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Integrating Indigenous Zimbabwean Music into the School Curriculum: Implications for Learner Engagement and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Despite Zimbabwe's rich musical heritage, indigenous music remains marginalised in the formal curriculum due to enduring colonial legacies that prioritise Western musical traditions. This qualitative case study, grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and conducted with full ethical approval, explored the experiences of 10 teachers and 10 students in a secondary school introducing indigenous music to examine how its integration can enhance learner engagement and reinforce cultural identity. Findings show that while learners and teachers value indigenous music for its capacity to boost motivation, participation, cultural pride and continuity, its effective implementation is hindered by inadequate teacher preparation, limited resources and Western-dominated pedagogical frameworks. The study concludes that integrating indigenous music holds transformative potential for decolonising music education and promoting culturally responsive pedagogy, and recommends

curriculum reform, strengthened teacher training, resource provision and community involvement to support sustainable implementation.

Keywords: *Colonial legacy, Community, Culture, Curriculum, Identity, Indigenous music.*

Introduction

Zimbabwe possesses a rich and diverse musical heritage in which music and dance are inseparable from social, spiritual and communal life. As a multicultural society, the country's indigenous musical traditions reflect the diversity of its ethnic communities and cultural histories (Mutero, 2025). Indigenous musical arts have long functioned as vehicles for communicating social values, narrating history, marking communal events and fostering social cohesion (Maguraushe, 2024; Music in Africa, 2025). These traditions include practices such as *mbira dzaVadzimu* ceremonies, *ngoma* drumming, *bosho* rhythmic accompaniment, traditional choral singing, dance forms such as *jerusarema* or *mbende*, and storytelling through song (Berliner, 1993; Turino, 2008). Integrated within rituals of ancestral veneration, healing, initiation and harvest celebrations, these musical forms perform functional roles that extend beyond entertainment to encompass moral instruction, intergenerational knowledge transmission and spiritual mediation (Vambe, 2004; Nzewi, 2007). As such, indigenous music constitutes a critical repository of cultural knowledge and identity formation within Zimbabwean communities (Nota, 2017).

Recent curriculum reforms in Zimbabwe have sought to realign formal education with this cultural reality. The Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC 2024–2030) positions indigenous knowledge systems, *Ubuntu/Unhu* philosophy and cultural heritage at the centre of teaching and learning. Within this policy framework, music is recognised as a key learning area through which learners develop cultural identity, creativity and practical competencies aligned with national development priorities. This orientation is reflected in the Primary and Secondary School Music Syllabus which emphasise learner engagement with Traditional African music through performance, composition and appreciation using indigenous instruments, local languages and community-based musical practices. Thus, by integrating indigenous music within curriculum policy and syllabus objectives, the HBC seeks to restore its educational legitimacy and reposition it as a pedagogical resource for heritage preservation, holistic learner development and cultural sustainability.

Background

Although Zimbabwe possesses a rich and diverse musical heritage embedded within its social, cultural and spiritual life, Traditional African music has historically occupied a marginal position within the formal school curriculum. This marginalisation is a direct legacy of colonial and missionary education policies that privileged Western musical traditions while undermining indigenous knowledge systems and local epistemologies in the arts (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Garwe, 2025). Despite policy reforms after independence, curriculum structures continued to reproduce these hierarchies, resulting in the limited integration of indigenous music in classroom practice. The Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (1999) represented a significant policy intervention by advocating for a curriculum rooted in Zimbabwean heritage, socio-economic realities and productive skills, with explicit recognition of the educational value of expressive arts such as music. These recommendations find concrete expression in the Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC 2024–2030), whose core policy goals include the promotion of *Ubuntu/Unhu*, the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage, the valorisation of indigenous knowledge systems and the development of practical skills for national development. Within this policy framework, music is positioned as a key learning area through which learners are expected to develop cultural identity, creativity, critical thinking and entrepreneurial competencies. Consistent with the objectives of the Primary and Secondary School (MoPSE, 2024) Music Syllabus, learners are required to engage with Traditional African music through performance, composition and appreciation, using indigenous instruments, local languages and community-based musical practices. The integration of Traditional African music under the HBC therefore reflects a deliberate curriculum policy shift that seeks to decolonise music education, restore the centrality of Zimbabwe’s musical heritage and align classroom practice with national goals of cultural continuity, skills development and heritage preservation.

The establishment of Western-style education entrenched Eurocentric frameworks that privileged European cultural expressions while suppressing indigenous traditions, a process scholars describe as the coloniality of power or epistemic violence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Garwe, 2025; Wuta, 2025). Missionary schooling further reshaped African cultural and spiritual identities through Christian doctrine and Western pedagogy, thereby displacing indigenous artistic and spiritual

expressions (Ngoma & Fikelepi-Twani, 2024). As a result, indigenous Zimbabwean music was relegated to informal community spaces and stripped of its educational value (Maguraushe, 2024), disrupting intergenerational transmission and weakening learners' connection to their heritage. Yet, its social significance endures as many traditional forms, particularly dance and communal performance survive within their original cultural contexts (Mutero, 2018).

Recent discourse in Zimbabwean education reflects growing recognition of the need to reclaim and reintegrate indigenous knowledge systems within formal learning. Curriculum reform efforts increasingly emphasise cultural inclusivity and epistemic plurality, underscoring the potential of locally grounded education to strengthen learner engagement, motivation and identity formation (Garwe, 2025; Maguraushe, 2024; Agawu, 2003). Integrating indigenous music into school programmes thus emerges as a critical strategy for promoting culturally responsive pedagogy and holistic development. However, meaningful implementation remains constrained by systemic barriers, including inadequate teacher preparation, limited instructional materials and the continued dominance of Western musical paradigms (Maguraushe, 2024).

Addressing these limitations requires a deliberate process of curricular decolonisation, one that reintroduces indigenous content while reconfiguring pedagogical practices to reflect local cultural logics and plural epistemologies (Lebaka, 2024; Garwe, 2025). Indigenous Zimbabwean music embodies collective memory, social cohesion and spiritual consciousness (Music in Africa, 2025; Nketia, 1974), and its integration into education holds transformative potential for cultural preservation and meaningful learning. Empirical studies show that engagement with traditional music nurtures cultural identity (Mataruse, 2017; Maraire, 1979), transmits communal values and promotes critical reflection (Maguraushe, 2024; Samkange & Chimbadzwa, 2016), while regional evidence demonstrates enhanced motivation and cultural pride among learners (Lebaka, 2024; Euba, 2011).

Within this context, integrating indigenous Zimbabwean music into the school curriculum represents not merely cultural recovery but a significant step towards an inclusive and decolonised education system (Darron & Sharon, 2019; Agawu, 2003). This study examines how such integration can enhance learner engagement, reinforce cultural identity and inform culturally responsive curricular reforms. Conducted with full institutional and ministerial ethical approval and in accordance with

BERA (2018) principles, the study seeks to generate insights that support curriculum development, teacher training and educational policy while safeguarding participants through informed consent, confidentiality and secure data handling. The following question guided the study: *How can the integration of indigenous Zimbabwean music into the school curriculum enhance learner engagement and reinforce cultural identity in Zimbabwean secondary schools?*

Methodology

Anchored in the interpretivist paradigm, this study sought to understand how the integration of indigenous Zimbabwean music into schooling can enhance learner engagement and cultural identity within a system historically shaped by Western musical dominance. The interpretivist stance, which views reality as socially constructed and context-dependent, provided an appropriate lens for capturing the meanings teachers and learners assign to their experiences of indigenous music in the curriculum (Schwandt, 2015; Lincoln et al., 2018). Guided by full institutional and ministerial ethical approval, the study prioritised informed consent, confidentiality and secure data management while exploring how such integration can enrich teaching and learning. Consistent with interpretivist assumptions, a qualitative design was employed to generate rich, descriptive accounts through interviews and observations, allowing participants' voices to shape the interpretation of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researchers adopted a reflexive role as active interpreters rather than detached observers (Willis, 2007). This helped ensure that constructed meanings remained sensitive to the socio-cultural contexts of participants and aligned with the broader aim of illuminating the interaction between culture, pedagogy and identity in Zimbabwean music education (Cohen et al., 2018). A case study design focusing on one secondary school that had recently introduced indigenous music into its curriculum enabled an in-depth exploration of how teachers and students interpreted and navigated this pedagogical shift within real-life learning environments (Yin, 2018). The study involved 20 purposively selected participants-10 teachers and 10 students, chosen for their direct engagement with indigenous music education with teachers responsible for instruction or curriculum implementation and students drawn from multiple classes to capture diverse learner perspectives (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Table 1: Profile of Student Participants

Student	Age	Gender	Form	Cultural Background	Exposure to Indigenous Music
1	14	F	2	Shona	Traditional dance at community events
2	15	M	3	Ndebele	Drumming from cultural group
3	16	F	4	Shona	School music dub
4	17	M	5	Tonga	Family mbira and songs
5	18	F	6	Ndebele	School choir traditional songs
6	15	M	3	Kalanga	School marimba ensemble
7	16	F	4	Shona	Dance competitions
8	17	M	5	Venda	Drumming in cultural events
9	18	F	6	Nambya	Traditional music dub
10	14	M	2	Shona	Songs from grandparents

Table 2: Profile of Teacher Participants

Teacher	Age	Gender	Experience in Years	Cultural Group	Engagement with Indigenous Music
1	28	F	5	Shona	Leads dance dub
2	34	M	10	Ndebele	Plays ngoma drums
3	42	F	18	Shona	Integrates songs in lessons
4	30	M	7	Kalanga	Marimba workshops
5	51	M	25	Tonga	Teaches mbira performance
6	36	F	12	Ndebele	School cultural festivals
7	45	M	20	Shona	Choral groups
8	33	F	8	Venda	Traditional games and songs
9	39	M	14	Shona	Composes indigenous music
10	29	F	6	Nambya	Promotes cultural identity

This sample reflects diversity in age, gender, cultural background and experience with students and teachers representing both formal and informal engagement with indigenous music. Such variation ensures rich, contextually grounded insights into the pedagogical and cultural dimensions of indigenous music education thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings of the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to capture teacher and learner perspectives on integrating

indigenous music. Ten teachers participated in individual interviews exploring their experiences, teaching practices and perceived challenges and opportunities, while two focus group discussions with ten students provided insights into learners' experiences, the relevance of indigenous music and its influence on cultural identity (Cohen et al., 2018; Morgan, 2019). All sessions were conducted in English and Shona, audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework, following an inductive approach that allowed themes to emerge from participants' narratives. Analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, contrasts and contextual meanings related to the teaching, learning and cultural significance of indigenous music. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation, member checking and thick description, while dependability and confirmability were supported by systematic documentation of analytic decisions alongside reflexive journaling and audit trails (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The data revealed five key themes reflecting teachers' and learners' experiences of integrating indigenous music in the curriculum: (1) marginalisation and limited representation, (2) cultural significance and educational value, (3) learner engagement and identity formation, (4) structural and pedagogical challenges, and (5) prospects for decolonising music education. Each theme is explored below, drawing on participants' voices and relevant literature.

Theme 1. Marginalisation and Limited Representation of Indigenous Music

Both teachers and students indicated that indigenous music remains marginal within the formal education system. Participants described a curriculum that continues to prioritise Western music theory, leaving local traditions largely excluded or treated superficially. A teacher observed:

Our syllabus focuses too much on Western notation and composers. Indigenous music is mentioned, but it is never examined or properly taught. (Teacher 3).

Another teacher reflected on institutional constraints:

When inspectors come, they ask about harmony and theory, not about mbira or marimba. So, we end up teaching what gets assessed. (Teacher 7).

Students echoed similar sentiments, expressing disappointment at the limited visibility of their cultural music:

We only learn about traditional songs during special functions. It is not part of the real lessons. (Student 4).

Most of the time we play Western songs. It feels like our own music does not belong in school. (Student 9).

These perspectives illustrate what Garwe (2025) terms epistemic violence, the systemic privileging of Western knowledge that marginalises indigenous epistemologies. Despite rhetorical support for cultural inclusion, the actual curriculum structure reinforces colonial hierarchies. Similar findings by Maguraushe (2025) indicate that indigenous music in Zimbabwean schools often exists at the periphery of formal learning, sustaining an epistemic imbalance where indigenous artistic forms are symbolically acknowledged but institutionally neglected.

Theme 2: Cultural Significance and Educational Value of Indigenous Music

Teachers emphasised that indigenous music serves as a repository of moral and social values that shapes learners' understanding of identity and community viewing it as a powerful pedagogical tool that connects learners to their cultural roots. One teacher had this to say;

When learners sing traditional songs, they learn respect, teamwork and the meaning behind our customs. It is not just entertainment; it teaches life lessons. (Teacher 1).

Another teacher noted:

Our music carries our stories and values. If we do not teach it, we are cutting learners from their cultural foundation. (Teacher 6).

Students similarly recognised the cultural and emotional resonance of indigenous music by saying;

Traditional songs remind me of home. They bring back the feeling of being part of something bigger than myself. (Student 3).

When we play marimba, we understand our culture better. It is not only music—it is who we are. (Student 7)

These insights affirm Mataruse's (2017) argument that Indigenous music acts as a vessel for cultural transmission and identity formation. Teaching

traditional music promotes holistic education by integrating cultural, emotional and cognitive development (Maguraushe, 2024; Mataruse, 2017). Indigenous music transcends aesthetic function to become a form of moral and cultural education resonating with the African humanist philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu*.

Theme 3: Learner Engagement and Identity Formation through Indigenous Music

Students expressed a deep sense of engagement and enjoyment when participating in indigenous music activities. They described learning traditional instruments and songs as empowering and relatable, in contrast to the abstract and technical nature of Western music. One student explained:

I enjoy mbira lessons more than anything because it feels natural. I can connect with the rhythm even without reading notes. (Student 2).

Another commented:

Learning our own music makes school exciting. It is something we understand from home, so we participate more. (Student 6).

Teachers confirmed this increased engagement, noting that indigenous music created more inclusive and participatory classrooms. One teacher made the following observation;

When we play traditional songs, everyone joins in even the shy learners. It builds confidence and teamwork. (Teacher 4).

Another noted:

Learners show more enthusiasm for marimba than for written theory. It gives them a sense of achievement. (Teacher 9).

Lebaka (2024) posits that culturally relevant music enhances motivation and learner participation. Indigenous music, being accessible and community-oriented, fosters affective learning outcomes that extend beyond technical proficiency. This theme underscores the role of indigenous music in cultivating belonging and identity affirmation which are key components of learner well-being and holistic development (Olatunji, 1995; Nzewi, 2003; Humwe Cultural Arts & Education Centre, 2024).

Theme 4: Structural and Pedagogical Challenges in Curriculum Integration

Despite recognising its value, both teachers and learners identified significant barriers to the integration of indigenous music. Teachers highlighted issues of inadequate training, lack of teaching materials and insufficient institutional support. One teacher said that,

We were trained to teach Western music. I do not have the skills to teach mbira or explain its tuning systems properly. (Teacher 2).

Another one added:

There are no instruments, no books and no workshops are conducted for indigenous music. It is left to personal initiative. (Teacher 8).

Students also recognised these limitations in their learning environment:

Sometimes we just talk about traditional music without playing it because there are no instruments. (Student 1).

Our teachers try, but they do not always know the songs or rhythms well. We end up learning from each other. (Student 5).

These perspectives reveal the structural and pedagogical constraints that hinder effective integration. The dominance of Western frameworks in teacher education produces professionals who are technically proficient in European notation but ill-equipped to transmit orally grounded indigenous traditions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The absence of instruments such as the mbira, marimba and hosho in schools further illustrates the material dimensions of cultural exclusion (Maraire, 1979). Without targeted investment and policy support, calls for decolonised music education risk remaining rhetorical rather than transformative (Agawu, 2023; Humwe Cultural Arts & Education Centre, 2024).

Theme 5: Prospects for Decolonising Music Education

Despite these challenges, both groups expressed optimism regarding the potential for curriculum transformation. Teachers advocated for collaborative approaches that involve traditional musicians and cultural practitioners in schools. One teacher had this to suggest:

We need to partner with local artists who understand traditional instruments better than we do. They can help us teach authentically. (Teacher 5).

Another added:

If the curriculum gave equal weight to indigenous music, learners would see that their culture matters in education. (Teacher 10).

Students similarly supported the idea of re-centering indigenous music within education:

It would be good if we could learn from elders who play mbira and hosho so that we do not lose our traditions. (Student 8).

Our culture should not just be for ceremonies. It should be part of learning every day. (Student 10).

These sentiments align with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2013) call for curriculum decolonisation which entails transforming epistemic hierarchies rather than merely adding indigenous content. Decolonising education involves validating indigenous knowledge as equally legitimate (Garwe, 2025; Agawu, 2003). The findings suggest that integrating indigenous music can serve as a catalyst for broader educational reform, fostering cultural confidence, curriculum inclusivity and epistemic justice.

Discussion

The findings indicate the presence of indigenous music within the formal school system though limited, signaling important spaces of cultural resilience and curricular possibility. Instances where teachers incorporate traditional songs, instruments or performance practices, often through co-curricular clubs or selected classroom activities, demonstrate that indigenous musical knowledge has not been entirely displaced. However, this partial inclusion occurs within an education system still shaped by the historical legacies of colonial and missionary schooling which privileged Western epistemologies and musical forms at the expense of local artistic traditions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Euba, 2011). This pattern echoes Isabirye's (2021) findings in Uganda where school music education continues to operate within colonial frameworks that inadequately connect with learners' cultural identities. The persistence of Western theoretical models as the dominant basis for pedagogy, assessment and musical value reflects epistemic violence whereby

indigenous knowledge systems are rendered inferior or peripheral (Garwe, 2025).

The limited but noticeable inclusion of indigenous music provides a foundation for more transformative interventions involving decolonising the music curriculum which requires more than adding isolated indigenous elements to the curriculum. It should involve re-positioning African epistemologies, performance traditions and philosophies of music-making as legitimate, examinable and valued forms of knowledge (Agawu, 2023, 2003). The process may include integrating local musical repertoires into syllabi in a visible way, adopting culturally grounded pedagogies such as participatory and communal learning, revising assessment standards to recognise oral/aural modes of knowing and strengthening teacher education programmes to empower educators with competencies in indigenous music (Maringe, 2017; Samkange & Chimbadzwa, 2016; Agawu, 2023). Such shifts challenge the enduring colonial matrix of power embedded in the curriculum and create opportunities for learners to experience musical arts education that affirms their cultural identities.

The findings also confirm that indigenous music holds profound cultural and educational significance. Maguraushe (2024) argues that music functions as a conduit for moral instruction, social cohesion and identity formation. This aligns with Mataruse's (2017) argument that traditional music encapsulates community values and transmits cultural narratives that strengthen social belonging. Teachers in this study recognised that indigenous music extends beyond artistic expression to embody collective wisdom and moral instruction resonating with the African humanist philosophy. The study thus supports the growing body of literature that positions indigenous music as a pedagogical medium that is capable of integrating cognitive, affective and social dimensions of learning (Maguraushe, 2024; Nota, 2017; Nzewi, 2003). Through such integration, education becomes a vehicle not only for skill acquisition but for cultural continuity and identity affirmation (Euba, 2011). Nota (2017) asserts that as music is a practice-based activity, experienced musicians from indigenous African communities ought to serve as music resource persons and contribute to shaping Zimbabwe's current school music curriculum.

A key insight concerns the relationship between indigenous music and learner engagement. Participants described indigenous musical practices as inherently participatory, community-oriented and emotionally resonant. It contrasts with the abstract and individualised

orientation of Western music pedagogy (Mataruse, 2017). The findings therefore substantiate the claim by Lebaka (2024) that culturally relevant education enhances learner motivation, confidence and participation. When learners encounter familiar rhythms and idioms in the classroom, they experience recognition and belonging in turn promoting deeper learning (Nota, 2017; Maraire, 1979). This reinforces the argument that inclusive education should accommodate diversity in learners' abilities as well as their cultural frames of reference. Indigenous music education contributes to both pedagogical effectiveness and cultural justice (Darron & Sharon, 2019). Desirable education must connect with students' lives, communities and environments and addresses global concerns for life thereby advancing arguments that validate curriculum models that centre African musical epistemologies (Maraire, 1979; Nketia, 1974).

The study highlights persistent structural and pedagogical barriers to integrating indigenous music in schools, including inadequate teacher preparation, limited instructional materials and insufficient institutional recognition (Yende, 2024; Mugovhani, 2011; Samkange & Chimbadzwa, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Western-dominated teacher training has produced educators skilled in European notation but ill-equipped to transmit orally grounded indigenous traditions, thereby perpetuating European exceptionalism and cultural superiority (Mtimkulu, 2025; Walker, 2020). The lack of indigenous instruments further reflects the material dimensions of marginalisation (Nota, 2017). Consequently, without targeted policy support and investment, decolonising music education risks remaining rhetorical rather than transformative (Garwe, 2025; Maringe, 2017). The findings underscore the potential of community engagement as a catalyst for change. Collaboration with traditional musicians, cultural custodians and local elders can bridge formal and oral knowledge systems, enhance authenticity and facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer (Nota, 2017; Olatunji, 1995; Nzewi, 2003; Maguraushe, 2024). Such participatory approaches align with African communal philosophies of learning and can create culturally responsive educational spaces that resonate with learners' lived experiences.

In the final analysis, this study reinforces the argument that integrating indigenous Zimbabwean music into formal education is both a pedagogical and decolonial imperative. Doing so enriches the curriculum and addresses historical injustices embedded within the educational system (Ngoma & Fikelepi-Twani, 2024; Nziramasanga Commission, 1999). Indigenous music education provides a platform for

learners to critically and creatively engage with their heritage thereby cultivating both intellectual and cultural agency (Garwe, 2025). Decolonisation of music education in Zimbabwe must move beyond symbolic gestures to embrace systemic change which should involve retraining teachers, revising assessment frameworks and providing adequate resources (Maguraushe, 2024; Nota, 2017; Maringe, 2017). The findings therefore, emphasise that the inclusion of indigenous music is not an ancillary cultural project but a vital strategy for transforming Zimbabwe's education system into one that truly reflects its people, history and values (Nota, 2017).

Conclusion

The marginalisation of indigenous Zimbabwean music in formal education reflects enduring colonial epistemologies shaping curriculum and pedagogy (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Integrating these musical traditions within the Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC 2024-2030) and the Primary and Secondary School Music Syllabus offers a concrete strategy to strengthen learners' cultural identity and promote heritage continuity (Garwe, 2025; Euba, 2011). Such integration fosters meaningful learner engagement, creativity and appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems. Thus, by formally embedding indigenous music in curriculum policy and classroom practice, education becomes a site for cultural affirmation, decolonisation and epistemic justice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Nzewi, 2007). Ultimately, recognising indigenous music as both a pedagogical and cultural resource supports the development of a more inclusive, contextually relevant and culturally responsive Zimbabwean education system.

Recommendations

In view of the conclusions, the study makes the following recommendations:

- a) The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should revise the national music curriculum to give indigenous Zimbabwean music a core, examinable status.
- b) Teacher education programmes should integrate indigenous music pedagogy.
- c) Schools should provide in-service training and workshops with traditional musicians and ethnomusicologists to enhance teachers' skills.

- d) Schools should collaborate with local artisans, cultural centres and arts councils to support the production and upkeep of indigenous instruments such as the mbira, marimba and hosho.

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