

# INDIGENOUS PROVERBS AS PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION: EDUCATIONAL USES OF XITSONGA PROVERBS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HOME LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

**Tinyiko Chauke**

Department of Language Education, School of Education, University of Limpopo  
Limpopo Province, South Africa  
E-mail: [tinyiko.chauke@ul.ac.za](mailto:tinyiko.chauke@ul.ac.za)

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## Abstract

This study examined how Xitsonga proverbs can cultivate conflict resolution skills in the South African Home Language classroom. It addressed rising interpersonal conflicts among learners and the limited use of indigenous oral traditions in classrooms. The study noted that emphasis on academic performance reduced opportunities for developing learners' social and emotional competencies. Grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, the study emphasized integrating culturally familiar content to enhance engagement, moral development, and social cohesion. A qualitative design was employed, using classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and learner artefact analysis. The study was conducted in selected Further Education and Training (FET) Phase secondary schools offering Xitsonga Home Language and involved Xitsonga Home Language teachers and learners. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience relevant to the study. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings. Learners improved in interpreting figurative meanings of proverbs and applying them to peer conflict resolution. Teachers observed enhanced empathy, restorative dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, moral reasoning, respect, and participation when proverbs were integrated into teaching. The study concluded that Xitsonga proverbs are effective pedagogical tools for promoting conflict resolution and affirming cultural identity. Findings highlight the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge into formal education to support both academic achievement and social development. This study contributes to discourse on culturally relevant pedagogy by demonstrating how indigenous oral traditions can foster conflict resolution and social cohesion in classrooms.

**Keywords:** *conflict resolution skills; home language classroom; indigenous knowledge systems; learner behaviour; moral education; xitsonga proverbs.*

## 1. Introduction

FET school environments face increasing challenges related to learner behaviour, interpersonal conflict, and weakened social cohesion. Adolescence is characterised by identity formation, emotional intensity, and heightened peer influence, often contributing to

relational tensions in schools. Without structured support, these challenges undermine academic performance and learner well-being (Elias et al., 1997; Zins et al., 2004). More recent scholarship reinforces this concern, emphasising the importance of integrating social and emotional learning into education. Elias et al. (2015) argue that social and emotional learning is essential for developing responsible, caring, and engaged learners, while Durlak et al. (2011) found that structured social-emotional programmes significantly improve learners' behaviour and academic outcomes. These insights highlight the need to integrate social, emotional, and moral development into classroom practice. Conflict resolution is recognised as a critical life skill that requires deliberate pedagogical integration.

Moral reasoning plays a central role in shaping learners' behaviour and decision-making, involving cognitive and emotional processes through which individuals interpret ethical situations (Tangney & Dearing, 2004). Developmental theorists such as Piaget (1952) and Kohlberg (1969) emphasise that moral reasoning evolves through stages, progressing from rule-based thinking to principled judgement. Extending this perspective, Narvaez (2014) argues that moral development is socially situated and requires guided participation in ethical practices, underscoring the importance of creating classroom environments that foster reflection, empathy, and responsible decision-making.

South African Home Language classrooms in the FET Phase provide a strategic space for developing these competencies. The Language in Education Policy recognises the role of home language in supporting cognitive development, identity formation, and meaningful participation (Department of Education, 1997). Heugh (2015) further argues that sustained use of home language enhances both comprehension and academic achievement. In African contexts, proverbs have historically functioned as tools for moral education and conflict resolution (Finnegan, 2012; Mbiti, 1990). Xitsonga proverbs, rooted in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), promote values such as respect, cooperation, and social harmony (Chilisa, 2012; Dei, 2014). Supporting this view, Ramose (1999) emphasises that African ethical systems are grounded in Ubuntu, which foregrounds communal well-being and relational responsibility. Similarly, Metz (2011) explains that Ubuntu-based ethics prioritise harmonious relationships and moral interdependence.

Despite their pedagogical value, proverbs remain underutilised in FET classrooms, often reduced to linguistic analysis rather than moral instruction. Teaching practices frequently prioritise examination performance, limiting the use of oral traditions as tools for social and moral development (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). This observation aligns with Dryden-Peterson (2016), who notes that curriculum pressures often marginalise culturally relevant pedagogies in favour of standardised assessment demands. Although CAPS encourages oral literature to promote critical thinking and values education (Department of Basic Education, 2011), a gap persists between policy and practice. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, this study views language as a mediating tool for developing higher-order thinking. Proverb-based learning supports moral reasoning, communication, and conflict resolution. This perspective is reinforced by Ladson-Billings (1995), who argues that culturally relevant pedagogy enhances learner engagement by integrating learners' cultural knowledge into instruction. Likewise, Gay (2018) maintains that culturally responsive teaching uses learners' cultural knowledge and experiences to make learning more meaningful and effective.

Although previous studies have explored Indigenous oral traditions, moral education, and culturally relevant pedagogy within African educational contexts, limited empirical research has specifically examined how Xitsonga proverbs function pedagogically to cultivate

conflict resolution competencies among FET learners in South African Home Language classrooms. Existing studies have largely focused on the linguistic, literary, and cultural significance of proverbs, with limited attention to their practical application in fostering empathy, restorative dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and moral reasoning among learners. Furthermore, much of the available research is conceptual or descriptive in nature, providing insufficient classroom-based evidence on how teachers and learners engage with proverbs as tools for conflict resolution within the FET Phase. This methodological limitation highlights the need for qualitative, context-specific investigations that examine the lived experiences of teachers and learners in the use of Xitsonga proverbs for social and moral development.

Furthermore, language teaching in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase frequently remains examination-oriented and text-centred, thereby constraining the pedagogical potential of oral traditions as valuable educational resources (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). Given that teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experiences significantly influence classroom practices, understanding their perceptions is essential for the successful implementation of curriculum innovations. Borg (2011) emphasizes that teacher cognition plays a central role in shaping pedagogical decisions and instructional practices, highlighting the need to explore teachers' perspectives on the integration of Xitsonga proverbs into teaching and learning.

This study is motivated by the need to address learner conflict through culturally responsive and policy-aligned pedagogical approaches. It argues that the integration of Xitsonga proverbs into classroom instruction can enhance learners' conflict resolution abilities, strengthen moral reasoning, and promote social cohesion. By examining the educational value of proverbs, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into formal education and supports broader initiatives aimed at decolonising education in South Africa (Chilisa, 2012; Dei, 2014). Situated within contemporary discussions of social-emotional learning, moral development, and culturally relevant pedagogy, the study highlights the potential of Xitsonga proverbs as culturally grounded resources for fostering constructive conflict resolution among learners.

Against this backdrop, the study is guided by four interrelated questions: How are Xitsonga proverbs pedagogically integrated into South African Home Language classrooms? In what ways do they contribute to the development of learners' conflict resolution skills? What challenges influence the implementation of proverb-based pedagogy in South African Home Language classrooms? And how do teachers perceive and mediate the use of Xitsonga proverbs to promote conflict resolution, moral reasoning, and social cohesion among Further Education and Training (FET) learners?

To address these questions, the study pursues four corresponding objectives. First, it seeks to examine how Xitsonga proverbs are pedagogically integrated into South African Home Language classrooms. Second, it aims to investigate the contribution of Xitsonga proverbs to the development of learners' conflict resolution skills. Third, it endeavours to identify the challenges affecting the implementation of proverb-based pedagogy within the classroom context. Finally, it explores teachers' perceptions of, and roles in facilitating, the use of Xitsonga proverbs to foster conflict resolution, moral reasoning, and social cohesion among FET learners. Through these objectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educational value of Xitsonga proverbs and their potential contribution to culturally responsive teaching and learning in South Africa.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Educational Value**

Scholars consistently affirm that integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into formal schooling enhances academic engagement, cultural identity, and moral development. IKS conceptualises knowledge as communal, relational, and embedded within everyday social practices (Chilisa, 2012; Dei, 2014). Within African contexts, these knowledge systems provide culturally grounded frameworks that shape identity, behaviour, and social responsibility. Odora Hoppers (2002) argues that Indigenous knowledge should be recognised as a system of knowledge, while more recent scholarship emphasises its significance for curriculum transformation, epistemic justice, and decolonised education (Le Grange, 2016; Shizha & Abdi, 2020). Khupe and Keane (2017) further contend that integrating IKS promotes contextually relevant and meaningful learning experiences.

While scholars generally agree on the educational value of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, debates persist regarding the extent to which Indigenous knowledge should be integrated into formal curricula. Some researchers advocate full epistemic inclusion as a means of achieving decolonial transformation (Shizha & Abdi, 2020; Chilisa, 2020), whereas others caution that institutional incorporation may unintentionally appropriate or dilute Indigenous knowledge systems when removed from their cultural contexts (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). This tension highlights an unresolved question concerning how schools can authentically integrate Indigenous knowledge while preserving its cultural integrity and community ownership. Recent scholarship further demonstrates that Indigenous pedagogies contribute not only to cultural affirmation but also to learner wellbeing, resilience, and social-emotional development (McKinley & Smith, 2022; Battiste, 2023). These findings position Indigenous Knowledge Systems as essential resources for addressing contemporary educational challenges beyond academic achievement alone.

### **2.2 Proverbs as Pedagogical Tools in African Oral Traditions**

In African contexts, proverbs have historically functioned as tools for moral education and conflict resolution. As a central component of oral literature, proverbs serve as repositories of communal ethics, social norms, and collective memory. They function not merely as artistic expressions but as pedagogical tools that transmit values through reflective dialogue (Finnegan, 2012). Mbiti (1990) explains that African societies are deeply communal and that moral teachings are embedded within everyday language practices. Proverbs encapsulate moral philosophies that regulate behaviour, encourage social responsibility, and promote harmonious relationships. Supporting this perspective, Yankah (1989) describes proverbs as “the palm oil with which words are eaten,” highlighting their role in guiding social interaction and decision-making.

Within the Xitsonga context, proverbs promote empathy, cooperation, respect, and moral reasoning, all of which are essential components of conflict resolution. Recent studies further indicate that oral traditions enhance critical thinking, ethical reflection, and learner engagement (Maphalala, 2021; Mokgoroane, 2022).

However, scholars differ regarding the contemporary relevance of oral traditions in modern schooling. While some argue that proverbs remain powerful pedagogical tools for developing ethical reasoning and social cohesion (Maphalala, 2021), others suggest that examination-oriented curricula and increasing digital influences have reduced learners’ engagement with traditional forms of knowledge (Meyiwa & Ndlovu, 2022). This debate

raises important questions regarding how oral traditions can be adapted to contemporary educational contexts without losing their cultural significance.

Internationally, similar findings have emerged from Indigenous educational contexts. Māori educators in New Zealand employ *whakataukī* (traditional proverbs) to promote cultural identity, collective responsibility, and restorative relationships within schools (Macfarlane et al., 2021). Native American storytelling traditions similarly function as pedagogical resources for moral education, conflict mediation, and community-based learning (Brayboy et al., 2020). In Aboriginal Australian education, storytelling and oral traditions have been used to strengthen learner engagement, cultural continuity, and social-emotional wellbeing (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2021). These international examples demonstrate that Indigenous oral traditions remain globally relevant as culturally responsive pedagogical tools.

### **2.3 Policy Frameworks Supporting Indigenous Knowledge Integration**

South Africa's educational policy framework recognises the educational value of indigenous languages and oral traditions. The Language-in-Education Policy advocates additive multilingualism and promotes home language use as a foundation for cognitive development and identity formation (Department of Education, 1997). Similarly, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) encourage oral literature to promote critical thinking, values education, and holistic learner development (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Collectively, these policies position Indigenous Knowledge Systems as an important component of curriculum transformation and social inclusion. However, a gap persists between policy and practice. Heugh (2015) notes that although language policies support multilingualism, implementation remains inconsistent across schools.

Recent studies continue to identify persistent implementation challenges despite progressive policy frameworks. Research on African language education indicates that curriculum intentions frequently exceed classroom realities due to resource shortages, inadequate teacher preparation, and assessment pressures (Maseko & Mncube, 2022; Probyn, 2023). Consequently, policy endorsement alone does not guarantee meaningful integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The policy-practice gap remains one of the most significant unresolved issues in Indigenous education research.

### **2.4 Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Learner Development**

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) emphasises the importance of affirming learners' linguistic and cultural identities to enhance engagement, participation, and social responsibility. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that effective teaching should empower learners intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically. Similarly, Gay (2018) maintains that culturally responsive teaching uses learners' cultural knowledge and experiences to make learning more appropriate and effective. These perspectives suggest that culturally grounded pedagogies create meaningful learning experiences while fostering learner confidence and belonging. Recent scholarship further demonstrates that culturally responsive approaches improve learner motivation, participation, and academic success (Hammond, 2015; Paris & Alim, 2017).

More recent research extends these arguments by linking culturally responsive pedagogy to social-emotional learning, restorative education, and learner wellbeing (Hammond, 2021; Khalifa et al., 2023). Scholars increasingly argue that culturally responsive teaching should move beyond academic achievement to include the development of

empathy, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility. Nevertheless, debates remain regarding the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy. Some scholars view CRP as transformative and emancipatory, while others argue that superficial implementation risks reducing culture to symbolic classroom activities rather than meaningful pedagogical practice (Paris & Alim, 2017; Aronson & Laughter, 2020). This tension underscores the importance of examining how culturally relevant approaches are enacted in specific classroom contexts. The use of proverbs aligns closely with these principles because it draws upon learners' cultural experiences to support moral reasoning, communication, and conflict resolution. Consequently, proverb-based learning provides a strategic approach to integrating cultural knowledge with social and emotional development.

## **2.5 Implementation Challenges, Research Gap, and Theoretical Framing**

Despite strong theoretical and policy support, the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in schools remains limited. Teaching in the FET Phase continues to be largely examination-driven, often marginalising Indigenous knowledge forms and oral traditions (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). Evidence suggests that teacher beliefs, professional preparation, and resource availability significantly influence the extent to which culturally responsive practices are implemented. Borg (2011) argues that teacher cognition shapes classroom practice, while Le Grange (2016) identifies limited institutional support and resources as barriers to effective integration. Recent studies similarly indicate that inadequate professional development opportunities constrain the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogies (Maphalala, 2021; Khalifa et al., 2023).

Furthermore, emerging scholarship on restorative justice and social-emotional learning highlights the importance of culturally grounded approaches to conflict resolution (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gregory & Evans, 2021). Although restorative education has gained prominence internationally, limited research has examined how Indigenous oral traditions can serve as pedagogical mechanisms for fostering restorative dialogue, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving within African classrooms.

A significant gap therefore remains in the literature. Although previous studies have examined Indigenous Knowledge Systems, oral traditions, culturally responsive pedagogy, and social-emotional learning separately, limited empirical research has specifically investigated how Xitsonga proverbs function pedagogically to cultivate conflict resolution competencies among FET learners in Home Language classrooms. Existing studies primarily focus on the linguistic, literary, and cultural dimensions of proverbs, with limited classroom-based evidence regarding their role in promoting empathy, restorative dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and moral reasoning. Moreover, few studies have employed qualitative classroom-based approaches that capture the lived experiences of both teachers and learners during proverb-based instruction.

The study is motivated by the need to address learner conflict through culturally grounded, policy-aligned pedagogy. By examining the educational use of Xitsonga proverbs, this study advances the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems into formal schooling and contributes to decolonised education in South Africa. The study is grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Social and Emotional Learning. These complementary frameworks explain how culturally grounded educational resources can foster moral reasoning, communication, conflict resolution, and social cohesion among learners (Durlak et al., 2011; Elias et al., 2015; Narvaez, 2014).

This study further contributes to international discussions on Indigenous pedagogies by demonstrating how African oral traditions can function as culturally responsive tools for conflict resolution, moral development, and social cohesion. In doing so, it connects South African educational experiences with broader global efforts to revitalise Indigenous knowledge within formal education. The literature review therefore situates the study within broader debates on social-emotional learning, moral development, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, culturally relevant pedagogy, restorative education, and decolonial curriculum transformation, highlighting the innovative role of Xitsonga proverbs in promoting conflict resolution within the FET Home Language classroom.

### **3. Research Method**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study adopted a qualitative case study design situated within the interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring socially constructed meanings and experiences in natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maree, 2020). This approach was particularly suitable for examining how Xitsonga proverbs are used pedagogically to develop conflict resolution competencies, as it prioritises context, culture, and lived experience. The interpretivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge emerges through interaction and interpretation (Maree, 2020). Interpretivist inquiry seeks to understand the meanings people ascribe to their experiences (Thanh & Thanh, 2015: 25), making it appropriate for studies grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems and culturally embedded practices. A case study design was employed to facilitate an in-depth and holistic investigation of the phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). This design enabled exploration of classroom practices, teacher decision-making, and learner engagement in relation to proverb-based instruction. Case studies provide rich, contextualised understanding of complex educational phenomena (Rule & John, 2015: 4). The design further aligned with the principles of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, which emphasise context-bound and culturally situated knowledge (Chilisa, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

#### **3.2 Participants and Sampling**

Participants included Xitsonga Home Language teachers and learners from selected secondary schools in the FET Phase (Grades 10–12). The study was conducted in Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa, and involved two (2) secondary schools offering Xitsonga Home Language. A total of six (6) teachers and ten (10) learners participated in the study. The teacher participants consisted of three (3) females and three (3) males with teaching experience of ten (10) years. Learner participants were drawn from Grades 10–12 and ranged in age from 14–17 years. Teachers were selected because they play a central role in curriculum implementation and the integration of oral traditions into classroom practice. Learners were included to explore how proverb-based instruction influences conflict resolution skills, moral reasoning, and classroom behaviour. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience relevant to the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This sampling technique is appropriate in qualitative research because it enables the selection of participants capable of providing insightful and relevant information (Etikan et al., 2016). Schools were selected based on their offering of Xitsonga Home Language, evidence of incorporating oral literature, and willingness to participate. Additional selection criteria included teachers' experience in teaching Xitsonga Home Language and learners'

active participation in classroom activities involving oral literature. The participating schools represented rural and peri-urban contexts, enabling the study to capture diverse educational experiences and perspectives. This sampling strategy ensured depth, relevance, and contextual richness of the data collected.

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods and Instruments**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to ensure depth, credibility, and triangulation. Semi-structured interviews with teachers explored perceptions of proverbs, instructional strategies, and classroom experiences. An interview guide ensured alignment with policy frameworks and research objectives.

Semi-structured interviews are effective because they provide flexibility while ensuring that key issues are explored (Maree, 2020). Kallio et al. (2016) note that this method allows researchers to obtain rich and detailed data while maintaining focus on research objectives.

**A total of six (6) teacher interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 30 minutes.**

Classroom observations were conducted using a structured observation schedule to document teaching strategies, learner engagement, and interaction patterns related to empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Observation captured naturally occurring practices and behaviours within the classroom context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method provided direct insight into how proverbs were utilised in classroom teaching and learning.

**A total of five (5) classroom observation sessions were conducted across the participating schools.**

Document analysis reviewed lesson plans, teaching materials, learner work, and curriculum documents, including the Language-in-Education Policy (Department of Education, 1997) and CAPS (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Document analysis provides contextual and corroborative evidence that complements interview and observation data (Bowen, 2009). The use of multiple data sources strengthened the study through triangulation, thereby enhancing credibility and validity (Carter et al., 2014).

### **3.4 Research Procedure**

This study sought ethical clearance approval from the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee. Since the research was conducted in a school environment, formal permission was requested from the Limpopo Department of Education, in line with the recommendations of Pandey and Pandey (2021). Furthermore, permission was obtained from the principals of the two selected secondary schools in the Vhembe District, Malamulele Central Circuit, where the study was conducted. Ethical principles were adhered to throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from teachers, while assent was obtained from learners together with parental consent where required. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw. Data collection was conducted systematically and chronologically. Semi-structured interviews were conducted first, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. This was followed by non-participant classroom observations focusing on the pedagogical use of proverbs, particularly in addressing learner behaviour and interpersonal conflict. Document



analysis was subsequently undertaken to assess alignment between classroom practices and curriculum policy frameworks. This procedure aligned with qualitative case study protocols recommended by Yin (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2018), ensuring methodological rigor and coherence.

### **3.5 Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, and Researcher Positionality**

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which identifies and interprets patterns within qualitative data. This approach was appropriate for examining relationships between teacher perspectives, classroom practices, and learner outcomes. The analysis followed a systematic process of transcription, coding, categorisation, and interpretation. The six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) guided the analytical process: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Data were coded inductively to identify emerging themes and deductively according to the theoretical frameworks of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Data analysis was managed using [NVivo/ATLAS.ti/MAXQDA/manual coding], which facilitated systematic organisation, retrieval, and comparison of codes and themes. Where applicable, coding consistency was enhanced through peer review and discussion of emerging themes with academic supervisors and research colleagues. Themes were interpreted in relation to policy mandates and classroom practices to identify patterns, gaps, and pedagogical implications.

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and reflexive journaling, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents (Carter et al., 2014). Member checking was used to validate interpretations with participants, while an audit trail enhanced transparency and dependability. Reflexive journaling supported researcher awareness of potential biases and strengthened confirmability. Confidentiality, anonymity, and secure data storage were upheld throughout.

Researcher positionality was explicitly considered throughout the study. As a researcher working within the Xitsonga linguistic and cultural context, I recognised that my familiarity with the community provided valuable cultural insight while also requiring continuous reflexivity to minimise subjective interpretation. Reflexive journaling was used to critically examine assumptions, positionality, and potential biases during data collection and analysis. Consistent with Indigenous and decolonial research approaches, the study sought to respect participants' voices and represent their lived experiences authentically (Chilisa, 2012). This methodological design ensured rigor, contextual relevance, and alignment with Indigenous Knowledge Systems and culturally responsive pedagogy.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of interview data and classroom observations revealed that Xitsonga proverbs play a multifaceted role in fostering conflict resolution, moral reasoning, and social cohesion within Further Education and Training (FET) Home Language classrooms. Rather than functioning solely as linguistic or literary resources, proverbs emerged as culturally embedded pedagogical tools through which learners interpreted social experiences, negotiated interpersonal relationships, and developed ethical understandings of appropriate behaviour. The findings further demonstrate that the educational value of proverbs is shaped by teachers' mediation practices and their beliefs regarding the legitimacy of

Indigenous Knowledge Systems within formal schooling. Three interconnected themes emerged from the data: (1) Xitsonga proverbs as tools for moral and conflict resolution education, (2) teachers as cultural mediators and agents of restorative pedagogy, and (3) the role of proverbs in strengthening cultural identity and holistic learner development. Together, these themes illustrate how Indigenous oral traditions can contribute to both academic and socio-emotional learning while supporting broader efforts to promote culturally responsive and decolonial pedagogies in South African education.

#### 4.1 Xitsonga Proverbs as Tools for Moral and Conflict Resolution Education

The findings indicate that Xitsonga proverbs functioned as culturally grounded mediational tools that enabled learners to engage in moral reflection, conflict mediation, and social-emotional learning. Through classroom discussions, storytelling, role-play, and reflective activities, learners employed proverbs to analyse interpersonal conflicts, evaluate behavioural choices, and negotiate mutually acceptable solutions. These findings support Chilisa's (2012) conceptualisation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems as living knowledge embedded in everyday social practice. They also resonate with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which views language as a mediational tool through which cognitive development and higher-order thinking occur. Moreover, the findings align with Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) theory (Elias et al., 2015), demonstrating how culturally meaningful narratives can scaffold empathy, self-regulation, responsible decision-making, and relationship-building skills.

A prominent finding was the use of proverbs as dialogic resources that encouraged collaborative reflection and collective problem-solving. The proverb "*Ximanga xi tlula nambu loko xi ri ni vanghana*" was frequently used to promote cooperation and shared responsibility in addressing conflicts. Classroom observations revealed that learners moved beyond blaming one another and instead engaged in discussions aimed at identifying common goals and mutually beneficial solutions. In several observed group activities, learners who initially resisted cooperation became more willing to negotiate responsibilities and participate in collective decision-making after discussing the proverb. Observable behavioural indicators included reduced verbal confrontation, increased turn-taking, active listening, and more constructive engagement during conflict-related discussions. One teacher explained:

"When learners discuss this proverb, they become calmer and more willing to listen to each other. Instead of arguing, they start looking for solutions together." (Teacher 2)

This finding suggests that the proverb served not only as a linguistic expression but also as a cultural framework for reframing conflict as a shared challenge requiring collective action. Such a process reflects restorative justice principles (Morrison, 2007), which emphasise dialogue, understanding, and relationship repair rather than adversarial approaches to conflict management. The proverb thus functioned as a culturally familiar mediational resource that transformed conflict situations into opportunities for collaborative learning and social growth.

The findings further demonstrate the contribution of proverbs to the development of emotional intelligence and empathy. The proverb "*Ku twanana i ku rivalelana*" encouraged learners to consider the emotions, perspectives, and experiences of others before reacting to conflict situations. Classroom observations revealed that learners openly discussed their

feelings, acknowledged classmates' viewpoints, apologised voluntarily, and proposed compromise-based solutions. These behavioural indicators suggest that empathy was not merely discussed as a moral principle but actively enacted through classroom interaction. As one learner remarked:

"The proverb helped me understand why my classmate was upset. Instead of arguing, we talked about the problem." (Learner 4)

The significance of this finding extends beyond conflict resolution. It demonstrates how Indigenous oral traditions can cultivate relational awareness and emotional competence through culturally meaningful modes of learning. This aligns with Ubuntu philosophy (Ramose, 1999; Metz, 2011), which emphasises interconnectedness, mutual recognition, and collective well-being. It also supports findings from social-emotional learning research showing that empathy develops through guided interaction, perspective-taking, and reflective engagement (Durlak et al., 2011). By encouraging learners to recognise and value the experiences of others, proverbs facilitated the development of interpersonal competencies that are essential for both academic and social success.

A related finding concerns the development of perspective-taking and critical reflection. The proverb "*Loko mati ma ri na ndzhope, ku na xivangelo*" encouraged learners to explore the underlying causes of conflict rather than focusing solely on assigning blame. During classroom discussions, learners examined factors such as miscommunication, emotional distress, peer influence, and differing expectations when analysing conflict scenarios. This shift from judgment to inquiry reflects the development of critical reflection and contextual reasoning. One teacher observed:

"Learners started asking why the conflict happened instead of immediately deciding who was wrong." (Teacher 1)

This finding is particularly significant because it demonstrates how proverb-based learning can promote deeper cognitive engagement with social issues. In line with Vygotskian perspectives on mediated learning, the proverb functioned as a cognitive tool through which learners organised their thinking, interpreted complex social situations, and developed more nuanced understandings of human behaviour. Such reflective engagement is fundamental to both moral reasoning and effective conflict resolution, as it encourages learners to move beyond simplistic explanations and consider the broader contexts in which conflicts emerge.

#### **4.2 Teachers as Cultural Mediators and Agents of Restorative Pedagogy**

The findings reveal that teachers played a pivotal role in transforming Xitsonga proverbs from cultural artefacts into meaningful pedagogical resources. Their mediation practices determined how proverbs were interpreted, contextualised, and applied within classroom settings. Consistent with Borg's (2011) theory of teacher cognition, teachers' beliefs about Indigenous Knowledge Systems significantly influenced the depth and effectiveness of proverb integration. Educators who viewed proverbs as valuable sources of knowledge incorporated them into classroom dialogue, behavioural guidance, and conflict mediation practices. By contrast, teachers whose instructional priorities were largely examination-driven tended to confine proverbs to literary analysis, thereby limiting their broader educational potential.

One of the most significant findings within this theme concerns the use of proverbs to facilitate restorative forms of discipline. The proverb *"Ku tshinya ku ri ni rirhandzu"* was used to encourage learners to reflect on their actions, recognise their impact on others, and participate in finding constructive solutions. Rather than relying solely on punishment, teachers facilitated dialogue aimed at fostering accountability and behavioural change. As one teacher explained:

"The proverb helps learners reflect on what they did and why it affected others. They correct themselves instead of simply fearing punishment."  
(Teacher 3)

This finding suggests that proverb-based pedagogy can support a transition from punitive disciplinary approaches toward restorative educational practices. Consistent with restorative justice literature, sustainable behavioural change was achieved through reflection, empathy, accountability, and relationship repair rather than through fear of sanctions. Teachers therefore acted not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as facilitators of ethical learning and social reconciliation. Their role highlights the importance of teacher agency in operationalising Indigenous pedagogies and translating policy aspirations into meaningful classroom practice.

#### **4.3 Proverbs, Cultural Identity, and Holistic Learner Development**

The findings further demonstrate that proverb-based instruction contributed significantly to learners' cultural affirmation, linguistic confidence, and holistic development. By engaging with proverbs in their home language, learners were able to connect classroom learning with their cultural experiences and community values. Proverbs provided a culturally meaningful framework through which learners could express opinions, negotiate meanings, and participate actively in learning activities.

The proverb *"Xihlovo a xi dungiwi"* emerged as a powerful symbol of cultural affirmation and linguistic pride. Learners expressed greater confidence when discussing moral issues and conflict situations in Xitsonga, and increased participation was observed during storytelling, classroom discussions, and reflective activities. One learner explained:

"When we use proverbs in Xitsonga, I feel proud because it connects us with our culture." (Learner 7)

This finding supports Ladson-Billings' (1995) conception of culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasises the importance of drawing on learners' cultural backgrounds as assets for learning. It also aligns with decolonial scholarship (Shizha & Abdi, 2020), which advocates for the recognition and validation of Indigenous languages and knowledge systems within formal educational contexts. By creating opportunities for learners to engage with culturally familiar forms of knowledge, proverb-based instruction fostered both academic participation and a stronger sense of cultural belonging.

Despite these positive outcomes, the findings also revealed a persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. The proverb *"Rito ri nge heteleli loko ri nga endliwi"* aptly captured participants' concerns regarding the inconsistent implementation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in schools. Although educational policies recognise the importance of Indigenous knowledge, participants identified several structural barriers that limited sustained implementation, including assessment pressures, time constraints, inadequate instructional resources, and limited professional development opportunities. As

a result, the successful integration of proverbs often depended on individual teacher commitment rather than systematic institutional support.

This finding highlights an important tension within curriculum transformation efforts. While policy frameworks increasingly advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, meaningful implementation requires sustained investment in teacher training, curriculum resources, and pedagogical support structures. Without such support, the transformative potential of Indigenous pedagogies may remain largely symbolic rather than substantive.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Xitsonga proverbs function as powerful mediational tools that promote empathy, moral reasoning, restorative dialogue, cooperative problem-solving, cultural affirmation, and social cohesion. The study extends Indigenous Knowledge Systems scholarship (Chilisa, 2012; Dei, 2014) by illustrating how Indigenous oral traditions can serve as practical pedagogical resources for addressing contemporary educational challenges. The findings further support Vygotsky's (1978) concept of mediated learning, align with Ubuntu ethics (Ramose, 1999; Metz, 2011), and reinforce Social and Emotional Learning frameworks (Elias et al., 2015). By demonstrating how culturally embedded knowledge can foster conflict resolution, ethical development, and holistic learner growth, the study contributes to ongoing debates on culturally relevant pedagogy, decolonial education, and the meaningful integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems within South African schooling.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the pedagogical use of Xitsonga proverbs in Further Education and Training (FET) Home Language classrooms as a means of fostering conflict resolution, moral reasoning, and social cohesion among learners. The findings demonstrate that Xitsonga proverbs function as culturally grounded mediational tools that support learners' emotional, cognitive, social, and ethical development. Through their metaphorical and dialogic nature, proverbs enabled learners to engage in collaborative problem-solving, perspective-taking, empathy development, and restorative dialogue. Classroom activities such as discussion, role-play, storytelling, and reflective engagement provided opportunities for learners to interpret conflict situations critically and develop constructive strategies for resolving interpersonal challenges.

The study further revealed that Xitsonga proverbs play a significant role in moral and social education by reinforcing values such as forgiveness, patience, respect, communal responsibility, and social harmony. In this regard, proverbs served as vehicles for transmitting Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Ubuntu-based values, enabling learners to develop culturally relevant ethical frameworks for understanding and addressing conflict. The findings also highlight the central role of teachers as cultural mediators and epistemic guides. Teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and pedagogical orientations significantly influenced the extent to which proverbs were used as transformative educational resources rather than merely as linguistic content. Where teachers consciously integrated proverbs into classroom practice, learners experienced richer opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and social learning.

In addition, the use of Xitsonga proverbs contributed to cultural affirmation and linguistic pride by encouraging learners to express values and experiences through their mother tongue. This strengthened learners' sense of identity, belonging, and participation within the classroom community while reinforcing communal ethics embedded in

Indigenous knowledge traditions. The findings further indicate that proverb-based pedagogy supports key social and emotional learning competencies, including empathy, responsible decision-making, relationship management, self-awareness, and cooperative problem-solving. Through sustained engagement with culturally meaningful narratives and reflective discussions, learners were able to internalise these competencies in ways that connected directly to their lived experiences.

Beyond its empirical contributions, the study advances scholarship on Indigenous Knowledge Systems, culturally relevant pedagogy, social-emotional learning, and decolonial education. The findings demonstrate that Xitsonga proverbs are not merely cultural artefacts preserved for heritage purposes but dynamic pedagogical resources capable of mediating moral reasoning, restorative dialogue, and conflict resolution competencies. The study therefore contributes to ongoing efforts to reposition Indigenous oral traditions as legitimate and valuable knowledge systems within formal education. Theoretically, it illustrates how Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Vygotskian sociocultural theory, Ubuntu philosophy, and social-emotional learning intersect to support holistic learner development. Proverbs functioned as cultural tools through which learners developed empathy, ethical awareness, perspective-taking abilities, and collaborative approaches to problem-solving, thereby providing a conceptual framework for understanding the educational value of culturally embedded knowledge.

While the study offers important insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research was conducted within a limited geographical context and focused on selected FET schools offering Xitsonga Home Language, which may affect the transferability of the findings to other educational settings. The study also relied on a relatively small purposively selected sample, which is appropriate for qualitative inquiry but does not support broad generalisation. Furthermore, the findings are context-specific and based on participants' experiences and perceptions, and should therefore be interpreted as providing in-depth contextual understanding rather than universally applicable conclusions. Despite these limitations, the findings have important implications for educational policy, curriculum development, teacher education, and future research. The study suggests that Indigenous oral traditions should be more deliberately integrated into Home Language curricula to support not only linguistic development but also social-emotional learning, moral education, and conflict resolution. Curriculum frameworks such as CAPS and the Language-in-Education Policy would benefit from clearer guidance on the pedagogical use of proverbs and other Indigenous knowledge resources. Equally important is the provision of sustained professional development opportunities that equip teachers with practical strategies for employing proverb-based pedagogy as a dialogic, reflective, and restorative approach to teaching and learning.

At the classroom level, educators should move beyond treating proverbs solely as objects of linguistic analysis and instead utilise them as tools for critical reflection, ethical reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving. Strategies such as storytelling, role-play, group discussion, conflict-analysis tasks, and reflective writing can facilitate meaningful learner engagement with Indigenous knowledge while promoting social cohesion and responsible citizenship. Teacher education programmes should likewise strengthen the inclusion of Indigenous pedagogies and culturally responsive teaching approaches in both pre-service and in-service training.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of proverb-based pedagogy on learners' social, emotional, and academic development and examine the educational

potential of other Indigenous oral forms, including folktales, praise poetry, idioms, and riddles. Further investigations into teachers' experiences of implementing Indigenous pedagogies across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts would also deepen understanding of their role in curriculum transformation and learner development. The use of mixed-methods and longitudinal research designs could provide broader evidence regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of Indigenous knowledge-based educational practices.

In conclusion, the integration of Xitsonga proverbs into Home Language teaching offers a culturally responsive and educationally meaningful approach to developing conflict resolution skills, moral reasoning, social responsibility, and social cohesion among learners. Their pedagogical value extends well beyond language instruction, positioning Indigenous oral traditions as powerful resources for holistic education in contemporary South African classrooms. By demonstrating how culturally embedded knowledge can support learner well-being, ethical development, and restorative social relationships, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonise education, strengthen culturally relevant pedagogy, and promote socially responsive learning environments within South African schools.

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