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Exploring the perceptions of Khelovedu first-language (L1) youth towards integrating Khelovedu into formal education

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During the colonial period in South Africa, African languages were marginalised as colonial languages gained institutional prominence, particularly in education. This legacy continues to shape language attitudes, with some speakers perceiving colonial languages as more prestigious and valuable than African languages, including their own. Within this context, the study examines the perceptions of Khelovedu first-language youth on integrating Khelovedu into formal education. Khelovedu is a non-standard dialect that remains marginalised in educational settings. The study also explores the benefits and challenges that Khelovedu-L1 youth associate with its use in schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 young people who were first-language (L1) speakers of Khelovedu and were recruited using convenience sampling. The data were analysed by using thematic analysis. The findings show that participants strongly support the inclusion of Khelovedu in formal education despite its continued marginalisation. This support is motivated by perceived cognitive benefits, improved understanding and the strengthening of cultural identity. However, participants also identified major challenges. These include the lack of educational resources, limited teacher training and the absence of language standardisation.

Contribution: The study highlights the agency of Khelovedu-L1 youth in driving language development and educational change. It shows that language standardisation and revitalisation can be led by youth through community-based initiatives, rather than relying solely on state intervention.

Keywords: perceptions; Khelovedu; youth; economic benefits; cultural reinforcement; cognitive benefits.

Introduction

This study sought to elicit youth's perceptions towards integrating Khelovedu into formal education. Research has demonstrated that studying perceptions towards language is important, as the study may lead to the transformation of language practices and the way language is used in society and across different contexts. Perceptions of a language can influence its acceptance, use and selection in education, legal systems and other domains. This present study focused on Khelovedu as the first language (L1) of youngsters from Ga-Modjadji, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Khelovedu is spoken by the Balovedu ba Ga-Modjadji and has historically been classified as a dialect during the apartheid regime in South Africa although scholars such as Rakgogo and Mandende (2022) challenge this classification. As a result of its perceived inferior status (dialect), learners who were born speaking Khelovedu are forced to take or learn Sepedi as Home Language, which is not spoken in their homes or community (Ramothwala 2024). This situation implies that Khelovedu learners are denied their constitutional right to be taught in their L1, placing them at a disadvantage, as evidenced by decades of research by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (Bühmann & Trudell 2008; Mabaso-Nkuna, Mabasa & Valoyi 2024; Makgabo & Modise 2021; Trudell 2016).

This predicament has sparked emerging scholarly interest in exploring the perceptions of parents, school governing bodies, teachers and district officials on the integration of Khelovedu into formal education, particularly in light of the perceived benefits of mother-tongue education. For example, researchers such as (Ramothwala 2024), have studied the attitudes of Khelovedu-speaking parents and found that they strongly support the integration of Khelovedu into formal education. Research on the Balovedu community remains extremely scarce, with only a

handful of studies addressing teachers, school governing bodies and learners (Ramothwala, Cekiso & Mandende 2024, 2025; Ramothwala, Mandende & Cekiso 2024). More significantly, little to no research has explored young people's perceptions on integrating Khelovedu into formal schooling, despite their central role in language maintenance and revitalisation. In the context of this study, youth refers to individuals aged 18–35 years who actively participate in the social, cultural, educational and economic life of the Balovedu community. This group includes university graduates serving the community in various capacities, such as teachers, local government political participants, artists who write and recite Khelovedu poetry, and content creators producing material in Khelovedu. The term therefore refers to a generation that serves as both a custodian of linguistic heritage and a potential agent of language maintenance, revitalisation and social change. To the researchers' knowledge, this is the first study that foregrounds youth perceptions in the context of Khelovedu. The researcher believes that eliciting youth perceptions on this issue is of paramount importance.

As active participants in political, economic and social spheres, young people constitute a critical driving force for development in any society. Their engagement in decision-making processes and broader societal matters positions them as key stakeholders in issues relating to language, education and cultural preservation. The future of any language is in the hands of its youth, as explained by Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale, which holds that the vitality of a language lies in its transmission to younger generations. If young people embrace the language and use it daily, the language is likely to be maintained. However, if they perceive it negatively rather than as a language associated with social or economic value, language shift may begin, ultimately leading to language attrition. As a result of the persistent marginalisation of Khelovedu in official domains, Balovedu youngsters may internalise negative perceptions of the language and its value.

This study sought to elicit the Balovedu youth's views on Khelovedu, with a focus on its potential use in education. Eliciting such views is of paramount importance, as the views serve as a yardstick for determining Khelovedu's future. This study therefore sought to establish how the Balovedu youth respond to the following questions:

- How do Khelovedu-L1 youth perceive the integration of Khelovedu into formal educational contexts?
- What benefits and challenges do Khelovedu-L1 youth associate with the use of Khelovedu in formal education?

Theoretical framework

Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital

This study found relevance in Bourdieu's (1977) theory of linguistic capital, given the persistent marginalisation of Khelovedu in schooling contexts. Bourdieu argues that some languages carry more symbolic power within institutions such as schools. Several researchers have found this theory useful in critiquing the dominance of other languages in schooling contexts. For example, Munyaradzi (2024) uses this framework to critique the dominance of English in South African higher education. This theory is also applicable to basic education in South Africa, given the linguistic dominance of languages such as Sepedi, isiZulu and isiXhosa, which are used as languages of learning and teaching for learners of Khelovedu and isiBhaca, respectively.

As a result of the marginalisation of Khelovedu and its classification as an 'inferior dialect', Balovedu youth may assign it lower status while valuing languages such as Sepedi more highly, as they are used as languages of learning and teaching. This theory speaks directly to this study, as it addresses linguistic inequality and access. Khelovedu, in its status within the education system, cannot provide the Balovedu with the same access to education and is less likely to be perceived as a language of upward mobility.

From this perspective, linguistic capital is unevenly distributed, with dominant languages carrying higher institutional value, while marginalised languages such as Khelovedu are associated with lower educational and socioeconomic returns. This theory helps explain whether youth view Khelovedu as beneficial or limiting for social mobility, and how language valuation influences their perspectives on its integration into formal schooling. The theory further provides a lens through which the study interprets participants' attitudes towards language hierarchy, educational access and the potential role of Khelovedu in either reinforcing or challenging existing linguistic inequalities within formal education.

Literature review

The use of language in every domain, especially education, touches on policy, including language policy, at both macro and micro levels. Both these levels are important as they serve different roles. For example, at the micro level, the key role players are community members or speakers of that particular language. They make decisions regarding language use in their communities and schools, including which language must be used in schools, as stipulated in the *South African Schools Act of 1996*. Therefore, language use reflects people's voices and perspectives, which shape these decisions. This study therefore examines the youth's perceptions on the use of their L1 in educational contexts.

Perceptions on L1 as a medium of instruction

Foundational literacy and cognitive transfer

Evidence consistently indicates that strong L1 foundations support early literacy and cognitive development, which, in turn, facilitate L2 learning during the foundation stage. Several reviews and empirical studies highlight that phonological awareness, vocabulary and metalinguistic skills in the L1 provide a scaffold for decoding and reading

in a second language, with transfer occurring as readers apply established linguistic schemas to new orthographies and structures (Flores-Flores et al. 2022; Fresneda et al. 2023; Paredes Muñante 2006). Early L1 instruction also contributes to better reading comprehension and writing ability overall, creating a more robust base for subsequent bilingual literacy (e.g. L1 development predicting L2 literacy outcomes; cross-language transfer of phonological and syntactic knowledge) (Fresneda et al. 2023; Guillén 2020; Rodríguez & Òrrios 2020). Moreover, theoretical work on biliteracy emphasises a continuum view in which L1 literacy supports L2 development, particularly when instructional practices connect the two language contexts in contextual and purposeful ways (Fresneda et al. 2023; Guillén 2020; Sierra & Vargas 2023). This cross-linguistic support aligns with Cummins' interdependence framework, which posits that skills acquired in L1 can facilitate L2 performance when learners have a solid L1 literacy base (Fresneda et al. 2023), and with Hornberger's biliteracy continuum, which stresses the value of leveraging L1 to anchor L2 learning (Fresneda et al. 2023; Sierra & Vargas 2023).

Pedagogical implications for the foundation stage

From a classroom-practice perspective, L1-informed instruction during early years can be organised through bridging approaches and bilingual frameworks that honour learners' home languages while gradually integrating L2 content. Beeman and Urow, as cited by Sierra and Vargas (2023), describe a trilayer model for biliteracy, instruction in Bridges between languages, and instruction in L2, illustrating how deliberate L1 use and cross-language supports can scaffold L2 literacy growth in early education settings. Research on early bilingual programmes and immersion models further indicates that starting L2 exposure early does not undermine L1 development when L1 is actively cultivated and reinforced; rather, such exposure can strengthen overall literacy outcomes by promoting cross-linguistic transfer and metalinguistic awareness (e.g. theories of biliteracy transfer; early exposure to bilingual contexts) (Guillén 2020; Sierra 1991; Sierra & Vargas 2023). In addition, systematic reviews of emergent literacy processes underscore that phonological awareness and oral language skills in the L1 are predictors of L2 literacy success, guiding teachers to prioritise rich L1 linguistic input and dialogic reading in the foundation stage (Flores-Flores et al. 2022; Fresneda et al. 2023).

Equity, access and long-term educational outcomes

Adopting L1-centric strategies also supports equity and inclusive education for multilingual and immigrant populations. The literature emphasises that honouring learners' L1s fosters engagement, confidence and social inclusion, reducing alienation and facilitating access to academic content across languages. This view aligns with UNESCO and UNICEF position statements and cross-cultural investigations that advocate for L1 education as a foundation for multilingual schooling and the equitable progression into L2 literacy (Askoaga 2020; Menéndez 2008; Serrano 2007). Implementing L1-integrated early literacy practices can also help bridge achievement gaps and promote cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism, contributing to sustained academic success as students progress through primary and beyond (Sartori 2023; Valero & Elboj-Saso 2021).

While some sources discuss varied national contexts and models of L1 and L2 integration, a common thread is that strengthening L1 literacy in the foundation stage yields dividends for L2 acquisition, reading fluency and lifelong learning trajectories (Fresneda et al. 2023; Serrano 2007; Sierra & Vargas 2023). Hawa et al. (2021) investigate students' perceptions of using the L1 and analyse the functions and occasions of its use in the EFL classroom in Indonesia. The findings reveal that students had negative perceptions of L1 use. Students chose to avoid using their L1 to improve their skills by maximising exposure to English as the target language in the speaking classroom. Tarekegn (2018) explores parents' attitudes towards using Amharic and English as Medium of Instruction (MoI) in private and government preschools in Ethiopia and finds that parents' attitudes in both settings were positive towards Amharic but neutral towards English. Mandyata et al. (2024) examine parents' attitudes towards early literacy instruction in local languages in Zambia and report significant parental support for beginning literacy in learners' home languages.

In a South African context, Ramothwala, Cekiso and Mandende (2024), investigated parents' perspectives on the possibility of using Khelovedu as MoI in the Foundation Phase schools in Bolovedu South, Limpopo Province, South Africa. This investigation was based on the *South African Schools Act of 1996*, which empowers parents to select the language of their choice to be used as the MoI at their respective schools. The study by Ramothwala, Cekiso and Mandende (2024), has demonstrated that examining parents' attitudes is of paramount importance, as they have implications for language policies. Ramothwala, Cekiso and Mandende (2024), finds that Khelovedu-L1 parents support the prospect of using Khelovedu as MoI, arguing that it would have enormous academic and cultural benefits.

These studies show that studying perspectives or attitudes towards the use of the L1 in education is important. The factors influencing these attitudes and perceptions are discussed in the following subsection. The gap this study addresses is that most studies on language preference in the South African context have focused on parents and teachers. These are crucial, as they have teaching and learning, as well as policy implications. However, limited attention has been given to youth, particularly those who speak languages that have not been elevated to official status, such as Khelovedu, which is spoken by over 1.2 million people across South Africa (Manyama & Amner 2025). Eliciting the perceptions of Khelovedu-L1 youth is important for understanding the future status of Khelovedu. Youth are widely regarded as key agents in language maintenance and shift, and their perspectives on their language are therefore significant.

Factors affecting perspectives or attitudes towards language preference

Research has revealed several factors that affect people's preferences regarding which language should be used as MoI. These include, among others, socioeconomic factors, which is one of the reasons why English is often preferred as the MoI, even though it is not the L1 of many South Africans (Iyamu & Ogiegbaen 2017; Tshotsho 2013). English is often described as the language of employment, goods or opportunities. A study by Klaas-Lang, Praakli and Vender (2025) surveys the language attitudes of Russian-L1 parents towards the transition to Estonian-medium education. The findings reveal that many parents support the use of both Russian and Estonian. Many Russian-L1 parents in Tartu consider it important for both Estonian- and Russian-speaking children to study in a shared, Estonian-medium learning environment. These attitudes were shaped by identity, practical concerns about language learning and future opportunities.

At the same time, parents identified several key challenges, including concerns about a decline in education quality, increased academic pressure and stress for children learning in a non-native language, a lack of suitable learning materials and parents' limited ability to assist with homework as a result of their own insufficient proficiency in Estonian. A study by Craig (1996) also confirms that language preferences and attitudes, especially among parents, are shaped by heritage and future opportunities. Similarly, a study by Tarekegn (2018) in Ethiopia reveals that parents support the use of L1 and English as a result of factors such as heritage and employment opportunities. On the contrary, a study by Nyarigoti and Ambiyo (2014) in Kenya finds that parents preferred English for its status and utility. The findings of Nyarigoti and Ambiyo (2014) are similar to those reported in South Africa. Studies in South Africa consistently show that English continues to dominate higher education contexts and remains the preferred language of instruction, including among students whose first languages are African languages. For example, a study by Magocha, Mutasa and Rammala (2019) reports that students prefer learning in English rather than in their L1. They state that students prefer to learn in English as it is likely to offer the prospect of a good job or social progression.

At a more practical level, for someone to be employed at a university as a lecturer teaching an African language course, he or she must be proficient in English, much as if he or she were teaching English. This is what Bourdieu describes as 'Linguistic Capital'. This fact is confirmed by Professor Leketi Makalela, who shares in a television interview (2020) that when you go to a job interview, you get interviewed in English and not in your home language. Not only do you get interviewed in English, but most jobs are advertised in English. An illustrative example of this is a post advertisement published in the Pretoria News (2010), as cited in Magocha et al. (2019:254). The advertisement was written in English, despite targeting teachers of African languages (e.g. Sotho and Xhosa) as well as other subject areas. This employment advertisement reflects the prioritisation of English over indigenous African languages in workplace recruitment and communication practices. Such situations foster the perception that English is more valued than one's home language. The above factors show how socioeconomic status, language status and material resources shape attitudes towards mother-tongue integration. In light of the above factors, this study seeks to establish the perceived benefits and challenges that Khelovedu-L1 youth associate with using Khelovedu in formal education.

Research methods and design

A qualitative approach was deemed ideal for eliciting Khelovedu-L1 youth perceptions towards the integration of their language, Khelovedu, into formal education. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative approaches are suitable when the purpose of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and meanings regarding a particular phenomenon. This was a case study design involving 15 Khelovedu-L1 speakers, purposively and conveniently selected, aged between 18–35 years. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in sectors relevant to the study, such as education, cultural activities, content creation and community engagement, in order to provide informed perspectives on the use and maintenance of Khelovedu.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analysed through thematic analysis. The researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data, generated initial codes, searched for patterns across the data set and organised these patterns into themes, following the phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Following the analysis, the researcher shared the findings with the participants to verify that the interpretations accurately reflected their views and experiences.

This process aligns with Birt et al. (2016), who emphasise the importance of member checking as a strategy for enhancing the credibility of qualitative research. The reliance on a single qualitative method and a small sample size introduced certain limitations to the study. As the study only included 15 participants, the findings may not be generalised to the broader population. In terms of trustworthiness, credibility was enhanced through the purposive selection of participants with relevant linguistic and community experience, ensuring that the data reflected informed and contextually grounded perspectives on Khelovedu use and maintenance. Dependability was supported by the use of a consistent interview guide across all participants, which ensured uniformity in the data collection process. Transferability is limited as a result of the small, context-specific sample. However, the researchers hope that the contextual detail provided will assist readers in considering the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology Faculty Committee for Research Ethics – Humanities. The ethical clearance number is FCRE/APL/STD/2020/08.

Findings

During the analysis, three themes emerged: perceptions of integrating Khelovedu into formal education, perceived benefits and perceived challenges. The findings are therefore presented according to these themes to provide answers for the study's research questions.

Although 15 participants were interviewed, not all quotations are presented here. Instead, excerpts were selected to illustrate the most salient themes and to represent the range of perspectives expressed.

Perceptions towards integrating Khelovedu into formal education

The participants generally expressed positive views towards the integration of Khelovedu into formal education. Most indicated that they would feel comfortable and would be willing to enrol in schools in which Khelovedu is used as a medium of instruction. However, two of the 11 participants indicated that they would not enrol in such schools, citing concerns related to the complexity and standardisation of the language, as reflected in the following extracts:

> 'I think Khelovedu should be integrated into formal education. I would most definitely enrol at a school that teaches in Khelovedu because I value linguistic preservation. One should embrace their culture/heritage. That will assist in keeping it alive for the next generations to come.' (P1, Male, 25–30 years, Librarian)

> 'I would not enrol in such a school; the language is a hard one to crack. I grew up speaking it, but I still struggle at some point. Having it as a LoLT would be very difficult.' (P2, Female, 25–30 years, Teacher)

> 'No. Khelovedu has different words that are supposed to mean the same thing.' (P3, Female, 31–35 years, Optemetrist)

> 'I believe that if we use our L1 (Khelovedu) for teaching and learning, learners will excel in all their subjects. It can show my child the importance of knowing our roots.' (P6, Male, 31–35 years, Lecturer)

> 'I support the use of Khelovedu as the medium of instruction because I would love to see my child know and master their original L1.' (P7, Female, 20–24 years, BEd student)

> 'I support the use of Khelovedu as the language of learning and teaching, and I would not hesitate to enrol in schools where Khelovedu is used as the language of learning and teaching. I believe so; it can give one a chance to express their language without being judged or having a bad feeling.' (P10, Female, 31–35 years, Teacher)

> 'I would enrol because learning in Khelovedu would help me understand better, gain confidence, and build a strong foundation before learning in other languages.' (P11, Male, 25–30 years, Teacher)

Some participants expressed support for the use of Khelovedu in education, particularly in relation to its perceived educational and cultural benefits. While certain participants raised concerns regarding language complexity and standardisation, others demonstrated a positive disposition towards the adoption of Khelovedu as a medium of instruction. These perspectives suggest the existence of varying attitudes towards the educational use of Khelovedu among the selected participants, highlighting the need for broader engagement and further research within the wider Balovedu community.

Perceived benefits of integrating Khelovedu into formal education

The positive support for integrating Khelovedu into formal education was motivated by the perceived benefits it could offer, including improved academic performance, social inclusion and cultural reinforcement. However, one participant indicated that they did not see the importance of incorporating Khelovedu into formal education, as reflected in the following excerpts:

> 'It could be an exciting experience. As librarians, we celebrate events like "International Mother Tongue Day". We aim to teach our users to feel proud of their native language. So it will add value in promoting our culture and connecting us with our heritage. The more subjects being taught in Khelovedu, the more books will be written.' (P1, Male, 25–30 years, Librarian)

> 'It's really not so important, honestly. I really find it unnecessary; it has so many words that are "informal", self-created, but we only understand what it means because of the context of the conversation.' (P3, Female, 31–35 years, Optemetrist)

> 'It will make teaching and learning much easier. Learners would be able to understand the questions teachers ask during lessons. Learners will be able to engage more easily in lessons, and sharing and creating information will be more accessible to them. By using khelovedu to learn, we acknowledge our L1 and preserve our culture as balovedu.' (P5, Female, 31–35 years, Teacher)

> 'Learners will have a sense of belonging; it will bring more clarity in their learning space; it's easy to write what you speak. Relief will be the feeling; learning content or subject in my language will save me time to process and to translate it before I can write.' (P6, Male, 31–35 years, Lecturer)

> 'I think having Khelovedu as a language of learning and teaching will help because learners understand better when they are taught in their L1. Some of my colleagues code-switch when delivering their lessons … so why not make Khelovedu a language of learning and teaching? Another thing is that it will foster linguistic diversity while ensuring that all learners are valued and respected in the curriculum and they have equal access to education.' (P8, Male, 31–35 years, Teacher)

> 'The importance of learning in our L1 is to build learners' self-confidence and self-esteem. Some learners are shy to participate in class during lessons because they struggle with vocabulary, and it can shape their self-identity, to know where they come from.' (P9, Female, 20–24 years, BEd student)

> 'It is very important because including Khelovedu in school lessons helps learners understand better, feel confident, and value their language and culture.' (P11, Male, 25–30 years, Teacher)

Most of the above responses suggest that integrating Khelovedu into formal education would offer substantial benefits, which explains the participants' overall support for its inclusion. These benefits extend beyond academic outcomes to include the promotion of learners' confidence, cultural identity and sense of belonging.

Perceived challenges towards integrating Khelovedu into formal education

Despite the perceived benefits of introducing Khelovedu into formal education, the findings indicate that its integration would pose several significant challenges. Participants identified the scarcity of written materials, such as textbooks and other reading resources, as a major obstacle, noting that very few books are written or translated into Khelovedu. In addition, limited teacher training was highlighted as a significant barrier, as reflected in the following excerpts:

> 'Lack of books translated to Khelovedu or even lack of books written in Khelovedu. Learners might experience a language barrier at the tertiary level. Non-Khelovedu-speaking teachers will require extensive training.' (P1, Male, 25–30 years, Librarian)

> 'We struggle to find most of the words in everyday communication in Khelovedu; we have to opt for code-switching or using the Sepedi dialect. So it being used as Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) will be very difficult; I do not think we would be able to translate some of the concepts from English to Khelovedu.' (P2, Female, 25–30 years, Teacher)

> 'Deciding which words are appropriate to use in books and which ones are not appropriate.' (P3, Female, 31–35 years, Optemetrist)

> 'A teacher who comes from a different province or who is used to a different language, as applies to learners who come from other regions, will face difficulties in understanding and pronouncing the words.' (P4, Male 25–30 years, Community Activist)

> 'There are not many written Khelovedu books, so this will become a challenge.' (P5, Female, 31–35 years, Teacher)

> 'The challenges could be a lack of reading materials.' (P6, Male, 31–35 years, Lecturer)

> 'Pronunciation and spelling could be the difficult part for both learners and teachers.' (P7, Female, 20–24 years, BEd student)

> 'Limited teachers to teach Khelovedu as a medium of instruction, availability of resources in teaching Khelovedu.' (P8, Male, 31–35 years, Teacher)

> 'Just like Sepedi, Khelovedu has dialects, so it will be difficult to know which one is standardised.' (P9, Female, 20–24 years, BEd student)

> 'Writing, because some words are difficult even for people who speak Khelovedu.' (P10, Female, 31–35 years, Teacher)

> 'Some challenges could include a lack of textbooks and learning materials in Khelovedu, limited teacher training, and difficulty translating some subject terms into Khelovedu.' (P11, Male, 25–30 years, Teacher)

The responses collectively indicate that integrating Khelovedu into formal education would be a complex and resource-intensive process. Successful implementation would require the development of textbooks and other teaching and learning materials, extensive teacher training and careful consideration of language standardisation. Without addressing these foundational issues, the effective use of Khelovedu as a medium of instruction would remain difficult to achieve.

Discussion

Perceptions towards integrating Khelovedu into formal education

Participants expressed largely positive attitudes towards the integration of Khelovedu into formal education, with most indicating willingness to enrol their children in schools in which Khelovedu is used as an MoI. However, two of the 15 participants expressed reservations, citing concerns about the language's perceived complexity and lack of standardisation. These concerns are understandable, as the absence of standardisation may lead some young people to doubt whether education in Khelovedu can provide access to broader socioeconomic opportunities. This view aligns with Bourdieu's Theory of Linguistic Capital, which explains how languages are hierarchically valued within a linguistic market. In this context, Khelovedu is positioned as a low-status language, while languages such as Sepedi are associated with prestige and mobility, prompting some speakers to favour Sepedi-medium education even though Sepedi is not their L1. Nevertheless, most participants' support for integrating Khelovedu into formal education indicates a strong preference for mother-tongue instruction among Khelovedu-L1 youth. This finding contrasts with studies by Magocha et al. (2019), Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2017) and Phindane (2017), which report a preference for English as the language of learning and teaching as a result of its perceived economic and social advantages. The divergence suggests a shifting orientation among Khelovedu-L1 youth towards valuing mother-tongue education for its educational and cultural benefits.

Perceived benefits of integrating Khelovedu into formal education

The findings of this study indicate that participants view the integration of Khelovedu into formal education as beneficial, particularly for cognitive, social and cultural outcomes. These perceptions align with previous research on L1 education, which highlights the cognitive advantages, enhanced social inclusion and cultural affirmation associated with instruction in learners' first languages (Babaci-Wilhite 2013; Ball 2011; Pflepsen 2011). In support of these benefits, Tegegne (2015) argues that using learners' native dialects promotes cognitive, social, emotional and linguistic development, thereby facilitating more meaningful learning. This perspective is echoed by participants, with one respondent (P9) noting that integrating Khelovedu would enhance learners' self-confidence and self-esteem.

Furthermore, the findings suggest a strong link between the language of instruction and cultural reinforcement.

Participants indicated that using Khelovedu as a medium of instruction would foster positive perceptions of Khelovedu culture among L1 learners. This view is supported by Alidou (2003) and Babaci-Wilhite (2013), who contend that using local languages in education facilitates the integration of indigenous cultures into the curriculum, promotes cultural sensitivity and strengthens cultural identity. For the Balovedu community, these benefits translate into more meaningful educational access and improved learner outcomes within their own linguistic and cultural context. Cognitive gains are associated with improved comprehension and increased participation in learning when instruction is delivered in Khelovedu, thereby reducing barriers to understanding complex concepts. Socially, the use of Khelovedu in education can strengthen learners' confidence, inclusion and communication within both school and community environments. Culturally, it affirms Balovedu identity by validating Khelovedu as a legitimate language of knowledge, thereby contributing to the preservation and continuity of Balovedu linguistic and cultural heritage across generations.

Perceived challenges in integrating Khelovedu into formal education

Despite the recognised potential of integrating Khelovedu into formal education, the findings indicate structural barriers that constrain its practical realisation. Foremost among these is the limited availability of written instructional materials. Participants' repeated references to the scarcity of textbooks and supplementary resources indicate that Khelovedu remains insufficiently developed in its written form. As a result, curriculum development and classroom instruction would be severely constrained, pointing to deeper challenges related to language standardisation and institutional support.

Consequently, without targeted investment in the development and translation of pedagogical materials, the integration of Khelovedu risks remaining aspirational rather than achievable. This concern aligns with existing scholarship. Ball (2011) stresses the necessity for local bodies to prioritise the development of written forms of dialects to ensure their pedagogical viability. Similarly, Prah (2006) argues that the promotion of dialects depends on sustained advocacy, dissemination of materials and publication, processes that ultimately enable textbook production across educational levels. Supporting this view, Abongdia (2013) identifies inadequate resources as a major impediment to effective mother-tongue education. The above studies suggest that resource availability is a prerequisite for effective pedagogical use. Moreover, the challenge extends beyond material production to human capacity. Carless (2002) observes that mother-tongue education in South Africa is hindered by limited teacher training and insufficient resources, a position echoed by UNESCO (Ball 2011) and UNICEF (Trudell 2016).

In the case of Khelovedu, these challenges are compounded: the absence of standardisation restricts the development of teaching materials, which in turn limits opportunities for teacher training. Therefore, the lack of resources and standardisation forms a self-reinforcing cycle that significantly undermines the feasibility of integrating Khelovedu into formal education. Bourdieu's Theory of Linguistic Capital helps explain the marginal position of Khelovedu within formal education, as its lack of standardisation, resources, and institutional recognition limits its value in the dominant linguistic market. In order to enhance the language's symbolic and educational capital, Khelovedu-L1 youth should actively engage in language documentation, advocacy and the development of written materials that promote its legitimacy and usability in educational contexts.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the perceptions of Khelovedu-L1 youth regarding the integration of Khelovedu into formal education, to examine the perceived benefits of such integration for Khelovedu speakers and to identify key barriers to its implementation. The findings indicate that to some extent, Khelovedu-L1 youth hold positive attitudes towards its inclusion in formal education, highlighting cognitive, social and cultural benefits. At the same time, the study identifies substantial challenges to integration, notably the lack of educational resources, insufficiently trained teachers and the absence of language standardisation. In light of these findings, the study advances the view that Khelovedu-L1 youth should take an active role in advancing the language's development. This role includes participating in efforts to standardise Khelovedu through community-driven documentation of its orthography and grammar, as well as contributing to the creation of written materials. Youth involvement in language advocacy, awareness initiatives and grassroots research on literacy practices and educational feasibility is particularly crucial. Such bottom-up engagement can foster ownership, strengthen sustainability and reduce overreliance on state-led interventions in promoting Khelovedu for pedagogical use. The study therefore contributes by highlighting the agency of Khelovedu-L1 youth in language development and educational change. The study demonstrates that the standardisation and educational use of Khelovedu does not have to rely only on state intervention. Youth-led documentation, advocacy and community-based literacy initiatives can play a central role. The study, therefore, frames language revitalisation as a bottom-up process grounded in community ownership and sustainability.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Tsebo Ramothwala: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration,

Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Josephat Mutangadura: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Tsebo Ramothwala.

Disclaimer

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