



In search of lasting peace in schools: Learner's perceptions of peace education in Western Cape Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, peace education programmes have been implemented in many European and African countries. Peace education is essential to reduce the scourge of violence affecting schools and for developing positive thinking. It is a tool to create consciousness among individuals to better comprehend the threat of conflict and violence. However, research and media reports indicate that violence continues to affect learners in schools. This poses the question of whether learners fully understand peace education as a strategy to combat school violence. The study was undertaken to determine secondary school learners' perceptions of peace education, using the integrative theory of peace as theoretical lens. The research employed a qualitative approach in three case studies at secondary schools in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. Three focus group interviews with a purposefully selected group of five learners in each school were conducted. The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that most participants had a poor understanding of peace education. It is recommended that schools should promote peace education and increase awareness among all learners by organizing public campaigns for peace education; integrating peace education into the curriculum; and providing learners and teachers with training in peace education.

Keywords: culture of peace; learners; peace buddies; peace education; school violence; South Africa

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Violence in schools – particularly secondary schools – is a global phenomenon and South Africa is no exception (Le Mottee & Kelly, 2017; Qwabe, Maluleke & Olutola, 2022). Annually, it is estimated that about 246 million children and adolescents globally experience some form of violence while at school (UNESCO, 2017). According to the latest crime and safety report in the United States (US), schools will record one or more serious violent incidents at some time every year, and minorities of students will be involved in physical fights while at school. In addition, the report states that a small number of students is likely to bring lethal weapons

to school or become victims of sexual assault or robbery while at school (Wang, Cheu, Zhang & Oudeker, 2020).

Violence in schools has a detrimental effect on children's development, as it deprives them of their fundamental right to education. Smit (2003, p.27) explains that violence hampers the mission of the school as an educational institution and creates a climate of insecurity and fear among learners. In the same vein, Burton and Leoschut (2013, p.12) assert that school violence often leads to poor academic achievement, as victims often struggle to pay attention in class and find it difficult to grasp the content and to cope with their schooling. For example,

bullying as one form of violence has devastating consequences, as victims often develop low self-esteem, poor concentration in class and a lower desire to attend school (Musariwa, 2017, p.12). In addition, in terms of social consequences of bullying, Mewhort-Buist (2017) states that victims of bullying are always quiet, shy, lonely, isolated, and often report being sick; sometimes they even ask their teachers to contact their parents to fetch them from school as they feel miserable.

The rising number of reported cases of incidents of violence in schools and their detrimental effects calls for the need for violence prevention strategies as a matter of urgency. This idea challenges the whole schooling system to be overhauled to include peace programmes that teach constructive attitudes, skills and behaviours that aim to curb the rise of conflict (UNESCO, 2013). In the past, the South African government has tried to implement various interventions to curb the scourge of violence. Although the country is praised as having one of the best constitutions in the world which aims to guarantee every right of its citizens, including the rights to human dignity, freedom and tolerance, violence continues to be endemic in schools. Davids and Waghid (2016) state that government policies and programmes have regrettably not been successful in achieving the desired outcome. Although subjects such as Life Orientation have been introduced to schools to conscientise learners about their constitutional rights and how to exercise tolerance towards other people from different cultures and backgrounds, research indicates that the problem is on the increase, and it continues to hamper the goals of schools; South Africa is not winning the battle against violence (Dube & Hlalele, 2018).

Several scholars such as Maxwell, Ensin and Maxwell (2004) and John (2013 and 2018) attest that there are very few

studies that have been conducted on other approaches to combat violence, such as peace education. Although in South Africa peace education is not yet part of the formal curriculum (John, 2016), research indicates that it is beginning to be introduced into South African schools due to ever-increasing numbers of school violence incidents (Ndwandwe, 2021). One initiative is the work done by a particular non-governmental Organisation (NGO) based in Cape Town, Western Cape: the Non-Violent Schools Campaign (NVSC) programme provided by the Quaker for Peace Centre (QPC) which strives to increase the number of individuals in schools who are willing to act against all types of violence to promote constructive teaching and learning. Teachers are learning how to teach the curriculum in innovative and engaging ways, as well as how to include the message of non-violence in every class. Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) sessions are attended by teachers, and AVP facilitators are trained. As a result, they may teach learners an alternative to turning to violence as a means of resolving disagreements. They also help and support learners in establishing and maintaining Peace Clubs at their schools, as well as invite learners to join the clubs so that they, together with the school administration and teachers, take responsibility for eliminating school violence. Peace Buddies are learners who join the clubs and engage in the QPC's camps, *indaba's* (Strategic gatherings) and workshops. The activities are enjoyable and thrilling and try to counter the belief that violence is permissible, amusing, and appealing. Peace Buddies also take part in AVP, which teaches them how to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence (QPC, 2011; 2015).

However, as far as can be determined, no previous research has investigated or captured the voices of learners and their perceptions of peace education as receivers

and beneficiaries of the programme provided by the QPC. Moreover, the voices of young people involved in programmes such as peace education have rarely been taken into consideration. Therefore, it was important to determine the perspective and perceptions of the Peace Buddies (learners in the NVSC) who have been exposed to peace education.

The aim of the study

The study was undertaken primarily to determine secondary school learners' (Peace Buddies) perceptions of peace education in selected secondary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. The study was guided by the following research question:

- What are the secondary school learners' (Peace Buddies) perceptions of peace education in the selected Western Cape schools?

THEORETICAL GROUNDING AND OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE ON PEACE EDUCATION

The Integrative Theory of Peace

According to the integrative theory of peace (ITP), the existence and assurance of peace is dependent on interaction between and among ethical, political, psychological, and spiritual states which are expressed through intra and interpersonal interaction within a geographical location of groups of people (Danesh, 2006; Mishra, 2021)

All human states of being, including peace, according to the ITP, are the result of the primary human cognitive (knowing), emotional (loving) and conative (choosing) skills, which together shape our worldview. ITP is based on current research on psychosocial development and peace education, as well as lessons learned, and observations collected during the seven-year implementation of the Education for Peace

Program in 112 schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Danesh, 2006).

Peace, according to the theory, is the best fruit of human individual and societal growth. It is the culmination of our journey from self-centered and anxiety-ridden survival instincts, as well as the quarrelsome, dichotomous tensions of identity formation processes, to a universal and all-encompassing state of awareness of our fundamental oneness and connectedness with all humanity and, indeed, all life (Danesh, 2006). For the purposes of this study, it can be argued that learner perception of peace education can be influenced by the kind of worldviews people possess. Therefore, it is important that the learners' worldviews be evaluated and transformed to one of peace and non-violence by developing their cognitive abilities, choices, and their willingness to pursue peace. According to Danesh, (2011, p. 131), the theory of integrative theory of peace education plays an important role in formulating and developing worldviews at all spheres of the society. An examination of this worldview is pertinent in this study as it helps identify predominant worldview of learners and how they can be addressed through peace. Therefore, their perceptions give hope to continue dreaming of a better future that is free of violence.

Understanding Peace Education

Today it is necessary to mobilise people so that they are not spectators who believe in everything the media presents to them, without being thoughtful and critical, and without assuming their responsibility in improving the future of humanity and participating in the construction of peace (Ahmed & Shahzad, 2021). This calls for schools and teachers to impart non-violent and peaceful skills to learners. Shaban (2012) maintains that effective combating of school violence requires youth to be taught how to

become peace lovers and be empowered to make non-violent choices. When learners are taught and become immersed in the language of non-violence at an early stage, they will be able to articulate their feelings and thoughts, which creates a conducive space to resolve conflict peacefully. Prinsloo (2007) emphasizes that it is important for the peace idea to be embedded within human conscientiousness early in life since children will strive to achieve it and support the establishment of new social platforms that are determined to eliminate all risks of violence. Furthermore, according to Paul (2010), establishing a peaceful society starts by every individual having peace efficacy. Schools remain one of the most suitable sites or settings in which society can formally invest to teach learners the competencies and attitudes required to attain the goals of establishing peaceful schools and lasting peace (Bar-Tal, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 2006). For example, in Rwanda to address the scourge of violence, peace education was implemented as a strategy to promote peace, reconciliation, mutual respect, and social cohesion. Themes of peace education, such as conflict resolution, critical thinking, and national healing, were incorporated into and addressed in the Rwandan curriculum (Ndwandwe, 2021). Nigeria is another example of an African state that suffers from a problem of violence. Olowo (2016) affirms that the country continues to be plagued by deadly political, religious, and ethnic conflicts. Falade (2014) states that Nigeria has been faced with the absence of enduring harmony and peaceful relationships. Aggressive and violent acts such as kidnapping, suicide, bombing, and assassination have become a daily occurrence. As a result, many people feel insecure and fear for their lives and damage to property.

To live in peace, people must have a passion for peace and understand that it is not

imposed by a few but is built by all and that human beings have the capacity to transform their conflicts peacefully and make the world more peaceful and safer (Behr, Megoran & Carnaffan, 2018). A security that is achieved through the efforts of all to fight against violence that threatens international, national, and local stability uses what Velez et al. (2021, p.2) define as "*the force of the word*" since violence is not a viable and sustainable solution to humanity's current challenges. Therefore, to put an end to the idea that violence is normal and inevitable, and that it is the only alternative to conflict, the role of education is important, as it is an instrument for the peaceful transformation of human conflict (Ahmed & Shahzad, 2021). It is peace education that allows people to improve the world and enjoy experiences with the different others, without prejudice or discrimination. Likewise, it teaches people to listen to their hearts, saving them from violence, because "if violence is born in the minds of people, it is in their hearts that peace must be established" (Behr et al., 2018, p.78). In fact, peace education has a huge role to play in achieving peace. According to Wahyudin (2018), education is essential to train people to seek what unites them, instead of what separates them.

This shows that some prejudices and conflicts have their origin in education, and specifically in some textbooks, which, instead of highlighting the moments of peace enjoyed in human history, highlight more wars and the triumphs of armies, which are often celebrated and feted (Mishra, 2021). It is essential that all various stakeholders improve education since the culture of peace programmes will not achieve their objectives without education that transmits knowledge instead of ignorance; that educates people to listen to the voice of all and not only ours; that teaches us to live with those who are different; that looks to the future with optimism (Ahmed & Shahzad, 2021). It is

important that the culture of peace be present in educational systems and that it reaches children through peace education projects and programmes (Ahmed & Shahzad, 2021). Teachers do not have to wait for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or other international Organisations to arrive in their classrooms; they can also take the initiative and contact those responsible for education in their countries to contribute their ideas and initiatives to plans for national and international cultures of peace (Ahmed & Shahzad, 2021). Likewise, peace education should not be exclusive to classrooms, but should also become the core element of homes, families, sports, and leisure centers for children and young people (Mishra, 2021).

Peace education is everyone's responsibility – in formal, informal, and non-formal respects – and it must be permanent, encompassing all ages, from the youngest to the oldest, teaching citizens coexistence, respect, and reciprocal enrichment (Wahyudin, 2018). Peace education allows citizens to be masters of themselves and their future, and to participate directly in the construction of peace, democracy, and stability both locally and globally. Likewise, it develops the critical capacity of citizens so that they become actors who can say 'no' to everything that humiliates human beings and damages the environment, and to everything that favors violence and the use of force. Consequently, it is an education that Wahyudin (2018) describes as facilitating the transition from a culture of violence, imposition, and force to a culture of understanding, dialogue, and peace.

It is, therefore, an education that puts in the hands of the new generation the necessary behaviors and values so that they develop and choose a culture of peace instead of one of violence and so that they work in favor of disarmament, dignity, justice, peace,

and human development in all its dimensions (Zembylas, Bekerman & Gallagher, 2009). It is an education that considers the reality in which we live, knowing that in many countries children do not have access to formal education and that our teaching, in general, is focused more on the technical and material – often forgetting the human and the teaching of the culture of peace (Mishra, 2021).

Globally, the subject of philosophy, which is the essence and tool of individual and collective thought, and which forms free, critical, and therefore creative and peaceful thoughts, is being alarmingly lost (Davies, 2016). It would be important to include philosophy, in particular, to make peace at different levels and in all countries since it favours peace education (Wahyudin, 2018).

It is interesting to point out that it is not a matter of values, but of a transversal education, included at all levels, that must involve everyone: politicians, family members, the media, and especially civil society (Mishra, 2021). Therefore, it is a cosmopolitan education that is enriched by all the cultures of the world. Previously, where the universal right to education was advocated, now we must speak of the right to universal peace education so that cosmopolitan citizens are free, equal and enjoy respect, dignity, and hospitality wherever they are, without anyone judging them on gender, colour, religion, or geographical location (Wahyudin, 2018).

The greatest wealth humanity has is our diversity, and we must strengthen it with peace education, which teaches us to live together and practise human solidarity (Khairuddin et al., 2019). In fact, in a global world, an education is necessary that provides tools for citizens to understand the complex world in which they live, so that they can participate with their knowledge and imagination in the peaceful transformation of

the conflicts that threaten humanity, as well as in the protection of natural resources for their balanced use among all of them (Davies, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative evaluation research design was adopted in this study. As the aim of the study was primarily to determine secondary learners' (peace buddies) perceptions of peace education, three groups sets of five learners from three different schools with an identify known as Peace buddies in the NVSC provided by the QPC (N =15 learners) were purposively sampled. Most of these learners were in Grades 10 and 11, and they were chosen because they were members of peace clubs and functions as peace buddies, and it is assumed they had rich experience and exposure to the programme of peace education from their previous grade. It is important to note that majority of the participants were females. To be specific, out of 15 participants, 10 were female or girls. The interest shown by girls in the programme shows that girls are more inclined and interested in peace efforts. Adejei, (2019) support the view that girls and women may show more interests to programme that aims to promote peace, since they are mostly and disproportionately affected negatively by conflict. Focus group interviews were conducted with each assembled group. Participants in the focus group discussions aired their perceptions based on questions prepared by the researcher and the researcher audio recorded all the discussions. The recorded data was later transcribed before thematic analysis was conducted. Six themes emerged from the interview responses and were analysed against reviewed literature and theory on peace education. The researcher gave the participants information about the study, and its goal during the field visit. In addition, in accordance with the concept of informed consent in ethical research, the participants were informed of their right to

withdraw from the study at any time. The study's results are framed in such a way that the participants human dignity, integrity, rights and confidentiality were protected, and any reporting that stigmatises, demeans, damages, or disintegrates the community under inquiry was avoided. Data collected during this study is deemed confidential and will not be disclosed in any way that might identify any person or organisation without their permission. For participants below the age of eighteen, parental consent was obtained. Additional verbal consent was pursued in all cases in which interview sessions were recorded.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After the analysis of all the focus group transcription, six identifiable themes relating to learners' perceptions of peace education in some selected secondary schools were identified, namely, (a) Peace education is perceived as education for developing a culture of peace (b) Peace education as education for peaceful living (c) Peace education as non -violence education (d) Peace education as a human rights issue (e) Peace education as conflict resolution education (f). Peace education as education on harmony and instilling values of social cohesion (ubuntu). The findings emerging from the study are discussed thematically and verbatim excerpts from written reflections of learners who identify as peace buddies elucidate themes. These themes are discussed.

Peace education is perceived as developing a culture of peace.

The findings indicated that most participants had a moderate understanding of the concept of peace education. They saw peace education as a kind of education that aims to provide people with the skills they need to cope with or react to violence in a proactive and peaceful manner. L4:S1 said:

Individuals are taught how to deal with a violent scenario and how to promote peace to our communities and schools via peace education.

Learner L5:S3 agreed:

Peace education teaches individuals how to cope with a variety of scenarios while still maintaining peace in the classroom and at school.

Another learner characterised peace education as the promotion and development of a peaceful lifestyle. Peace should be a daily habit. The learner (L3:S3) said:

Peace education, in my opinion, means that you must always behave peacefully and that there must always be peace. There must be peace in the church, and there must be peace in the school. We all need peace in our lives. We can't enjoy life if there isn't serenity.

The above submissions by learners are in line with the submission by Mishra (2021) who aver that a peaceable classroom can be made possible through teaching learners to appreciate each other regardless of their differences. These responses by learners are also in line with Kreidler, (1991:51) an elementary school teacher and conflict expert, who first coined the term "peaceable classroom" to describe how conflict in the classroom can take place due to various factors such as miscommunication, lack of care and respect of another, failure to communicate feelings appropriately and exclusion. A peaceful classroom is characterized by the affirmation of other human rights, and existence of cooperation, communication, diversity appreciation, proper expression of emotions and peaceful conflict resolution (Ndwandwe,2021). A peaceful classroom is one in which students feel like they belong and are accepted.

Peace education as education for peaceful living.

The second findings that developed from the participants' responses is that peace education tries to teach peace-making abilities such as communication, respect for others and conflict resolution. A learner (L3:S3) made the following statement:

To begin with, school-based peace education entails studying what makes [schools] peaceful, as well as learning how to behave [peacefully] oneself. In terms of [developing] communication skills, treating others with respect, and so forth... It ultimately has an impact on bullying as well.

The proposition made by Kwon, Walker, and Kristjánsson (2018) – that peace education furnishes learners with knowledge, skills, and attitudes that empower them to either prevent conflict, resolve conflicts peacefully, or create social conditions conducive to peace – is supported by participant L3:S3's responses. Non-violence and social fairness are important ideals in peace education. Non-violence is exemplified through ideals such as human rights, respect, freedom, and trust. The ideals of equality, accountability, and solidarity are used to achieve social justice.

Peace education as non-violence education.

Peace education is perceived as education for non-violence. Non-violence education is defined as education that tries to provide people with the skills to settle problems without resorting to violence and to urge them to avoid using physical force to do so. Non-violence education, sometimes known as peace education, is based on the idea of "do no harm". The following participants agreed on the definition of peace education as being education that educates individuals to reject the use of violence and instead utilise discourse (communication) to

bring about peaceful conflict resolution. L3:S1, for example, said:

I believe it is when you are being taught not to use violence to solve issues, but rather to sit down and speak through them.

Another learner, L1:S1, said:

When individuals are trained to be nonviolent, they must engage in dialogues, [communicate] rather than using their fists or power, and when they are met with problems, they must use words [dialogue] instead of their fists or strength.

The findings confirm that peace education is critical for reducing violence and promoting a culture of tolerance and peace among youths in the study area. This supports assertions by Pinzon-Salcedo and Torres-Cuello (2018) that peace education programmes should be implemented in schools, colleges, and institutions. Peace education for young people would imply that components of everyday life that are profoundly tied to one's identity become part of the daily school-level curriculum. Education is a gateway to empowerment, but when it includes material on peace, it becomes a pathway to long-term peace, understanding, coexistence, and progress in the country and beyond. Thus, the introduction of peace education at all levels, particularly at pre-school and school levels, is necessary to change the traditional stereotypes of developing minds and to enable them to become responsible citizens over time, thereby preventing future conflicts, overcoming communal riots within national borders, and combating so-called terrorism beyond national borders (Pinzon-Salcedo & Torres-Cuello, 2018). As a result, peace education will address the fundamental issues that young people face. Most young people have become victims of ignorance, violence, wrath, hate, despair and terrorism,

and peace education is now their only hope of escaping this bleak condition. As a result, if we wish to protect future generations from the scourge of war, we must instil peace through education. Meaning the use of corporal punishment or use of force to resolve problems should be avoided.

Peace education as a human rights issue.

Peace education is considered as education on respect for human rights, according to the fourth theme that emerged from the participants' comments. Instructors see peace education as a means of instilling a culture of respect among people. Individuals are taught to abstain from harming others via peace education. According to one learner (L1:S2),

For me, peace education is educating kids to respect one another, to respect one another's space, to give each person a voice, and to accept our differences.

Learner L3:S2 said,

My concept of peace education is that it is [education] that teaches individuals to respect others, their viewpoints, and their human rights.

Peace education, according to learners, encourages individuals to live in harmony, respect the rights and views of others, and build a peaceful society. The results of this research are consistent with Deveci, Yilmaz, and Karadag's definition of peace (2008), which includes the absence of disputes and violence, a harmonious society, safety and agreement, tolerance, empathy, respect for diversity and collaboration. Similarly, the conclusions of this research are in line with those of Wong et al. (2021), who conclude that peace is achieved via tolerance, respect for human rights, the establishment of social fairness and the teaching of problem-solving and conflict resolution strategies. Human rights are those fundamental

principles without which humans cannot live in dignity as human beings. Freedom, justice, and peace are all built based on human rights. Their regard permits both the person and the community to grow to their greatest potential. The battle for freedom and equality is at the heart of the evolution of human rights across the globe.

Peace education as conflict resolution education.

The fifth theme that emerged from the participants' perspectives on peace education is conflict resolution education. The goal of conflict resolution is to prepare people to minimize the disruption and damage that might occur when disagreements erupt. The learners' (L4:S3) statements supporting the aforesaid finding are as follows:

Peace education is the capacity to educate people about peace and to teach them that not everything can be handled via conflict, but rather by working together and reaching a tee.

The participants also characterized peace education as non-violence education that teaches people mediation skills as a method of resolving conflict without violence. L1:S4 stated:

If two learners are arguing... we speak about the situation.

One learner L2:S2 mentioned the importance of spreading love and giving love to others.

This was a crucial ingredient in attaining peace. We are compelled to treat others with justice and fairness because we love them.

According to L4:S4, love is an essential virtue that informs peace education.

Basically, the notion of peace education to me is dissolving the stigma that [violence] produces towards one another and bringing and

simply spreading peace, just by teaching love through education. Love is what you promote. What you're talking about is love. So essentially, education is used to educate and enlighten learners about love.

Based on the participating learners' perceptions of peace education, it would be reasonable to conclude that peace and peace education are critical for humanity.

Peace education is education on harmony and instilling values of social cohesion (ubuntu)

The sixth theme reveals that peace education was perceived as education that tries to build harmony and inculcate ubuntu principles. Peace education, according to the definition of harmony, attempts to help people cope with their differences, as well as promote good values and the notion of living in harmony.

Learner L1:S3 said:

Peace education is built on teaching people how-to live-in harmony with one another, which we call ubuntu (Humanity).

According to the findings, the majority of learners identified peace with tranquility, love, respect, friendship, tolerance, solidarity and equality. A joyful existence, a setting devoid of threats of violence, and respect for other beliefs are all concepts associated with peace. Learners thought that peace education should involve developing public knowledge about peace, educating learners how to accept interpersonal diversity and objectively instilling ideals such as solidarity, fairness, respect, and tolerance in learners. The findings are supported by Msila, (2009) indicates that some African-based models such as Ubuntu combined with other universal philosophies can help is combating or lessen violence in schools.

CONCLUSION

The study was undertaken primarily to determine secondary school learners' perceptions of peace education in some selected secondary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. We conclude, based on the research findings, that most participants had a moderate understanding of the concept of peace education and its aims. Their views of peace education coincided with literature. The study established that participants perceived peace education as education for developing a culture of peace; peaceful living; non-violence education, human rights issues, conflict resolution education, and education on harmony and instilling values of social cohesion (ubuntu). It is therefore recommended that the school curriculum be scrutinized to ascertain whether it prepares learners who are equipped with peaceful resolution skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the above discourse, the following recommendations are made:

Schools should endeavor to promote peace education in schools to achieve peaceful coexistence by organizing public campaigns for peace education.

Learners should constantly be exposed to the culture of peace through discussion forums, workshops, seminars, and through the provision of guidance/counseling services. In addition, there is a greater need for a deeper inquiry into the disposition of learners towards peace education.

Enough training should be provided to both teachers and learners to be conversant with peace education.

Peace education should develop based on the country's needs and should be integrated into the curriculum.

Various stakeholders (teachers, parents, and every member of society) should each play their role in supporting peace

education. Parents need to enlighten themselves on non-violent parenting and must serve as good role models for their children.

Social media and digital technology should be used to promote peace education.

Future research should assess the strategies that can be employed for ideal school profiles, with a democratic school atmosphere, learners participating in decision-making processes, and teachers, managers, and school personnel serving as positive role models in terms of peace education. Workshops, information exchange, and the development of family centers should all be used to improve school and family collaboration. Other research relating to peace education for teacher education programmes and primary school learners might make a significant contribution to this topic.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest in relation to this article.

AUTHOR NOTE

This work is drawn from my doctorate thesis conducted in Western Cape, South Africa

FUNDING STATEMENT

This study had the financial support of the University of South Africa through the Academic Improvement Programme (AQIP) as part of my doctoral studies.

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