



## Effectiveness of Sesotho folktales on children's language skills development at a pre-school in the Maseru district, Lesotho: Parents' and teachers' perceptions

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**Abstract** – Folktale is an indigenous pedagogical tool that offers invaluable moral lessons and enhances children's cognitive and language skills. Some countries are considering incorporating cultural activities into the school curriculum to preserve culture and benefit from learning through local cultural resources. This study explored parents' and pre-school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of Sesotho folktales in developing children's language skills in Lesotho. It used a qualitative approach, employing a case study design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and pre-school teachers at a pre-school in the Maseru district, Lesotho. The data were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that both parents and teachers highlighted that folktales could positively influence the children's language skills development. The findings revealed further that the art of folktale narration is disappearing among the Basotho community, as parents and teachers indicated that they do not narrate folktales to their children and learners, respectively. This study concludes that there is a need to maintain the narration and teaching of folktales in pre-schools and within the Basotho community, given their significant role in the development of children's language skills and education.

**Keywords:** Early childhood care and development, Folktales, Language skills development, Parents' perceptions, Teachers' perceptions

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### I. INTRODUCTION

RECENT research has shown that folktales play a pivotal role in children's development (Haiyu, 2018; Hazra, 2018; Rahman et al., 2022; Octaloca et al., 2023; Ramar, 2024). A folktale is a prose narrative that includes elements of traditional stories preserved through human memory and transmitted orally or in writing from one generation to another (Handoo, 1994). The term 'folktale' generally refers to all kinds of oral traditional narratives and is part of folklore. Folklore emerged in the 19th century (Hazra, 2018) as a form of entertainment for both children and adults. When narrating a folktale, a Basotho storyteller begins with 'Ba re ne re', and the listeners reply by saying 'Qoi' (Guma, 1993) to show that they are listening attentively to the narrator. The folktale narrator also has an interesting way of putting the tale to an end.

The early childhood care and development policy in Lesotho is designed for children aged 2 to 5 years (Ministry of Education and Training, 2013). According to the Lesotho Early Childhood Care and Development (LECCD) curriculum guide, the LECCD curriculum is structured around six themes for children aged 5 years: approaches to learning, health and well-being, investigations and discovery, language and communication, social relations and spirituality, beliefs and morality (Ministry of Education and Training, 2021). The focus of this study is on theme four, language and communication. Under this curriculum theme, children are expected to learn listening skills, interpersonal, and non-verbal communication. The learning concepts under the language and communication theme are "cultural connections, oral storytelling, literacy, personal identity and self-expression" (Ministry of Education and Training, 2021: 163). While the

researcher acknowledges the importance of all these learning concepts, oral storytelling is closely linked to the study's objective.

Interestingly, the curriculum guide clearly states that teachers should engage learners in storytelling and retell stories to children often, as these learning activities create a play-based atmosphere. Latif (2014) asserts that storytelling can be an engaging learning approach because it is accessible and offers benefits beyond mere entertainment for children, also enhancing their imagination. The LECCD curriculum guide also encourages teachers and schools to "invite families and community members to share culturally relevant oral stories, folklores and traditions with the children" (Ministry of Education and Training, 2021, p. 169). During their learning programmes, children are also expected to narrate stories, whether imaginary or actual. It is evident that the government of Lesotho, through the Ministry of Education and Training, wishes to use indigenous knowledge and oral traditional literature to help children learn through culturally relevant activities such as folklore narrations and other traditional practices. Some African countries, such as Cameroon, use pedagogical tools like riddles, folktales, and traditional games to foster creativity, problem-solving, and language skills in children (Wiysahnyuy & Ngalm, 2023).

#### Effectiveness of folktales on children's language skills

The literature indicates that many African families narrated folktales to their children in the past to instill moral values and impart cultural knowledge (Masowa, 2024). Hazra (2018) argues that folktales remain relevant due to their immense significance in the development of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Rahayu (2013) affirms that narrating stories to young children offers benefits such as increasing children's language literacy, sharpening their imagination, and improving their morals and concentration skills. Folktales have been linked to various benefits in language teaching, including improving vocabulary, critical thinking, and comprehension

skills (Mantra & Kumara, 2018). May (2023) believes that introducing folktales to children can help them gain language literacy by enjoying the humorous details of these oral narratives. In line with the above discussion, it is evident that the use of folktales may help improve children's language skills.

Sarwar (2023) explored the effect of folktales on children's development in the early years and found that folktales play a crucial role in fostering children's emotional and language development. Similarly, a study carried out by Nhung (2016) revealed that oral traditional literature, including folk stories, has been considered to promote both literacy (reading and writing) and oral (listening and speaking) skills. Maluleke et al. (2023) in Botswana investigated teachers' perceptions of the use of folktales and oral tradition in English as a Foreign Language classrooms. Their study found that teachers taught folktales as part of the curriculum; however, they complained that learners found them difficult because they were old-fashioned. Another study, conducted by Manjula and Segni (2016), found that folk stories foster creativity and comprehension skills, which are beneficial not only for language development but also for daily life experiences. Their study further found that folktales enhance classroom interaction and student engagement with teachers and peers. By participating in folktales by listening or narrating, students can improve their reading comprehension skills (Bayly, 2007). Scientia et al. (2018) also conducted a study, finding that folktales serve as meaningful linguistic and cultural resources that enhance children's vocabulary and reading skills. Another study conducted in Cameroon by Wiysahnyuy and Ngalim (2023) found that most teachers and parents believed there were many benefits to integrating folklore into schools as a traditional pedagogical tool. In essence, research from other countries shows that, in addition to inculcating cultural and moral values, folktales are linked to language and literacy development and promote children's language skills. However, research on teachers' and parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of folktales in developing language skills in Lesotho has received little attention.

## II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

As society moves towards a world of technology in the modern age, indigenous pedagogy, such as folktales and storytelling, is being sidelined (Dorji, 2010; Costello, 2021). Abah et al. (2018) noted that traditional folktales are slowly becoming extinct in some African countries due to the increasing penetration of technology. In many homes, caregivers, guardians, and parents use mobile phones, television games, and other technology-based entertainment to distract children before bedtime or at any time of day (Sawar, 2023). These practices are contrary to recommendations from the World Health Organisation (WHO). WHO encourages children under 5 years to spend minimal time watching television or using a mobile phone screen, and to focus more on quality sedentary activities, such as reading, storytelling, and physical activities. While it is understood that technological advancement is beneficial for education and that the curriculum must respond to the demands of the times, the reactions that push out culturally relevant pedagogy must be eschewed. Storytelling in the form of folktales is one of the indigenous pedagogic tools that can be beneficial in several ways, including the development of children's language skills. Other African countries, such as Cameroon, still value folktales, and teachers continue to use them in their teaching practices (Wiysahnyuy & Ngalim, 2023). However, there is evidence that in some countries, folktales are slowly facing extinction (Abah et al., 2018). Monaka et al. (2019) argue that folktales remain relevant and contribute significantly to the education and entertainment of young people, among others. Based on the above discussion, this study aimed to determine whether the culture of narrating folktales exists in early childhood centres and in modern households. It also sought to explore teachers' and parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of folktales on children's language skills development.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand early language skills development and the social value of folktales, this study draws on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which holds that language learning is 'inherently socially situated' (Vygotsky, 1978). The key principle of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is that human learning and development are primarily a social process. Regarding language learning, sociocultural theory emphasises that language is acquired from the surrounding environment through informal interactions. The two fundamental tenets of the sociocultural theory that guide this study are social interaction and the more knowledgeable other (MKO). Vygotsky believes that social interaction with parents, teachers, and peers plays an important role in human development and cognition. The principle of the more knowledgeable other refers to someone with greater knowledge than the learner. This concept is relevant to this study because it helps me understand the roles of parents, teachers, and the community as the more knowledgeable others in supporting children's development. Sociocultural theory views knowledge as a culturally and socially mediated process involving interaction between the more knowledgeable other and the less experienced (Vygotsky, 1978). When children are in the zone of proximal development, the use of folktales by parents and teachers provides scaffolding for learners, as language is introduced through stories that are central to everyday life experiences and interactions. In this study, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides an appropriate lens for understanding how pre-primary children construct knowledge through folktales.

## IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The overarching aim of this study is to explore teachers' and parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of folktales in developing children's language skills at a pre-school in the Maseru district.

## V. METHODS

### Research approach

This study used a qualitative approach to understand the perceptions of the pre-primary teachers and parents of the effectiveness of folklore on children's language skills development. Qualitative research is a method used to examine and understand the meanings individuals or groups attach to a social or human challenge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). When carrying out a qualitative study, most researchers focus on "...how individuals describe their own experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). The qualitative approach has been applied to this study because the researcher intended to interpret how pre-school teachers and parents at the selected pre-school describe their experiences and construct meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of the effectiveness of folktales on children's language skills development. Furthermore, the qualitative design enabled participants to express their experiences in their own words, providing the researchers with an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Lincoln & Guba, 2004).

### Research design

The research design used for this study is an exploratory case study. Case studies are "a design of inquiry in many fields in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, often a programme, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 51). Yin (2018) defines a case study as an inquiry into a phenomenon in its real-world context, using multiple, flexible methods such as interviews, observations, and audiovisual materials. This study chose the exploratory case study design to provide an understanding of the pre-school teachers' and parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of folktales on children's language skills development at the selected pre-school. Furthermore, the exploratory case study was appropriate because the aim was to develop an in-depth understanding of the case within its context rather than broader generalisations (Yin,

2018).

### Research site

This study was conducted at a private pre-school in the urban area of Maseru district in Lesotho. Although it is a privately owned pre-school, it follows the LECCD curriculum guide. The medium of instruction at this pre-school is English, contrary to the LECCD curriculum guide and the Lesotho education language policy. This school was chosen because it is one of the larger pre-schools in Maseru and accommodates children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and districts of Lesotho. The researcher believed that the school had potential participants who would participate in the data collection. Furthermore, the choice of school was influenced by its proximity to the researcher's residence at the time the study was carried out.

### Participants

The sample comprised five pre-primary teachers and five parents of learners in the reception class (five-year-old children). The selected teachers were all female and were purposively chosen (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) from among other pre-primary teachers because they taught reception classes. Snowball sampling was used to select five parents of children attending this participating school. This strategy was used to recruit parents because it was hard to access them (McCombes, 2023). One of the teachers who participated in the study helped recruit the parents of learners in the reception classes. The selected parents were a combination of both working and non-working classes. Of the five parents, three were female while two were male.

### Data collection instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit data from both teachers and parents. The prepared questions for the participants (parents and teachers) of this study were whether teachers used folktales in their teaching and whether parents narrated folktales to their children at home. Regardless of whether the teachers and parents narrated folktales to children, the next question focused on teachers' and parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of folktales on children's language skill development. The interviews were conducted in English and Sesotho, at the individual's choice, and all lasted less than 30 minutes. Sesotho versions were translated into English by the author.

### Data analysis

The data were analysed thematically following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The first step was to transcribe the audio recordings into written texts. I then translated all Sesotho versions into English. After reading the transcripts, I generated initial codes and then sorted them into categories (Flick, 2014) based on their similarities. From the categories emerged the study's themes. The themes were then grouped according to the study's research questions. I then interpreted my findings and compared them with the existing literature to assess consistency and identify any differences. Trustworthiness is pivotal in qualitative research because it is a method the researcher uses to demonstrate that a study's results are valid (Maree, 2016). In this study, trustworthiness was maintained by following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. The researcher also involved the participants in checking and validating the interpretations of their responses.

### Ethical considerations

Permission to carry out the study at the school was obtained from the Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training and the pre-school principal. All interviews were held according to the participants' schedules and completed in one week. Before the interviews began, participants were given information sheets about the research. After they had read the information sheets on the study's aim, they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The participants were further informed of their consent and voluntary participation. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. All data were kept safely by the researcher. Permission to publish the study was obtained from the participants.

## VI. RESULTS

### Biographic results

Table 1: Biographic results of the teachers

| Participants  | Gender | Highest Qualifications          | Teaching Experience | First Language |
|---------------|--------|---------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Participant 1 | Female | Diploma in PE <sup>3</sup>      | 7 years             | Sesotho        |
| Participant 2 | Female | Diploma in ECE <sup>1</sup>     | 3 years             | Sesotho        |
| Participant 3 | Female | Form 5 (SEC <sup>2</sup> )      | 10 years            | Sesotho        |
| Participant 4 | Female | Certificate in ECE <sup>1</sup> | 5 years             | Sesotho        |
| Participant 5 | Female | Diploma in ECE <sup>1</sup>     | 2 years             | Sesotho        |

<sup>1</sup>ECE: Early Childhood Education

<sup>2</sup>SEC: Secondary Education Certificate

<sup>3</sup>PE: Primary Education

Table 2: Biographic results of parents

| Participants   | Gender | Employment    | Location     | First Language |
|----------------|--------|---------------|--------------|----------------|
| Participant 6  | Male   | Self employed | Maseru rural | Sesotho        |
| Participant 7  | Female | Non employed  | Maseru urban | Sesotho        |
| Participant 8  | Female | Employed      | Maseru urban | Sesotho        |
| Participant 9  | Male   | Employed      | Maseru urban | Sesotho        |
| Participant 10 | Female | Non employed  | Maseru rural | Sesotho        |

### Thematic results

#### Teachers' use of folktales in their teaching practices

All five teachers who participated in this study reported never integrating folktales into their teaching practices. The data revealed that teachers in this pre-school did not at all narrate folktales to children and did not invite learners to narrate the tales to other children. One teacher said,

"...ha re etse lits'omo hohang hang sekolong sena (we do not narrate folktales at all at this school)" (Participant 3).

Another teacher mentioned that she did not narrate folktales and said she did not believe it was something she would do in her class, since it was not the norm at their school. The teachers stated that they do not use folktales because they are not part of the school's activities, and that this would delay learners' English language acquisition. This is how the teacher put it,

"(kannete 'm'e ha ntse re ruta lits'omo bana batla lieha ho ithuta Sekhooa) honestly, madam, when we teach folktales, children will be delayed in acquiring the English language" (Participant 1).

Another teacher said,

"(nna hake li tsebe le ho li tseba lits'omo, joale ha nkebe ke nahane le ho li etsa kannete) I personally do not even know folktales, so I never even think of narrating them" (Participant 5).

#### Parents' use of folktales

The data shows that not all parents narrate folktales to their children for various reasons. The reasons the parents gave were,

"Modern life has really made us forget our culture. When I was young, my mother narrated folktales to my brother and me in the evening before we went to bed. We enjoyed them so much, but right now, I do not even remember a single folktale; technology has taken over. Again, the way my children are so busy with mobile phone games and watching television cartoons, I doubt they will pay attention to me when I narrate the tales to them" (Participant 8).

Another parent reported that she does not narrate folktales to her child because she does not know any, as no one narrated them to her when she was growing up. She reported that when she was in high school, she remembers being taught folktales, but she could not even recall one of them because she never took them seriously.

One parent said,

"(ha ke etsetse ngoanaka lits'omo hohang hobane ha a tsoa sekolong o bapala hona hoo, ha a khathala o shebella tv ebe o se a khaleha a ntse a e shebelletse joalo) I do not narrate folktales to my child because when she gets home, she plays a lot, and when she gets tired from playing, she watches cartoons, and she eventually sleeps while watching television. (Hape le nna ka ha kea be ke tsoa mosebetsing ke ee utloi ke khathetse hoo ke senang le matla a ho bua) again, when I am from work, I feel so tired that I do not even have the energy to talk" (Participant 9).

#### Effect of folktales on children's language skills development

##### Teachers' perceptions

Although they did not integrate them into their teaching, the teachers

reported that folktales enhance language skills such as listening and speaking. However, they feared that folktales would only help their learners develop their mother tongue (Sesotho) and not their second language (English). This is how one teacher put it,

*“(bana bana ba tseba Sesotho hobane ke sona se ba se buang hae, joale rona sekolong mona re batla ba ithute Sekhooa) these children know Sesotho because it is the language of communication in their homes and in their communities, so we want them to learn English language while they are here at school”* (Participant 2).

Another teacher also shared the same sentiments,

*“We want our children to learn the English language here at school because they need it more than Sesotho, so folktales will only help them with enriching their Sesotho vocabulary and not English. Our concern is the English language”* (Participant 4).

*Parents’ perceptions*

Three parents noted that they were not aware of any benefits of folktale exposure on children’s language skills development. They indicated that most of the folktales focused on culture and entertainment. One parent said,

*“(lits’omo mosebetsi oa tsona ke ho koizetsa bana) the function of folktales is to help send children to sleep”* (Participant 10).

The other two parents said that they believed that folktales promoted children’s language skills development, although they could not explain clearly how effective they were. One male parent noted that,

*“(lits’omo li ruta bana puo e manoni ea Sesotho) folktales teach children rich Sesotho vocabulary”* (Participant 6).

## VII. DISCUSSION

The results show that neither pre-primary teachers nor parents narrate folktales to children. The literature reviewed in this study has proven that folktales play a pivotal role in children’s language skills development. The Lesotho Early Childhood Care and Development curriculum guide states that teachers should narrate stories like folktales to children who are in the reception classes (children who are five years old) and “invite families and community members in sharing culturally relevant oral stories, folklores and traditions with children” (Ministry of Education and Training, 2021, p. 169). According to this study’s findings, the teachers at the participating pre-school do the opposite of what the curriculum guide recommends. As suggested by the curriculum guide, inviting families and community members who are knowledgeable about narrating folktales to children creates a conducive atmosphere for children’s learning and development. Among the various stakeholders responsible for providing access to quality early childhood programs are the community, pre-schools, teachers, and families. Teachers in pre-schools are obligated to implement the curriculum by focusing on the themes and learning concepts outlined in the curriculum guide. This notion of inviting parents and the community to narrate stories to children is supported by Vygotsky’s (1978) key principle of sociocultural theory, which views human learning and development as a social process. In other words, caregivers, parents, peers, teachers, and the culture at large are responsible for human development, as they are the more knowledgeable others.

The findings of this study, which show that teachers and parents did not narrate folktales to children, contrast with those of a study conducted in Cameroon by Wiisahnyuy and Ngalim (2023). Their study discovered that kindergarten teachers and parents narrated folktales to their children. The findings of this study also differ from those of a study conducted in Botswana by Maluleke et al. (2023), which found that teachers incorporated folktales into their teaching programmes. This indicates that other African countries are retaining folktales and using them as indigenous pedagogical tools.

The findings also suggest that teachers rarely use their mother tongue in their teaching practices, as they stated they were more concerned with teaching children English than Sesotho. This practice is contrary to the Lesotho Curriculum Assessment Policy, which clearly states that

children should be taught in their mother tongue up to Grade 3, the primary level (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009). This lack of mother tongue instruction in the early years can be detrimental, as it denies children their linguistic rights to use their mother tongue in learning. Researchers have criticised the use of target-language instruction over mother-tongue instruction, especially in settings where teachers and learners share the same mother tongue (Brown, 2000; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). The teachers’ belief that using folktales will delay the process of learning English as a second language is contrary to recent research, which shows that integrating the mother tongue into second-language learning can be beneficial (Sibanda, 2019; Tran, 2024). This study, therefore, suggests that teachers in this school need to find suitable approaches to using folktales (Lits’omo) in their programmes, as recommended by the Lesotho Early Childhood Care and Development curriculum guide.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of the effectiveness of folktales in developing children’s language skills at a pre-school in Maseru. It also aimed to explore whether the culture of narrating folktales among Basotho pre-primary teachers and parents exists. The results show that both teachers and parents (as LECCD stakeholders supporting children) did not narrate folktales to children and had limited knowledge of the effect of folktales on children’s language development. Due to the immense significance of the role of folktales in children’s language learning and language skills development, this study concludes that all the pre-primary teachers, parents, and all the relevant stakeholders should collaborate in ensuring that folktales, as one of the culturally relevant learning tools, are used and narrated in schools and at children’s homes. As language skills move from listening to speaking and from reading to writing, folktales play a crucial role in developing children’s language skills and enhancing their cross-cultural awareness.

This study recommends that, in line with the Lesotho Early Childhood Care and Development curriculum guide 2021, pre-schools should incorporate traditional storytelling, specifically folktales (Lits’omo), into their curricula or programmes. It recommends an interaction through folktales narration between parents/guardians/caregivers and children, as the results of this study indicate that parents do not narrate tales to their children, the recommendation is that parents, guardians or caregivers, as part of the larger community, should find suitable time to narrate folktales to children because they are responsible for providing access to quality early childhood programmes. Part of the time children spend on their mobile phones can be used by parents to narrate folktales, thereby increasing interaction between children and family members. Teachers should create an environment for storytelling. This study recommends that pre-primary teachers create an environment that allows children to create and share culturally relevant oral stories, such as folktales. Teachers should also invite community members and families who are knowledgeable in oral traditional literature to share oral traditional stories with children so that children can learn from the more knowledgeable others, as suggested by the psychologist, Vygotsky.

Regular monitoring is recommended, as the findings show that teachers did not narrate folktales to children at the participating school. It is suggested that the Ministry of Education and Training regularly monitor pre-schools to ensure that all themes and learning concepts in the LECCD curriculum guide are incorporated into the LECCD programmes. This study also recommends in-service and professional training on the learning-through-play approach to increase teachers’ knowledge and equip them with skills to fulfill the goals of the national LECCD curriculum and the needs of children in general.

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## X. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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