow the teachers to discuss the challenges they face when teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences, as well as the opportunities available to them in teaching these topics.

Through these interviews, I gained insights into the teachers' knowledge of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences classrooms. Mansouri, Ghanatios, Hatzinger, Barich, Dampha, Temple, Clemency & Hostler (2022) note that interviews enable researchers to ask a set of questions in a specific order, which helps identify patterns in responses and facilitate comparison between participants while controlling for other factors. This reduced research biases and increased the study's trustworthiness and confirmability. The interviews allowed me to inquire about the opportunities that teachers have to address the challenges they face when teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences during the Intermediate Phase. Ten interviews were done over a period of three months, with each interview lasting roughly an hour. Through conducting interviews with all of the teachers, I was able to compile comparable information about how Social Science teachers approach the challenges of teaching learners on controversial topics as well as the opportunities that come with doing so. I created interview protocols (Appendixes A&B) to direct the conversations with each teacher, ensuring that the interviews were insightful and focused.

Three types of interview questions were used: main, follow-up, and probing questions. According to Robinson (2023), probing involves asking follow-up questions when responses are not fully understood, are vague or ambiguous, or when more specific

or in-depth information is desired. The main questions were deeper ones that asked teachers to consider their experiences in the classroom and share their thoughts on both the challenges and opportunities they experienced when teaching learners on contentious Social Science topics in the Intermediate Phase. After the teachers answered in order to get additional specific examples and explanations about the opportunities and challenges mentioned, I used follow-up and probing questions in addition to the main question. These probing and follow-up questions were written in small print below the main question for easy reference.

3.10 Interview and Ethics

The ten teachers who took part in this study did so voluntarily. Teachers of [Social Sciences](#) were not compelled or forced to engage in any way by me. They agreed to participate in my study of their own free will. I provided them with consent forms to read and sign, which served as evidence of their voluntary participation. According to Husband (2020), all research participants must give their permission to be part of a study and must be provided with relevant information to make an "informed" consent to participate. To enable my research participants to make an "informed" decision about participation, I made sure to give them all the information they needed to know about the study. I told every Social Science teacher that they may leave the study at any moment, for any reason, and that they didn't have to give a reason. Each teacher was interviewed for about an hour at a time at their individual school during their non-teaching working hours (see to Appendixes A & B). The interview locations within school premises were chosen based on the facilities that each school offered. The teachers were asked to choose a comfortable spot for their interviews.

3.11 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Pseudonyms were used to conceal the true identities of the Social Sciences teachers who acted as cases in this study and the sampled schools to maintain their confidentiality. It is essential to respect the privacy and protect the identities of all participants involved in research that involves human subjects. By safeguarding the identities of the Social Sciences teachers, the data gathered in this study is shielded from potential embarrassment or exposure to their supervisory authorities. In research ethics, confidentiality encompasses the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that

any use or sharing of information obtained from human subjects upholds the dignity and autonomy of the participants while also safeguarding the interests of individuals and communities (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). As a researcher, I have not shared the findings from the Semi -Structured Interviews and Focus Group Discussions sharing this information with other teachers or site administrators, as it might be used against the participants. I ensured anonymity and confidentiality by not disclosing my findings to any other research site teachers, except from the participants themselves.

3.12 Data analysis and interpretation

Identifying themes and patterns in the data was one of the tasks involved in the analysis of the qualitative data in this study. This process was facilitated by organizing the data into codes and categories. According to Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019), coding is the process of labelling and organizing qualitative data to identify different themes and their relationships. Coding and categorizing the data helped me understand the information and identify important themes. The collected data included various sources, such as semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions. Focus groups were conducted to gather as much information as possible about the opportunities and challenges teachers face when teaching controversial topics. The data was collected systematically to ensure accuracy. Once the data was coded and categorized, it was then interpreted. The analysis focused on understanding the meaning behind each theme and what it can tell us about the participants and the context being studied.

The final step of the analysis involved summarizing the collected data and writing a report that clearly presents the results of the analysis. This report aims to inform policymakers, Social Sciences researchers, and other interested individuals who seek to understand the collected data.

3.13 Data analysis using thematic analysis

The collected data were analysed thematically, which involved a continuous back-and-forth process of collecting and analysing evidence. After conducting the semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions, without delay, the data was printed, transcribed, and manually filed in preparation for coding and further analysis. This process of conducting interviews, transcribing, and analysing the data was

repeated until all ten Social Sciences teachers were interviewed over the eight-week fieldwork period. The narrative analysis involved simultaneous data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Each of the ten Social Sciences teachers had a narrative created from the data gathered, and an intra-case analysis was done to look at the opportunities and challenges each teacher faced in their Grade six classrooms.

3.14 Emerging themes

Through focus groups, field notes, and semi-structured interviews, I gathered an enormous quantity of qualitative data. Based on the emerging themes about the opportunities and challenges teachers encounter while teaching learners on controversial topics in Grade six classes, I coded this data. To ensure meaningful data, I made sure that similar data received similar tags by condensing the evidence into themes, sub-themes, and categories. According to Hassani, Dackermann, Mousavi, and Li (2023:15), the purpose of compiling and categorizing data is to "aggregate data into a small number of themes" to effectively analyse the findings. Several themes emerged from the data collected for this research. These themes gave rise to sub-themes, which were then further explored in detail to find underlying trends, patterns, and cause-and-effect relationships in the data. The data analysis method became more systematic as a result of my ability to organise the data into pertinent and manageable categories through the thematic analysis of the data into sub-themes.

3.15 Data coding

The study's primary themes for data coding came from the research questions. Prior to any data being gathered, these questions were created and informed by the studied literature. However, when the data had been gathered, the sub-themes, categories, and codes were identified (pilot study). Data coding involves labelling and organizing qualitative data to identify themes and patterns (Locke, Feldman, and Golden-Biddle, 2022). The coding process provided structure to the free-form data, allowing for systematic evaluation. In this qualitative study, I approached my findings with rigour, analysis, and reflection due to the coding process. Similar data were assigned common codes based on the topics, categories and sub-themes determined by the research questions.

3.16 Data synthesis

After coding the data from each narrative study into various categories, the data was analysed, contrasted, compared, and synthesized. This allowed for an exploration of how contentious topics are taught in Grade six classrooms and an interpretation of the opportunities and challenges that teachers face when doing so. Qualitative research synthesis employs a wide range of techniques to integrate information from multiple studies on a subject, generating new theories, applications, and knowledge. The application of qualitative research synthesis is rapidly spreading across academic fields (Shen & Chong, 2023).

Comparative data analysis and synthesis were conducted to identify similarities and differences in how these ten Social Sciences teachers understand and teach controversial topics. Cross-case synthesis was employed to draw conclusions about the opportunities and challenges teachers encounter when teaching controversial topics in Grade Six Social Sciences classrooms. Regarding the examination of opportunities and challenges in teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences classes in the Intermediate Phase, the findings of the cross-case analysis enabled me to either support or contradict existing literature.

3.17 Trustworthiness of the study

In their qualitative study on opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase, trustworthiness was addressed in various ways. The truthfulness or truth value of the qualitative research and the openness of the study's methodology were essential to ensuring the findings' applicability and integrity. In this section, I will discuss the components of trustworthiness in this study.

In this study, to prove that the results are reliable, I decided to apply the ideas of credibility, dependability, and transferability. Credibility is a term used to describe how well qualitative research measures truth value, or whether the study's conclusions are true and accurate. It depends, in part, on the researchers' own reputation and the caliber of their work (Daniel, 2019). In this study, credibility was applied to establish or ensure that the research findings give a correct interpretation of the participants' original opinions and reflect credible information derived from the original data collected by the Social Sciences teachers. To reduce biases during data collection and

analysis, as a researcher, I recognized my personal biases and employed techniques such as thick description, member checking, and prolonged engagement at research sites.

3.18 Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research is closely related to reliability. It measures the extent to which a research study can be replicated by another researcher and produce the same results (Díaz, Pérez, Gallardo & González-Prieto, 2023). To ensure dependability, the study began by tracking semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions, conducting analysis and interpretation, and providing sufficient contextual information so that other researchers could theoretically replicate the study and obtain consistent findings. Sujana and Dharmawan (2023) state that one technique for evaluating a qualitative study's dependability is an inquiry audit carried out by an outside party. I ensured dependability by implementing rigorous data collection procedures and well-documented analysis. The process logs included detailed researcher notes of all activities undertaken during the study and decisions made regarding aspects such as participant selection for interviews.

3.19 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which other researchers can confirm the findings of a research study (Awan, Yahya & Arif, 2023). It is used to demonstrate that this qualitative research is unbiased and not influenced by my assumptions or biases as the researcher. To establish confirmability, I have provided a detailed audit trail that shows every stage of the data analysis procedure, guaranteeing that my conclusions fairly represent participant replies and are unaffected by conscious or unconscious bias. Additionally, in this study, confirmability of the qualitative data was ensured through thorough checks and rechecks during data collection and analysis, ensuring the accuracy of the findings. A clear coding schema was used to identify the codes and patterns discovered during the analysis to document confirmability. Member checking of the data was also conducted, and semi-structured interviews were held, or reflexivity was practised to confront any potential personal biases.

3.20 Transferability

According to Olesen, Christensen & O'Neill (2021), transferability refers to the extent to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or applied to other

contexts or settings. In this study, transferability was achieved through a "thick description" of the findings obtained from the narrative study. This was done by presenting readers with evidence that demonstrates the applicability of the research findings to other contexts, situations, timeframes, and populations. As a researcher, it was my responsibility to provide the evidence that substantiates the applicability of the findings.

3.21 Authenticity

The term "authenticity" describes how well researchers represent the diverse viewpoints and beliefs of the study participants and how they encourage systemic, and participant change throughout the analysis process. There are criteria for both authenticity and trustworthiness that help researchers evaluate the degree of rigor in their findings (Zhang, Zheng, Huang, Lee & Hyun, 2023). The researcher satisfied this criterion by selecting Intermediate Phase Social Sciences teachers as suitable participants for the study sample and by providing a thorough and detailed description.

3.22 Researcher's personal biases

Researcher bias occurs when a researcher's perspective influences the results of a study (Younas, Fàbregues, Durante, Escalante, Inayat & Ali, 2023). To avoid this, I used the interviewees' own words and asked for clarification if necessary. I sought elaboration from responders before adding information, showed them my data results, and provided contact information for myself and my supervisors. I kept detailed records of all research materials.

3.23 Rich and thick descriptions

Interview transcriptions, completed with semi-structured and focus group discussion protocols, the fieldwork memos served as the foundation for the primary data that was utilised to compile a thorough narrative of each teacher. Thick and detailed descriptions of each Social Sciences teacher's possibilities and obstacles in teaching contentious topics in their classroom contexts were made possible by the teachers' own words from the in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and fieldwork notes. As I could cite teacher's exact words from the taped interviews, audio-recorded interviews helped me minimize my own biases and subjectivity while transcribing and analysing the interview data. At the conclusion of each day, I collected and recorded

my reflecting memories (called fieldwork notes), which enabled me to create extensive and in-depth summaries of each of the 10 teachers.

3.24 Member checking

I followed up with the ten teachers to confirm that the data interpretation and analysis appropriately reflected their opinions to make sure the gathered data is authentic and trustworthy. In essence, member checking is when participants in a qualitative study validate their data, checking for accuracy and validity (McKim, 2023). Member checking happened during data collection when I summarized and confirmed the interpretation of what a participant said. I presented the study's main findings, the teachers' personal profiles, and representations of their respective schools to the Social Science teachers so they could voice any questions or concerns as needed. To ensure that the teachers' ways of teaching controversial topics in the classroom were correctly documented, I promptly corrected any misinterpretations or misrepresentations I had made in conversation with the teachers. The findings of this study were more broadly applicable to comparable circumstances due to the meticulous data collection and analysis that was conducted utilizing well-organised and described procedures.

3.25 Ethical considerations

Ethics encompasses the application of fundamental ethical principles to research activities. These principles include the design and implementation of research, respect for society and others, the use of resources and research outputs, scientific misconduct, and the regulation of research (Kambhampati, Menon & Maini, 2023). In this study, ethics were the guiding principles that the researcher had to uphold when conducting research involving intermediate Phase Social Sciences teachers. These principles included requesting approval for conducting the study, getting informed consent, making sure that participation is voluntary, protecting confidentiality and anonymity, being honest, and providing accurate reporting. The researcher is responsible for protecting participants from physical and psychological discomfort, such as the loss of positive self-esteem and embarrassment, during semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions, or any other activities in which the researcher and teachers participate during and after the data-gathering process (Sologuren-García, Linares, Flores, Mendoza-Mamani, Pilco, Escobar-Bermejo, Sotelo-Gonzales & Palza-Portugal, 2023).

3.27 Permission to conduct research

Permission to conduct the research was granted by the university's ethical clearance committee. To gain access to the school, permission was requested from the Free State Department of Education (FSDoE) in writing, and the principals of the schools involved in the study were also requested to give permission to conduct research. All were assured of anonymity in the study and that data generated would be kept safely until the end of the study. Ethical issues were highlighted for participants to address confidentiality, non-identification of participants, and data that emerged in this study. Each participant received details of the study verbally during the preliminary meeting and consent forms written in the language they would understand. Participants were asked during the meeting if they wished to be included in the study, and if they agreed, they were requested to complete the consent form. Informed consent focused on two main areas. Firstly, all participants would receive sufficient information about the study (Lobo, Frølich, Abdelrazek, Rasmussen, Grundy, Livingston, Islam & Kensing, 2023) that was written in a suitable language and format so that they understood the implications of what they were agreeing to. Secondly, participation would be voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time during the study if they wished. Participants were given responsibility in the research proceedings and were encouraged to ask questions for clarity.

3.28 Summary

This study utilised critical social theory to analyse the key elements of modern society and identify contradictions that can help transcend its inherent pathologies and forms of dominance. It employed a transformative paradigm that recognizes inequalities and injustices while acknowledging the importance of evaluation and research in addressing social challenges. The qualitative approach was used to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by teachers in teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences classrooms in the Intermediate Phase. Narrative analysis was utilised to delve into the complexity and richness of these challenges, capturing their multiple dimensions, perspectives, and facets. Purposive sampling techniques were employed to ensure the credibility of the findings. The study examined ten Social Sciences teachers over a three-month period, using semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions to reduce personal biases and subjectivity, and member checking.

Chapter four presents how Social Sciences teachers discuss their experiences of teaching controversial topics in grade six classrooms.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents and analyses primary evidence collected from ten Social Sciences teachers in Intermediate Phase Schools through semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions. The evidence aims to investigate how these teachers address the challenges they encounter when teaching controversial topics in Intermediate Phase classrooms, as well as the opportunities available for teaching such topics. The chapter is organised as follows: main and sub-research questions, background information of the participants, presentation of data, analysis, and discussion.

This study's primary research question is: What are the opportunities and challenges involved in teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase?

Therefore, the following sub-questions assisted in creating a narrative for each theme:

1. Which topics are identified by Intermediate-Phase teachers as controversial in Social Sciences?
2. How are controversial topics taught in the Social Sciences curriculum in the Intermediate Phase?
3. What opportunities and challenges are encountered by Social Sciences teachers when teaching controversial topics in the Intermediate Phase?
4. What lessons can be learned from teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum?

A thematic approach is used to identify the challenges they face in their classrooms while teaching controversial topics and the opportunities they encounter.

4.2. Participants' background information

Ten primary school Social Science teachers in the Intermediate Phase participated in this study. The study was conducted in five primary schools located in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District of the Free State province. The participants varied in age, ranging from 28 to 60 years old. They had teaching experience of five to twenty-five years and held qualifications that ranged from an Advanced Certificate in Education to

a Master of Education degree. The table below provides a summary of the ten teachers backgrounds.

Table 2: Participants' background information

Semi-structured interviews	Age	Gender	Qualification	Teaching Grade	Teaching Experience
Zukiswa	30	F	Master of Education	Gr. 4-6	10 years
Thando	28	M	B-Ed (Hons)	Gr. 4-6	6 years
Thuto	35	M	B- Ed	Gr. 4-6	11 years
Zethu	29	F	B - Ed	Gr. 4-6	5 years
Siyanda	28	M	B-Ed	Gr.6	5 years
Focus group					
TEACHER 1	38	M	B.Ed. (Hons)	Gr. 4-6	6 years
TEACHER 2	35	M	B.Ed.	Gr. 4-6	8 years
TEACHER 3	47	M	B.Ed.	Gr. 4-6	25 years
TEACHER 4	28	M	Advanced Certificate	Gr. 4-6	5 years
Teacher 5	60	M	B- Ed (Hons)	Gr.4-6	30 years

4.3 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The results from the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions are presented, explained and analysed in this section. This study aims to investigate how teachers taught controversial topics in Social Sciences in the Intermediate Phase. The transcripts were analysed using the steps outlined in Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis, as covered in Chapter 3. The four above-mentioned sub-research topics served as the basis for the analysis. The manual categorization of the interview transcripts produced the themes and sub-themes shown in the table below.

Table 3: Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Topics identified by teachers as controversial.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of controversial topics. • Topics identified as controversial. • Controversial topics can change over time. • Alignment with curriculum guidelines. • Impact on learner’s engagement.
2. ways in which teachers teach controversial topics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences in how controversial topics are taught. • Learners' responses to how controversial topics are taught. • Strategies to address biases.
3. Opportunities & challenges.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities • Professional development (Opportunity and challenge). • Tolerance (opportunity). • Challenges • Teaching techniques. • Improving learner engagement.
4. Lessons learned from teaching controversial topics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different cultural contexts. • Evidence of effective teaching.

Based on participant comments and quotes from a focus group and semi-structured interviews, the following sections present the major themes and sub-themes.

4.3.1. Theme 1: Definition of controversial topics

This theme addresses the sub-research question, which explores how Intermediate Phase teachers define controversial topics in Social Science. The participants' interview transcripts revealed the following sub-themes: Definition of controversial

topics; Identification of controversial topics; Changes in controversial topics over time; Alignment with curriculum guidelines; Impact on learner engagement.

Sub-theme 1: Definition of controversial topics

In this sub-theme, **the researcher** wanted to get teachers understanding and way in which they define controversial topics in the Social Sciences. Teacher Thuto preferred to define controversial topics as: *“subjects that spark disagreement and conflicting opinion amongst individuals, groups, or societies”*.

On the other hand, teacher Zukiswa shared her definition of controversial topics as, *“topics that spur impassionate debates, fuel intellectual curiosity, and drive scholarly inquiries”*. She further added to that, *“these topics challenge established doctrines, prompt us to re-examine entrenched positions and urge us to re-imagine possible future*. Moreover, teacher Thando of Nzimase Primary shares his definition of these topics as he conceptualizes them as *“issue that sparks intense debate, disagreement, and divergent perspectives”*. He further added that, *“topics like this contends established norms convention and accepted truth inviting learners to grab with the complex moral, philosophically and socio-political dilemmas”*

Teacher 1 of the focus group defined these topics as *“topics that require a comprehensive understanding of their nature, a safe and inclusive classroom environment”*.

Teacher 3: *“These subjects are contentious because they are delicate and may cause parents and learners to feel uneasy or disagree”*.

Teachers' explanations of contentious Social Science issues are comparable but different in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Thando, Zukiswa, and Thuto emphasise that contentious issues give rise to discord, discussion, and divergent viewpoints among individuals, communities, or societies. In particular, Thando and Thuto noted that these subjects go against intellectual curiosity, customs, and norms. According to Zukiswa, contentious subjects pique people's intellectual interest, inspire academic research, and force us to reconsider our long-held beliefs and consider alternative scenarios.

An explanation that aligns more closely with classroom practice is offered by the focus group teachers. According to Teacher 1, a secure and welcoming classroom atmosphere is necessary for discussing contentious subjects, as well as having a thorough understanding of their nature. Teacher 3 notes that these subjects are controversial because they can cause anxiety or conflict between parents and learners.

During the focus group discussion, teachers emphasised five classroom management issues, while the teachers in the semi-structured interview focused more on the sociological and intellectual aspects of controversial topics. All teachers agree that these subjects are contentious, debatable, and challenge ideas. During the semi-structured interview, teachers delve into the philosophical and future-oriented aspects of contentious subjects in greater detail.

In the context of Social Science research, I would define controversial topics as those that provoke passionate discussions, challenge conventional wisdom, and require a sophisticated understanding of their ethical, philosophical, and socio-political dimensions. It is crucial to establish a secure and welcoming classroom environment that encourages critical thinking and intellectual curiosity before introducing these topics. While acknowledging the possibility of disagreement and discomfort, teachers must be prepared to guide learners through the conflicts.

Sub-theme 2: Topics identified as controversial.

Intermediate Phase teachers from the focus group and semi-structured interviews were asked to identify the topics they consider controversial in the subject of Social Sciences. Their responses were recorded based on their understanding and opinion, as indicated below:

Teacher 1,2 and 4 from a focus group discussion said:

Teacher 1: *“I find the teaching of discrimination, particularly, tribal discrimination, gender roles and stereotypes as controversial”.*

Teacher 2: *“. I regularly teach sexual orientation, racial discrimination, and religious diversity as controversial topics”.*

Teacher 4: *“I focus on the teaching of “local history” as controversial topic in grade six classrooms. Because of problems with race, gender, class, culture, language, and politics, studying local history in classroom can be controversial.”*

Teachers from semi-structured interviews also had their share on the topics they focus on in their classrooms:

Zethu: *“I think the teaching of intolerance, religious diversity and intolerance are the ones we frequently identify as controversial. Other topics include sustainable development, environmental degradation and climatic or weather changes”.*

Thando: *“we talk about apartheid, its causes and the ramifications of apartheid, feminism, stereotypes, and gender roles as controversial topics”.*

Zukiswa: *“I specialize in racism, discrimination, tribalism, and xenophobia”.*

The significance of teaching social justice and equality was emphasised in group discussions as well as semi-structured interviews. Teachers highlighted the importance of confronting discrimination, especially in relation to gender norms, tribalism, and stereotypes. Zethu, Thando, and Zukiswa, as well as the quotations from Teachers 1, 2, and 4, all touch on this issue.

According to the data analysis, teachers may understand the importance of inclusion and diversity in the classroom. They make a commitment to promoting an accepting and respectful society, as seen by their emphasis on teaching tolerance, religious diversity, and environmental sustainability. The quotations from Thando and Teacher 4 emphasise the need to educate about local history and the effects of apartheid. This subject highlights how crucial it is to comprehend the historical background to address modern societal concerns.

While social justice and equality were discussed in both focus groups and semi-structured interviews, the particular topics highlighted varied. Semi-structured interviews focused on the value of teaching tolerance, religious diversity, and environmental sustainability, whereas focus group discussions centred on teaching discrimination, specifically tribal discrimination, gender roles, and stereotypes. The historical background of social issues

was given additional weight in the semi-structured interviews when Thando talked about the origins and effects of apartheid. This shows that teachers are aware of how critical it is to comprehend the past while discussing current societal challenges.

The data suggests that teachers recognize the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives in their classrooms. This includes addressing discrimination, promoting tolerance, and teaching about environmental sustainability. The emphasis on historical context in the semi-structured interviews highlights the need for teachers to contextualize social issues in their classrooms. This approach can help learners better understand the complexities of social issues and develop more nuanced perspectives.

The data implies that teachers should adopt interdisciplinary approaches to address social issues. This could involve integrating subjects like history, social studies, and environmental science to provide a comprehensive understanding of social issues.

In summary, the data shows that teachers understand the significance of including social justice and equality in their lessons. The information makes it clear that in order to promote an environment of acceptance and respect, teachers must use interdisciplinary teaching strategies, contextualize social concerns, and integrate a variety of viewpoints.

Sub-theme 3: Controversial topics change over time

Teachers were asked whether controversial topics can change over time. They all agreed that this is possible due to certain factors. The statements from Teachers 1, 3, and 5 in the focus group discussion are quoted below:

Teacher 1: *“I’d like to think that gender roles and tribal discrimination are subject to change over time as a result of advocacy, efforts, legislative changes, cultural transformations, and societal tie standards”.*

Teacher 3: *“definitely, Xenophobia and colonialism are complex and interconnected issues that have evolved over time. Media plays a significant role in shaping attitudes towards foreigners and contributing to xenophobia”.*

Teacher 5: *“Political issues, bullying, social media, gender issues, and sexual orientations are controversial topics that can change over time. Factors contributing to*

these changes include societal attitudes, the rise of social media and technology, and advocacy groups and policymakers' efforts. Political discourse has increased polarization, leading to online harassment and bullying, particularly in South Africa”.

Teacher Siyanda in a semi- structured interviews responded:

Siyanda: *“the topics I teach such as sexual orientation, ethnic prejudice, and religious variety evolve throughout time. These changes are a result of social progress, historical background, media impact, education, evolving laws, and globalization”.*

Participants in focus groups and Siyanda (semi-structured) agree that contentious issues such as sexual orientation, gender roles, discrimination based on ethnicity, and

ledges Indigenous peoples' right to an education, including the right to be educated in their native language, culture, and customs”.

Teacher 2: *“South Africa's Social Sciences curriculum guidelines emphasise addressing issues like tribal discrimination, sexual orientation, racial discrimination, and religious diversity. The NCS aims to foster social justice, inclusivity, and respect for diversity. Basic Education's policy promotes teaching religion and life orientation in schools, fostering learners' understanding of diverse religious beliefs and practices, and developing critical thinking skills.*

On the other hand, teacher Zethu and Thando share their perspectives:

Zethu: *“The Department of Basic Education’s Social Sciences Subject Assessment Guidelines offer insights into how controversial topics can be integrated into the curriculum emphasise the importance of fostering critical citizenship skills, ethical reasoning, and understanding social justice issues. The Southern Africa Regional Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality shares best practices for managing classroom controversies”.*

Thando: *“CAPS provide a framework for teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences and, it emphasises the importance of promoting critical thinking, tolerance, and respect for diverse perspective. On the other hand, the South African Council for*

Education (SACE) offers a code of professional ethics for responsible, respectful, and inclusive discussions”.

Zethu and Thando focus on incorporating controversial topics into the curriculum, whereas Teachers 1 and 2 prioritise the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Zethu and Thando also prioritise the development of critical thinking skills, while Teachers 1 and 2 concentrate on more general educational concepts and rights. Zethu and Teacher 1 place greater emphasis on culture and rights-related issues. Teachers 2 and Thando bring up the South African Council for Education (SACE) code of professional ethics, but the other participants do not specifically address it. A common theme observed among all participants in this study is the promotion of diversity, social justice, and curricular alignment. However, while the semi-structured interview participants examine the practical integration of contentious issues, critical thinking skills, and professional ethics within the curriculum, the focus group participants offer a broader perspective on educational ideals and rights.

Sub-theme 5 Impact on Learner Engagement

The data below presents the impact of controversial topics on learner engagement, as revealed through both focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

Teacher 1: *“Controversial topics in Social Sciences education, such as tribal discrimination, gender roles and stereotypes, require a comprehensive understanding of their nature, a safe and inclusive classroom environment, and a variety of teaching strategies. Teachers should select relevant issues, create a culture of respect and open-mindedness, and encourage learners to express their opinions”.*

Teacher 3: *“As teachers we should be well-informed about controversial topics to provide a balanced and accurate perspective. we create a supportive classroom atmosphere by setting ground rules, encouraging active listening, and promote respectful dialogue, select, time, and frame issues carefully, use pedagogical choices that support critical thinking and regularly reflect on their teaching practice. Establishing a procedure for examining controversial issues and adopting strategies based on learners' ages and skills.*

Siyanda: *“I foster respectful dialogue and active listening, use various teaching approaches, establish procedures for learners to examine fresh information, and adopt strategies based on their confidence, experience, and learners' ages and skills”.*

Thando: *“learners mostly feel challenged by complexity of the issues and struggle to articulate their thoughts while others feel passionate and energized by the opportunity to explore their views. I create safe and inclusive learning environment where all learners feel respected and valued and provide opportunities for self-respect peer feedback”.*

The data is similar in that all teachers emphasise respect and open-mindedness. Teachers emphasise the need for a culture of respect and open-mindedness in the classroom, encouraging learners to express their opinions and critically evaluate arguments. This theme is consistent across both data sources, indicating the importance of creating a safe and inclusive environment for discussing controversial topics. Furthermore, teachers from both focus groups and semi-structured interviews highlight the importance of a supportive classroom environment. They stress the need for setting rules, encouraging active listening, and promoting respectful dialogue. This theme is also present in both data sources, highlighting the importance of establishing a positive and inclusive atmosphere for discussions. Again, they emphasise critical thinking and pedagogical choices. Teachers discuss the importance of using pedagogical choices to promote critical thinking and selecting issues carefully. This theme is consistent across both data sources, indicating the need for teachers to be mindful of the issues they choose and how they present them to learners.

Differences in this data are that Teacher 3 and Siyanda provide more detailed strategies for teaching controversial issues, including establishing procedures for examining issues, adopting strategies based on learners' ages and skills, and using various teaching approaches. Thando's insights focus more on the emotional responses of learners and the need for a safe and inclusive environment.

Thando highlights the emotional challenges learners face when discussing complex issues, such as feeling challenged by complexity and struggling to articulate thoughts. This theme is not explicitly mentioned by the other teachers, indicating that Thando's

insights provide a more nuanced understanding of the emotional dimensions of discussing controversial topics.

The data from both focus groups and semi-structured interviews underscores the importance of creating a supportive and respectful classroom environment for discussing controversial topics. Teachers emphasise the need for critical thinking, active listening, and respectful dialogue. While there are some differences in the specific strategies and emotional responses discussed, the overall themes highlight the need for a balanced approach to teaching controversial issues that acknowledges both the intellectual and emotional aspects of these discussions.

4.3.2. Theme 2: ways in which teachers teach controversial topics.

This theme explores ways in which teachers teach controversial topics.

Sub - theme1: Differences in how controversial topics are taught

Teachers from both the focus group and semi-structured interviews discussed the different methods they use in grade six classrooms to address controversial topics and encourage open discussions. Each teacher took turns sharing their approaches based on the topics they frequently cover in their classrooms.

For focus groups teachers 1, 3 and 4 indicated how they handle these topics in the following manner:

Teacher 1: *“I create a safe and inclusive environment in the classroom, setting ground rules, providing diverse learning materials, facilitating open discussions, using case studies and real-life examples, and promoting learner engagement. Moreover, I provide diverse learning materials”.*

Teacher 3: *“I acknowledge and celebrate diversity, provide background information, co-develop classroom norms, and develop an anti-racist classroom”.*

Teacher 4: *“I ensure to form a supportive environment that values respect, kindness, and trust, fostering a culture of openness and mutual respect among learners”.*

On the other hand, teacher Thando, Thuto and Zukiswa shared their perspectives as:

Thando: *"I foster respect for individual opinions by establishing clear ground rules, encouraging active listening, and modelling respectful behaviour".*

Thuto: *"I foster a culture of trust and safety, provide opportunities for learners to practice effective communication skills, encourage self-reflection and identify learners' biases and assumptions".*

Zukiswa: *"I approach them with a commitment to fairness and openness, creating an environment that encourages respect. I carefully select authentic and relevant issues that are connected to the curriculum to engage learners effectively".*

Teachers 1, 3, and 4 differed in that they placed more emphasis on the value of fostering learners' participation, offering a varied range of learning resources and establishing a secure and welcoming atmosphere in focus groups. They also emphasised the need for establishing anti-racist schools, providing basic knowledge, and recognizing and celebrating diversity.

On the other hand, in semi-structured interviews, teachers Thando, Thuto, and Zukiswa emphasised the importance of respecting people's individual ideas, establishing a culture of safety and trust, and promoting good communication and active listening. They also highlighted the need to choose real and relevant topics, model courteous behaviour, and foster an atmosphere that values respect.

Focus groups and semi-structured interviews are similar, which emphasises how crucial it is to foster openness and respect while discussing contentious issues. Establishing unambiguous ground rules and encouraging attentive listening were stressed in both approaches. Both approaches highlighted how crucial it is to include learners in debates about contentious issues in an effective manner.

While semi-structured interviews focused on encouraging respect for individual ideas and developing a culture of trust and safety, focus groups often focused on creating a safe and inclusive atmosphere. Semi-structured interviews focused on the teacher's importance in modelling polite behaviour and promoting active listening, while focus groups underlined the function of the instructor in establishing ground rules and offering a variety of learning resources.

Sub-theme 2: Learners' responses to how controversial topics are taught

Data from focus groups and semi-structured interviews teachers on how learners respond in the classroom to the teaching of controversial topics is presented below:

Teacher 1: *“Learners who are taught about gender roles and stereotypes and discrimination question their preconceived notions about gender. They learn to challenge the presumptions and prejudices that underpin gender roles and stereotypes by looking at the historical and cultural background of these concepts. Children sometimes respond well when I teach these sensitive issues”.*

Teacher 3: *“learners rarely respond and avoid being honest to the core about xenophobia as when they share their opinions, they think they will be taken as perpetrators or instigators of violence against those who come outside of South Africa”.*

The views of teachers in semi-structured interviews were that:

Thando: *“learners typically respond to controversial topics during lessons with a mix of curious engagement and sometimes discomfort. Some learners mostly feel challenged by complexity of the issues and struggle to articulate their thoughts, while others may feel passionate and energized by the opportunity to explore their views”.*

Zukiswa: *“some learners exhibit curiosity and participate fully in class discussions, while others may feel doubtfully or perplexed. Other learners show significant signs of reluctance or uneasiness because of their own beliefs or their lack of exposure to these kinds of topics”.*

Regarding engaging with controversial topics, learners exhibit a range of responses, as both sources demonstrate. According to teachers in both focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, some learners respond well, showing curiosity, involvement, and even enthusiasm when discussing topics like gender roles, stereotypes, and tribal discrimination. This implies that teachers have experienced the same thing—namely, that some learners respond positively.

However, the results also show significant variances. During the focus group discussion, Teacher 3 highlighted that fear is a major obstacle to open communication about

contentious topics. Learners may be reluctant to express their genuine views on subjects like xenophobia for fear that doing so will make them appear to be encouraging violence against marginalized groups. This fear of consequences emphasises the necessity for a secure and encouraging learning environment, as well as the intricate socio-political forces at work.

In the semi-structured interviews, Thando and Zukiswa provide insights into the internal struggles that certain learners encounter when attempting to understand contentious subjects. Some show curiosity and fully engage in class discussions, while others are hesitant, doubtful, or confused. The wide range of individual responses indicates that teachers must use adaptable teaching strategies to meet the varied needs and viewpoints of their learners.

It becomes clear that although there are common insights about how learners deal with sensitive subjects, there are also subtle variations driven by factors such as exposure to these subjects, personal opinions, and fear of retaliation. It is important to acknowledge and address these complexities while creating instructional strategies that encourage learners to engage in critical thinking, open communication, and empathy.

Sub-theme 3: Strategies to address biases

Siyanda: “In order to foster critical thinking and require a variety of viewpoints, I use a debate format where learners are split into groups and given opposing opinions on difficult societal topics such as sexual orientation, racial discrimination, and religious diversity”.

Teacher 3: " By exposing media biases and empowering learners to recognize and dissect prevailing narratives, I use a multimodal method that combines essays, podcasts, and films to critically evaluate subjects like xenophobia and colonialism. This fosters critical thinking and awareness”.

Siyanda and Teacher 3 encourage learners to critically analyse and question prevailing beliefs by utilizing discussions and media biases. To foster critical thinking and participation, they split the class into groups and assigned opposing perspectives on difficult societal issues. With this method, learners can address the complexities of power

dynamics and social inequality and move beyond oversimplified or prejudiced conceptions.

To address topics like xenophobia and colonialism, Teacher 3 employs a multimodal approach that combines articles, podcasts, and movies. His focus is on revealing media biases and equipping learners with the tools they need to identify and analyse dominant narratives. This method fosters critical consciousness and agency.

By actively involving learners in critical analysis, questioning prevailing ideas, and encouraging a greater understanding of social injustices and power dynamics, both teachers promote critical awareness and engagement. The teaching strategies they use enable learners to think critically, consider other viewpoints, and develop the ability to recognize and challenge oppressive societal structures and narratives.

4.3.3. Theme 3: Opportunities & challenges

Sub-theme 1: Professional development (opportunity and challenge)

Teacher 1: "I never received any professional development towards the teaching of these topics. As a teacher I ask colleagues on how they teach or handle them in their classroom so that I can learn from them".

Teacher 2: "I have received support though through our school ethos does not fully allow teaching of sexual orientations, especially the new issue of gays and lesbian as they believe God created only man and woman and nothing opposite. Based on my school ethos, same sex marriage is not acceptable by God".

Teacher **Siyanda**, in a semi-structured interview, said, "*learners enjoy learning about their traditions, traditional food, attire, and heritage. Moreover, they enjoy learning other cultures other than their own.*

Similar issues that arise from institutional limitations or a lack of formal training are shown by both focus groups and semi-structured interviews when it comes to addressing particular topics. In order to overcome these obstacles, teachers look for alternate strategies, such as stressing cultural education or informal learning from colleagues.

Teacher 2 stresses the influence of school ethos and religious beliefs on teaching techniques, whereas Teacher 1 focuses mostly on the lack of formal professional development opportunities. Without specifically mentioning institutional or religious restrictions, Siyanda's viewpoint is primarily concerned with cultural education and the interests of the learners.

The semi-structured interviews and focus group accounts shed light on the complexity of the field of professional development and instructional methods. Teachers demonstrate resilience by seeking advice from their peers and adapting their techniques to suit institutional and cultural contexts, even when they may lack proper professional training in certain areas. In order to empower teachers to provide inclusive and culturally sensitive education, educational institutions must provide comprehensive support that addresses both pedagogical requirements and ethical considerations.

Sub-theme 2: Tolerance (opportunity)

When teachers from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were asked about how they incorporate tolerance into their teaching of controversial topics, they responded as follows:

Thuto: *"I illustrate how various viewpoints have changed over time in my classes by using historical and cultural background. Learners have a more sophisticated tolerance and an understanding of the complexity involved as a result".*

Zukiswa: *"To present learners a variety of viewpoints on a subject, I employ primary literature and multimedia resources. They are able to critically assess information and construct a more knowledgeable and accepting worldview as a result".*

Teacher 3: *"At the start of the class, I make sure to lay out the ground rules clearly, emphasizing respect and being open-minded. In addition, I urge learners to think about different viewpoints and participate in respectful discussions".*

Teacher 4: *"I use case studies and role-playing exercises to help my learners develop empathy and a sense of diversity in viewpoints. This promotes tolerance and helps learners realize the advantages of considering other people's points of view".*

The focus group discussions of Teachers 3 and 4, as well as the data from the interviews of Thuto and Zukiswa, are comparable in that they highlight the importance of fostering respectful discussion, offering various perspectives, and promoting critical thinking. However, the specific approaches used to achieve these objectives vary. Teachers 3 and 4 utilise case studies and role-playing exercises, while Thuto and Zukiswa focus on using historical and cultural contexts to illustrate concepts.

It is evident from the data that it is crucial to provide learners with opportunities to develop tolerance through respectful dialogue and exposure to diverse opinions. Techniques such as case studies, role-playing exercises, and the use of primary literature and multimedia materials are effective in fostering critical thinking and empathy among learners. These findings suggest that teachers should strive to create an inclusive environment that values diversity and open-mindedness, as these qualities can lead to more tolerant and knowledgeable learners.

The data indicates that teachers are committed to giving learners the chance to cultivate tolerance by exposing them to a range of opinions and encouraging civil conversations. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers continue to emphasise these strategies in their lesson plans, as the techniques they employ have proven successful in promoting critical thinking and empathy among learners.

Sub-theme 3: Teaching Techniques and Psychological Well-Being (challenge)

Teachers from both semi-structured interviews and focus groups shared their perspectives on teaching techniques and psychological well-being as challenges when teaching controversial topics. To make things interesting and relevant for learners, Zukiswa, Thando, and Teacher 3 emphasised the significance of relevance and objectivity in their perspectives on teaching controversial topics.

Zukiswa: *“Making sure the contentious subjects I discuss are pertinent to the curriculum and in line with the learning objectives is one of the largest hurdles. It assists learners in understanding the significance of these problems and how they apply to their own lives.”*

Thando: *"Learning is more likely to occur when subjects are applicable to the learners' daily life. I attempt to make the topics more approachable and engaging by utilizing contemporary settings and examples from real life."*

Teacher 3: *Remaining impartial and refraining from taking sides on contentious matters is crucial for teachers. This may prove challenging, particularly for learners who have strong opinions. In order to help learners, focus, I make an effort to pay attention to the facts."*

All three teachers emphasise that academics should be connected to learners' everyday experiences. While Thando makes themes more engaging by using modern settings and real-life examples, Zukiswa emphasises the need to ensure that controversial subjects are aligned with the curriculum and learning objectives. To help learners stay focused, Teacher 3 emphasises objectivity and the importance of paying attention to the facts.

In contrast to Thando, who focuses more on using real-life examples to make things relevant, Zukiswa's approach is more concerned with linking the curriculum and learning objectives. Maintaining objectivity and paying attention to the facts are the primary goals of Teacher 3's teaching style.

By analysing this data, we can gain a better understanding of the viewpoints and strategies employed by these teachers, as well as identify significant similarities and differences that can guide our own teaching.

Sub-theme 4: Improving learner engagement (challenge)

The challenge that teachers face in improving learner engagement when teaching controversial topics in both semi-structured interviews and focus groups is outlined below.

Siyanda: *"When it comes to some matters, some parents are very outspoken about their concerns. It's critical that as teachers be in constant contact with parents and respond politely to any concerns they may have."*

Zethu: *"I feel pressure from administrators to steer clear of certain subjects or teach them in a specific manner. This can be difficult, particularly when I think the integrity of the lesson is being jeopardized by these demands."*

Teacher 1: *"Controlling learners' emotional reactions when they are talking about delicate subjects is difficult. I make every effort to make sure that everyone in the classroom feels respected and comfortable, even though some learners have strong opinions on particular topics."*

Teacher 5: *"It can be difficult to obtain appropriate materials and resources. I look for educational resources that are interesting to learners and that are unbiased and balanced."*

This analysis shows that Teacher 1, Teacher 5, Zethu, and Siyanda all have perspectives that are similar and different from one another. The participants shared emphasis on the value of excellent communication and teamwork—whether with parents, administrators, or other teachers—is what unites them. They all draw attention to the difficulties they have in establishing a polite and welcoming learning atmosphere as well as finding pertinent teaching materials.

Zethu and Teacher 5 highlight the difficulties they have as a result of administrative pressure and the availability of resources, whereas Siyanda and Teacher 1 place greater emphasis on the value of parent participation and classroom management.

The analysis offers a thorough grasp of the difficulties teachers have in their line of work by including Siyanda's voice. The quotes from Siyanda highlight the importance of ongoing dialogue and cooperation with parents, while the viewpoints of the other participants highlight the different challenges that teachers face on a daily basis. This analysis shows that Teacher 1, Teacher 5, Zethu, and Siyanda all have perspectives that are similar to and different from each other. The participants share an emphasis on the value of excellent communication and teamwork, whether with parents, administrators, or other teachers. They all highlight the difficulties they face in establishing a polite and welcoming learning atmosphere, as well as finding relevant teaching materials.

Zethu and Teacher 5 highlight the difficulties they face due to administrative pressure and the availability of resources, while Siyanda and Teacher 1 place greater emphasis on the value of parent participation and classroom management.

The analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges teachers encounter in their profession by including Siyanda's perspective. Siyanda's quotes underscore the importance

of ongoing dialogue and cooperation with parents, while the viewpoints of the other participants shed light on the various daily challenges that teachers encounter.

4.3.4. Theme 4: Lessons learned

This theme focuses on [the lessons](#) can be learnt from the teaching of controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum.

Sub-theme 1: Different cultural contexts

During focus group discussions the teachers explained that different cultural contexts influence the teaching of controversial topics. Quoted below is what some of the teachers said:

Teacher 2: *“different cultures influence teaching controversial topics like tribal discrimination, gender roles, and religious diversity in South Africa. Incorporating cultural socialisation and coping skills can effectively address these issues. Different cultural backgrounds have different preconceptions and biases regarding gender roles and stereotypes”.*

Teacher 3: *“the complicated problem of xenophobia is linked to the idea that foreigners harm South Africa's economy and society. It is influenced by factors such as migration patterns, feelings of threat, and political and economic instability. individual experiences and the cultural setting can influence this notion”.*

However, Thando from the interviews said that:

Thando: *“cultural background influences the prioritisation of a certain controversial topic. For example, traditional practices and customs such as polygamy and female circumcision are more prominent. Additionally, language barriers can affect the choice of controversial topics as the topics require advanced literacy skills in English”.*

The two focus group participants and one from the semi-structured participants acknowledged the influence of cultural backgrounds on the classroom teaching of contentious subjects, highlighting the necessity of comprehending and addressing a range of preconceptions and biases. They acknowledge the complexity of controversial

topics, which are shaped by a confluence of personal experiences, societal norms, and cultural contexts.

But there are distinctions as well. Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 concentrate on certain contentious issues that are pertinent to South Africa, such as xenophobia and tribal discrimination, respectively, but Thando's viewpoint is more comprehensive, covering a range of issues influenced by cultural background. Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 do not specifically address the added difficulty of language hurdles when addressing contentious subjects, as Thando points out.

The semi-structured interview and focus groups provided valuable insights into the complex relationship between cultural circumstances and the teaching of contentious subjects. In order to properly address sensitive topics in education and promote diversity, it is imperative that one comprehends and navigates these cultural nuances. Furthermore, Thando's viewpoint emphasises the significance of taking language obstacles into account when choosing and delivering instructional materials, emphasizing the requirement for pedagogy that is both culturally and linguistically responsive.

Sub-theme 2: Case studies/practices as evidence of effective teaching of controversial topics

Teacher 1: *“I employ a case study methodology, concentrating on actual instances of gender norms and stereotypes as well as tribal discrimination. I encourage learners to conduct research on particular issues and then explain their results”.*

Teacher 2: *“I use a debate structure in which learners are split up into groups and given competing points of view on topics including racial prejudice, sexual orientation, and religious diversity”.*

Teacher 3: *“I use a multimodal approach, combining essays, podcasts, and films colonialism and xenophobia. Learners are encouraged to think critically and gain a deeper awareness of these topics by being taught to examine and uncover biases in the media”.*

Thando: *“I prioritize fair representation of all perspectives and encourage learners to seek out alternative viewpoints”.*

Thuto: *“in my classroom I integrate diverse perspective and promote critical analysis to cultivate a rich learning environment that nurtures empathy, understanding and ethical reasoning”.*

All participants in this analysis prioritise active learning techniques that encourage learners to think critically and analyse information. There is also a common focus on developing learners' awareness, comprehension, and empathy. The goal of semi-structured interviews and focus groups is to enable learners to explore controversial topics through investigation, discussion, and critical analysis.

However, there are some distinctions among the teachers. Teacher 1 emphasises case studies and real-world examples, while Teacher 2 places more emphasis on structured debates. Teacher 3 employs a multimodal approach that incorporates a variety of media types. Thuto promotes the integration of multiple perspectives, the development of empathy, and ethical reasoning. On the other hand, Thando places more emphasis on fair portrayal and searching out alternate opinions.

Although each respondent uses a different technique to teach contentious subjects, their ultimate aim is to help learners develop critical thinking, awareness, and empathy. Their methods and emphasis may vary slightly, but the overarching goal remains the same.

4.4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In response to the opportunities and difficulties teachers face when teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences during the Intermediate Phase, this section presents and interprets the data analysis findings from the preceding section. The discussion includes related literature reviewed in Chapter two. This discussion is organised under the following sub-headings: definition of controversial topics, navigating the challenges and opportunities of teaching controversial topics, classroom management strategies for creating inclusive learning environments, issues raised in teaching controversial topics, how controversial topics change over time, professional standards and curriculum guidelines that encourage critical and inclusive discussion of controversial topics, strategies for creating a safe and inclusive environment for discussing controversial topics, promoting tolerance and inclusivity through diverse teaching strategies and critical

social theory, and fostering critical consciousness and empathy through diverse instructional approaches.

4.3.1. Defining Controversial Topics

Definition of controversial topics

The findings indicate that teachers characterize controversial topics as those that ignite debate and differing opinions within communities and larger groups (such as tribal discrimination, gender roles, stereotypes, sexual orientation, racial discrimination, religious diversity, and local history). These topics involve intense discussions, conflicts, and diverse perspectives, encouraging learners to confront moral, intellectual, and socio-political challenges by questioning accepted norms, conventions, and truths. In the interview, Thuto defined controversial topics as "subjects that spark disagreement and conflicting opinions among individuals, groups, or societies". Zukiswa viewed controversial topics as "topics that inspire passionate debates, fuel intellectual curiosity, and drive scholarly inquiries", while Thando stated that "these are issues that provoke intense debate, disagreement, and divergent perspectives". Topics that generate considerable disagreement and conflict among people, organisations, and civilisations are considered controversial. Contentious subjects are constantly evolving and influenced by various factors such as law, activism, cultural changes, media representation, and educational objectives. To effectively teach these subjects, it is crucial to understand their dynamic nature and local context. Establishing a secure environment, promoting open communication, attentive listening, and validating diverse viewpoints is essential (Ping, Halam & Osman, 2020).

Controversial subjects can serve as effective teaching tools, fostering critical thinking, social awareness, and active citizenship skills by exposing unconscious biases and power systems. Inclusive learning environments are crucial for discussing these subjects effectively and utilizing them for transformative learning is a key objective for teachers. Tribukait (2021) defines controversial issues as "those problems and disputes that divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values". On the other hand, Flensner (2020) argues that these are issues which evoke strong emotions and divide communities. These kinds of

issues can arise anywhere, at any time, and they range from local to global concerns, such as minarets and climate change, according to Noddings & Brooks (2016). Beck (2019) shares the perspective that these topics typically become controversial when learners hold competing values and interests, when they strongly disagree about statements, assertions, or actions, when the subject touches on sensitive aspects (such as political or religious matters), or when they evoke an emotional response. These topics may relate to past events, current affairs, or desired future outcomes. For example, gay marriages and LGBTQ+ in church. According to Miller (2023), controversial topics refer to any subject matter that has the potential to be offensive or cause alarm. This includes topics related to political or personal beliefs and values that lack sensitivity or cause controversy, prejudice, or oppression in the classroom. For example, colonialism, racism, and xenophobia.

Navigating the Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Controversial Topics

The current study focuses on teaching controversial topics in the classroom and highlights their importance in challenging accepted norms, conventions, and truths. Teachers emphasise the need to understand the historical and cultural context of these topics to effectively discuss them. They acknowledge that these topics are dynamic and can evolve due to factors such as advocacy, legislation, cultural shifts, media influence, and education. Critical social theory emphasises the importance of creating a safe and inclusive environment for discussing sensitive issues (Norrie & Morgan, 2021; Harms & Reiss, 2019). This involves setting clear ground rules, encouraging open dialogue, validating diverse viewpoints, and developing empathy and effective communication skills. The goal is to create a classroom culture that values respect, trust, and questioning dominant narratives. Critical theory suggests that controversial topics can be powerful pedagogical tools, fostering critical thinking, social awareness, and active citizenship skills (Meneses, 2020). By revealing implicit biases and power structures and encouraging critical analysis of multiple perspectives, controversial topics can promote transformative learning.

The study highlights the importance of critical social theory in teaching Social Sciences. It emphasises the need to question dominant ideologies, understand historical context,

create inclusive learning environments, and leverage sensitive topics to promote social awareness and change. Teachers must create a welcoming and safe space for learners to explore controversial and sociological topics, even if they may find them uncomfortable or unsettling. This aligns with the recommendations of scholars like Arao, Clemens and Burden (2023), who emphasise the need to acknowledge learners' discomfort, reassure them that their feelings and contributions are valid, and cultivate a classroom built on respect, kindness, and trust. This creates the conditions necessary for learners to feel comfortable exploring sensitive topics and fosters a supportive and respectful learning environment.

According to Burden (2020), teachers and learners should collaborate to establish a classroom climate that prioritizes compassion, respect, and trust. In addition, he says that a classroom where learners feel comfortable bringing up potentially delicate subjects is one where questions are encouraged and diverse preferences, interests, and curiosities are respected. Active listening, empathy, critical thinking, and polite dissent are all helpful skills for learners to acquire while having productive conversations about contentious topics, as Hamilton, Staal, and Vander Ark (2021) point out. From the beginning, it is important to cultivate a genuine classroom culture that prioritizes these qualities. However, Vander Ark, Liebtag, and McClennen (2020) stress that learners can develop constructive debate and discussion habits by engaging in activities that foster active listening, empathy, critical thinking, and polite dissent. They go on to say that it is crucial to establish a genuine classroom that appreciates these principles right away.

Research demonstrates that controversial topics make parents and learners uncomfortable or disagree. Parents tend to steer clear of teaching contentious subjects, even if they are included in the curriculum, as noted by Garrett & Alvey (2021). These academics contend that fear of learners' reactions and a lack of understanding and experience in the subject matter are the main reasons parents avoid teaching contentious subjects. For the same reasons, contentious topics that suddenly come up in the classroom can also be justified by teachers by not having to teach them (Pace, 2019). This may make it simpler for them to rationalize ignoring such topics. The scholars' (Göregen & Cornelissen, 2020) insights align with the challenges raised by Teacher 3 -

that controversial topics can cause unease or disagreement among parents and learners. This fear, along with a lack of knowledge/expertise, often leads teachers to avoid addressing these issues, even when they are part of the curriculum.

However, as Bulmer (2021) contends, avoidance is not a viable solution, as controversial topics will inevitably arise in the classroom regardless. Teachers must find ways to acknowledge and engage with these issues constructively, rather than dismissing them. While the risks and challenges associated with controversial topics are significant, some teachers still choose to confront them head-on, even when they arise unexpectedly. This requires a certain level of courage and pedagogical skill that not all teachers may possess. Providing teachers with the necessary training, support, and resources can empower them to navigate these sensitive discussions effectively. The key implication is the critical need to create safe, inclusive learning environments that foster empathy and active listening; the importance of addressing teacher avoidance through professional development; and the value of equipping teachers with the courage and skills to engage learners in meaningful discussions of controversial issues, even when they are not formally part of the curriculum.

Since there have been attacks on teachers who do not back down from tackling contentious subjects in the classroom, avoidance has increased even more. Avoidance, meanwhile, **will not** stop contentious topics from unexpectedly coming up in the classroom (Fader, 2021). Even when challenging topics come up unexpectedly in the classroom, some teachers nevertheless dare to address them despite the dilemma and risk that they frequently carry (Cassar, Oosterheert & Meijer, 2023). Bulmer (2021) contends that there is no way to stop learners from bringing up topics on their own, and when they do, the teacher must decide whether to accept or reject them. This is true even if they could find a way to eliminate every problem from the official curriculum.

The assertions made by teachers in the current study are consistent with the tenets of critical social theory. They highlight the importance of gaining a thorough grasp of contentious issues to reveal implicit presuppositions, prejudices, and power relations. They stress the value of fostering a welcoming and safe learning environment in the classroom, giving voice to underrepresented groups, and providing platforms for a range

of viewpoints. They recognize the political dimension of education, as contentious issues frequently subvert prevailing narratives, leading to opposition and conflict. They stress the value of inclusive discourse, critical analysis, and navigating the political aspects of education in their statements. Learners who engage with contentious topics gain the ability to question, confront, and change unjust societal conditions (Garrett, 2020). This technique is essential for creating a secure and welcoming learning atmosphere that encourages candid discussion and thoughtful analysis of divisive topics.

Classroom Management Strategies for Inclusive Learning Environments

Teachers employ a variety of strategies, including classroom management and sociological and intellectual components, to set the environment and everyday routine in order to promote efficiency and learner participation. In the focus group discussion, Teacher 3 said, "I encourage empathy and co-develop classroom norms." On the other hand, Thando said, "I usually maintain a balanced and respectful classroom environment, establish ground rules in the classroom, and promote active listening skills." Critical social theory is in line with Teacher 3 and Thando's remarks, which highlight the significance of establishing inclusive environments where a range of viewpoints are acknowledged, heard, and tolerated. This promotes critical analysis by allowing for an open discussion of contentious issues. By using active listening techniques, learners can interact with a variety of perspectives and grow in empathy for the experiences of others (Andolina & Conklin, 2021). This is in line with the purposes of critical theory, which include elevating marginalized voices, revealing unconscious biases, and promoting social justice (Kempf, 2022). Critical thinking and social awareness are developed in the classroom through teachers' emphasis on empathy, inclusivity, and open communication, which supports transformative learning. According to Altavilla, Manna, and Lipoma (2021), empathy is a crucial element of a successful teaching strategy because it enables teachers to foster a welcoming and inclusive learning environment, forge close bonds with learners, and ultimately support successful learning outcomes.

Nonetheless, Wink, LaRusso, and Smith (2021) point out three difficulties learners encounter when thinking about empathy: a) comprehending human behaviour, b) realizing why actions that appear illogical and unreasonable in the present were common

in the past, and c) realizing what constitutes an empathetic explanation and what does not. According to Weiner, Francois, Stone-Johnson & Childs (2021), learners may refrain from engaging in debates pertaining to delicate subjects out of fear that they will be made fun of, their viewpoints mocked, or intense emotions sparked by the subject matter brought to light. Teacher Thando stated, "Many of the learners in my Intermediate Phase classrooms appear reluctant to participate when I try to foster discussions on controversial topics such as apartheid and discrimination. I have observed that learners are afraid to share their opinions or feelings on contentious topics as they fear being teased or ridiculed by their peers," stated teacher 4 during the focus group sessions. Rusticus, Pashootan & Mah (2023) suggest that to create a safe and supportive environment, teachers must make group agreements at the beginning of the year. These might include guidelines like "no name-calling," "no interrupting," "listen without judgment," "share to your level of comfort," "you have the right to pass," and the like. Boyd (2023) further adds that learners should be reminded that when they talk about groups of people, they should be careful to use the word "some," not "all."

On the other hand, Dieringer, Ferretti, and Sokolowski (2022) propose that teachers engage in community-building exercises and proactively handle conflicts in order to foster a polite and happy learning atmosphere. Above all, provide an example to learners on how to discuss delicate and contentious subjects by being truthful and transparent with them, honouring differing opinions, and showing acceptance for their emotions. Teacher 3 said, "Teaching contentious subjects may be difficult, in my experience, particularly when it comes to fostering a courteous and cheerful learning environment. Learners frequently have strong thoughts and feelings regarding these subjects, therefore, it's important to successfully manage the classroom to make sure everyone feels heard and protected. "Siyanda stated in an interview, "The learners can become emotional and defensive when we teach topics like racism, poverty, or gender equality. It's critical to establish an environment where learners may express their ideas without worrying about criticism or mockery. Teachers need to guide learners through difficult situations while encouraging critical thinking and intellectual curiosity. They emphasise that to handle these subjects and prevent any discomfort, professionals must continue their professional development. "Teachers often stress the need to accept and be tolerant of others with

different beliefs and viewpoints. They also stress the value of utilizing a variety of instructional strategies to spark curiosity among learners and encourage critical thinking. According to teachers, discussing these subjects can increase learner involvement by fostering academic research and intellectual curiosity. Teachers understand that there may be cultural differences in what constitutes a difficult issue and how it is taught. They stress the importance of using research-based teaching strategies to ensure learners are effectively engaged with these subjects and grow as critical thinkers.

Issues raised in teaching controversial topics

Teachers in the study highlighted contentious issues, such as discrimination, stereotypes, regional history, religious diversity, and environmental deterioration. They emphasised the importance of teaching equality and social justice, particularly in combating discrimination and fostering tolerance. The teachers acknowledged that education is political and ideological, and it is crucial to expose implicit prejudices and injustices. They supported the emphasis of critical social theory on exposing oppression and using education as a means of promoting social justice. The participants' awareness of these contentious subjects and their efforts to discuss them in the classroom demonstrate their commitment to advancing social equality. Waghid (2024) and Theoharis (2024) underscore the significance of teaching equality and social justice as controversial topics, with the aim of cultivating a more compassionate and empathetic society. Both focus groups and semi-structured interviews emphasise the importance of teaching tolerance, religious diversity, and environmental sustainability.

Controversial topics change over time

Teachers concur that a variety of factors might cause controversial topics to shift over time. Gender roles, tribal discrimination, xenophobia, colonialism, political issues, bullying, social media, gender issues, and sexual orientations are among the specific topics that have been identified as evolving. The assertions made by Teacher 1 and Siyanda, which highlight how social categories and power systems are dynamic, are consistent with critical social theory. They emphasise the struggle against repressive conditions by marginalized groups and social movements, attributing changes in gender roles and tribal prejudice to advocacy, legislative changes, cultural developments, and

societal norms. Siyanda's viewpoint rejects single-issue assessments and instead examines the interaction of several oppressive and power structures, highlighting the multidimensional and intersectional character of social issues. Critical social theory holds that social development is a complex process influenced by a range of social, political, and cultural forces (Allan & Briskman, 2020). This is what he believes. Both participants stress the significance of looking at how power, identity, and social structures interact to shape lived experiences and the potential for transformation. They also recognize the dynamic, contextual, and politically charged nature of social issues.

Levinson (2018) highlights that controversial topics change over time as personal narratives are interpreted and filtered through local knowledge to create new knowledge. As past conflicts are reframed and re-examined in light of changing social and cultural circumstances, new conflicts may originate from this mediation and interpretation process. He emphasises that understanding the context in which conflicts originate is crucial for teaching and discussing these topics in the classroom. According to Kerr & Huddleston (2021:8), "teaching controversial topics through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights" emphasises how these subjects are connected to historical culture and how social memory and master narratives, among other things, are connected to the reasons for controversy. They also stress how important it is to comprehend the background from which contentious themes arise to teach and discuss these topics effectively in the classroom. As "personal narratives are interpreted and mediated with local knowledge to create new knowledge," it argues, disagreements evolve. As current disputes are recontextualized and reinterpreted in light of shifting social and cultural settings, this process of interpretation and mediation may give rise to new ones.

Teachers' perspectives and literature highlight several key factors that influence the evolution of controversial topics over time. Advocacy and social movements drive change around topics like gender roles and sexual orientation, shifting focus from authoritative narratives to diverse micronarratives (Bain & Podmore, 2021). Changing laws and legislation also contribute to the changing nature of controversial issues, as legal changes can spark new debates or alter existing ones. Cultural shifts and societal views also play

a role in how these issues are framed and addressed. Media portrayal and coverage significantly shape societal perceptions of controversial issues, as the way these topics are represented in the media can greatly influence their understanding and debate (Luther & Clark & Lepre, 2024).

Changes in curriculum, educational goals, and exposure to new ideas and information also impact the evolution of controversial topics. Understanding the historical and cultural context from which controversial topics arise is crucial for effectively teaching and discussing them. Personal narratives and local knowledge interact to create new understandings, and as disputes are recontextualized, new conflicts can emerge. Recognizing these influences is crucial for navigating sensitive discussions in the classroom.

According to Resnik & Elliott (2023), a number of factors have an impact on difficult issues: By questioning individual and local knowledge, advocacy moves the emphasis from authoritative narratives to a variety of micronarratives. Laws can change and spark new debates or alter ones that already exist. Cultural transformations impact society's perspectives and attitudes, resulting in adjustments to the way certain issues are framed and dealt with. Contentious issues might shift as societal perceptions do. These opinions are also greatly influenced by the portrayal and coverage provided by the media. Changes in curriculum or educational goals expose learners to new ideas and information, which influences controversial subjects as well. In general, these variables have a role in the development of controversial topics and the effects they have on society. Findings from semi-structured interviews and focus groups both concur that contentious subjects evolve with time. Focus groups offer more in-depth and focused conversations on subjects, like the influence of social media on LGBTQ+ individuals and the media's part in xenophobia. Semi-structured interviews provide a more comprehensive viewpoint on the evolution of contentious issues. Teachers in the current study agreed that contentious issues evolve throughout time for historical, sociological, and technological reasons.

This data shows that because of their varied experiences and backgrounds, teachers have differing opinions about contentious issues. Teachers' backgrounds and personal experiences shape their views on gender identity, diversity, and local history. According

to Landsman & Lewis (2023), understanding the complexities and nuances in teachers' opinions on contentious issues like race, gender, and political discussions is crucial for fostering an inclusive learning environment. In an interview, Siyanda said, "Due to personal convictions or outside influences, some teachers may find it difficult to discuss political problems in the classroom; others, however, may view it as a chance for critical thinking and informed citizenry." While Teacher 1 said, "Classroom subject-matter restrictions cause confusion about race and gender-related teaching bans, impacting textbooks, materials, videos, and datasets. Teachers' perceptions vary, with some supporting gender identity and diversity, while others are cautious due to cultural norms and institutional biases."

The opinions of Siyanda and Teacher 1 are consistent with critical social theory because they recognize the difficulties teachers encounter when bringing up political topics in the classroom because of their own beliefs or outside pressures. The way they present political conversations as chances for critical thinking and informed citizenship is consistent with critical theory, which emphasises the use of education to provide learners the tools they need to confront oppressive systems and seek social change. This viewpoint recognizes that education is a political endeavour and that teachers have the ability to use the classroom as a place of resistance and change. Teacher 1 emphasises how racial and gender-based subject-matter constraints might affect teaching materials and create misunderstanding. They recognize that, as a result of institutional biases and cultural norms, teachers have differing perspectives on gender identification and diversity. While noting the difficulties and complexity involved, both participants stress the need for using education as a tool for critical analysis, discussion, and social transformation.

On the other hand, Bellaera, Weinstein-Jones, Ilie, Baker (2021) assert that teachers' perspectives reflect their individual experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs, which are essential for developing critical thinking skills. They also say that contextual factors, such as institutional biases and cultural norms, also influence their perceptions. Personal convictions and external influences can also influence their willingness to discuss political issues. This can lead to confusion about classroom policies, affecting the selection of textbooks, materials, and datasets. According to Teacher 4, "I am a vital resource for

assisting learners in navigating difficult and delicate topics. In the classroom, my teaching of these topics is undoubtedly influenced by my personal experiences, views, and backgrounds."

However, Thando stated, "It's crucial to recognize that each of us has personal prejudices and beliefs that might affect how we present facts and lead conversations. We also consider the larger institutional and cultural aspects that are relevant at the same moment." Thando and Teacher 4 both agreed that their unique experiences, viewpoints, and backgrounds have a big impact on how they approach teaching difficult subjects. They stressed the value of allowing learners to consider many viewpoints while simultaneously emphasizing the necessity of being forthright and honest about one's own opinions. Vartiainen, Pellas, Kahila, Valtonen & Tedre (2024) highlight that teacher data literacy is essential for making informed decisions about teaching practices and understanding the impact of their actions on learners. Data analytics can identify areas needing additional support or professional development, refine instructional strategies, and address diverse learner needs. Teachers' willingness to tackle controversial topics might be influenced by subject matter limits, institutional biases, and cultural conventions. The way that teachers approach teaching political problems can also be influenced by their own beliefs and other factors. It emphasises how critical it is to comprehend teachers' varied points of view and the circumstances that influence them. The findings highlight how important it is for teachers to understand the many viewpoints and difficulties they may encounter when instructing on contentious subjects.

Professional Standards and Curriculum Guidelines Encouraging Critical and Inclusive Discussion of Controversial Topics

The data reveals that contentious subjects align with curriculum guidelines, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and South Africa's Social Sciences Curriculum. These guidelines emphasise diverse respect, inclusivity, and social justice, fostering critical citizenship abilities, ethical deduction, and understanding of social justice concerns. Teachers 1, 2, and Thando acknowledge the teaching of stereotypes, gender norms, and tribal discrimination in regular classrooms and recognize the importance of utilizing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to

promote inclusive education. The Basic Education policy promotes teaching religion and life orientation, fostering learners' understanding of diverse religious beliefs and practices and developing critical thinking skills. The South African Council for Education (SACE) offers a code of professional ethics for responsible, respectful, and inclusive discussions.

The declarations emphasise the incorporation of critical social theory into professional standards, curriculum frameworks, and educational policies to provide inclusive, challenging, and transformative learning opportunities. CAPS encourages learners to interact with various viewpoints on historical events, hone their critical thinking abilities, and set ground rules for polite conversation. Teachers should be sensitive to their learners' feelings and discourage dogmatic pedagogies that could hinder their attempts to critically interact with history.

Rossouw (2023) indicates that CAPS fosters the growth of critical thinking abilities, emotional intelligence, inclusive involvement, and a more thorough comprehension of past experiences. Additionally, it improves learners' communication abilities by preparing them for real-life conversations (Agustina & Setiawan, 2020). Encouraging a sense of community and inclusivity is facilitated by the focus on courteous classroom participation. In general, CAPS offers a framework for teaching controversial topics that encourages inclusive engagement, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking. Ultimately, learners benefit from this framework by being better prepared for discussions they will encounter in the real world and by developing a deeper understanding of historical events (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences requires fostering critical thinking, tolerance, and respect for differing viewpoints, as the CAPS framework highlights. The South African Council for Education (SACE) provides a professional ethics code to facilitate inclusive, courteous, and responsible classroom discussions of contentious issues (Kriel, Livingston & Kwenda, 2023). The presented data demonstrates how contentious subjects generally align with curriculum standards and norms. However, it also shows how participants prioritize certain elements, such as cultural rights, critical thinking, and professional ethics, differently.

During the semi-structured interviews, teachers Thando, Thuto, and Zukiswa stress the importance of fostering respect for individual opinions, establishing a culture of safety and trust, and promoting effective communication and active listening. They also emphasise the need for selecting relevant topics and modelling courteous behaviour. In the interview, Thando said, "I foster respect for individual opinions by establishing clear ground rules, encouraging active listening, and modelling respectful behaviour." Similarly, Thuto said, "I foster a culture of trust and safety, provide opportunities for learners to practice effective communication skills, encourage self-reflection, and identify learners' biases and assumptions." Zukiswa adds, "I approach them with a commitment to fairness and openness, creating an environment that encourages respect. I carefully select authentic and relevant issues that are connected to the curriculum to effectively engage learners.

By encouraging respect for individual viewpoints, cultivating a culture of trust and safety, and exposing learners' biases, Thando, Thuto, and Zukiswa's comments are in line with critical social theory. In the classroom, they upend established hierarchies and power structures, fostering critical discourse and transformative learning. Creating a culture of safety and trust, letting learners practice communication skills, and disclosing presumptions that aren't always apparent yet influence social reality are all priorities for Thuto. By addressing contentious subjects with an emphasis on transparency and justice, Zukiswa fosters an atmosphere that values respect. To successfully engage learners, they carefully choose real-world problems that are related to the curriculum. These claims draw attention to the initiatives made to design learning activities and classroom settings that are consistent with the fundamental ideas of critical social theory. This allows learners to acquire the competencies and attitudes required for both social change and transformative learning.

Techniques for Establishing a Secure and Welcome Space for Talking About Divisive Subjects

According to Rios, Borel, Morris, Eggers, Calhoun, and Steiner (2023), it is critical to establish a secure environment in which learners can discuss challenging subjects and openly voice their opinions. They suggest that to fully understand learners' needs and perspectives, teachers should reconsider the assumptions they have made about them.

Furthermore, they argue that learners are more likely to engage in genuine conversations, share their opinions, and listen to others with empathy and respect when they feel comfortable and trusted by their teachers and classmates.

According to Fouberg (2023), establishing a secure environment in the classroom where difficult topics can be discussed is crucial. The author suggests using first-person narratives and introducing ideas upfront to encourage deeper interaction. The study proposes that teachers can equip learners with critical thinking skills by fostering a safe environment, promoting effective communication, and active listening. Teachers utilise methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups to address contentious subjects, including promoting participation, providing resources, and creating a secure environment. The findings indicate that these techniques are employed by teachers in grade six classrooms.

The findings reveal that teachers often rely on informal learning from peers or the school culture as they have not received formal training on how to teach contentious subjects. Teaching approaches can be influenced by school culture and religious beliefs, which may limit the range of topics that can be covered. For example, based on the school's ethos, Teacher 2 stated that same-sex marriage is not endorsed by God. He is quoted saying, "I have received support, but our school ethos does not allow for the teaching of sexual orientations, especially the new issue of gays and lesbians, as they believe that God created only man and woman and nothing else. According to my school ethos, same-sex marriage is not accepted by God."

The critical social theory perspective recognizes sexual and gender diversity as natural expressions of human identity. It challenges the school's mindset that denies the existence and value of LGBTQ+ identities, thus allowing them to regain their rightful place in educational settings. The curriculum and classroom discussions prioritize the voices, experiences, and perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals, fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. Teachers face challenges in addressing contentious subjects due to the lack of formal training, highlighting the need for comprehensive professional development programs. Additionally, significant shifts in social and political contexts and

entrenched school cultures can make it more challenging to effectively teach contentious subjects.

Mosala (2023) emphasises the importance of respectful discussion of controversial issues in a democratic culture. However, teaching such issues can be challenging for teachers and school administrators. To address these challenges, a supportive, inclusive, and democratic school environment is crucial. Teachers like Siyanda emphasise cultural education and address learners' interests when dealing with controversial issues. This approach aligns with critical social theory and fosters inclusive classrooms. Cassar, Oosterheert, and Meijer (2023) also underline the importance of teaching contentious subjects for the advancement of democracy. Teachers must adapt their methods to fit institutional and cultural contexts, seeking guidance from their peers. Educational institutions must provide comprehensive support to enable teachers to deliver inclusive and culturally sensitive education. Despite the challenges stemming from the lack of formal training and institutional constraints, teachers demonstrate resilience by adjusting their techniques and seeking support from their peers.

Promoting Tolerance and Inclusivity Through Diverse Teaching Strategies and Critical Social Theory

Teachers emphasise the importance of promoting tolerance through polite discourse and a spectrum of viewpoints in their teaching methods. They use strategies such as case studies, role-playing games, and original literature and multimedia content to develop empathy and a sense of diversity among learners. These teaching techniques align with the tenets of critical social theory, which encourages learners to become involved, socially conscious citizens who can effect positive change.

To encourage inclusivity, teachers should assess their own prejudices and offer a variety of examples. They also use primary literature and multimedia materials to expose learners to various perspectives. The goal is to give learners agency, foster critical consciousness, and equip them to become involved, socially conscious citizens who can effect positive change. Teachers acknowledge the impact of cultural origins on teaching contentious subjects, such as xenophobia, gender norms, religious diversity, and discrimination based on tribe. They emphasise the need to recognize and deal with the

distinct prejudices and preconceptions that result from diverse cultural backgrounds. Coping strategies and cultural socialisation are incorporated in this process.

Teachers highlight the importance of addressing systematic disparities, recognizing placed priorities, and addressing accessibility and inclusiveness. They stress the importance of combining coping mechanisms with cultural socialisation when tackling contentious issues like gender norms, religious diversity, and tribe discrimination. They also highlight the strength of cultural prejudices by pointing out how dominant groups often use marginalized populations as scapegoats during times of economic instability.

Miller, Struve, Murray, and Tompkins (2024) emphasise the importance of recognizing and confronting the unique prejudices and preconceptions that result from learners' various cultural origins. They argue that teachers can better encourage meaningful debates and assist learners in developing critical thinking abilities by fostering inclusive environments, offering different materials, and personalizing the subject. Freire's "liberation pedagogy" approach emphasises learner empowerment and critical analysis of societal concerns rather than controlling cultural stereotypes. The language proficiency of learners might influence the selection of topics in the classroom, and teachers should avoid abstract concepts or difficult topics if they find it difficult to express their experiences and viewpoints.

Fostering Critical Consciousness and Empathy Through Diverse Instructional Approaches

Teachers employed active learning techniques such as case studies, debates, and multimodal approaches to teach controversial subjects. These techniques aimed to foster critical thinking, awareness, and empathy among learners. Teacher 1 focused on gender norms and stereotypes, while Teacher 2 used a debate structure to divide learners into groups and present opposing viewpoints on topics such as racial prejudice, sexual orientation, and religious diversity. Teacher 3 employed a multimodal approach, incorporating essays, podcasts, and films to examine and uncover biases in the media.

Critical social theory was integrated into the lesson plans of all three teachers, with a focus on social injustices, power dynamics, marginalization, critical analysis, critical thinking, and learner agency. Dewey's concept of progressive education emphasises

learner-centred learning and active engagement in the learning process (Do, 2022). Freire, Bean, and Melzer (2021) stress the significance of learner involvement and critical thinking in the educational process. Active learning strategies that stimulate learners to think critically and analyse data are essential.

The data analysis revealed that case studies, discussions, and multimodal approaches were effectively used to teach controversial subjects. The shared goal was to promote awareness among learners, develop understanding and empathy for these issues through analysis and critical thinking. The teachers aimed to create a classroom environment that encouraged critical thinking, equitable representation of viewpoints, and the cultivation of ethical reasoning abilities.

4.3.15. Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the data generated from ten Intermediate Phase Social Sciences teachers who participated in the study. These teachers were from five primary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district in the Free State province. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, and a discussion based on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 followed. The themes presented in the data were developed from the four secondary research questions, and corresponding sub-themes were identified. The data from the participants' interviews and focus group transcripts were used to address the four research questions. The findings provide answers to both the study's primary research question and its secondary questions.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

This narrative study explores the opportunities and challenges that teachers encounter when teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences in primary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District. This chapter provides a summary of the findings, as well as conclusions and recommendations. Through thematic analysis of data obtained from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, I gained in-depth insights into the opportunities and difficulties teachers have while teaching on contentious topics in Social Sciences during the Intermediate Phase.

Teaching controversial topics can be a delicate and challenging task, especially in Intermediate-Phase classes. It is crucial to understand how teachers handle sensitive subject matter and create inclusive learning environments as they address controversial topics and adapt their teaching methods. This research demonstrates how teachers modify their instructional approaches to encourage learners to participate in contentious discussions, thereby promoting tolerance and understanding among individuals from diverse backgrounds.

5.2. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.2.1. Exploring the Nature and Impact of Controversial Topics in Education

Controversial topics, such as tribal discrimination, gender roles, stereotypes, sexual orientation, racial discrimination, religious diversity, and local history, spark debate and opposing views within communities and larger groups. These topics involve intense discussion, conflict, and differing perspectives, encouraging learners to confront moral, intellectual, and socio-political challenges by questioning accepted norms, conventions, and truths. Teachers emphasise the importance of creating a welcoming, safe space for learners to explore intellectual and sociological topics, even if certain subjects might be uncomfortable. They acknowledge the discomfort of learners and reassure them that their feelings are valid and valuable. Teachers and learners should work together to create a classroom that values respect, kindness, and trust, where questions are welcomed, and different perspectives are respected.

5.2.2. Addressing controversial topics in the classroom

Due to ignorance, risk aversion, and fear of negative responses, teachers often avoid teaching controversial topics. However, some teachers still tackle these subjects, aligning themselves with critical social theory. Engaging with controversial topics can help learners question, confront, and ultimately change unjust societal conditions. Teachers implement strategies such as classroom management, sociological analysis, and intellectual exploration, fostering empathy, co-developing classroom norms, maintaining a balanced environment, and promoting active listening skills. Empathy is crucial for creating a supportive learning environment, but learners may face challenges. Teachers emphasise the importance of ongoing professional development, embracing diverse beliefs, and utilizing research-based teaching strategies to ensure effective engagement and growth in critical thinking.

5.2.3. Identifying and Addressing Key Controversial Topics in Education

Teachers have identified several contentious issues, including discrimination, stereotypes, religious diversity, environmental degradation, and the effects of apartheid. They emphasise the importance of teaching equality and social justice to combat discrimination and promote tolerance. This aligns with critical theory, which challenges prevailing social structures and oppressive ideologies. The teachers aim to foster a culture of tolerance, religious diversity, and environmental sustainability. The discussion of controversial topics has evolved over time, influenced by factors such as advocacy, legislation, cultural shifts, media influence, education, globalization, and historical background. The teachers also emphasise the dynamic nature of social categories and power systems, focusing on the struggle against repressive conditions experienced by marginalized groups.

5.2.4. Navigating the Complexities of Controversial Topics: The Influence of Personal Narratives, Local Knowledge, and Societal Contexts

Understanding the context in which conflicts originate is crucial for effectively teaching and discussing controversial topics in the classroom. Teachers' personal narratives, local knowledge, and societal changes can influence their views on topics such as gender identity, diversity, and local history. Teachers' opinions align with critical social theory as

they recognize the difficulties they face when discussing political issues, either due to their personal beliefs or external pressures. Critical social theory emphasises the use of education to equip learners with the necessary tools to confront oppressive systems and strive for social change. Racial and gender-based constraints can affect teaching materials and create misunderstandings, often as a result of institutional biases and cultural norms. Therefore, addressing these complexities and nuances in teachers' opinions is essential for fostering an inclusive learning environment.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and South Africa's Social Sciences curriculum (CAPS) recognize the importance of addressing topics such as gender roles, religious diversity, and tribal prejudice. CAPS promotes respect for diversity, inclusivity, and social justice, while the Department of Basic Education's guidelines focus on cultivating critical citizenship skills, ethical reasoning, and an understanding of social justice issues. Aligning contentious subject matter with curriculum guidelines encourages the development of critical thinking skills, emotional intelligence, inclusive participation, and a comprehensive understanding of historical experiences.

5.2.5. Promoting Inclusive and Responsible Discussions of Controversial Topics through Professional Ethics and Critical Pedagogy

The South African Council for Education (SACE) provides a code of professional ethics to promote inclusive, courteous, and responsible classroom discussions on contentious issues. Teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences requires the fostering of critical thinking, tolerance, and respect for differing viewpoints. Teachers place emphasis on creating a safe and inclusive environment by establishing ground rules, providing diverse learning materials, facilitating open discussions, and promoting learner engagement. They acknowledge and celebrate diversity, provide background information, co-develop classroom norms, and cultivate an anti-racist classroom. The "liberation pedagogy" approach of Paulo Freire underscores the significance of learners being able to contribute their unique experiences and viewpoints to the classroom. This approach empowers learners to take action and challenge the prevailing norms. Teachers such as Thando, Thuto, and Zukiswa stress the importance of respecting individual opinions, establishing a culture of safety and trust, and promoting effective communication and active listening.

Incorporating controversial topics into the curriculum is crucial, but teachers often rely on informal learning from peers or the prevailing school culture, which can limit the range of subjects covered. Critical social theory challenges the mindset of schools that deny the presence and value of LGBTQ+ identities, with the aim of creating inclusive and equitable learning environments.

5.2.6. Enhancing Teacher Capacity and School Environment for Effective Teaching of Controversial Topics

Teachers often struggle to manage contentious subjects in the classroom due to a lack of formal training. Comprehensive professional development programs are essential to address this issue. It is crucial to create a supportive, inclusive, and democratic school environment for teachers to effectively tackle controversial topics. To achieve this, teachers employ various strategies such as case studies, role-playing games, and original literature and multimedia content. These methods aim to expose learners to diverse perspectives, foster critical thinking, and develop empathy. When teaching contentious subjects like xenophobia, gender norms, religious diversity, and discrimination based on tribe, cultural origins play a significant role. Teachers emphasise the importance of recognizing and addressing the distinct prejudices and preconceptions that stem from diverse cultural backgrounds. In this process, incorporating cultural socialisation and coping skills is crucial.

5.2.7 Language Barriers and Cultural Contexts in Teaching Controversial Topics

Language barriers can affect the choice of controversial topics, as they require advanced literacy skills in the dominant language. Teachers understand that contentious issues are complex and influenced by various factors, including cultural settings, social conventions, and individual experiences. The selection of topics in the classroom might be influenced by the language proficiency of learners, as they may avoid abstract concepts or difficult topics if they find it challenging to express their experiences and viewpoints. Dewey and Freire's progressive education concept emphasises learner-centred learning and active engagement in the learning process. Active learning strategies motivate learners to think critically and analyse data, fostering a nurturing environment that develops empathy and understanding. Overall, these teachers aim to create a classroom climate that

encourages critical thinking, equitable representation of viewpoints, and the growth of ethical reasoning abilities.

5.3. CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions that can be drawn from this data are that controversial topics, such as tribal discrimination, gender roles, and religious diversity, can generate intense debate and present moral and intellectual challenges. It is recommended that teachers establish a safe and inclusive environment for discussing these topics, with an emphasis on active listening, empathy, critical thinking, and respectful dissent. This approach is consistent with critical social theory, which emphasises the importance of understanding contentious issues to uncover biases and foster inclusive discourse. Engaging with controversial topics can empower learners to question, confront, and challenge unjust societal conditions, thereby creating a secure and welcoming learning environment. Teachers should lead by example and incorporate controversial topics into the curriculum, acknowledging diversity and prioritizing the voices of underrepresented groups.

A significant obstacle to effectively managing controversial topics in the classroom is the lack of professional development. Comprehensive professional development is needed to provide teachers with the necessary skills to facilitate productive discussions. A supportive school culture is crucial for successfully teaching controversial topics. Adapting teaching approaches to institutional influences aligns with critical social theory, promoting empowerment and a sense of belonging. Strategies for promoting critical thinking and empathy include the use of case studies, role-playing, primary sources, and multimedia. These methods align with critical social theory's emphasis on challenging marginalization and oversimplified interpretations of complex issues. Employing strategies grounded in critical social theory can empower learners to engage with diverse perspectives, develop critical thinking skills, and challenge injustices.

The research findings underscore the importance of considering cultural backgrounds when teaching controversial topics, highlighting the need for teachers to address biases and prejudices arising from diverse backgrounds. Cultural socialisation and coping skills are crucial, aligning with critical social theory's emphasis on examining systemic disparities and promoting inclusiveness. Language barriers can also influence the

selection of controversial topics, as advanced literacy skills in the dominant language are often required for engaging in sophisticated debates. The complexity of controversial issues is also a concern, with teachers avoiding abstract concepts or difficult topics if learners struggle to express their views.

To develop critical thinking, awareness, and empathy among learners, teachers **utilise** various teaching techniques, including case studies, debates, and multimodal approaches. They incorporate critical social theory, which highlights social injustices, power dynamics, marginalization, critical analysis, and learner agency. Learner-centred learning is also essential, as the progressive education concepts of Dewey and Freire emphasise the value of active engagement in the educational process. In conclusion, the findings underscore the need for inclusive, learner-centred classrooms that encourage critical thinking, equitable representation of viewpoints, and the development of ethical reasoning skills when addressing controversial topics.

5.4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study makes six recommendations on how the teaching of controversial topics can be improved at the Intermediate Phase. These recommendations are: the use of case studies, facilitating structured debates, community involvement, encouraging a culture of safety and trust in teachers, providing intensive professional development to help teachers handle contentious topics, and examining the causes.

5.4.1. Use Case Studies

Teacher 1 of the focus group discussion said, "I employ a case study methodology, focusing on real examples of gender norms and stereotypes, as well as tribal discrimination." Applying a case study approach, Teacher 1 focuses on real instances of contentious issues, such as discrimination based on ethnicity and gender. It is easier for learners to understand and relate to the topics when specific situations are used. He went on to say that encouraging learners to conduct research on particular topics and then explain their findings is necessary to cultivate empathy and critical thinking.

5.4.2. Facilitate Structured Debates

While Teacher 2 said, "As a teacher, I use a debate structure in which learners are split up into groups and given competing points of view on topics including racial prejudice, sexual orientation, and religious diversity." During debates, Teacher 2 assigns learners to groups and asks them to discuss various points of view on topics such as diversity in religion, sexual orientation, and racial prejudice. Through organised debates, learners can investigate many points of view in a supervised environment (Popescu & Badea, 2020; Lorensius, Anggal & Lujan, 2022).

5.4.3. Invite Community Involvement

On the other hand, Teacher 4 said, "I employ a community involvement strategy, inviting experts and members of the community to give talks about local history in the classroom." When it comes to teaching about pertinent history, Teacher 4 invites community members and local experts to speak. Learner participation in the community gives them access to first-hand information and experiences about the contentious issues being debated (Goodenough, MacTavish, MacTavish & Hart, 2023).

Teachers stress the value of exposing learners to a variety of perspectives on controversial topics in each of the examples. Examining opposing viewpoints aids learners in forming their own opinions and developing critical thinking skills on difficult subjects. Teachers emphasise contentious topics like current social concerns and local history that directly impact the lives of their learners. Making the information relevant to the experiences of learners increases its impact and level of engagement. The teachers suggest that the best ways to handle controversial topics in grade six Social Sciences classes are to use case studies, organised discussions, community involvement, different perspectives, and relevant topics. The secret is to establish a space where learners can comfortably explore challenging topics from multiple perspectives (Nyabando & Evanshen, 2022).

On the other hand, during the semi-structured interviews, teacher Thuto said, "I foster a culture of trust and safety, establish clear expectations, and provide opportunities for learners to practice effective communication skills. I also encourage self-reflection and identify learners' biases and assumptions." In contrast, Zethu mentioned that "learners

are encouraged to critically analyse the root causes of intolerance and reflect on how these issues manifest in contemporary society.

The following are the main recommendations that can be made in light of the statements made by teachers Zethu and Thuto:

5.4.4. Encourage a Culture of Safety and Trust in Teachers

Thuto stresses the significance of creating a safe and trusting environment in the classroom. Learners can now explore delicate and contentious subjects without worrying about being judged. Thuto also emphasises the importance of setting clear guidelines for how contentious subject discussions will be conducted. This provides the conversations with direction and organisation.

5.4.5 Intensive Professional Development to Help Teachers Handle Contentious Topics

It offers comprehensive professional development programs for teachers. These programs aim to help teachers facilitate discussions on controversial topics in a safe, inclusive, and effective manner. Our focus is on providing training in pedagogical techniques, fostering inclusive school cultures, exposing teachers to diverse perspectives, and offering ongoing support and collaboration. During our programs, teachers will be trained in creating welcoming learning environments, promoting critical thinking and empathy, and navigating cultural biases and language barriers. We believe that schools should align their policies with critical social theory principles and actively engage with diverse viewpoints. Additionally, mentorship programs should be established to help teachers navigate the evolving challenges of teaching controversial topics. By taking a holistic approach, we aim to create inclusive, critical, and empowering learning experiences for learners.

5.4.6. Examine the Causes

Zethu's method involves challenging learners to critically analyse the root causes of intolerance and how these problems appear in contemporary society. This more thorough examination goes beyond merely talking about the apparent conflicts. In conclusion, the main suggestions are cultivating trust, establishing clear expectations, offering practice in communicating, promoting introspection, and identifying underlying problems. The

intention is to establish a learning atmosphere in the classroom where learners can thoughtfully and constructively address difficult and sensitive topics.

5.5 FINAL WORD

In my opinion, contentious subjects are necessary to push back against conventional wisdom and encourage learners to engage with ethical, intellectual, and socio-political concerns. However, teachers tend to avoid these subjects due to ignorance, anxiety about learners' reactions, and perceived hazards. It is essential to establish a safe, welcoming, and trustworthy classroom atmosphere where a range of viewpoints are acknowledged and valued to effectively teach contentious subjects. This can be achieved by establishing ground principles, encouraging empathy and active listening, and recognizing diversity. Teachers' perspectives on contentious subjects are greatly influenced by their individual histories, local expertise, and social environments. It is essential to address these subtleties and complexities to promote an inclusive learning environment.

Two contentious issues, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and South Africa's CAPS, can be aligned with curricular requirements to foster critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and a greater comprehension of historical events. To successfully handle these delicate themes, teachers require thorough professional development programmes that provide them with pedagogical strategies, cultural sensitivity, and ongoing support. Education establishments can support this by funding teacher capacity building and fostering positive school climates, enabling teachers to harness the transformative power of contentious Social Science subjects. With a comprehensive approach, learners can have inclusive, critical, and powerful learning experiences that will equip them to be active, socially conscious citizens.

The study highlights the importance of thorough professional development for teachers instructing learners in Social Science in the Intermediate Phase on contentious subjects. One major issue is the lack of professional development that teachers frequently experience. Addressing this requires a democratic, inclusive, and supportive school climate. To promote critical thinking skills and expose learners to a variety of viewpoints, teachers should employ a range of teaching tactics, such as role-playing and case

studies. Teachers' approaches to controversial subjects are influenced by their cultural backgrounds and places of origin. Language barriers can also influence the choice of contentious topics, and modern educational ideas like learner-centred learning can create a supportive atmosphere. By investing in teachers' professional development and fostering inclusive school climates, teachers can be better equipped to handle these challenges and encourage learners to be critical thinkers and socially conscious citizens.

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Appendix 1: Language Editing Certificate



CERTIFICATE
OF LANGUAGE EDITING

ERRCDF
Rethinking Education 4 Inclusive Development

The certificate is awarded to

Sithembiso Mlambo

This certificate confirms that Sithembiso Mlambo's thesis titled "Exploring the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase" was edited by a professional English-language editing staff at the ERRCD Forum.

  22/07/2024

Bunmi Omodan

Bunmi Omodan (PhD)
Editor-in-Chief
ERRCDF Language Editing Service
LangEditor@errcd.com
www.errcd.com

Appendix 2: Ethics Approval



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

18-Jan-2024

Dear Mr Sithembiso Mlambo

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

Exploring the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase

Ethical Clearance number: **UFS-HSD2023/1915**



We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to

the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely **Dr Adri Du**

Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

205 Nelson Mandela
Drive
Park West
Bloemfontein 9301
South Africa

P.O. Box 339

Bloemfontein 9300

Tel: +27 (0)51 401 9337 duplessisA@ufs.ac.za www.ufs.ac.za

Appendix 3: Title Registration Letter



14 September 2023

APPLICATION FOR TITLE REGISTRATION

Applicant: Mlambo, S

Student Number: 2017498391

Discipline: Curriculum Studies

Study Code: Masters (EDCI8900)

Dear Mr Mlambo

Your registered title is as follows: **“Exploring the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase”**

All of the best with your studies.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Mafora'.

Prof Patrick Mafora
Chair: CTR committee

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Duvenhage'.

Ms CS Duvenhage
Secretary: CTR committee



Appendix 4: Free State Department of Education Permission Letters

Enquiries: M.Z. Thango
Ref: Research Permission: S. Mlambo
Tel. 051 404 8808
Email: MZ.Thango@fseducation.gov.za



education
Department of
Education
FREE STATE PROVINCE

958 Inqabakucasha Crescent
C Section
Ulundi
3838

Dear Mr. S. Mlambo

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE FREE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: THABO MOFUTSANYANA DISTRICT

This letter serves to inform you that you have been granted permission to conduct research in the Free State Department of Education within the Thabo Mofutsanyana Education District. The details in relation to your research project with the University of the Free State are as follows:

Topic: Exploring the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase.

- 1. List of schools involved:** Letotolo Primary, Letlotlo Primary, Tiisetso Junior Primary, Sephokong Intermediate and Qwaqwa Primary.
- 2. Target Population:** Ten teachers teaching Social Sciences in grade 6 at the selected schools.
- 3. Period of research:** From the second week of February 2024 until 30 September 2024. Please note that the department does not allow any research to be conducted during the fourth term (quarter) of the academic year. Should you fall behind your schedule by three months to complete your research project in the approved period, you will need to apply for an extension. The researcher is expected to request permission from the school principals to conduct research at schools.
- 4. The approval is subject to the following conditions:**
 - 4.1** The collection of data should not interfere with the normal tuition time or teaching process.
 - 4.2** A bound copy of the research document should be submitted to the Free State Department of Education, Room 101, 1st Floor, Thuto House, St. Andrew Street, Bloemfontein or can be emailed to the above-mentioned email address.
 - 4.3** You will be expected, on completion of your research study to make a presentation to the relevant stakeholders in the Department.
 - 4.4** The ethics documents must be adhered to in the discourse of your study in our department.
- 5. Please note that costs relating to all the conditions mentioned above are your own responsibility.**

Yours Sincerely,

Mr. MZAMO W. JACOBS
DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE, M&E AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

DATE: 13/11/2023

RESEARCH APPLICATION BY S. MLAMBO. PERMISSION LETTER 13 NOVEMBER 2023. THABO MOFUTSANYANA DISTRICT
QASME, M&E and Strategic Planning Directorate Private Bag X20565, Bloemfontein, 9300 - Thuto House, Room 101, 1st Floor, St Andrew Street, Bloemfontein

www.fsdoe.fs.gov.za

Enquiries: M.Z. Thango
Ref: Notification of research: S. Mlambo
Tel. 051 404 8808
Email: MZ.Thango@fseducation.gov.za



District Director
Thabo Mofutsanyana District

Dear Ms. Mabaso

NOTIFICATION OF RESEARCH: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH PROJECT IN THABO MOFUTSANYANA DISTRICT

This letter serves to inform you that Mr. S. Mlambo has been granted permission to conduct research in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District under the auspices of the University of the Free State. The details in relation to the research project are as follows:

Topic: Exploring the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase.

1. **List of schools involved:** Letotolo Primary, Letlotlo Primary, Tiisetso Junior Primary, Sephokong Intermediate and Qwaqwa Primary.
2. **Target Population:** Ten teachers teaching Social Sciences in grade 6 at the selected schools.
3. **Period of research:** From the second week of February 2024 until 30 September 2024. Please note the department does not allow any research to be conducted during the fourth term (quarter) of the academic year nor during normal school hours. The researcher is expected to request permission from the school principals to conduct research at schools.
4. **Research benefits:** This study will help teachers to equip students with the capability to discuss controversial topics in a balanced and non-emotional way in Social Sciences. This will enable learners to develop respect for different and conflicting opinions and appreciate divergent views from persons of different backgrounds. Moreover, it will help teachers and learners to develop the ability to adapt to the ever-changing global and classroom environments.
5. The Sub-directorate of Research and policy will make the necessary arrangements for the researchers to present the findings and recommendations to the relevant officials in the Department.

Yours Sincerely,

Mr. MZAMO-W. JACOBS
DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE, M&E AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

DATE: 13/11/2023

Appendix 5: Focus Group Discussion Protocol

Focus Group Discussions protocol: For primary school Social Science teachers

DATE:

TIME:

VENUE:

(Before the interview, I will record the following: pseudonym of interviewee, gender, school, date, place & time)

The opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Science at the Intermediate Phase.

The purpose of this study is to explore the opportunities and challenges that you experience in teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the intermediate Phase classrooms.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. You are requested to respond to the following set of questions to the best of your ability.
2. You are kindly notified that the conversation will be recorded and after the research has been completed, they will be destroyed.
3. You will be expected to sign a consent form before the commencement of the interview.

TEACHER BACKGROUND

- **Gender**
- **Age**
- **Experience**.....
- **Qualifications**.....

Main question	What are the opportunities and challenges in the teaching of controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate phase?
Sub-questions	Interview questions for Social Sciences teachers

<p>1. Which topics are identified by Intermediate Phase teachers as controversial in Social Sciences?</p>	<p>Do the identified controversial topics change over time, and if so, what factors contribute to these changes?</p> <p>How do you handle controversial topics in the classrooms, and what techniques do you use to promote open discussions?</p> <p>Are there differences in the perception of controversial topics between teachers with different backgrounds or teaching experiences?</p> <p>How do the identified controversial topics in Social Sciences align with curriculum standards and guidelines?</p> <p>What impact do controversial topics have on learners' engagement and learning in Social Sciences?</p> <p>Are there any best practices or recommendations for addressing controversial topics in Social Sciences education based on the insights from Intermediate Phase teachers?</p>
<p>2. How are controversial topics taught in the Social Sciences curriculum in the Intermediate Phase?</p>	<p>Are there any differences in how controversial topics are taught across different schools or regions?</p> <p>How do learners respond to the way you teach controversial topics?</p> <p>What strategies do you use to address biases or misinformation when teaching controversial topics?</p>

3. What opportunities and challenges are encountered by Social Sciences teachers when teaching controversial topics in the Intermediate Phase?	<p>Have you received any professional development to professional development that has helped them to cope with the challenges in teaching controversial topics?</p> <p>Apartheid is a controversial topic in South African schools. How do you handle this topic?</p>
4. What lessons can be learnt from the teaching of controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum?	<p>What is the influence of different cultural contexts on - teaching controversial topics?</p> <p>Do you have any successful case studies or best practices that shows you have effectively taught controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum?</p>

Appendix 6: Semi- structured Interviews Protocol

Semi-structured interview protocol: For primary school Social Science teachers

DATE:

TIME:

VENUE:

(Before the interview, I will record the following: pseudonym of interviewee, gender, school, date, place & time)

Type of Interview: Face-to-face semi-structured interview, one-on-one.

Title of the study: The opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Science at the Intermediate Phase

The purpose of this study is to explore the opportunities and challenges that you experience in teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the intermediate Phase classrooms.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. You are requested to respond to the following set of questions to the best of your ability.
2. You are kindly notified that the conversation will be recorded and after the research has been completed, they will be destroyed.
3. You will be expected to sign a consent form before the commencement of the interview.

TEACHER BACKGROUND

- **Gender**
- **Age**
- **Experience**.....
- **Qualifications**.....

Main question	What are the opportunities and challenges in the teaching of controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate phase?
----------------------	---

Sub-questions	Interview questions for Social Sciences teachers
<p>1. Which topics are identified by Intermediate Phase teachers as controversial in Social Sciences?</p>	<p>What specific controversial topics are included in the Intermediate Phase Social Sciences CAPS curriculum?</p> <p>How do you define "controversial topics" in the Social Sciences context?</p> <p>According to you, what are the most frequently mentioned/taught controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase?</p> <p>Are there cultural variations in the controversial topics you identified as an Intermediate Phase Social Sciences teacher?</p>
<p>2. How are controversial topics taught in the Social Sciences curriculum in the Intermediate Phase?</p>	<p>Are there guidelines or standards for teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum?</p> <p>What is your approach on discussions of controversial topics to ensure a balanced and respectful classroom environment?</p> <p>What resources and materials are used to teach controversial topics in Social Sciences?</p>

<p>3. What opportunities and challenges are encountered by Social Sciences teachers when teaching controversial topics in the Intermediate Phase?</p>	<p>Which teaching methods do you use to teach controversial topics?</p> <p>Which resources are available for teaching controversial topics?</p> <p>What are the benefits of discussing controversial topics with learners?</p> <p>What challenges do you face when teaching controversial topics?</p> <p>How do learners typically respond to controversial topics during lessons?</p> <p>Which strategies do you use to foster respect for individual opinions when teaching controversial topics?</p> <p>Are there any legal or policy considerations that impact your teaching of controversial topics?</p> <p>Which challenges do you associate with teaching controversial topics?</p>
<p>4. What lessons can be learnt from the teaching of controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum?</p>	<p>What are the potential benefits of teaching controversial topics in the Social Sciences?</p> <p>How do you create a safe and inclusive learning environment when discussing controversial topics?</p>

	<p>How can you ensure that diverse perspectives are included and respected in these discussions?</p> <p>Are there any ethical considerations when teaching controversial topics in the classroom?</p>
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Appendix 7: Turnitin Report

Mlambo_dissertation.docx

ORIGINALITY REPORT

7 %	7 %	4 %	2 %
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	ir.cut.ac.za Internet Source	1 %
2	pdfs.semanticscholar.org Internet Source	1 %
3	www.hilarispublisher.com Internet Source	1 %
4	theconversation.com Internet Source	<1 %
5	cehhs.utk.edu Internet Source	<1 %
6	Osei-Tutu Jonah, Tatek Abebe. "Tensions and controversies regarding child labor in small-scale gold mining in Ghana", African Geographical Review, 2018 Publication	<1 %
7	docslib.org Internet Source	<1 %
8	hdl.handle.net Internet Source	<1 %

Appendix 8: Participants Consent Form

Research study information leaflet and consent form

Date: 01 March 2024

Title of the research project

Exploring the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase

Principle investigator / researcher(s) name(s) and contact number(s):

Sithembiso Mlambo 2017498391 0788691025

Faculty and Department:

Name of Faculty: Education

Name of Department: Curriculum Studies and Higher Education

Study leader(s) name and contact number:

Godsend Tawanda Chimbi (UFS staff member)

Contact number: 0627308084.

Ijeoma Ogbonnaya (UFS staff member)

What is the aim / purpose of the study?

The study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase.

Who is doing the research?

Sithembiso Mlambo (I) is the one who will be doing the research. I am supervised by Dr GT Chimbi & ICE Ogbonnaya. I am doing this project to explore the opportunities and challenges teachers have in teaching of controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate Phase.

Has the study received ethical approval?

Awaiting (ethical clearance application under development).

Approval number: UFS-HSD2023/1915

Why are you invited to take part in this research project?

Participants were chosen because they are Social Science teachers in the Intermediate Phase. Teachers' contact details will be obtained once the permission has been granted by the principal of the school. They are ten participants in this study selected for the following reasons: they are Social Science teachers at the Intermediate Phase, have at least five years of teaching experience in Social Sciences, hold a Bachelor of Education degree in Intermediate Phase teaching, and they are male or female.

What is the nature of participation in this study?

The participant's actual role will be to answer the questions of this study. The study involves audio recording taping, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The questions of the study are:

Main research question

What are the opportunities and challenges in the teaching of controversial topics in Social Sciences at the Intermediate phase?

Sub-research questions

1. Which topics are identified by Intermediate Phase teachers as controversial in Social Sciences?
2. How are controversial topics taught in the Social Sciences curriculum in the Intermediate Phase?
3. What opportunities and challenges are encountered by Social Sciences teachers when teaching controversial topics in the Intermediate Phase?
4. What lessons can be learnt from the teaching of controversial topics in the Social Sciences curriculum?

The expected duration of participation and the time needed to complete specific research activities like, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews is within the period of 3 months. The time allocated to conduct interviews is 30 minutes per participant and an hour for focus groups. There are no risks to the study as teachers are adults who can make decision to remain or withdraw in the study.

Can the participant withdraw from the study?

Being in this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What are the potential benefits of taking part in this study?

Your participation will contribute to the scientific knowledge that help teachers to equip learners with the capability to discuss controversial topics in a balanced and non-emotional way in Social Sciences, will enable learners to develop respect for different and conflicting opinions and appreciate divergent views from persons of different backgrounds. Furthermore, it will help teachers and learners to develop the ability to adapt to the ever-changing global and classroom environments. Your participation in the study will be kept confidential.

What is the anticipated inconvenience of taking part in this study?

Possible or reasonably foreseeable side-effects to the potential participants is that their teaching time will be affected and to avoid this the researcher will conduct interviews and focus group discussions when the teachers are not having classes. The researcher will ask the teachers to indicate the times they will be free so that he can interview them or engage in focus group discussions.

Will what I say be kept confidential?

Yes, confidentiality of information will be maintained. Your name will not be recorded, anywhere and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your answers will be given a fictitious code number or a pseudonym, and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. Only the researcher and supervisors will

have access to the data and confidentiality will be maintained by signing a confidentiality agreement. Your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including the transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records. Your anonymous data may be used for other purposes, e.g., research report, journal articles, conference presentation, etc. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report. While every effort will be made by the researcher to ensure that you will not be connected to the information that you share during the focus group, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the focus group will treat information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all participants to do so. For this reason, I advise you not to disclose personally sensitive information in the focus group. You are absolutely under no obligation to participate in the study, and you can stop being in the study at any time without getting in trouble.

How will the information be stored and ultimately destroyed?

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of three years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at the university of the Free State. for future research or academic purposes, electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer. The information will be kept for 3-5 years after that will be destroyed (according to the University, any collected data can only be used for 3-5 years). Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. There are no anticipated risks associated with the study.

Will I receive payment or any incentives for participating in this study?

No payment or incentives will be received in this study.

How will the participant be informed of the findings / results of the study?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Sithembiso Mlambo on 0788691025 / 2017498391@ufs4life.ac.za The findings are accessible for five years. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact 0788691025,

2017498391@ufs4life.ac.za. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact 0627308084, ChimbiGT@ufs.ac.za (supervisor). There are no risks associated with this research.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Appendix 9: Consent to participate in this study

I, the undersigned,

(participant's full names to be included), (the "Participant")

confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study referred to as the

(the "Study") in relation to

and which Study is being conducted by:

Sithembiso Mlambo

(insert the name of the researcher), (the "**Researcher**").

I, the undersigned Participant, further confirm that–

1. the Researcher has explained the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of my participation in the Study;
2. I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the Study as explained in the attached information sheet;
3. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the Study;
4. I understand that my participation in the Study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable);
5. I voluntarily provide the UFS and the Researcher with my personal information and consent to the UFS and the Researcher collecting, disclosing and processing my personal information in order to conduct the Study and any related activities in relation thereto;

6. I hereby acknowledge and confirm that I understand the purpose for which the UFS and the Researcher may collect, store, use, delete, destroy, outsource, transfer or otherwise process, as the context and circumstances may require and as contemplated in terms of POPIA, my personal information as set out herein;
7. I am aware that the findings of the Study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings and that my personal information will be aggregated and deidentified at such stage;
8. I also give the UFS permission to share, without notification, the collected data with other researchers at the UFS or other Higher Education Institutions. This permission is dependent on the same principles of ethical research practices, anonymity/confidentiality, safekeeping of information, and other issues listed above applying.

I, the Participant, agree to the recording of the semi-structured interview.

Full Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Sithembiso Mlambo

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____