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Folklore-based pedagogy for literacy and critical thinking in Sepedi classrooms

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Background: South African primary schools continue to face significant literacy challenges, with PIRLS 2016 finding that 78% of Grade 4 learners were unable to read for meaning. In Sepedi-speaking communities, the gap between indigenous oral traditions and formal education deepens these challenges, as culturally significant folklore resources remain underutilised.

Objectives: This study examined the pedagogical potential of Sepedi folklore including folktales [*dinonwane*], proverbs [*diema*], and riddles [*dithai*] as culturally responsive tools for developing literacy and critical thinking among Grade 7 Sepedi home language learners in the Lebowakgomo Circuit, Limpopo.

Method: A qualitative design used semi-structured teacher interviews, non-participant classroom observations and document analysis of learners' folklore-based activities. Participants were purposively selected, and data were analysed thematically using inductive coding.

Results: Sepedi folklore functioned as an effective medium for vocabulary acquisition, figurative language, narrative competence and oral proficiency. It engaged culturally familiar schemas, reducing cognitive load and promoting higher-order analytical engagement. Dialogic folklore instruction improved learner engagement, inferential reasoning, and evaluative understanding.

Conclusion: Sepedi folklore is a valuable tool for addressing literacy challenges and promoting critical thinking. Successful implementation requires ongoing professional development, curriculum alignment and community collaboration.

Contribution: The study provides empirical evidence linking folklore-based pedagogy, literacy development and critical thinking in indigenous African language classrooms, supporting the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into formal literacy instruction.

Keywords: critical thinking; culturally responsive pedagogy; indigenous knowledge systems; literacy development; Sepedi folklore.

Introduction

South Africa faces a persistent literacy crisis that undermines educational equity and constrains democratic participation. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2016 found that 78% of South African Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language, representing the lowest performance among all participating countries (Howie et al. 2017). This pattern persists beyond the early grades. The Sepedi Early Grade Reading Benchmarks (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2022) similarly report that a large majority of learners struggle with reading comprehension.

The crisis is also profoundly unequal. In former Model C schools, roughly 35% of learners achieved international reading benchmarks, whereas comprehension rates in township and rural schools fell below 10%. These disparities point to a systemic failure that disproportionately affects learners from historically disadvantaged communities, particularly Sepedi-speaking learners in rural Limpopo province, where resource limitations, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate teaching materials compound the challenges of learning to read (Spaull, Pretorius & Mohohlwane 2020).

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Part of the explanation for the persistence of this crisis lies in the gap between curriculum policy and classroom practice. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) designates critical thinking as a cross-curricular skill and explicitly includes oral literature in the Home Language curriculum, requiring teachers to draw on indigenous knowledge systems (DBE 2011). Classroom realities, however, diverge sharply from these aspirations. Research indicates that South African classroom pedagogy continues to privilege factual recall over higher-order thinking, with teachers relying predominantly on literal questions that offer few opportunities for analytical engagement (Hoadley 2017; Reeves & McMillan 2022). This pattern exemplifies what Freire (2018) termed the 'banking model' of education, in which knowledge is deposited into learners for later retrieval during assessment, rather than developed through the active, questioning disposition that critical thinking requires.

An underutilised resource for addressing this gap lies within learners' own communities. Sepedi-speaking communities possess rich oral literature traditions encompassing folktales [*dinonwane*], proverbs [*diema*], riddles [*dithai*], and praise poetry [*theto*], which have historically served educational functions, including moral instruction, cultural transmission, and cognitive development. These oral traditions employ sophisticated linguistic features, including ideophones, figurative expressions, and complex narrative structures that represent significant yet underutilised pedagogical resources for developing literacy skills and critical thinking in formal schooling contexts (Bazimaziki 2023).

Despite growing scholarly advocacy for integrating indigenous knowledge systems into education, limited empirical research has examined how Sepedi folklore can be systematically employed to address the documented literacy crisis while fostering critical thinking competencies. International and African scholarship recognises the pedagogical potential of folklore for cognitive and linguistic development (Emeagwali & Shizha 2016; Finnegan 2012; Fisher & Larkin 2008). Within South Africa, folklore is likewise recognised as a tool capable of developing higher-order thinking skills (Maluleke & Smith 2025). What remains scarce, however, is empirical evidence of how teachers integrate Sepedi folklore to develop literacy and critical thinking in primary school classrooms, and how learners engage with such instruction.

The present study addresses this gap by presenting empirical data on classroom implementation, teacher strategies, and learner engagement in Grade 7 Sepedi Home Language instruction in the Lebowakgomo Circuit, Limpopo province. The study is framed by two complementary theories, interpreted through the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory positions cultural artefacts such as folklore as mediators of cognitive development through social interaction, while Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasises coherence between home and school learning environments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2007). Culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay 2018; Ladson-Billings 2021) connects these theoretical perspectives by foregrounding the use of learners' cultural resources to strengthen educational relevance and outcomes. These frameworks are discussed in greater detail in a dedicated section below.

This study aimed to examine the role of Sepedi folklore as a culturally responsive pedagogical tool for developing literacy skills and critical thinking among Grade 7 learners. The objectives of the study were to: (1) investigate the integration of Sepedi folklore into Home Language instruction to support literacy development; (2) assess the effectiveness of folklore-based pedagogy in enhancing critical thinking skills, including inferential and evaluative comprehension; (3) identify the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing folklore-based literacy instruction in rural primary schools; and (4) offer evidence-based recommendations for culturally responsive literacy pedagogy in South African indigenous language classrooms.

Literature review

Folklore as a pedagogical tool in South African education

Folklore and oral literature in South Africa serve as important educational resources that support language development, cultural identity, and critical thinking skills. The CAPS framework advocates the integration of indigenous narratives into educational practice, particularly in African language classrooms (DBE 2011). Research conducted in South Africa indicates that folklore-based pedagogy promotes cognitive development, ethical reasoning, and cultural affirmation, contributing to decolonised and transformative education (Hlalele 2019). Empirical studies further demonstrate that storytelling and narrative-based teaching strengthen learners' comprehension, interpretation, and evaluative skills, particularly in multilingual and culturally diverse classrooms (Maluleke & Smith 2025).

Studies of Sepedi folklore in primary education show that traditional narratives improve learners' interpretive skills, moral reasoning, and cultural identity, while also providing accessible pathways to critical literacy. Folklore offers opportunities for inquiry across multiple cognitive levels. A single folktale can facilitate questions ranging from literal recall to in-depth analysis of symbolism, evaluation of characters' decisions, and the application of moral lessons to contemporary contexts. The cultural familiarity of folktales enhances learner engagement and provides accessible entry points for sustained analytical exploration (Maluleke & Smith 2025).

Literacy development through folklore in South African contexts

Folklore in South Africa is recognised as an important resource for promoting literacy, particularly within African language education. Curriculum frameworks encourage

the use of indigenous narratives to strengthen reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and the formation of cultural identity (DBE 2011). Studies indicate that folklore-based instruction improves learners' inferential and evaluative comprehension, particularly when delivered in their home languages. Folklore is increasingly recognised as a culturally responsive literacy pedagogy that supports multilingual learners by integrating oral and written language practices and fostering critical engagement with texts (Maluleke & Smith 2025).

Sepedi oral literature draws on a rich vocabulary that includes specialised terms associated with traditional practices, natural phenomena, social relationships, and cultural concepts (Bazimaziki 2023). Proverbs and idioms are common features of Sepedi oral literature, conveying complex meanings through figurative language. Studies demonstrate that explicit attention to figurative language improves both comprehension and cultural awareness. Ideophones constitute an important, though often overlooked, element of Sepedi narrative language, enriching sensory imagery and promoting narrative engagement (Bazimaziki 2023). Folklore-based instruction that emphasises ideophonic language supports indigenous linguistic practices while strengthening learners' stylistic awareness and expressive abilities.

Reading comprehension and critical thinking

Reading comprehension and critical thinking are interconnected cognitive processes that reinforce one another in literacy development (Duke & Pearson 2002; Snow 2018). Comprehension requires readers to derive meaning from text by synthesising textual information with existing knowledge, whereas critical thinking involves evaluating that meaning, questioning assumptions, and forming reasoned judgements (Afflerbach & Cho 2009). Bloom's revised taxonomy distinguishes between literal comprehension (remembering and understanding) and critical thinking (analysing, evaluating, and creating), providing a framework for evaluating cognitive engagement across different levels (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001).

Studies of classroom discourse in South Africa indicate a strong reliance on low-level questioning, limiting the development of critical thinking skills. Teachers predominantly ask literal questions that require factual recall, whereas inferential and evaluative questions constitute only a small proportion of classroom interactions (Hoadley 2017; Reeves & McMillan 2022). Folklore provides valuable opportunities for developing comprehension across multiple cognitive levels. Educators who use effective questioning techniques can support learners' progression from understanding basic narrative structures to engaging in more complex interpretive and evaluative tasks. The moral ambiguity inherent in traditional tales encourages evaluative discussion, requiring learners to formulate and justify their judgements (Maluleke & Smith 2025).

Indigenous knowledge systems and educational transformation

The integration of indigenous knowledge systems into formal education is a central aspect of contemporary educational reform in South Africa. Post-apartheid educational policies recognise the importance of indigenous knowledge, with CAPS mandating its integration across a range of learning areas (DBE 2011). Formal schooling, however, often fails to draw on readily available cultural resources, creating a disconnect between home- and school-based learning that undermines educational effectiveness (Hlalele 2019). The purposeful integration of folklore into educational curricula can bridge informal and formal learning, affirm learners' cultural identities, and promote critical thinking skills through culturally responsive teaching pedagogies. South African educators are increasingly developing innovative approaches to folklore pedagogy by combining indigenous narratives with digital technologies and the performing arts (Hlalele 2019). Comparative studies of folklore across South Africa's diverse cultural groups promote intercultural dialogue and contribute to national cohesion (Zhou & Liao 2025). These applications demonstrate the continued relevance of folklore in addressing contemporary educational challenges while respecting indigenous intellectual traditions.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical lenses – sociocultural theory, and ecological systems theory – integrated through the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy. Together, they explain why culturally familiar narratives can be expected to support both literacy and critical thinking, and they provide the analytical categories used to interpret the findings presented below.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory holds that learning is most effective when it occurs through social interaction and cultural mediation, with language serving as the primary symbolic tool for cognitive development. Within this framework, folklore is understood as a culturally embedded linguistic form that mediates the transmission of both cultural knowledge and cognitive skills. The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is central to the present analysis. Skilled teachers scaffold learners' engagement with folktales through strategic questioning, the provision of contextual information, and guided discussion, enabling learners to reach understandings beyond what they could achieve independently. In this study, the ZPD provides the lens through which teachers' questioning and dialogic interactions are interpreted as advancing learners from literal recall to inferential and evaluative reasoning.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory complements this perspective by explaining the nested contextual levels that shape learner development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2007). Folklore operates simultaneously across several of

these levels: as a microsystem resource embedded in family storytelling, as a mesosystem connector linking home and school when classroom instruction draws on narratives learners already know, and as a macrosystem carrier of cultural beliefs and knowledge systems. Interpreted through this theory, the integration of folklore into formal instruction strengthens coherence between the home and school microsystems, which this study identifies as a key mechanism for improving learner engagement and affirming cultural identity (Gay 2018; Ladson-Billings 2021).

Culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay 2018; Ladson-Billings 2021) integrates these two theoretical lenses by emphasising that effective teaching validates and builds on the cultural knowledge learners bring to the classroom. It reframes learners' home-language oral skills not as deficits to be corrected but as assets to be leveraged. In the present study, culturally responsive pedagogy provides the evaluative framework against which folklore-based instruction is examined, namely the extent to which it positions learners as competent meaning-makers and connects their cultural resources to school-valued literacy and reasoning.

Research methods and design

Study design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist framework. A qualitative approach was appropriate for examining the complex, context-dependent processes through which teachers integrate folklore into literacy instruction and how learners engage with folklore-based activities to develop critical thinking.

Setting

The study was conducted in primary schools within the Lebowakgomo Circuit, Capricorn South District, Limpopo province, South Africa. The circuit serves predominantly Sepedi-speaking communities in rural and semi-urban settings, where indigenous oral traditions remain culturally significant. Schools in the circuit reflect the resource constraints typical of historically disadvantaged educational contexts, including limited library facilities and instructional materials.

Study population and sampling strategy

The study population comprised Grade 7 Sepedi Home Language teachers and their learners in primary schools within the Lebowakgomo Circuit. Purposive sampling was employed to select teachers with experience in teaching Sepedi Home Language in the Senior Phase. The sampling criteria required participants to have at least 3 years of teaching experience in Sepedi Home Language and to be willing to participate in classroom observations during folklore-based lessons. The final sample comprised four teachers from four primary schools.

Data collection

Three data collection methods were employed to achieve methodological triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers to explore their perceptions, knowledge, and practices regarding the integration of folklore into literacy instruction. The interview questions focused on teachers' understanding of the pedagogical value of folklore, the strategies used in folklore-based instruction, the challenges they encountered, and the perceived effects on learners' literacy and critical thinking skills. Non-participant classroom observations were conducted during folklore-based Sepedi Home Language lessons to examine teaching practices, questioning strategies, learner engagement, and interaction patterns. An observation schedule, informed by Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001), was developed to assess the cognitive demand levels of teacher questions and learner responses. Finally, document analysis was conducted on learners' written responses to folklore-based activities, including comprehension questions, interpretive tasks, and evaluative exercises, to examine evidence of critical thinking across different cognitive levels.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis in accordance with the six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts and observation field notes were transcribed and coded inductively, with initial codes organised into potential themes through an iterative process of comparison. The themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and defined in relation to the research objectives. Document analysis employed a deductive coding framework based on Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001) to categorise learners' responses according to cognitive demand levels. Trustworthiness was enhanced through data source triangulation, member checking, and the maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee at the University of Limpopo (ethics clearance number: TREC/2498/2025: PG). Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Limpopo Department of Education and the principals of the participating schools. All participating teachers provided informed consent, and parental consent was obtained for learner participation. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were securely stored in accordance with the *Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA)*.

Results and discussion

This section presents the findings from the empirical data collection. The results are organised according to the thematic framework derived from the thematic analysis of

semi-structured interviews conducted with four Grade 7 Sepedi Home Language teachers (designated Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, and Teacher D), non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Five themes emerged from the data: (1) folklore as a vehicle for vocabulary and figurative language development; (2) enhancing reading comprehension through culturally familiar narratives; (3) fostering critical thinking through dialogic engagement with folklore; (4) challenges in implementing folklore-based literacy instruction; and (5) bridging home and school literacy practices. Interview extracts are presented in the original Sepedi, together with English translations, to preserve participants' authentic voices. To provide a deeper analysis, the discussion of each theme is integrated with the findings and interpreted explicitly through the study's theoretical framework.

Theme 1: Folklore as a vehicle for vocabulary and figurative language development

The analysis of teacher interviews and classroom observations indicated that Sepedi folklore functioned as an effective medium for vocabulary acquisition and the development of figurative language. Teachers indicated that folktales familiarised learners with culturally relevant vocabulary related to traditional practices, natural phenomena, and social interactions, extending beyond the vocabulary typically encountered in standard textbook materials. Proverbs [*diema*] embedded within folktales required interpretive engagement, with teachers guiding discussions of their metaphorical meanings and contemporary relevance. Classroom observations further indicated that learners demonstrated high levels of engagement when presented with culturally relevant linguistic material, as folklore provided authentic contexts for exploring ideophones and specialised terminology. The interview data supported these observations.

Teacher B emphasised the vocabulary-building function of folklore, stating:

> '*Go ruta tlotlontšu go dilo tša tlhago le tša segaga borena tše batho ba di lemogago. Go ruta batho tlhompho le ditlwaelo tša setšo*' [It teaches vocabulary about natural things and things that we have in our language, that people are familiar with. It teaches people respect and cultural customs].

This response illustrates how folklore introduces domain-specific vocabulary associated with cultural institutions and the natural environment, extending learners' lexical repertoires beyond conventional textbook content. Teacher C similarly highlighted the linguistic refinement afforded by folklore:

> '*Ke šupa go kgetha mantšu ge re efa polelo. Polelo e a hlweka re tseba le pebofatšo. Re khuthiša mantšu ao a sa amogelegago*' [I point to choosing words when we speak. Language becomes clean, and we know honorific. We eliminate unacceptable words].

Teacher C's response suggests that folklore instruction cultivates lexical precision and stylistic awareness, encouraging learners to develop sensitivity to register and appropriateness in language use. Teacher A further noted the broader educational value of folklore for language development:

> '*Go re bana ba kgone go nyakišiša thuto ya setšo le mabokgoni a polelo ya go ruta ya Sepedi*' [So that children can explore cultural education and language skills of Sepedi teaching].

This perspective suggests that teachers regarded folklore not merely as a supplementary resource but as a foundational medium through which both cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are developed simultaneously.

Classroom observations confirmed that learners actively engaged with culturally embedded vocabulary during folklore-based lessons, responding particularly well to proverbs [*diema*] and ideophones that required the interpretive negotiation of figurative meaning. Interpreted through Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, these findings show folklore functioning as a cultural-linguistic mediator. The domain-specific vocabulary, proverbs, and ideophones encountered in folktales are not isolated word lists but culturally embedded tools through which learners acquire language and cultural meaning simultaneously. This interpretation aligns with international research demonstrating that folklore provides optimal contexts for vocabulary instruction through narrative embedding and cultural framing (Beck, McKeown & Kucan 2013; Fisher & Larkin 2008), and that engagement with linguistically rich texts strengthens both receptive and productive vocabulary while deepening cultural knowledge (Cervetti, Wright & Hwang 2016). The interpretive demands of proverbs [*diema*] are particularly significant. As Serpell and Marfo (2022) argue, African proverbs foster higher-order thinking because they require analogical reasoning and contextual sensitivity. Teacher C's emphasis on lexical precision and register therefore reflects more than vocabulary development; it illustrates the metalinguistic awareness that culturally responsive pedagogy seeks to cultivate by treating learners' home language as an intellectual resource (Gay 2018).

Theme 2: Enhancing reading comprehension through culturally familiar narratives

The findings indicated that folklore-based instruction enhanced learners' reading comprehension across multiple cognitive levels. Document analysis of learners' written responses revealed stronger performance on inferential and evaluative comprehension tasks when learners engaged with folklore rather than with culturally unfamiliar texts. Teachers observed that the familiar narrative structures and cultural contexts of Sepedi folktales reduced cognitive load, enabling learners to focus on higher-order analytical processes rather than basic comprehension. The layered symbolic features of folklore facilitated simultaneous engagement with literal, inferential, and evaluative levels of comprehension.

Teacher interview data provided compelling evidence of how folklore-based instruction enhanced reading comprehension. Teacher D described a prediction-based reading strategy grounded in folklore:

> '*Ke kaonafatša ka mokgwa wa go dumelela barutwana gore ba nagana gore pele go ba mafelelong go tlo direga eng ge re dutše re bala. Gape ke a kaonafatša ka go botšiša gore ba nagana gore nonwane ye e bolela ka eng ge ba lebeletše seswantšho le hlogo ya nonwane*' [I improve by allowing learners to think about what will happen at the end while we are reading. I also improve by asking what they think the folktale is about when they look at the picture and the title of the folktale].

This strategy reflects the activation of prior knowledge and predictive reasoning through culturally familiar narrative elements, with paratextual features such as titles and illustrations serving as comprehension scaffolds. Teacher B employed a similar multimodal approach:

> '*Ka go fa barutwana hlogotaba, setšhwantšho sa setšweletša seo se sepedišetšanago le kanegelo, barutwana ba tla abelana dikgopolo gore setšweletšwa se bolela ka eng ka morago ga lebelela dikokwana tše pedi bohlokwa*' [By giving learners a topic, a picture of the production that goes with the story, learners will share ideas about what the production is about after looking at two important elements].

Teacher A reinforced these approaches by identifying key comprehension strategies:

> '*Go bala ka šedi le kwešišo. Go leka go kwešiša merero ya dithutwana. Go lebelela hlogo ya kanegelo le diswantšho tšeo di šomišitšwego*' [Reading with attention and comprehension. Trying to understand the themes of the lessons. Looking at the title of the story and the pictures that were used].

Collectively, these responses demonstrate that teachers employed culturally embedded visual and textual cues within folklore to scaffold reading comprehension, enabling learners to activate relevant background knowledge and construct meaning at progressively higher cognitive levels.

These findings are best explained by schema theory, which proposes that culturally familiar content activates relevant background knowledge, reduces extraneous cognitive load, and frees attentional resources for analytical engagement (Anderson & Pearson 1984). When the narrative world of a folktale is already familiar, learners need not expend cognitive effort decoding unfamiliar settings or conventions and can instead direct those resources towards inference and evaluation. This finding speaks directly to the comprehension crisis documented in PIRLS 2016 (Howie et al. 2017). The evidence suggests that culturally responsive texts can scaffold learners' progression from literal to inferential and evaluative comprehension, a progression that recall-oriented instruction rarely supports. The prediction and paratextual strategies described by Teachers A, B, and D, in which titles and illustrations function as comprehension scaffolds, operationalise schema activation and are consistent with evidence that folklore-based instruction strengthens inferential and evaluative comprehension when delivered in learners' home languages (Maluleke & Smith 2025).

Theme 3: Developing critical thinking through dialogic engagement with folklore

Classroom observations revealed that folklore-based lessons employing dialogic teaching approaches promoted high levels of critical thinking engagement. Teachers who posed open-ended questions about character motivations, moral dilemmas, and alternative narrative outcomes facilitated evaluative discussions that moved learners beyond literal recall. The moral ambiguity inherent in traditional tales, in which characters display both commendable and problematic behaviours, created productive opportunities for reasoned argumentation. Learners demonstrated increased ability to formulate and justify judgement, to consider multiple perspectives, and apply narrative lessons to contemporary situations.

Teacher interviews provided compelling evidence of dialogic strategies that promoted critical thinking. Teacher D explicitly described the use of higher-order questioning:

> '*Mokgwa wa go botšiša barutwana dipotšišo tša maemo a godimo gore ba kgone go ikgopolela*' [The method of asking learners higher-order questions so that they can think critically].

This deliberate deployment of cognitively demanding questions during folklore instruction created opportunities for learners to move beyond literal recall towards analytical and evaluative engagement. Teacher A described a comparative strategy that linked folklore to contemporary life:

> '*Ka mokgwa wa go fa bana sebaka sa go bapetša tšeo dikanegelo di se bolelago le bophelo ba lehono*' [By giving children the opportunity to compare what the stories say with today's life].

This approach required learners to analyse narrative content, identify underlying principles, and evaluate their relevance to contemporary contexts – a process that engages multiple levels of Bloom's revised taxonomy. Teacher B emphasised the importance of learner-initiated meaning-making:

> '*Ka go tlwaetša barutwana go nagana ka kanegelo le go bolela seo ba se naganang pele thutwana e ka tšwelapele*' [By getting learners used to thinking about the story and saying what they think before the lesson can continue].

This response highlights a pedagogical practice in which learners are positioned as active interpreters rather than passive recipients of narrative meaning.

Regarding evidence of critical thinking, Teacher A stated that learners demonstrated analytical engagement:

> '"*… ge ba araba dipotšišo" and "ka mokgwa wa go ngwala kakaretšo" and "ka mokgwa wa go ekiša dikanegelo ge ba di bala*"' […when they answer questions, by writing summaries, and by imitating/dramatising stories when they read them].

Teacher D similarly observed evidence of critical thinking when learners wrote and presented short stories:

> '*Ba bontša mabokgoni a go tsenelela ge ba ngwala le go hlagiša dikanegelokopana*' [They show deep or critical skills when writing and presenting short stories].

These responses indicate that critical thinking was demonstrated across multiple modalities – oral discussion, written analysis, and dramatic performance – suggesting that folklore-based pedagogy engages diverse cognitive pathways.

The critical thinking gains observed in this study support the sociocultural account of learning, particularly the operation of the ZPD (Vygotsky 1978). Teacher D's deliberate use of higher-order questions and Teacher B's practice of eliciting learners' interpretations before proceeding illustrate how guided dialogic interaction scaffolds forms of reasoning that learners could not yet perform independently. The comparative task described by Teacher A, in which learners compare narrative content with contemporary life, engages the upper levels of Bloom's revised taxonomy (analysing, evaluating, and creating) (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001), moving instruction beyond the literal recall that continues to characterise many South African classrooms (Hoadley 2017; Reeves & McMillan 2022). The moral ambiguity of traditional tales proved especially conducive to evaluative reasoning, consistent with evidence that African folklore develops analytical reasoning through engagement with morally complex characters and situations (Nnyagu & Umezinwa 2018). That critical thinking was demonstrated across oral discussion, written summaries, and dramatic performance further suggests that folklore engages multiple cognitive pathways rather than a single mode of response.

Theme 4: Challenges in implementing folklore-based literacy instruction

Despite the pedagogical benefits identified, teachers reported significant challenges in implementing folklore-based instruction. These included limited access to published Sepedi folklore collections, time constraints associated with curriculum coverage requirements, inadequate professional development in folklore-based pedagogical approaches, and concerns about assessment practices. Some teachers also expressed uncertainty about how best to scaffold learners' progression from literal to evaluative engagement with folklore. Resource constraints, including the absence of school libraries and limited instructional materials, further restricted opportunities for the systematic integration of folklore.

Teacher responses revealed resource-related challenges that constrained effective folklore integration. Teacher C noted the dependence on external sources of knowledge:

> '*Re na le ba bagolo le dingwalwa tšeo di tšweletšego di ka re thušago go kaonafatša tseebo go tša setšo*' [We have elders and publications that have been produced that can help us improve knowledge in cultural matters].

While this response acknowledges the availability of community knowledge holders and published materials, it also reveals a dependency on resources that are not systematically integrated into the formal curriculum. The reliance on elders as primary knowledge holders raises concerns about the sustainability of this approach, particularly in contexts where urbanisation is weakening intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Classroom observations further confirmed considerable variation in teachers' pedagogical approaches to folklore-based instruction. While Teacher D demonstrated confidence in employing higher-order questioning strategies, other teachers relied primarily on comprehension-based activities that remained at lower cognitive levels. Teacher C described an instructional approach centred on procedural compliance:

> '*Barutwana ba bontšha mabokgoni a bona ka mehla ka phapošing gobane dithutwana ka moka di swanetše go dirwa go latelwa mabokgoni*' [Learners show their skills all the time in the classroom because all lessons must be done following skills].

This response suggests an emphasis on procedural compliance rather than critical engagement with folklore, indicating that professional development in dialogic and inquiry-based pedagogical approaches remains a significant need. The absence of structured folklore resources and assessment frameworks aligned with higher-order thinking further compounded these challenges, leaving teachers to develop their own approaches with limited institutional support.

Viewed through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the challenges reported here are not merely individual shortcomings but constraints operating across multiple systemic levels (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2007). The scarcity of published Sepedi folklore collections limited instructional materials, and the absence of assessment frameworks represent macrosystem and exosystem conditions that no individual teacher can resolve. Although reliance on elders and community knowledge holders constitutes a valuable resource, it also exposes a fragile mesosystem connection that urbanisation and changing family structures are gradually eroding. The variation in teachers' pedagogical confidence – from Teacher D's confident use of higher-order questioning to Teacher C's compliance-oriented approach – suggests that dialogic and inquiry-based teaching expertise remains unevenly developed and insufficiently supported. These findings echo barriers documented across African educational contexts (Gustafsson & Taylor 2022; Wiysahnyuy & Valentine 2023) and suggest that the pedagogical potential of folklore cannot be realised through individual teacher initiative alone but requires coordinated policy, curriculum, and professional development support.

Theme 5: Bridging home and school literacy practices

The findings revealed that folklore-based pedagogy facilitated meaningful connections between learners' home literacy practices and formal schooling. Teachers reported that learners with prior exposure to oral storytelling in their families and communities demonstrated stronger narrative competence and interpretive skills. Folklore-based instruction validated learners' cultural knowledge as a legitimate educational resource, thereby improving their confidence

and engagement. However, teachers also observed that urbanisation and changing family structures had reduced some learners' exposure to traditional storytelling practices, suggesting that school-based folklore instruction serves both pedagogical and cultural preservation functions.

Teacher interviews confirmed that folklore-based instruction facilitated connections between home cultural practices and formal schooling, particularly through creative engagement. Teacher B described how learners bridged oral and literate traditions:

> '*Ka nako ya bomolomo le ka nako ya go ngwala le go hlagiša barutwana ba ka ngwala mošomo wa go itlhamela nonwane, goba ba dira papadi ka tšona dinonwane gomme bapala sefaleng*' [During oral time and during writing and presenting, learners can write creative folktales or make plays from folktales and perform on stage].

This response illustrates how folklore-based pedagogy enabled learners to draw on home-based oral traditions and transform them into multiple school-based literacy practices, including creative writing and dramatic performance. Teacher B further noted that learners demonstrated comprehension:

> '*… ge ba kgona go bolela gore kanegelo e mabapi le eng ... ebile ba kgona go e nyalantšha le tše dingwe tša setšo*' […when they can tell what the story is about ... and can connect it with other cultural things].

This indicates that folklore served as a bridge through which learners made intertextual connections between school-based narratives and their broader cultural knowledge.

Teacher A observed that:

> '*… barutwana ba ka hlama dikanegelo tša bona mabapi le setšo*' […learners can create their own stories about culture].

Teacher C similarly noted that:

> '*… yo mongwe le yo mongwe o itlhamela kanegelo ya gagwe yeo e amanago le tša setšo*' […each one creates their own story that relates to cultural matters].

Teacher D also reported that learners demonstrated creativity:

> '*… ge ba ngwala ditaodišokanegelo*' […when they write narrative essays].

Collectively, these responses indicate that folklore-based instruction encouraged learners to position their cultural knowledge as a legitimate resource for academic production, thereby validating home literacy practices within formal educational settings. The creative transformation of cultural narratives into written texts and dramatic performances represents a productive integration of informal and formal literacy practices that affirms learners' cultural identities while developing school-valued competencies.

This theme most clearly demonstrates the mesosystem coherence predicted by Bronfenbrenner's theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2007). When school instruction draws on the oral traditions of the home, the boundary between informal and formal learning becomes a bridge rather than a barrier. The creative transformation of folktales into written narratives and dramatic performances, reported by all four teachers, exemplifies culturally responsive pedagogy in action by positioning learners' cultural knowledge as a legitimate foundation for academic production rather than a private competence left at the school gate (Gay 2018; Ladson-Billings 2021). At the same time, teachers' observations that fewer learners now enter school with strong oral storytelling backgrounds indicate that school-based folklore instruction increasingly serves a cultural preservation function alongside its pedagogical role, reinforcing the argument for its systematic rather than incidental inclusion in the curriculum.

Synthesis of key findings

This study investigated the role of Sepedi folklore as a culturally responsive pedagogical resource for developing literacy skills and critical thinking among Grade 7 learners. The findings demonstrate that folklore-based instruction enhances vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and critical thinking while validating learners' cultural identities and strengthening connections between home and school literacy practices. Simultaneously, the study identified important implementation challenges related to resource availability, professional development, and the alignment of assessment practices.

Strengths and limitations

The strengths of this study include methodological triangulation through multiple data sources, contextual authenticity arising from research conducted in authentic classroom environments, and its focus on an under-researched indigenous language context. The qualitative design enabled a rich exploration of implementation processes and contextual factors that may have been overlooked in quantitative approaches. However, the study also has several limitations, including the purposive sampling strategy that limits the transferability to other circuits and provinces. In addition, the cross-sectional design precludes an assessment of the sustained impact of folklore-based instruction over time. Future research employing longitudinal designs and larger samples across diverse contexts would strengthen the evidence base.

Implications and recommendations

The findings have important implications for educational policy, teacher education, and curriculum development. First, professional development programmes should equip teachers with pedagogical strategies for integrating folklore into literacy instruction, including dialogic questioning techniques that scaffold learners' progression towards higher-order thinking. Second, curriculum developers should produce comprehensive Sepedi folklore resources aligned with CAPS requirements, including structured lesson plans and assessment rubrics that address multiple

cognitive levels. Third, schools should establish partnerships with community knowledge holders and cultural organisations to document and preserve oral traditions for educational use. Finally, assessment frameworks should be revised to incorporate culturally responsive assessment methods, including oral presentations, storytelling performances, and narrative-based comprehension tasks that capture higher-order thinking beyond conventional written assessments.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that Sepedi folklore constitutes a pedagogically valuable and culturally responsive resource for addressing South Africa's literacy crisis while fostering critical thinking among primary school learners. Folklore-based instruction enhances vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and evaluative reasoning by activating culturally familiar schemas and facilitating dialogic engagement with morally complex narratives. The integration of indigenous oral traditions into formal schooling bridges the divide between home and school literacy practices, validating learners' cultural identities while developing academically valued cognitive competencies. However, realising the full pedagogical potential of folklore requires systemic support through professional development, the provision of appropriate resources, curriculum alignment, and assessment reform. These findings contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into formal education as a means of advancing both educational excellence and decolonial transformation in South African primary schools.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Ablonia D. Maledu: Supervision; Writing – review & editing. Nkame E. Ngobeni: Conceptualisation; Data curation; Writing – original draft; 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 authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its references.

Disclaimer

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