



# The Use of Indigenous African Repertoires in Developing Literacy in Visual and Performing Arts Learners in Chiredzi District, Zimbabwe

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## Article History

Received: 2025.04.18

Revised: 2025.11.09

Accepted: 2025.11.11

Published: 2025.11.12

## Keywords

Afrocentricity

Curriculum

Eurocentric

Music repertoires

## How to cite:

Nhamo, M., Kekana, S. M., & Magwati, P. (2025). The Use of Indigenous African Repertoires in Developing Literacy in Visual and Performing Arts Learners in Chiredzi District, Zimbabwe. *PAN African Journal of Musical Arts Education*, 3(1), 22-32.

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## Abstract

Zimbabwe's attainment of independence in 1980 from British rule brought some hopes of a decolonised school curriculum. However, 40-five years after independence, Zimbabwe continues to have the challenge of a largely Eurocentric school curriculum. The current Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) content requires alignment to local realities so that it has relevance to the local society. This study examines the use of indigenous African music repertoires and how they enhance concept formulation among learners. Premised on the Afrocentricity theory, the paper interrogates how indigenous music heritages can be utilised to develop literacy in VPA lessons. A qualitative approach was used to carry out a case study, with twenty teachers purposively selected and ten learners who were randomly selected to make a total of 30 participants. Five schools were picked to constitute a case study in Chiredzi district owing to the fact that the grasping of teaching and learning concepts in this region especially in the English language, remains diminished and limited. Research findings revealed that teachers faced difficulties in developing music literacy aspects such as time values, rhythm, and pitch in VPA teaching and learning. This reveals a need to decolonise the school curriculum that tends to be culturally irrelevant to the African context. To address the problem, professional development workshops should be mounted to help teachers develop effective, culturally pertinent content.

## Introduction

The Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) curriculum plays a crucial role in learners' holistic academic and practical development. African indigenous musical repertoire plays a pivotal cultural role in the development of music literacy. However, its implementation often lacks the context necessary to fully benefit the African learners, especially in appreciating their indigenous heritage. In many cases, teaching materials and approaches are heavily influenced by Western models, thereby marginalising local African traditions that could otherwise enrich learners' experiences. The school curriculum in post-colonial Zimbabwe is, in many ways, a legacy of



British colonialism, which introduced a form of formal education premised on Eurocentric ways of knowing (Gonye & Moyo, 2018). African states, Zimbabwe included, face a problem of Eurocentric school curricula, despite having been independent for several decades. Zimbabwe's attainment of independence in 1980 from British rule raised hopes for the restoration and revival of a locally and culturally informed learning curriculum.

The colonial government imposed a curriculum that marginalised Zimbabwe's rich cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems. This legacy continues to impact the education system, highlighting a need for decolonisation and inclusive curricula that celebrate and embrace diverse perspectives. The European type of education had overt undertones of racial superiority that explicitly sought to promote Eurocentric epistemologies, while undermining African Indigenous knowledge systems and practices (Mlambo, 2006; Shizha, 2013). Thus, the colonial educational framework deprived the African learners of access to curricula that were culturally relevant to their learning experiences. This was meant to maintain control and dominance over African learners (Chikowero, 2015). The British government introduced its language, values, culture, and religion, thereby disregarding African musical repertoires as heathen and pagan, as observed by Mapaya (2014), Shizha (2013), and Mugovhani (2012). The imposition of British laws and values became oppressive and discriminatory. In Zimbabwe, for example, it was unfortunate that after gaining independence, the learning institutions were not substantially adjusted and aligned to suit a newly liberated nation. The curriculum continued to serve the interests of the colonisers. As a result, the indigenous African repertoires continued to suffer marginalisation in the school curriculum. According to the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) website, the Visual and Performing Arts subjects are not attracting many students, suggesting a potential lack of interest or unclear career prospects in these fields. From such a scenario, it appears that those who designed the curriculum did not realise that the bulk of the content and pedagogy were heavily influenced by foreign content.

It should be noted that although the VPA learning areas are among the examinable subjects in Zimbabwe's public examination board, these subjects continue to attract a very depressed candidature. According to Masaka (2017), curricula content and pedagogy are critical ideological and political tools for any government since the curriculum principally reflects the objectives of those who control it. Implicitly, this is particularly so for countries that were once under colonial administration and were subjected to curricular content and methodologies that at times differed from the aspirations of the indigenous people. Since Zimbabwe largely experienced Western education and pedagogical practices crafted along colonial ideologies, the content negatively affected concept formation. In that context, there is a great need to redesign the current VPA approaches. In their analysis of the school system during the colonial period, Shizha and Kariwo (2011) observe that individuals who attended colonial schools were not exposed to practical knowledge appropriate to their community realities. The foregoing position appears to imply that the Native Education system was designed in a manner which would divorce African learners from a culturally and community-centred curriculum.

The study examines how indigenous African repertoires can be pedagogically utilised to increase learners' participation, comprehension, and identity awareness in the VPA disciplines, which integrate Music, Visual Arts, Dance, and Theatre. For example, by utilising indigenous African repertoires in the Music learning area, teachers can expose learners to musical idioms such as



African traditional song genres, metre (rhythm time), and chants. These songs can also teach moral lessons (Муродов, 2025; Aderibigbe, 2018). In the Visual Arts learning area, the teacher can help learners develop some practical skills that are contextually relevant in their communities. Learners could be asked to produce artefacts out of locally available resources. In this case, the idea would be to minimise the financial costs of importing resources needed in production processes. Learners could also be taught part of their history through concepts in art criticism. Further, in the Theatre area, the teacher might decide to develop language skills, such as patterns, listening, and cultural knowledge. Furthermore, in the Dance learning area, the teacher will introduce and equip learners with drumming techniques, dance patterns, and instrumental playing skills. This being the case, it becomes a clarion call for teachers to embrace indigenous African repertoires as they implement the VPA curriculum in post-colonial African schools.

The quest to truly indigenise the school curriculum in post-colonial states has been a thorny issue for most of the former colonised nations (Laakso & Hallberg, 2024). Previously, many researchers consistently raised the issue of aligning school curricula with the heritages of the societies in which the schools are located. Among some of the distinguished music educators are Zoltan Kodály, Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, and Carl Orff (Campbell, 2004). They emphasise the use of folk music and cultural heritage in the implementation of an effective music curriculum. Maguraushe (2024) also discusses the need to teach traditional instruments such as mbira and marimba to children to strengthen indigenous music in Zimbabwe's cultural education. Ganyata (2020) recommends an experiential pedagogy that integrates indigenous African music into primary education to foster a multicultural learning environment. Similarly, Mataruse (2017) conducted a study on the role of traditional music in preserving cultural identity within Zimbabwean schools. The study's results revealed the need to include traditional music in the curriculum to enhance cultural literacy. Muparutsa (2012) also discusses mbira's role in Zimbabwean music and its potential application in music education to enhance cultural understanding and musical performative skills. One of the recommendations is the use of indigenous musical traditions in schools, as they help develop new talents in singing, drumming, and dancing among learners. From the research studies that have been highlighted, it becomes apparent that the curriculum in post-colonial African schools needs to be designed in such a manner that it incorporates indigenous African repertoires to better reflect the cultural heritage of local communities. In that regard, the methodologies should emphasise the utility of culturally relevant and appropriate content in the school curriculum. It is for this reason that this study examines the use of indigenous African repertoires in developing literacy in Visual and Performing Arts education in Chiredzi District, Zimbabwe.

## Method

Drawing from some qualitative projects (Gray, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Gilbert, 2015), we used a qualitative case study approach. We engaged 30 participants, comprising 20 teachers and 10 learners. For the reason that we wanted VPA practitioners as well as a balanced gender, we purposively selected ten (10) female and ten (10) male teachers from five schools in Chiredzi district. The remaining ten participants comprised learners who were randomly selected in pairs, two from each of the five (5) schools, to provide a diverse perspective on VPA teaching and learning content and approaches. Participants were interviewed to share their views on how indigenous African repertoires could be utilised to develop learners' literacy during VPA lessons. To conform with ethical standards, the researchers obtained approval from the Provincial Education Director for Masvingo Region, South-Eastern Zimbabwe. This study prioritised interviewing schoolteachers, as



they implement the VPA curriculum. Data were obtained through interviews with selected VPA teachers and learners as well as observations on how teachers schemed, planned, and delivered their VPA content. This was done to determine the extent to which indigenous African repertoires were incorporated into the VPA curriculum by teachers in Zimbabwean schools. The study enabled the researchers to identify the aspects of the curriculum that teachers prioritised during their practice. Besides the thematic analysis of teachers' scheme-cum plans and lesson observations, the researchers accessed data from textbooks, journal articles, and internet sources. Such sorted data helped the researchers reflect on how indigenous African repertoires were utilised in teaching and learning in the VPA learning areas.

### **The Afrocentricity Theory**

The study is informed by Asante's Afrocentricity theory, drawing on his 2010 and 2013 works. The theory analyses African cultural issues as critiqued by indigenous Africans and their compatriots, rather than an etic approach in which the critics of African cultural issues are people who are not part of the African culture and, in most cases, do not participate, let alone understand, the indigenous African culture. The Afrocentricity theory is interdisciplinary and tends to explore the history, psychology, sociology, literature, economics, education, and social justice. As concerned African VPA teacher educators, we aim to complement efforts that result in addressing a perennial challenge, of rubber-stamping a colonial curriculum that disguises itself as representing Zimbabwe's local communities. It is of interest that we situate our argumentation within the dictates of Afrocentricity with a focus on gaining a reformed, decolonised and/ or indigenised curriculum. Of interest to the emphasis of Afrocentricity theory is Nhamo (2022), who sees it as a response to the derogatory Western scholarship on Africa, Africans and their cultural heritage that are at the mercy of cultural imperialism. In that context, Afrocentricity becomes a transformative agent that shapes all people's lives, attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviours, thereby creating, *inter alia*, a new revolutionary perspective on all facts. By employing the ACT, one realises the need to properly articulate the role of indigenous African cultures in their communities and how that should be conceived.

Similarly, Mapaya (2016) advocates for a Music pedagogy that blends European written notation with African orality to reduce the disjuncture between South African university-based music education and music praxis within black communities. That assertion comes against a background in which the country's university-based music training and musical praxis seem to disadvantage the African indigenous learners. In that regard, this helps to validate the claim that the curriculum in post-colonial African schools needs to prioritise the heritage-based pedagogy. Matiure (2002) discusses how African children can acquire musical competencies as they play game songs and imitate elders during performance events. It is in the authors' interest to firmly incorporate the aspect of orality into VPA teaching and learning. The author goes on to encourage teachers to utilise performance skills practised in local communities to enhance lesson delivery.

### **The Ideal School Curriculum in Post-colonial Africa**

Teachers and other stakeholders in the school curriculum in post-colonial countries like Zimbabwe ought to recognise the significant role of indigenous African heritages in developing learners' music literacy. This aligns well with Africa's decoloniality agenda (Oyekunle, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Many African researchers point to the significant role of heritage-based curricula in the cognitive and psychomotor development of learners (Mutale, 2025; Sibanda & Young, 2020; Savin,



2016). In 2024, the Zimbabwean government, through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, transformed the curriculum to a heritage-based one as part of its ongoing efforts to reform and improve the nation`s educational curriculum.

In view of the foregoing submission, when teachers fail to utilise indigenous African music repertoires, this may imply that the bulk of the content taught to learners is alien to them, thereby leading to poor mastery of the concepts. In that scenario, the mismatch between what learners experience in the community and at school is what Dewey (1990) calls a wastage in education. In view of Dewey`s assertion, the greatest wastage in education is not about the financial expenses which the parents and guardians incur. Rather, it is the dissonance that often exists between the community experiences and the curricula in institutions. Thus, the researchers realise that, close to four decades after gaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe continued to endure a dilemma of a theoretically oriented curriculum, premised on Eurocentric models. Despite the many commissions culminating in the Nziramasanga's (1999) *Report on Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training*, the topology of the curriculum has not experienced much change, in content besides semantics, such as the "New curriculum", "Competence Based Curriculum" and recently 'Heritage-Based Education'. The commission had recommended an overhaul of the country's Eurocentric curriculum, which had continued to be modelled on European values. In an effort to address the missing component in the VPA curriculum, researchers in this study sought to determine how the problem of a culturally irrelevant curriculum could be addressed.

To implement a culturally relevant curriculum for learners, teachers in post-colonial African states can utilise localised rhythmic time values rather than the commonly universalised rhythmic patterns, such as "taa, ta-te, tafatefe," which have no immediate meaning to the Zimbabwean indigenous learner. Instead of taa, Zimbabwean learners can be introduced to goo, which is a very familiar axe`s, sanhu`s cutting rhythmic sound value.

ma-nye ma-nye ma-nye goo                      ma-nye goo ma-nye goo



ma-nye ma-nye ma-nye goo                      ma-nye ma-nye goo goo

The rhythm above is of a common Karanga song well known as *maonde*, fig tree fruits. After the rhythm - sound values have been mastered, learners can then be introduced to the pitch concept as shown in the following excerpt from Sheila Brown (1987).



Maonde



Source: Brown (1987)

This means a teacher can choose African indigenous melodies that help learners grasp concepts easily. For example, the teacher can draw on African traditional repertoire to develop learners' literacy in concepts such as time signatures, rhythm, pitch, and harmony, as illustrated in the above song titled *Maonde*. Similarly, in the second lesson after rhythm familiarisation, the teacher may split the learners into two main groups for concepts on rhythm and pitch levels. The third lesson will then be based on keywords extracted from the song's lyrics, after learners have mastered the different pitch levels of the song. After leading the class in singing the song, the teacher and learners can discuss the meaning of each phrase and the song's theme. Discussions with learners will enhance their understanding and appreciation of the song's theme.

In the next lesson, the focus could be on another concept, such as time signatures. As illustrated in the attached song, the entry point would be the simple quadruple. To help learners conceptualise more easily, the teacher could ask them to sing softly while s/he taps or claps the rhythms of the song, demonstrating time values or sound durations.

The next step would be to divide the class into two groups: half claps to the song's rhythmic patterns while the other half sings. As observed by scholars (Carder, 1990; De Kock, 1989), a music teacher can employ the Dalcroze method in the teaching of rhythm. In that regard, the rhythms in African songs will motivate learners to respond through movement, as most will be familiar with the music. Most probably, any traditional vocal music would be accompanied by kinaesthetic bodily movements, such as dancing, and by instruments such as drums and clappers. Thus, such movements become part of the music's rhythm, which should be performed and experienced by learners. In a discussion on how to develop rhythmic understanding among African learners, Matiure (2002, p. 12) asks, "why then do we continue to teach rhythm literacy from the Western perspective?" As Africans, our children are exposed to diverse rhythmic patterns and game movements. We should take advantage of that and use the child's cultural repertoire to develop rhythm literacy. Such an approach breaks



the boredom of dogmatism, in which learners are bombarded with inappropriate, alien theoretical issues. It augurs well with Bruner's principle of gradation, from simple to complex (McLeod, 2019).

## Results

The study examined the predominance of Western content in the VPA curriculum. From the interviews and observations, the following themes emerged with regard to how teachers implement the VPA lessons:

1. Shortage of instructional and infrastructural resources
2. Lack of training (technical and practical)
3. Attitude of teachers

In his analysis of the Zimbabwean situation at the dawn of the millennium, Nziramasanga (1999) observes that there is an acute shortage of basic textbooks, infrastructure, and essential facilities, especially in marginalised areas, making these areas unattractive to trained teachers. The observation implies that in 1999 there were serious shortages of essential resources, owing to the country's poor economic performance. What should be remembered is that when schools lack the requisite instructional resources, such as textbooks, most teachers become incapacitated. Sharing this view are Motlote et al. (2000), who postulate that, from experience, there can be no meaningful teaching and learning without adequate resource materials. For the officially designed curriculum to be fully implemented as planned, the government or the Ministry of Education should supply schools with adequate resource materials, such as textbooks, to enable teachers and learners to fulfil their roles satisfactorily within the curriculum. As was previously highlighted in this study, an effective development of music literacy depends on the availability of relevant instructional materials. The few teachers who claimed to have been teaching Theory of Music in their schools said they did not know how to extract teaching content from learners' cultural repertoires.

## Discussion

The study revealed a critical shortage of resources, including textbooks with culturally relevant content. Almost all schools lacked the necessary instructional resources to develop learners' music literacy effectively. There were very few basic textbooks on music theory with culturally relevant content for learners. The following verbal quotes illustrate the above finding:

When asked what approach they used to develop concepts in Music among their learners, most teachers cited the lack of textbooks with relevant indigenous repertoires in the school curriculum. Teacher participant one said, "There is a serious shortage of textbooks with heritage-based content. I am spending a lot of time on the internet, yet there is virtually an absence of an indigenised curriculum." Sharing the sentiment was teacher participant two, who felt that "There are serious shortages of textbooks on theory of music with an Afrocentric bias." Teacher participant three also echoed that: "There are no syllabus copies at our school and hence we had nowhere to refer to, during scheming." So far, all the foregoing submissions bear testimony that the development of music literacy will continue to be a pipeline dream due to a shortage of culturally relevant curriculum in most schools. The lack of such instructional resources in schools means that most teachers will fail to develop musical concepts in their lessons effectively.

Furthermore, teacher participant four submitted that: "VPA does not have both children's and teachers' guide textbooks." From such a submission, it becomes clear that the development of many concepts, such as pitch, will continue to derail the Ministry of Education's vision because of a



shortage of critical resources for the effective use of indigenous African repertoires in developing literacy among Visual and Performing Arts Learners in Zimbabwe.

The absence of such critical resources meant that teachers were unable to effectively implement the VPA Syllabus, in general and Music in particular. Of great concern was a critical shortage of textbooks which both the teacher and learners should be using to develop music literacy. Without such crucial textbooks, the curriculum fails to yield the desired results. Music theory demands a lot of reading and practising written exercises if learners are to meaningfully benefit from the teacher's presentation of the curriculum content. The absence of these crucial instructional resources raises questions about how the syllabus could be effectively implemented. In all the schools the researchers visited, the following observations emerged:

The use of indigenous African repertoires in developing concepts among learners in Visual and Performing Arts, particularly music, was very minimal. To make learning effective and meaningful, the use of indigenous African terms to demonstrate rhythm values should be considered. Terms such as *manye* (a slight run), *fambe* (soft walk that involves intervallic stops), and *goo* (sound of an axe usually produced when chopping down a tree) may be helpful. In such a context, two quavers can have their sound values signified by the term *ma-nye* (ru-n) while a crotchet can be shown using the term *goo*, which in Chishona usually identifies the sound of an axe chopping down a tree.

From formal discussions with some teachers, it emerged that one primary reason learners seemed to have difficulty mastering music concepts was that the way teachers taught their lessons in VPA disciplines disregarded a heritage-based approach, which made the concepts very complicated for learners. By implication, such a scenario was likely to leave many learners without the enthusiasm and motivation to master certain music concepts. Based on teachers' voices, the observation clearly showed that implementing the VPA was a challenge because the implementers appeared to have limited pedagogical skills to use indigenous African repertoires in developing concepts in Visual and Performing Arts, especially Music.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the observations discussed in the preceding section, it would be logical to suggest that induction workshops be held to help teachers upgrade their knowledge and skills in extracting teaching content from local communities' musical heritage. Such workshops would allow teachers to meet and share experiences on how best to develop learners' music literacy. A lack of such workshops may mean that teachers continue to play fiddle in how they design and develop music concepts.

As core implementers of the music curriculum, teachers should be equipped with the requisite skills to effectively use indigenous African repertoires to develop learners' literacy in Music and other Visual and Performing Arts disciplines. This will go a long way toward helping teachers become more effective at developing music literacy among senior primary learners. The kind of capacity building aligns well with Nziramasanga (1999), who emphatically recommends that the curriculum for teachers' colleges be aligned with the new system's revised curriculum and teaching methodologies. Significant in the quotation is the need to involve college and university lecturers as experts at different levels of the curriculum development process. It was clear that most teachers needed to be staff-developed on how to teach rhythm from an African perspective. In this context, one feels that college and university lecturers could be engaged in the upgrading of teachers'



knowledge and skills. The teaching profession demands many induction and mentoring sessions to keep teachers abreast of current trends.

Through focus group discussions conducted by the researcher with the learners, some interesting issues were identified. For example, learner participant one mentioned her enjoyment of mbira music, noting that it is rarely sung in class. *“Ini hangu ndinofarira dzimbo dzembira. Kuchikoro hatinyanyi kudziimba. Kazhinji vanongoita zvokungotibvunza mibvunzo yavanouya nayo.”* (Personally, I like mbira music. In most cases at school, we are just asked questions). The learner participant implied that in most cases, teachers often focused more on a set of questions rather than engaging the learners in performing mbira songs. This approach to music teaching may discourage learners from actively engaging with their cultural music repertoires. Ideally, teachers should frequently involve learners in traditional music and movement, thereby allowing them to experience songs they know and like. When learners connect with their traditional music in such a way, they are likely to respond creatively, keeping time with the rhythm. As a result, both the teacher and the class can develop a shared sense of rhythm.

Learner participant two mentioned, *“Lessons differ. Sometimes we practice traditional dances for school competitions.”* What is evident from this statement is that teachers often teach music from the community primarily for its aesthetic value, rather than its academic functions. As a result, one could argue that music is taught as a co-curricular activity rather than utilised to enhance music literacy among primary school learners.

When asked to share their views regarding experiences encountered between their community and school, learner participant three responded, *“They should allow us to discuss and present the performances that we commonly practice at home”* This highlights that students have limited opportunities to practice what they learn in their communities. Consequently, teachers were perceived as alienating learners from their musical heritage during curriculum implementation. In line with Kodály’s pedagogy, teachers should frequently incorporate teaching materials that reflect learners’ musical mother tongue (MMT) to indigenise the school curriculum. Judging by the foregoing excerpts, one sees a glaring negative attitude by school teachers towards the communities’ reservoirs of knowledge. In light of that, one feels that teachers should view the host communities as sources of teaching content. What the teachers need to appreciate is that schools are miniature societies operating within the macro society. They should not view members of the local communities as strangers to the school curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

The integration of indigenous African repertoires into the VPA curriculum promises to provide rich, culturally relevant learning materials in post-colonial states like Zimbabwe. If utilised efficiently, the materials can go a long way in developing literacy among the learners. If teachers could incorporate culturally relevant songs, dances, and instrumental practices into classroom discourse, they could enhance learners’ appreciation of their identity and sense of belonging. Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the integration of indigenous African content into the formal school curriculum remains a mirage. Their utility remains minimal and inconsistent. Teachers reported lacking the necessary training, instructional resources, and institutional support to implement indigenous knowledge systems in their teaching practices effectively. Further, the teaching materials and content delivery were heavily influenced by Eurocentric values, thereby marginalising the local indigenous African repertoires that could otherwise enrich the learning experience. Lastly, the



researchers noted that no matter how industrious teachers work, as long as they do not utilise some culturally relevant curriculum content, the development of literacy in schools will remain a pipe dream. Based on the overall findings and conclusions, we further recommend that the VPA teaching programme include locally available learning materials and indigenous knowing ways, mainly informed by the epistemologies of the learner's cultural environment.

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## Statutory Instruments

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Schools. Heritage-Based Junior School Visual and Performing Arts Syllabus 2024 - 2030. Harare: Curriculum Development Unit

## Website

<https://www.zimsec.co.zw> The Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC)