



Khelobedu-L1 parents' attitudes towards using Khelobedu as a medium of instruction

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Abstract

Learners who speak Khelobedu are taught in Sepedi because their language, Khelobedu, is classified as a dialect. Dialects are currently not accommodated in South African classrooms. The Khelobedu-L1 learners therefore do not enjoy the constitutional and linguistic rights of being taught in their mother tongue as other learners are enjoying. Given this situation, we deemed it necessary to explore the attitudes of Khelobedu-L1 parents towards the possibilities of using Khelobedu as a Medium of Instruction in the Foundation Phase. We conducted this study with 142 parents of Bolobedu South region, in Limpopo province. We used both quantitative and qualitative approaches and followed a case study design. Data was gathered through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and was analysed through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The results of the study revealed that Khelobedu-L1 parents embraced the use of Khelobedu as a MoI. The results also reflected that parents are wary that the use of Sepedi forces their children to follow other peoples' cultures, while suppressing theirs. In this paper, we discuss the factors that shape this attitude in parents.

Keywords: learner achievement, parental involvement, cultural imperialism, Khelobedu, Sepedi

Introduction

The South African Schools Act of 1996 (SASA) recognises parents as caregivers responsible for learners. Parents exercise the language rights of minor learners on their behalf. Therefore, studying parents' attitudes towards the Medium of Instruction (MoI) is important since it might lead to change or to maintaining the language policy in schools (Phindane, 2017). Furthermore, it might lead to the elevation of certain languages, the attrition of others, the promotion of some and the relegation of others. For example, parents who prefer to have their children taught in English over their indigenous mother tongues unwittingly favour English as the ideal MoI at the expense of African indigenous languages. Reasons for choosing English are associated with beliefs that English is a language that opens doors and facilitates upward mobility (Gordon & Harvey, 2019).

Research in Africa shows that most African parents are favourably disposed towards English as MoI over indigenous mother tongues. This kind of attitude is well documented in studies conducted across Africa. Nyarigoti and Ambiyu (2014) investigated parents' attitudes toward the implementation of mother tongue education in Kenyan schools. Their study reported that parents favoured English over African languages for socio-economic reasons based on the belief that English is the language of opportunities. In a similar study, Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2017) investigated parents' attitudes towards the mother-tongue MoI policy in Nigerian primary schools. The results of their study revealed that parents harboured gravely negative attitudes towards any African language as MoI and would not subscribe to their children being taught in their mother tongue. One of the reasons provided in justifying the parents' attitudes was that there is a scarcity of appropriate materials in African languages. Similarly, Phindane (2017) surveyed parents' attitudes towards MoI in grades 1–3 in Motheo District, South Africa. The findings were that parents preferred English as MoI at Foundation Phase (FP). The preference of English as MoI by parents is critiqued by Msila (2011) who indicated that black parents are not aware of the cultural, cognitive, and pedagogical implications of learning in an additional language, so they choose English consistently. In this study, therefore, we aimed to make parents aware of such implications.

What is noticeable from the studies cited above is that they concentrated on attitudes towards official languages such as Kiswahili and English. In this study we departed from the previously mentioned ones by focusing on the attitudes of the parents towards one of the previously marginalised dialects, namely Khelobedu. For us, a dialect is a language variation connected to a specific social or regional group. The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) and the Constitution of South Africa marginalise the mother tongue of Khelobedu learners, one of the minority groups in South Africa. The education policy compels this group of learners to give up their mother tongue, Khelobedu, since it is not regarded as a language fit for instruction. In this study we explored the attitudes of Khelobedu-L1 parents towards the use of Khelobedu for instruction at the FP level and the ideologies that inform these attitudes. Our study was motivated by the fact that the use of dialects is prohibited in South African classrooms because they are deemed detrimental to teaching and learning. We aimed to test this proposition, and in an exploration of parents' views regarding the use of the dialect,

Khelobedu, as MoI in the Bolobedu region. Banning the use of a dialect has some challenges for these monolingual learners and this situation is common in South Africa (Cekiso et al., 2019; 2013; Majola et al., 2019; 2024; Rakgogo & Mandende, 2022; Ramothwala et al., 2021; 2022.) None of the works we reviewed investigated the views of parents regarding the use of dialects in education, particularly in FP. A survey and presentation of the parents' attitudes towards the use of dialects as MoI is critical since it would complement findings from previous studies by giving their perspectives. This is important because parents are stakeholders in the education system, so it is only proper to solicit their views on this matter. Furthermore, parents as policy makers, enabled by SASA, need to be engaged in such matters of national interest.

This study also adds to the body of knowledge by emphasising the potential of dialects for improved academic outcomes and cultural preservation, thus contributing valuable insights into the discourse on language policy in education, especially in contexts that exhibit linguistic and cultural diversity. In this study, we also discuss how dialects can be elevated and outline the measures that speakers of the relevant dialects could use in order to promote their dialects in mainstream education. To achieve this goal, we sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

- What are the Khelobedu-L1 parents' attitudes toward Khelobedu used as MoI to teach Khelobedu-L1 learners?
 - Sub question: What are the benefits of using Khelobedu as MoI?
- What are the Khelobedu-L1 parents' attitudes toward Sepedi as MoI to teach Khelobedu-L1 learners?
 - Sub question: What are the implications of the use of Sepedi as MoI to teach Khelobedu-L1 learners?

Language situation in Bolobedu South

Before reviewing the literature related to parents' attitudes towards the medium of instruction, we deemed it necessary to outline, first, the language situation in Bolobedu South.

Since this study deals with parents' attitudes towards MoI, an awareness of the language situation in Bolobedu is essential. Bolobedu South is a predominantly Khelobedu-speaking community which is situated 25 kilometres east of Tzaneen town, so the vast majority of learners and teachers in this region speak Khelobedu as their L1. There are also learners and teachers, albeit a small number, who speak Xitsonga as their L1. Our point is that Sepedi is used as MoI in the FP classrooms in over 50 primary schools in Bolobedu, Xitsonga is used as MoI in only one of these schools, while Khelobedu is used as mode of communication in informal daily life. This situation exists because the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) document for FP (Grade R–3) dictates that Khelobedu-L1 learners are to learn through the medium of Sepedi. Sepedi linguists, such as Webb et al. (2004) and Mohale (2014) point out that although Sepedi is used as MoI, it is not spoken by learners and possibly not even by some teachers in and around Bolobedu.

We argue that Khelobedu learners are not proficient enough in Sepedi to carry out tasks and exams effectively in this language, and their performance is, therefore, not satisfactory. A study by Ramothwala et al. (2021) showed that some Khelobedu-L1 speakers have raised concerns or voiced their frustration with the situation. One such is Motshekga¹ (2007), the chairman of the Kara Heritage Institute and lawyer to the Modjadji Royal House, who has argued that “learners often find it difficult to perform well academically, when they are taught in the language that is not the language they speak at home” (p. 2). When interviewed by Matlala (2012) of *The Citizen*, Motshekga pointed out that most children in the Balobedu kingdom failed matric (Grade 12) because of language issues. He argued that if learners had been speaking and writing in their L1, there is no doubt that the pass rate would have been higher. In 2012, when Mampeule, a spokesperson of the Modjadji Royal Council, was interviewed by Michael Sakuneka of *The Star*, he argued that “our children struggle in school because they are taught in Sepedi while at home, they speak Khelobedu” (2012, p. 5).

These concerns raised by Khelobedu-L1 speakers are bolstered by the 2014 and 2015 Grade 12 results. The former showed that learners in the Mamaila Circuit located in central Bolobedu had an average pass rate of 68.3%, against the national pass rate of 75,8% with Sepedi being the learning area with the worst performance, especially in the Motupa Circuit (Department of Basic Education, 2015). In 2015 learner performance in Sepedi in the Greater Tzaneen Municipality was reported as 53.71% (Department of Basic Education, 2016). Based on the linguistic situation in Bolobedu South, and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) reports, we deemed it important to survey parents' attitudes towards this MoI.

Challenges in the implementation of mother-tongue education

Despite the benefits associated with using the learners' home languages for instruction, there are various issues facing the implementation of mother tongue policy in South Africa. The main problems facing the national language policy and its implementation plan are the lack of political interest and effort, and the lack of resources being made available for effective implementation of the policy (Abongdia, 2013). Furthermore, Tshotsho (2013) maintained that mother-tongue education is still difficult to implement in South Africa because of the variety of mother tongues held among educators and learners, the lack of teacher training in these languages, and the lack of resources available in them. Another factor hindering the use of dialects in education is parents' attitudes.

Parents' attitudes towards the medium of instruction

Attitudes towards language, according to Kircher (2016, p. 241), refer to a “range of different behaviours, including the decision of which language(s) to learn [and] which language(s) to use as one's main means of communication.” It is important to study language attitudes,

¹ Personal interview, January 2007. Polokwane, Limpopo.

whether positive or negative, in multilingual settings since such insights contribute to language maintenance or to language change.

Literature review

There is a plethora of research done on parents' attitudes towards the medium of instruction around the world. These include, but are not limited to studies by Nyarigoti and Ambiyó (2014), Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2017), Phindane (2017) and Tarekegn (2018). However, these studies have focused on parents' attitudes towards English as MoI, thus leaving room for exploration of parents' attitudes towards African indigenous languages.

Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2017) investigated parents and teachers' perceptions of mother-tongue MoI policy in Nigerian primary schools. They distributed questionnaires to 1500 parents of primary school children. The results showed that while parents appreciate the advantages of mother-tongue education, they would not subscribe to their children being taught in their mother tongue. They further reported that the parents' attitudes were influenced by the lack of suitable materials in the mother tongue, and the push for the availability of wider communication. These negative attitudes towards African indigenous languages were also reported by Nyarigoti and Ambiyó (2014) in Kenyan schools. Tarekegn (2018) explored the attitudes of parents towards using Amharic and English as MoI in private and government preschools in Ethiopia. Tarekegn (2018) surveyed the attitudes of 384 randomly sampled parents. The findings revealed that parents' attitude in both private and government preschools were positive toward Amharic, but neutral towards English, unlike the findings of Nyarigoti and Ambiyó (2014) and Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2017) that English was preferred.

Phindane (2017) surveyed the attitudes of forty parents who were purposively selected in the Motheo District in Free State. The findings were that parents preferred English as the language of instruction at FP. In line with this finding, Phindane's study recommended fostering a change in attitude and noted the need for a serious campaign towards convincing stakeholders to appreciate the role played by the mother tongue in the early years of schooling. This is the gap we hoped to fill in highlighting the role African indigenous languages can play in the cognitive development of learners and the development of positive perceptions towards their own cultures.

Based on the above studies, it can be inferred that parents across Africa generally have negative attitudes towards indigenous languages as their children's MoI. This attitude towards seems to be attributed to the pragmatic function associated with English. To this effect, most parents do not want their children to learn through the medium of indigenous languages because they believe that it will ruin their children's ability to speak English with fluency (Kamwendo et al., 2010). Such attitudes are contributing factors toward the flight from mother tongue instruction, that ends up devaluing African indigenous languages while raising the status of English (Tshotsho, 2013). It is therefore evident that parents are more concerned with the end product rather than with the process that leads to it. For this reason, they need to be sensitised on the benefits that mother tongue instruction will have on their children as learners. For instance, parents should be made aware of the close ties that exist

between language and culture as well as between language and identity. They should be told specifically that their children will automatically lose their culture and identity the moment they lose their language. This is vital since some, if not most, parents seem to have a misconception that their children should be taught using English as MoI so that they can have access to better employment opportunities. We believe that it is crucial for parents to understand the advantages of mother tongue education and recognise that this will not impede their children's ability to learn English. In particular, parents need to know that children learn more quickly and effectively in a language they can comprehend and that this helps to avoid learning delays. Parents ought to be made aware that their children will be able to apply the skills they learned in their native tongue to learning English once they reach a certain level of the language so mother tongue instruction in the early grades serves as a foundation for the learning of English. In other words, parents need to know that having their children learn in their mother tongue is not a barrier to their learning English.

The process of promoting a dialect to the level or status of a standard language

According to McKinnell (2024), the process during which a specific dialect becomes the standard version of a language is influenced by a variety of factors—political, administrative geographical, historical and economic, as well as educational. Furthermore, the media, and factors like cultural prestige and social acceptance are all involved. McKinnell argued that when a government or other authoritative organisation uses a certain dialect for official and business purposes, that dialect is more likely to be elevated to the position of standard language as happened with the North German Hanse. MacGowan (2024) has expressed a similar opinion in claiming that the Tuscan dialect in Italy was designated a standard language as a result of the popularity of Dante's *La Comedia*, and that this dialect became generally recognised and spoken throughout Italy.

Rakgogo and Zungu (2022) conducted a study in South Africa on elevating Sepedi from a dialect to an official standard language. Their study focused on the role of economic, cultural, and political power and influence when a dialect was promoted to the position of official language. The study's findings indicated that all official standard languages had previously been dialects. However, because of socioeconomic power and political influence, these particular dialects were deemed superior and promoted to the status of official languages.

Regarding the possibilities of employing a dialect (for example, Khelobedu) as a MoI falls under the category of raising a dialect to the rank of standard language. Some scholars, such as Gxilishe (2013), have pushed for the use of the dialects alongside the mainstream language in classrooms. This viewpoint is an attempt to meet halfway with individuals who speak the dialect. Cekiso et al (2019) carried out research on FP teachers' experiences with mother tongue instruction. Their findings revealed that instructors were not educated to teach in their mother tongue, which was, in this case, isiXhosa. The authors suggested that teacher training institutes give appropriate and relevant professional training to FP instructors so that they can effectively teach in isiXhosa. This viewpoint is easily applicable to the current study since the prospect of employing Khelobedu as a medium of education has never been investigated previously. To achieve this crucial aim, higher education institutions must prepare teachers to

teach in Khelobedu as MoI. Cekiso et al (2019) proposed that all textbooks, readers, educational materials, study aids, and associated literature be provided in isiXhosa. The same is true for the current study, all the required and supporting materials should be made available in Khelobedu. Additionally, pre-service as well as in-service teacher training needs to foreground Khelobedu as a language that would contribute to effective teaching and learning.

Methodology

Approach and design

We used the quantitative research approach and adopted the case study design in which questionnaires are used to gather the data. Cherry (2021) defined a case study as “an in-depth study of one person, group, or event and it seeks patterns and causes of behaviour” (p. 59) so we used this to survey the attitudes of Khelobedu-L1 parents towards the use of Khelobedu and Sepedi as MoI in the FP classrooms in Bolobedu South.

Respondents and participants

A total of 142 Khelobedu-L1-speakers residing in Bolobedu South were surveyed. These respondents were selected using the purposive sampling procedure, which, according to Creswell (2014), enables the researcher to select information-rich participants. These respondents were selected because they were parents, and most of them had children in FP. Of these respondents, 55.60% were male and 44.40% were female. Their age distribution ranged between 24 and 69 years.

A total of four parents (of the 142 who completed questionnaires) who serve on the School Governing Body (SGB) in four primary schools in Bolobedu South were interviewed. These participants were purposively selected because they were SGB members in schools where a vast majority of learners speak Khelobedu. The SGB members were all males and Khelobedu-L1 speakers. Their ages fell within the range of 47–52 and most of them were teachers and this indicated that they were informed about the matter under investigation.

Data collection methods

An effective survey questionnaire formatted on a scale was used to measure the attitudes of parents towards the language of MoI in Bolobedu South. It was content validated by an expert in language education to ensure the appropriateness of the items. A vernacular version was also prepared and furnished during the actual data collection process to ensure dependable responses from the respondents. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: Section A dealt with the biographical details; Section B with five open-ended questions; and Section C with 10 belief statements. The questionnaire was deemed a useful instrument to measure the parents’ attitudes in relation to the language of MoI following Glasow (2005) who asserted that “a survey is a useful method for recording existing community circumstances, characteristics of a population, and community attitudes” (p. 16). In addition

to this, the survey is one of the more popular approaches in social sciences when data is to be collected from a section of society.

Data analysis

We used descriptive statistics to analyse the data using frequency, weighted mean, and percentage rate. Means were used to determine the respondents' attitudinal positional tendencies (or aggregate attitudinal stance). The percentages were used to illustrate the distribution of the respondents on the open-ended questions. For the means, and consistent with the Likert-type scale, each of the five options was allocated a score as follows: 5 for strongly agree (SA) (4.50–5.00); 4 for agree (A) (3.50–4.49); 3 for not sure (NS) (2.50–3.49); 2 for disagree (D) (1.50–2.49); and 1 for strongly disagree (SD) (1.00–1.49). To ensure the validity and reliability of the quantitative data, we sought the opinion of a departmental colleague with expertise in quantitative research regarding the instrument's ability to measure the intended concept. Furthermore, the use of a questionnaire and interviews aided us in triangulating our results to guarantee the accuracy of our findings. The qualitative data was analysed thematically in relation to interpreting and understanding it, often through the discussion of specific examples. We returned to the participants and shared our interpretation with them following data analysis in order to ensure its validity and reliability.

Findings

Below are the answers to every question, supported by verbatim quotes from some of the participants. The responses to the four open-ended questions were divided into two primary categories based on the similarities in the content: attitudes toward Khelobedu as MoI and attitudes toward Sepedi as MoI. Descriptive statistics were then used to present the Likert scale results, giving additional insight into the opinions of Khelobedu-speaking parents regarding the use of Sepedi and Khelobedu as MoI in FP classrooms.

Category 1: Sepedi as MoI

Questions 1 and 2 from the questionnaire were grouped under this category since they both relate to the use of Sepedi as MoI in the FP classrooms.²

Question 1: Do you think that learners in Bolobedu do not perform well at school because Sepedi is used as MoI, instead of Khelobedu?

Table 1
Responses on Question 1

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	111	78, 2%
No	31	21, 8

² These participant responses have not been edited.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Reasons for “Yes”	Children who have access to computer at home do well in IT at school. In the same way, children who are taught in home language do well at school. Sepedi is not the language they learned from home as they start to be exposed to knowing, communicating and naming objects on earth. Learners understand better if they are taught in the language that they use in their everyday lives. At home children speak Khelobedu and they know most of the things in Khelobedu. So at school they learn in Sepedi, translating from Sepedi to Khelobedu is difficult.	
Reasons for “No”	That is not the reason, it depends on the IQ of a child. Those who are not performing well it is because of either not academically gifted or being lazy to hard at school. The attitude of learners is the most important part of their performance. Because they lack the right resources and learning material.	
Number and percentage of those who did not give reasons	21	14, 8%

Question 2: Is it unfair to use Sepedi as a MoI for Khelobedu-speaking learners?

Table 2
Responses on Question 2

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	104	73, 2%
No	38	26, 8
Reasons for “Yes”	It is not their actual home language and they are learning it for the first time when they come to school. Learners must be taught in their mother tongue in order to form basis or foundation for learning. They do not know the language and cannot express themselves young as they are in some-one’s language. They are adopting the culture that is not theirs and that turns them into people they are not supposed to be.	
Reasons for “No”	Limpopo as a province is having more slang as such Sepedi is the best. Sepedi is an official language for all learner in our province. They will be learning to speak and to write an official language. Sepedi has been used for quite a long time already.	
Number and percentage of those who did not give reasons	21	14, 8%

Synthesis on Category 1

Given the above responses in this category, an inference could be made that most of the learners in Bolobedu FP classrooms do not perform well because they are being instructed

through the medium of Sepedi, which the respondents believe to be an unfamiliar language to Khelobedu-speaking learners. In this regard, 73.2% felt that it is unfair to use Sepedi as MoI to teach Khelobedu learners, as per the reasons in Table 2. The respondents see this as a linguistic injustice because other learners are taught through the language they actually use at home, while this is not the case with their children. They feel that this is a gross injustice because another culture is being imposed upon their children while theirs is suppressed through the use of Sepedi as MoI. The findings in this category imply that the issue of MoI goes way beyond academics and extends to issues of culture and other spheres of life. One does not just learn a language, one also learns the culture but it should not be at the expense of culture because such education is devoid of fundamental rights and will result in cultural alienation.

Category 2: Khelobedu as MoI

Questions 3 and 4 were grouped under this category since they both relate to the use of Khelobedu as a MoI.

Question 3: Would you enrol your child at a school where Khelobedu is used as MoI?

Table 3
Responses on Question 3

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	121	85, 2%
No	21	14, 8%
Reasons for “Yes”	This will improve his/her performance because he/she will be using the language learned since from birth. It is their mother tongue and their heritage. It will help them to know their culture and customs. I will also be able to help them with Khelobedu in their books. There will be no communication problem. Because as his mother tongue it will enhance his understanding and better interprets concepts.	
Reasons for “No”	While I acknowledge that language develops when frequently used, but encouraging my child to be taught in the language spoken by the few would be to limit her. She won't be able to compete globally. The child will be disadvantaged for speaking and writing an unofficial language. I need my child be multilingual, not be stereotyped, being a multilingual, she could conquer the world. I think Khelobedu is more suitable for people's identity only.	
Number and percentage of those who did not give reasons	19	13, 4%

Question 4: Do you think that Khelobedu should be officially adopted as MoI in areas where many learners speak it as, for example, in areas such as Bolobedu?

Table 4
Responses on Question 4

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	126	88, 7%
No	16	11, 3%
Reasons for “Yes”	They speak it in large numbers. There are people who speak Khelobedu and Khelobedu music is also recognized across the country. There are many areas of Balobedu in this country so it should be officially recognised because there are many people who speak Khelobedu especially in Limpopo. If it can be recognised the performance of learners would be better as they will be using their mother tongue.	
Reasons for “No”	There must be one common language that must be used by all population groups in which Khelobedu as a dialect forms part of. We are all South Africans & we have to use common languages more especially in Education Department. People will miss touch with the outside world.	
Number and percentage of those who did not give reasons	28	19, 7%

Synthesis on Category 2

Drawing from the responses in this category, it can be deduced that a large number (85.2%) of respondents believed that there would be enormous benefits to using Khelobedu as MoI in the FP classrooms, and, as a result, they would enrol their children at schools where Khelobedu is used as MoI. Furthermore, the vast majority (88.7%) of the respondents felt that Khelobedu should be officially adopted as MoI in schools where it is predominantly spoken.

Descriptive statistics

The respondents’ attitudes were measured on a scale of 1–5, 1 being a minimum value, indicating that respondents **strongly disagree**, and 5 being the maximum value, indicating respondents **strongly agree** with the given statements. The midpoint value was 2.5, which indicates the attitudinal tendency of **not sure**. The respondents’ attitudinal tendencies on the given statements are illustrated in Table 5 below.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Analysis N
Q1: Learners in Bolobedu perform poorly at school because Sepedi is used as medium of instruction and not Khelobedu.	3.76	1,429	142
Q2: It is unfair to instruct Khelobedu-speaking learners through the medium of Sepedi.	3.92	1,283	142
Q3: Sepedi should continue to be used as medium of instruction, even if all learners are Khelobedu speakers.	2.54	1,447	142
Q4: Learners in Bolobedu would pass more if Khelobedu was used as MoI.	4.04	1,339	142
Q5: Khelobedu should be used as medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase in Bolobedu.	3.94	1,410	142
Q6: Khelobedu should not be officially adopted as the medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase classrooms in Bolobedu.	1.84	1,324	142
Q7: Khelobedu is only relevant for discussing issues of tradition.	2.01	1,305	142
Q8: Khelobedu should not be developed for use in any form of schooling (e.g., primary school, high school, or university).	1.87	1,265	142
Q9: Even if Khelobedu is related to Sepedi, it should be developed as a separate language.	3.84	1,335	142
Q10: Khelobedu is not just a language, it is people's identity.	4.15	1,347	142

The descriptive statistics above show that Khelobedu-L1 speakers held positive attitudes towards Khelobedu and negative attitudes towards Sepedi. Statement 1 and 2 recorded the mean of over 3.76 and 3.92 respectively, which shows the attitudinal tendency of agreement. This implies that the respondents agree that learners in Bolobedu perform poorly as a result of being taught through the language that is not their own, and they believed that to be an unfair practice which is shown by the mean of 3.92. Regarding the use of Khelobedu as MoI, the respondents showed positive attitudes, which is indicated by the mean of 4.04 and 3.94. These scores imply that the respondents are keen for Khelobedu to be used as MoI. For this reason, they indicated that Khelobedu should be developed as a separate language to be used in schools since they deem it relevant in their children's education.

Presentation of the findings from the school governing body members

As already indicated in the methodology section, four SGB members of the parent component from four selected primary schools in Bolobedu South were interviewed to establish their attitudes towards the use of Khelobedu as MoI. Four themes emerged during the interviews with the parents. The themes are SGB members' attitudes towards Sepedi as MoI, SGB members' attitudes towards Khelobedu as MoI, academic performance using Khelobedu, and measures to promote Khelobedu.

Theme 1: SGB members' attitudes towards Sepedi as MoI

SGB members' attitudes towards issues of MoI are very important since they are empowered by SASA to develop language policies suitable for their children. It was important to establish how they felt about their children being taught in Sepedi, so they were asked, "How do you feel about the use of Sepedi to teach your children?" In response to this question, most of the parents held a negative attitude towards the use of Sepedi as MoI, as the following extracts demonstrate.

SGB1: I feel the issue of using any language to offer instruction to learners who use a different language as a home language is a moral issue than it is a 'feelings' issue. In short, I can call it a linguistic injustice perpetuating linguistic inequality in South African schools. As a Molobedu, I think it is an unfair treatment that is informed by a narrative that elevates other languages above others.

SGB2: The use of the language is confusing the learners because Sepedi is not their mother tongue or the language that is spoken at home. It is just like learning the second language.

SGB3: It is unfair, because they are not learning through the language they speak at home. For example: Xitsonga learners are taught in their home language but not Khelobedu learners.

SGB4: I don't see any problem when they are using Sepedi if they can be taught properly and understood.

From the above responses, it is evident that most (75%) of the parents do not embrace the use of Sepedi as MoI to teach their children. They feel that using Sepedi is unfair since it differs from the language they speak at home. In short, they call it "linguistic injustice."

Theme 2: SGB members' attitudes towards using Khelobedu as MoI

The members were asked how they feel about the use of Khelobedu as MoI to teach their children. In response to the question, all the parents held positive attitudes, as the following excerpts show.

SGB1: Using Khelobedu as a medium of instruction in the FP is morally acceptable. I feel that at that tender age, learners can easily master any language especially the language they use at home.

SGB2: The use of Khelobedu in the FP can be much more relevant because learners do have prior knowledge in terms of naming the objects and things they see.

SGB3: I would be very happy. The learners will pass because it is the language they know very well, and the pass rate will be high.

SGB4: I will be very happy if our children can use Khelobedu. It will help them to know their culture and customs.

Reflecting on the above responses, it is evident that all the four SGB members embrace the idea of using Khelobedu as MoI in the FP. This is evident through the use of phrases such as “I would be very happy”, “it can be a good thing”, and “is morally acceptable.” Moreover, they advanced reasons for their positive attitudes towards the idea of using Khelobedu as MoI, and those are that they believe Khelobedu will benefit their children academically and culturally. SGB1 remarked that at that tender age, learners can easily grasp what is being taught if it is taught in the language they use at home. SGB4 remarked that using Khelobedu would also help them to know their culture and customs. SGB4’s response implies that learners’ culture is just as important as academic achievement. To this effect, SGB4 believes that using Khelobedu can help the learners achieve both.

Theme 3: Learners’ academic performance using Khelobedu as MoI

There is a general consensus around the world that teaching learners in the language they speak at home has many pedagogical benefits. In line with this, the SGB members were asked, “What could be learners’ academic performance if they were taught in Khelobedu?” In response to the question, most of the members said they believe using Khelobedu would benefit the learners optimally, as the following extracts show.

SGB1: I believe they will do well, but teacher training is important.

SGB2: Academic performance was going to be better because they are not going to experience language barriers.

SGB2: Learners will perform excellently because they will be taught in a language they know from birth.

SGB4: I think they will achieve greatly, because they won’t take time to adapt, and to adjust.

Reflecting on the above responses, it is evident that most SGB members believe that using Khelobedu as MoI would enhance the learners’ academic performance. They used phrases such as “performance was going to be better”, and “they will achieve greatly.” The members

believe that learners would hit the ground running since they would not experience language barriers. Furthermore, SGB1 also believes that learners will do well, but highlighted the importance of teacher training. This means that whichever language is used as MoI, teacher training should be prioritised.

Theme 4: Measures to promote Khelobedu as MoI

Regarding measures to promote Khelobedu, the SGB members outlined a number of methods Khelobedu speakers could employ to promote their dialect. They said that in order to promote their dialect, they should do advocacy campaigns, mobilise an influential cohort that includes academics and politicians, and engage in outreach programmes, referendums, and consultation processes. The following extracts outline these measures.

SGB1: Advocacy and mobilisation of an influential cohort which includes academics and politicians from Bolobedu. One of the significant factors hindering efforts to promote Khelobedu is that the majority of Balobedu (me included) seem to be shy to express themselves in the language. Therefore, I think we should begin to demonstrate to other people that Khelobedu is as good as their languages. Furthermore, Balobedu seem to shy away from engagement, a tool that can change the status quo. We need to start having forums where we can engage to promote our language.

SGB2: The authors of the books must be made available to write the books. The educators must as well be trained to teach Khelobedu.

SGB3: Through advocacy campaigns.

SGB4: Through referendums and consultation processes.

What can be gleaned from the members' verbatim quotes is that the issue of language promotion rests on the shoulders of the very speakers of the language themselves. Accordingly, the speakers should organise advocacy campaigns, referendums, and the mobilisation of an influential cohort. Most importantly, the local language speakers should not be shy to express themselves in their L1s.

Summary of findings

Based on the findings from the two categories, the descriptive statistics, and interviews, it is evident that Khelobedu-L1 parents held positive attitudes towards Khelobedu and the possibility of using it as a MoI. This finding contradicts the results of a study conducted by Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2017) on parents' and teachers' perceptions of mother-tongue medium of instruction policy in Nigerian primary schools. The results of their study revealed that parents would not subscribe to their children being taught in the mother tongue. This was in view of the push for a language of wider communication and the lack of suitable materials. The finding also contradicts the findings of a study conducted by Phindane (2017) that investigated children's and parents' preferences of language of learning and teaching in Grades 1–3. The findings were that learners and parents preferred English as the language of

instruction at FP. The findings of this study, therefore, imply that Khelobedu-L1 speakers would subscribe to their children being taught in Khelobedu. This attitude was found to be influenced by the issues of culture, educational benefits, and parental involvement.

Discussion

Culture

Culture emerged as one of the findings when we were testing the parents' attitudes towards the issue of MoI. The respondents believed that teaching their children in Sepedi is tantamount to cultural imperialism. This attitude is represented by one respondent who said, "Teaching Khelobedu-L1 learners in Sepedi is unfair because they are adopting the culture that is not theirs and that turns them into people they are not supposed to be." This accounts for why the parents showed negative attitudes towards Sepedi as MoI.

Fanon (1967) confirmed that to learn through a language that is not one's own means to assume the culture of the native speakers of that language, thus confirming the study's finding. This is further confirmed by Babaci-Wilhite (2013) who argued that teaching learners in a language that is not their own can lead to cultural alienation or a cultural bomb as Wa Thingo (1986) aptly put it.

The findings of this study further revealed that the parents were positive towards the use of Khelobedu as MoI. They indicated that the use of Khelobedu would help their children learn about their culture and possibly develop positive perceptions towards it. This is highlighted by responses such as "It will help them to know their culture and customs", and "It is their mother tongue and their heritage." This finding is supported by Diallo (2011) who established that "if learners learn through the medium of their own languages, 'there is cultural and linguistic reinforcement in the home' and other domains" (p. 222). Similarly, the finding of this study is further bolstered by Nadela-Gragada et al. (2022) who claimed that teaching learners in the language they use at home promotes their culture and identity. This means that teaching learners through their own languages facilitates the integration of the local culture into the school curriculum thus creating a culturally sensitive curriculum and developing a positive perception of culture. The use of Khelobedu in schools may, therefore, promote the interaction between home (culture) and the school (language and curriculum) which will enhance the cognitive development and learning abilities of the learners. This is why the parents showed positive attitudes towards the use of Khelobedu as MoI.

Academic benefits of using Khelobedu as MoI

In terms of educational benefits, the parents believed that the use of Khelobedu in the education environment would help their children understand the content better and subsequently progress academically. This was indicated by a mean of 4.04. The finding under discussion is consistent with findings of Tegegne (2015) and Wolff (2016) and organisations such as United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2016), that learning in one's own language holds various advantages for the learner, including increased access, improved learning outcomes, reduced chances of repetition and drop-out rates, and socio-

cultural benefits. Furthermore, this organisation reported improved performance among learners who were taught in their dialects in Vietnam. The results showed that children who were taught in their dialects scored 75% in mathematics, while those who were taught in additional languages scored 61%. The report revealed that teachers developed a new curriculum to provide instruction to minority-language learners in Vietnam through their dialects. The finding of this study suggests that the use of Khelobedu as MoI would have a positive impact on learner achievement. The question that arises is whether the DBE, and other stakeholders are going to heed the study's findings and revise language policies to accommodate all the rich linguistic resources that accompany learners to the classroom. It is high time the DBE realise that learner's L1 is not a problem but a resource and a tool that helps learners appreciate their culture. In a country where literacy is very low, allowing learners such as the ones from Bolobedu to learn in their mother tongue may help to meet this challenge.

Parental involvement

One of the other factors behind parents' negative attitudes towards Sepedi as MoI was lack of parental involvement in assisting learners with their schoolwork. This finding is highlighted by one parent who said, "I am not able to assist my child because I also do not know Sepedi." Khelobedu-L1 parents felt that the use of Khelobedu as MoI would afford them an opportunity to assist their learners and, thus, be involved in their children's education. This finding is highlighted by this response, "I will also be able to help them with Khelobedu in their books." In line with this finding, Nyarigoti and Ambiyi (2014) asserted that teaching learners through the medium of their own languages will ensure that the parents are involved in school activities, hence making the school part of the community. In agreement with the study's finding, Pflapson (2011, p., 2) stated that "the use of a familiar language for instruction facilitates parental involvement and strengthens community support for education." It is, therefore, important for schools to recognise the role parents play in the learning or language learning journeys of their children. In Kenya, Kioko (2015) supported these findings by asserting that children's learning does not begin in school; learning starts at home in the child's home language. Consequently, if teaching in school uses the children's language, learning becomes fun and interactive. The present study highlights the role of parents in the language learning journeys and development of their children and calls for language policies that would allow learners to learn in the languages they speak at home so as to position parents as what might be called home teachers. In this way, the lay parents might not be excluded from participating fully in development activities (Nyarigoti & Ambiyi, 2014).

Khelobedu can be promoted through advocacy, use, and the development of written materials

At the moment, only official languages are used as MoI in South African schools. In recognising non-accommodation of dialects, the participants indicated that dialects could be promoted through advocacy, use, and the development of written materials. Advocacy, which means articulating a position and mobilising support for it, has been found to be among

measures for language promotion by researchers such as Hinton (2002), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2016), and Flubacher and Busch (2022). The finding of this study further revealed that the speakers of the dialects concerned are the key role-players in taking their dialects to the next level. Similarly, Hinton (2002) argued that only community members have the right to advocate for the survival of their language and added that this includes the right to choose against a language. This, therefore, means that the speakers of the marginalised dialects should do what Flubacher and Busch (2022) called "language advocacy." Language advocacy, in the context of this study, would entail Khelobedu-L1 parents campaigning for schools to use Khelobedu as MoI as well as the SGB to formulate language policies that promote Khelobedu as MoI. Such campaigns, according to Olko and Sallabank (2021), are valuable and can contribute to the development and promotion of dialects into mainstream education.

Another way of promoting dialects, as found in the study, was through use. Again, this is an effort that should be carried out by the speakers of the language themselves. This means that the speakers of these side-lined dialects should not be shy to use them, especially in public domains, as remarked by SGB1. This finding resonates with the international principle that any language can be developed and promoted through use. Dołowy-Rybińska and Hornsby (2021), in their study of language revitalisation, added that for a language to be promoted successfully, the speakers must want to use it. This is a very important aspect of language promotion. Without speakers embracing their languages overtly, any effort towards language promotion may very well be unsuccessful.

The development of written materials was also found to be among the measures through which dialects could be promoted. This finding is underscored by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2016), which submits that local bodies must give significant attention to the development of written forms of dialects and their suitability for pedagogical use. Similarly, Prah (2006) submitted that for dialects to be promoted, there must be advocacy, linkages, dissemination of materials, and publications in that dialect. Once the above is achieved, it will feed directly into the production of textbooks for primary, secondary, and, subsequently, tertiary education.

Conclusion

Our study sought to survey attitudes of Khelobedu-L1 parents towards the medium of instruction in Bolobedu South, as well as to investigate factors shaping their attitudes. We found that Khelobedu-L1 parents showed positive attitudes towards the use of Khelobedu as MoI. This was because the use of Khelobedu would lead to great academic achievement, increase parental involvement, as well as facilitate the integration of Balobedu culture into a culturally sensitive school curriculum that would help develop a positive perception of culture. The findings of this study provided substantive evidence that there is correlation between academic success and parental involvement. It demonstrated that the involvement of parents in their children's education will have a positive impact on it. Also, the study demonstrated that there is a link between the use of mother tongue and cultural

reinforcement. The findings of this study are therefore consistent with international practice based on the recognition that mother tongue plays a very important role in the intellectual development of learners and in connecting learners with their culture. It is for these reasons that we argue that dialects deserve respect and recognition in South African schools. Valuing dialects in the classroom is likely to make a real difference to the educational achievement of the speakers.

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Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Faculty Committee for Research Ethics – Humanities of Tshwane University of Technology.³ The respondents were given leaflets to inform them about the study and their roles in the data collection.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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