

# Enhancing religious education teaching and learning for sustainable development in Lesotho

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This article utilises Gadamerian hermeneutics method and Freirean theory of the purpose of Religious Education to explore how Religious Education can contribute to achieving United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, emphasising education for sustainable development. The study contends that Religious Education in Lesotho occupies a distinctive position in the education system, surpassing other countries in its extensive integration. Due to historical factors, Religious Education is taught in nearly all religiously affiliated schools, comprising about 90% of all educational institutions in Lesotho, and even in certain public schools. The curriculum of Religious Education in Lesotho aligns directly with the educational objectives of SDG 4. Additionally, Lesotho's Religious Education corresponds to three levels of school education for sustainable development: whole school approach, classroom approach, and community approach. Nevertheless, the study asserts that for Religious Education in Lesotho to better align with education for sustainable development, various enhancements are required. Firstly, inclusivity across all religious traditions is essential, moving beyond a sole focus on Christianity. Secondly, there is a need for wider dissemination and implementation of Religious Education in all schools, irrespective of their affiliation. Lastly, a shift from traditional pedagogies to transformative approaches is recommended to boost the effectiveness of Religious Education in advancing sustainable development.

**Contribution:** This article contributes by analysing Lesotho's case and its implications for enhancing Religious Education teaching to effectively address SDGs. It broadens existing knowledge on Religious Education's potential as a platform for sustainable development and provides recommendations for its improved implementation in a specific context.

**Keywords:** Religious Education; Sustainable Development Goal 4; Lesotho; peace education; inclusivity; pedagogy.

## Introduction

This conceptual article focuses on the commitment to ensure that learners acquire necessary knowledge and skills for the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, with specific reference to Religious Education. The impetus underscores the United Nation's (UN's) 2030 'Agenda for Sustainable Development', which is 'a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity'. The plan comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 4 focuses on education for sustainable development. The Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development was ratified by the member states of the United Nations, including Lesotho, during the 2015 World Education Forum. The forum was organised by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in collaboration with other UN agencies such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The event took place in Incheon, Republic of Korea (UNESCO 2015).

Based on target 4.7, this article argues that Lesotho's Religious Education has a potential to provide learners with knowledge and skills for the promotion of a culture of peaceful and nonviolent behaviour and practices that can eventually contribute to the sustainable development. There is a general agreement of the indispensable relationship between peace and development; without peace there is no development and without development there is no peace (Berdal 2014; Cortright 2016; McLaughlin 2017). Sustainable development, as UNESCO (2015) realised can be achieved by promoting a culture of peace through education. A culture of peace according to the United Nations (1999) is a:

**Note:** Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals groups and nations. (p. 3)

In this article, the author makes three points for building a culture of peace for sustainable development in Lesotho through Religious Education. Firstly, the author believes that Religious Education has the potential to promote a culture of peace in Lesotho. Secondly, the author contends that Lesotho's Religious Education teaching and learning is ideally positioned to meet the educational needs of sustainable development. Thirdly, the author recommends that, while Religious Education is capable and well-positioned, it should be improved or strengthened. To address these points of interests, the author used hermeneutics method and analysis of Oerther (2020), and Paulo Freire's (1972) theory of Religious Education.

## Methodological commitment

The author engages in a discussion for the improvement of Religious Education in order to respond to the educational needs of SDG 4 in Lesotho, employing Gadamer's hermeneutics method. According to Malpas (2003), Gadamerian hermeneutics emphasises the significance of 'prejudice' as a crucial step in comprehending any subject of research. Prejudices, contrary to negative connotations, are viewed positively as they enable researchers to approach understanding. They function as a form of pre-judgement that facilitates understanding. Pertierra (2020:47) states that prejudices are shaped by historical, cultural, and traditional influences, which serve as the foundation of one's knowledge and provide the context for all inquiries. These conditions determine the questions or interests that initiate the research process. Gadamer refers to these conditions as the 'horizon' of understanding (Malpas 2003).

Horizon, as discussed by Oerther (2020), highlights the contextual and subjective nature of knowledge. Just as the physical horizon sets the visual boundaries for sight, the epistemic horizon establishes the limits that make knowledge attainable. The epistemic horizon frames one's position by considering the historical and traditional influences (what lies behind), the cultural and societal aspects of the present (what surrounds), and the future expectations (what lies ahead). The interests shaped by this horizon allow researchers to explore alternative perspectives, such as texts, resulting in a fusion of horizons. Oerther (2020) explains that the fusion of horizons occurs when the claims made within the text enhance and expand the researcher's initial understanding. For instance, engaging in a conversation with another person exposes one to a different 'horizon'.

In case of the current work, the author's prejudices influenced the selection of texts, that is, the horizon beyond the self-horizon. The texts selected were mainly those with information required to understand the contribution of Religious Education in the UN's SDG 4. The epistemological

concerns that facilitated the fusion of horizons included, 'What is the viability of Religious Education in the promotion of a culture of peace for sustainable development?' 'What is the current position of Lesotho Religious Education in relation to education for sustainable development?' 'How effective is Religious Education in promoting sustainable development competencies?'

## Religious Education and the promotion of a culture of peace for the sustainable development

The significance of Religious Education to the building of a culture of peace for sustainable development was investigated using Paulo Freire's (1972) conceptualisation of Religious Education. Although Freire used the term 'theology' because he was writing from a Christian perspective, the author used hermeneutic commitment to interpret Freire's views for the sake of this particular analysis. Instead of theology, author used the concept 'religion', which is neither Christian nor any other religion, but rather all-encompassing. Christian specifics are interpreted for the sake of inclusion. In his 'letter to a theology student', which the author understands as 'letter to a religion student', Freire reaffirms Galtung's (1967) thesis of positive and negative peace, from which the theory of Religious Education was built. Negative peace, according to Galtung, is experienced in the absence of direct violence, which includes wars, murders, assaults and verbal abuse. Positive peace, on the other hand, is characterised by the absence of structural and cultural violence such as oppression, discrimination, marginalisation, corruption, inequity and injustice.

Freire (1972) highlights two goals of Religious Education. The first is to liberate humans from all types of violence including oppression. Such endeavour can only be achieved if religious teaching departs from the illusionary approach of reforming a person's heart or mind while ignoring the reality in which he lives, that is, structural and cultural circumstances. Religious commitment to changing a person's heart is the perpetuation of unjust social structures that harbour organisational and cultural violence. According to Freire (1972), Religious Education is an educational activity that engages in a loving deed of educating learners to peel aside the veils that conceal the truth and uncover the underlying roots of structural and cultural violence.

The second goal of Religious Education identified by Freire (1972) is to be geared towards teaching for the recreation of a person or influencing people to be born again as emphasised in some Christian circles. Being born again or becoming a new person, according Freire, means creating a society where individuals can fully live up to their potentials without fear of intimidation or any type of violence. According to Freire, the religious concept of salvation that is emphasised in many religious traditions, is associated with liberation, which comes not only from teaching students how to be saved or liberated but also from empowering them to become agents

of saving or liberating activists against all forms of violence. Again, as Freire explains, Religious Education is crucial to the teaching of the utopian goal of the saved person, where one joins a blissful life of peace and justice. The utopian life taught in Religious Education should not be mistaken with the life after death, which may result in the construction of an adjusted, passive person waiting patiently for a destiny over which she or he has no control. Utopian life teaches Religious Education students, to be masters of their own destiny, to change the history of man by working towards the realisation of liberation, peace and justice, here and now.

In short, Freire believes that Religious Education has a vital role in fostering the essential competencies needed to cultivate a culture of peace, surpassing both structural and cultural barriers, and ultimately contributing to sustainable development.

## The position of Religious Education in Lesotho education system

Religious Education is well-placed in the Lesotho educational system to fulfil Freire's concerns for the function of Religious Education. Unlike in other countries where Religious Education is completely a private business reserved for religious institutions, Religious Education in Lesotho is taught alongside other school subjects. The position of Religious Education has been determined by historical factors in the education system of Lesotho. According to Thelejani (1990) and Molelle (2006), formal schooling system was established by the Christian missionaries upon their arrival in Lesotho in the 1830s, with the goal of promoting Christian religion literacy. Ever since, the Christian institutions continued to own a large share of schools. By 1869, Lesotho had become the British colony. The British government nationalised schools under Christian ownership; hence, the introduction of other subjects continues together with the teaching of Christian religion. The education reforms that followed after independence in 1966 did not affect the position of Religious Education because Christian institutions continued to own about 90% of schools in Lesotho (UNESCO 2006). As per the International Religious Freedom Report, in any school offering Religious Education, including all religious schools and some secular schools, the subject is mandatory. As a result, Religious Education has the potential to be articulated as education for sustainable peace and development because of its structural position in the education system of Lesotho.

More crucially, Religious Education in Lesotho already includes all three levels of peace education in schools proposed by Navarro-Castro and Nario-Galace (2010), namely the whole school approach, the classroom approach and the community approach. The term 'whole school approach peace education' refers to the incorporation of peace ideas, viewpoints and values into the daily life of the school community. Most, if not all, schools in Lesotho enable students and teachers to express and share their faith experiences with the entire school at the assembly. Religious activities including

prayer sessions and religious ceremonies are mandatory for the whole school community. There are different religious related students' organisations emphasising and spreading the religious values and virtues within school environment (United States Department of State 2022). As a result, Religious Education offers a valuable platform for transmitting peace principles to the entire school community, utilising various school platforms such as assemblies and student organisations. School assemblies provide an ideal setting for promoting peace principles to the entire school community. These gatherings offer opportunities to deliver messages, engage in reflective activities, and showcase the importance of peace through performances or presentations. By incorporating peace-focused themes into assembly programmes, schools can raise awareness, inspire collective action and encourage students to embrace peaceful attitudes and behaviours. Student organisations as well play a crucial role in promoting peace within the school community. Religious Education can empower these organisations to organise events, workshops, and campaigns centred around peacebuilding. Through student-led initiatives, such as peace clubs or interfaith dialogue groups, students can actively engage their peers, exchange ideas and collaborate on projects that promote peaceful coexistence and understanding. These activities create a sense of ownership among students and encourage them to become advocates for peace within their school and beyond.

Classroom approach refers to peace education curriculum covering knowledge, skills and values. Knowledge content includes topics such as peace, conflict, violence, human rights and democracy. Skills include reflection, empathy, conflict resolution and group building. Values include self-respect, respect for life, respect for creation, cooperation, compassion, justice and a positive viewpoint (Navarro-Castro & Nario-Galace 2010). All of these are already addressed in Lesotho Religious Education curriculum. Religious Education within the Lesotho curriculum is positioned in the learning area of Personal, Spiritual and Social. Subjects in this learning area are set to contribute in the cultivation of knowledge and understanding of the self and others. Learners are expected to develop knowledge and understanding of respect for human rights, gender equity, good relations and responsible citizenry. They are expected to develop appropriate skills towards nurturing of positive relationships with others regardless of cultural, social, religious or political differences and special needs. Values aimed at, include humility, assertiveness, selflessness and honesty in interacting with others (Ministry of Education and Training 2008). The Lesotho General Certificate of Secondary Education (LGCSE) syllabus of Religious Education is more explicit on the topic 'Religion and Society' where the content of peace education covering knowledge, skills and values is directly addressed (Ministry Education and Training 2020).

The community approach to peace education strives to understand the different attitudes, narratives and influences to which students might be exposed outside the school environment, for the ultimate success and sustainability of

peace education programmes. Therefore, the importance of collaboration between the formal schools, non-formal actors in the wider community and those working in the provision of non-formal players such as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) cannot be over emphasised (Brooks & Hajir 2020). When applied to Religious Education, Brooks and Hajir conceptualisation of community approach to peace education would mean engaging the community in Religious Education initiatives with the aim of creating a supportive environment for sustainable peace and sustainable development. Community-based Religious Education for peace engages the broader community in promoting peace, understanding and harmony through religious teachings and practices. It recognises the influential role that religious institutions and community organisations can play in fostering peaceful coexistence and addressing conflicts within and between communities. Partnerships with local religious leaders, community organisations and NGOs can facilitate experiential learning, community service projects and initiatives that address cultural and structural violence. This collaborative approach empowers students to actively contribute to their communities' peace strategies.

Community-based Religious Education for peace in Lesotho is feasible because of different faith-based organisations (FBOs) already engaged in peace initiatives. Local FBOs according to The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) (2020) include the Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL), which is active in a variety of sustainable peace for sustainable development areas that focus more on structural and cultural peace including environmental justice, food security, public health and gender equality. Christian Council of Lesotho has spearheaded numerous initiatives around democracy and good governance, including greater government accountability, political literacy and human rights protections. Another local FBO active in peace issues, according to WFDD (2020), is the Transformation Resource Centre (TRC), which has developed and implemented programming designed to raise awareness of political, economic and social issues and to foster civic engagement, especially among women and youth, in communities across the country. The group disseminates information about recently passed or pending legislation affecting these communities, runs civic education workshops for women and youth, hosts discussions about local and national governance issues, and trains community leaders to lead civic initiatives of their own.

Active in peace initiatives international FBOs identified by the WFDD (2020) are Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and World Vision Lesotho (WVL). Catholic Relief Services believes that personal well-being can only be achieved in the context of just and peaceful relationships. As a result, it strives to integrate peacebuilding, governance and gender concerns into all of its programming, with the goal of resolving conflicts and changing unjust structures, systems and policies (CRS 2022). World Vision Lesotho is involved in building peace initiatives by weaving resilience through

communities. The aim of WVL peacebuilding activities is to contribute to good governance, sustainable and equitable economic development, peace and reconciliation, and civic empowerment. World Vision supports, promotes and listens to children and young people in conflict areas, enabling them to mobilise for peace.

The involvement of FBOs in community peace initiatives plays a vital role in fostering religious peace education within schools and establishing strong foundations within communities. The FBOs participation in community peace initiatives provides a solid foundation for religious peace education to take root within and beyond the schools. Their active engagement fosters understanding, builds relationships, and provides valuable resources and expertise that contribute to the success and sustainability of religious peace education programmes. By working collaboratively, schools and FBOs can create an environment that nurtures peaceful coexistence, respect and harmony among diverse religious groups, benefiting both the school community and the broader society.

## The improvement of Religious Education to better address sustainable development

While there is a recognition of the relevance and strategic position of Religious Education in promoting peace education for sustainable development in Lesotho, it is crucial to address certain gaps that currently exist. One key area that requires improvement is religious inclusiveness, as the current approach to Religious Education in Lesotho predominantly focuses on Christianity, neglecting other religious traditions. This exclusionary approach assumes that the majority of people in Lesotho are Christians, thereby marginalising and discriminating against students from minority faith groups (Ntombana & Mokotso 2018). This form of religious structural violence can create tensions and divisions, and if left unaddressed, may escalate into direct violence beyond the school setting. To enhance Religious Education for sustainable peace and development, it is necessary to shift towards an interfaith approach that embraces all religious traditions (Dinama 2010). This means revising the curriculum to include teachings and perspectives from diverse religious traditions present in Lesotho. By incorporating a broader range of religious beliefs and practices, students can develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for different faiths, fostering inter-religious dialogue, respect and harmony. To achieve this shift towards interfaith Religious Education, it is important to promote collaboration and partnerships with representatives from various religious communities. Involving religious leaders, scholars and practitioners from different faith traditions can enrich the curriculum and ensure its accuracy and inclusivity. It is crucial to engage these stakeholders in the curriculum development process, as their input can help create a curriculum that is sensitive to the needs and experiences of all students, regardless of their religious background (Miedema 2017).

Another area within the education system of Lesotho is the semi-privatisation of Religious Education, leading to unequal access and limited coverage of religious peace education. While Religious Education is included in the national curriculum, it is primarily taught in private religious schools, while public schools often sideline this subject (United States Department of State 2018). This restriction hinders the achievement of sustainable development through a culture of peace. To address this, it is essential to make Religious Education wholly accessible in public schools. The semi-privatisation of Religious Education creates disparities in access to religious peace education. Limited coverage in public schools means that a significant portion of students may miss out on the valuable teachings and skills related to peace, tolerance and understanding that Religious Education can provide. This exclusion perpetuates inequalities and hampers the development of a cohesive and harmonious society. To promote sustainable development through a culture of peace, it is crucial to make Religious Education accessible to all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background or school type. This requires a shift towards making Religious Education a core component of the curriculum in public schools. By doing so, students in public schools will have equal opportunities to benefit from the teachings and values that religious peace education offers.

Making Religious Education wholly public also encourages inclusivity and diversity in religious teachings (Smith 2018). It ensures that students from different faith traditions, as well as those who do not identify with any specific religion, can engage with and learn from a variety of religious perspectives. This fosters mutual respect, interfaith dialogue, and a deeper understanding of different beliefs and practices. Implementing this change requires policy reforms and resource allocation to support the integration of Religious Education in public schools. It also necessitates providing adequate training and support to teachers to effectively deliver religious peace education in a secular and inclusive manner (Johnson 2019). By making Religious Education wholly public, Lesotho can bridge the gap in access and coverage, enabling all students to benefit from the values, knowledge and skills that religious peace education offers. This inclusive approach promotes sustainable development by nurturing a culture of peace, tolerance and understanding among students, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious and equitable society.

Lastly, the pedagogical approach employed in Religious Education is a crucial aspect that needs to be addressed. Currently, Religious Education, like many other subjects, follows a traditional pedagogy that Paulo Freire (1970) refers to as the 'banking model' of education, where educational materials are treated as a transaction, and the teacher acts as a depositor of information while students passively receive, memorise and repeat. However, this approach is unlikely to bring about the transformative change required for fostering a culture of peace. To promote a culture of peace, a pedagogical shift is recommended in Religious Education. Paulo Freire (1970) advocated for a pedagogical approach known as

conscientisation, which involves developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. This approach moves away from the passive transmission of knowledge to an interactive and participatory learning process.

In conscientisation, according to Freire (1970), students are encouraged to critically analyse and question religious teachings, traditions, and their implications in the context of peacebuilding and sustainable development. They are actively engaged in discussions, debates and activities that promote critical thinking, empathy and understanding. This pedagogical shift empowers students to become active participants in their own learning, fostering their capacity for critical reflection and promoting a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding peace and social justice. Teachers play a vital role in facilitating conscientisation in Religious Education. They act as facilitators and guides, creating a safe and inclusive learning environment that encourages dialogue, encourages students to voice their perspectives, and fosters respect for diverse viewpoints. Teachers should be equipped with the necessary training and resources to implement this pedagogical shift effectively. Incorporating experiential learning, problem-solving activities and real-world applications into the Religious Education curriculum can further enhance the pedagogical shift. This approach allows students to connect theoretical concepts with practical experiences, promoting a deeper understanding of the relevance of religious teachings in promoting peace, social cohesion and sustainable development. By embracing a pedagogical shift towards conscientisation in Religious Education, Lesotho can foster critical thinking, active citizenship, and a culture of peace among its students. This transformative approach empowers students to challenge social norms, engage in positive action, and contribute to the creation of a more just and peaceful society.

## Discussion

This article has examined the potential of Religious Education in Lesotho to address the United Nations' SDG 4, which emphasises education for sustainable development. Through the application of the Gadamerian hermeneutics method and Freirean theory, it has been demonstrated that Religious Education holds a unique and influential position within the education system of Lesotho. The historical factors in Lesotho have resulted in the widespread integration of Religious Education in schools, encompassing almost all religiously affiliated institutions and even some public schools. This extensive coverage positions Religious Education in Lesotho ahead of other countries in terms of its integration into the education system. Furthermore, the curriculum content of Religious Education directly aligns with the educational objectives of SDG 4. Moreover, Lesotho's Religious Education corresponds to the three levels of school education for sustainable development: the whole school approach, classroom approach and community approach. These levels provide a comprehensive framework

for incorporating sustainable development principles into Religious Education across different contexts. However, there are areas that require improvement to enhance the relevance and responsiveness of Religious Education to education for sustainable development in Lesotho. Firstly, it is crucial to ensure inclusivity by incorporating all religious traditions, moving beyond a sole focus on Christianity. Secondly, there is a need for broader dissemination and implementation of Religious Education, making it available in all schools regardless of their affiliation. Finally, a shift from traditional pedagogies to transformative pedagogies is recommended to maximise the effectiveness of Religious Education in promoting sustainable development. By addressing these areas of improvement, Lesotho's Religious Education can become a more powerful tool for advancing SDGs and nurturing responsible and peace conscious citizens. Overall, this research highlights the significance of Religious Education in Lesotho's education system and its potential for contributing to sustainable development. It provides valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing Religious Education teaching and learning to align with the principles of education for sustainable development.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Author's contributions

R.I.M. declared that they are the sole author of this research article.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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