

## **Indigenous Music Pedagogy and Cultural Identity: A Transformational Model for Sustainable Education in Unity Schools in South-East Nigeria**

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### ***Abstract***

This study investigated the role of indigenous music pedagogy and cultural identity as a transformational model for sustainable educational practices among Unity Schools students in South-East Nigeria. Two research questions guided the study. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The sample comprised 60 Cultural and Creative Arts teachers purposively selected from selected Unity Schools in South-East Nigeria. Data were collected using a 20-item structured questionnaire validated by experts in Music Education and Measurement and Evaluation. The instrument yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.81 using Cronbach's alpha. Mean and standard deviation were used for data analysis. Findings revealed that the integration of indigenous music pedagogy significantly enhances students' cultural identity through increased self-awareness, cultural pride, and deeper understanding of community values. The study further showed that indigenous music pedagogy functions as a transformational model by promoting participatory learning, community engagement, student motivation, and culturally responsive teaching practices. The study concludes that embedding indigenous music pedagogy within Unity Schools in South-East Nigeria can foster sustainable, culturally relevant, and transformative educational practices. It recommends the integration of indigenous music frameworks into teacher training and curriculum development.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Music Pedagogy, Cultural Identity, Transformational Model, Educational Sustainability, Unity Schools.

## **Introduction**

In Nigeria's rich cultural tapestry, indigenous musical traditions are not mere relics of the past, but living, resonant expressions of identity, community and value. Onwekwe (2024) asserts that in the vibrant rhythms of our indigenous musical traditions lies not merely a pastime, but a living archive of cultural memory, identity, resilience, and transformation. Adedeji (2024) claims that music, in this sense, becomes a pedagogical gateway, a conduit through which students reconnect with ancestral wisdom, communal values, and personal meaning. This shows that when the drum falls silent in our classrooms, the heartbeat of our ancestors recedes into the shadows of history. For instance, the sound of the metal gong-bell called the Ogene in Igboland, a sharp tone, once served as a village call, an announcement, a community heartbeat. In the north, the poetic ballads of the Hausa Waka and the strings of the Goge violin carry ancestral memory and moral tales, rendering music a living library of the people's memory. And among the Yoruba, the tradition of apprenticeship under a master musician in informal settings enables the passing on of (orin) song, rhythm, and communal value. Yet, in Nigeria's formal schooling system, these rich traditions are often sidelined, replaced by predominantly Western-centric curricula, instruments, notation systems, and pedagogies thereby marginalising indigenous musics, sidelining local voices, undermining students' sense of cultural rootedness and stifling the potential for music to serve as a fulcrum of cultural identity, creativity, and moral growth (Dordzro, 2023; Nzewi, 2024).

According to Agbabiaka and Albert (2023), in Nigeria's richly plural society, education remains a powerful arena for shaping identity, promoting integration and fostering sustainable national development. The federal government's establishment of the federal unity colleges (commonly referred to as "Unity Schools") sought to nurture a sense of national cohesion beyond ethnic and regional divisions. Nnam and Nmadu (2024) note that Federal Government Colleges, as agents of national integration, operate against a backdrop of urgent cultural, social and educational imperatives: the need to sustain indigenous cultural identity, the need to revitalize meaningful pedagogy, and the need to embed sustainable practices in our schools, through indigenous music pedagogy.

Indigenous knowledge systems refer to the local, historically developed, communal ways of knowing, doing and being in a culture, while music pedagogy is the theory and practice of teaching

and learning music (Babalola, 2023). Therefore, Indigenous music pedagogy has been widely conceptualised as a culturally embedded approach to music teaching that reflects the epistemologies, values, and lived experiences of local communities (Nzewi, 2024; Ojukwu & Obielozie, 2022). It emphasises oral transmission, participatory learning, improvisation, and community-based performance practices. Similarly, Campbell (2020) notes that culturally responsive music education enables learners to construct meaning through familiar cultural soundscapes, thereby strengthening identity and engagement. From the above discussion, it is imperative to know that within this context, indigenous music pedagogy emerges as a potent mechanism through which cultural identity can be revitalised, not simply as heritage for heritage's sake, but as a living, pedagogical resource that can transform educational practices, enhance student engagement, support cultural continuity and contribute to sustainable schooling.

The dominance of Euro-Western music curricula in African schools has been criticised for marginalising indigenous knowledge systems and weakening learners' cultural consciousness (Dordzro, 2023; Sanni et al., 2022). Decolonising music education, therefore, involves repositioning indigenous musical knowledge as central rather than peripheral (Nzewi, 2024). According to Dordzro (2023) and Nzewi (2024), decolonial education refers to efforts to challenge dominant colonial epistemologies and centre local ways of thinking. Similarly, in Nigeria, calls have been made to incorporate indigenous instruments and local materials into music education to strengthen identity and relevance for African children (Ojukwu & Obielozie, 2022). Onwekwe argues that music rooted in local culture carries deep symbolic, cognitive and affective capacities to connect learners with their identity, community and creative potential. Onwekwe (2024), notes that indigenous African music must be situated in the curriculum in such a way that its epistemological framework is true to local ontology, not simply grafted into a Western music syllabus.

From the above discussion, one can conclude that Indigenous music pedagogy, therefore, is concerned not just with what music is taught, but how, why, and in whose image, it is taught, transmission modes, communal participation, oral traditions, improvisation, culturally specific instruments, and the social functions of music (rites, communal bonding, history, identity) are central. This means that indigenous music pedagogy embodies not simply skills acquisition, but the transmission of values, histories, cosmologies, and social roles embedded in sound and

movement. When applied in school settings, such pedagogy can revitalise cultural identity by placing students as inheritors and creators of their own sonic heritage, rather than passive recipients of a foreign music canon.

Cultural identity, from a contemporary educational perspective, is viewed as dynamic and socially constructed through interaction with cultural symbols, practices, and learning environments (Hall, 1996; Gay, 2018). According to Ladson-Billings (2021), cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging to a group and identification with a particular culture, embedded in its shared values, practices, symbols, language, beliefs and collective memory; it is dynamic, socially constructed and deeply embedded in educational, communal and individual lives. In the Nigerian context, cultural identity may include ethnicity, language, traditions, musical practices, world-views and social roles (Odofin, Akanni, & Korede, 2014). In sociology, Okoro (2024) explains that cultural identity involves the internalisation of one's group membership and its associated meanings. From the perspective of music education, identity is also understood as a "resource used by individuals to promote social change." Within African and Nigerian school contexts, cultural identity becomes especially urgent: as youths navigate modernity, globalization, and external musical influences, how they understand who they are becomes critically tied to how they learn and express themselves. The role of music in cultivating or undermining cultural identity must therefore be foregrounded; thus, the need to ensure integration of indigenous music pedagogy to achieve a transformational model.

The term transformational is used intentionally to mean a substantive shift in pedagogical paradigm, from imported or generic approaches to culturally grounded, identity-affirming, locally relevant practices that foster sustained educational outcomes. Transformational model in the educational sense, therefore, refers to a pedagogical framework that seeks not merely incremental improvement but a radical re-visioning of practice so that learners and communities are empowered, culturally rooted, and able to engage critically with their world (Unoma and Ogunleye, 2025). The transformational model not only concerns teaching music skills but also fosters cultural confidence, emotional engagement, communal cohesion, and creative agency. The transformational model, therefore, is concerned with repositioning indigenous music pedagogy so centrally that it becomes the engine for identity, revitalisation and educational transformation. This model is of the opinion that a school may partner with local elders and artisans to bring traditional

instrument-makers into music classes, enabling students not just to play instruments, but to build them, thereby linking craft, culture and creativity. The weekly ensemble might perform at community festivals, the same festivals that carry Igbo proverbs, songs, dances, and oracles, thereby reconnecting the school with its local cultural ecology. Teachers might situate the learning of a rhythm in the story of communal rice pounding or yam festival, drawing the link between sonic pattern and lived practice. The classroom becomes alive with the echo of ancestral voices: the chant, the foot-stomp, the bark of the ogene. Thus, the need for transformational teaching and learning.

In educational literature, transformational teaching is described as an approach “focused on empowering educators to meet the diverse needs of today’s learners” and to create “equitable learning environments where all students thrive.” Beyond that, transformational learning is defined as a strategy whereby students engage in meaningful community-linked experiences, reflect on them, and apply them to produce change at a personal and social level. In the context of indigenous music pedagogy for African schools, a transformational model would mean moving beyond token inclusion of local songs to a fully integrated model in which cultural knowledge, musical traditions, identity affirmation and pedagogy are interconnected and re-shaping the educational ecology. In this model, students might learn to play local instruments (e.g., the Igbo ogene, uchan, akpalu, udu, etc.), not merely as novelty, but as living tools of expression. They would explore the rhythms of their local communities, compose original pieces using indigenous idioms, collaborate in performance groups that draw on oral tradition, and reflect on the meanings and values embedded in those musical practices.

Learning in this way leads to students’ motivation and community engagement. While student motivation highlights the learner’s internal and external drivers for engagement, community engagement emphasises collaboration between schools, families, cultural custodians, and local artisans. For example, in an Igbo cultural community, children might engage with the oro (metal gong), ekwe (wooden slit-drum), and ogene (metal trumpet) in a classroom ensemble, learning the patterns of call-and-response, communal interlocking rhythms, dance invocation, and storytelling. Through this, they not only acquire musical competence but also internalise cultural metaphors of cooperation, respect for elders, communal labour (ikụ ỌLU), and spiritual connectedness

(Onwekwe, 2024). In turn, their sense of identity as Igbo youth is reinforced; the cultural heritage is revitalised; and the school becomes a site of cultural continuity rather than alienation.

From the above discussion, revitalising cultural identity through indigenous music pedagogy offers a transformative model for African schools in general and Unity Schools in Nigeria in particular, where students are culturally anchored, musically engaged, morally grounded, and creatively empowered. It is not simply about preserving tradition, but about adapting it for contemporary relevance, ensuring continuity, and unleashing generative creativity. Onwekwe (2024) asserts that it is about affirming that the heartbeat of tradition still pulses in the classroom and in the lives of our youths. Recognising that students today face alienation from their cultural roots, diminished motivation, and a sense of disconnect from school and community, the model offers a path of reconnection, purpose and transformation. Conclusively, the transformational model in this study refers to an educational model or framework that brings about big change in pedagogy, in learners' dispositions, institutional culture, and community linkages rather than superficial modifications. It implies empowerment, agency, cultural resonance and sustainability.

Sustainable education practices are those that are culturally relevant, locally resourced, and capable of long-term continuity (UNESCO, 2022). Integrating indigenous music into school systems aligns with global calls for culturally sustaining pedagogy and education for sustainable development (ESD). In other words, practices that promote long-term viability, cultural relevance and ongoing renewal. In the Nigerian setting, sustainable educational practices involve aligning schooling with local resources, community involvement, culturally affirming pedagogy and institutional resilience. Unity schools in Nigeria are supposed to engage in such practices.

In Unity Schools located in South-East Nigeria, music education presents a strategic platform for bridging the gap between national integration and cultural rootedness. While these schools were established to foster unity, the neglect of indigenous musical traditions undermines students' connection to their cultural identities. Indigenous music pedagogy, when embedded into the formal curriculum, transforms music education from a purely aesthetic subject into a cultural, social, and identity-building tool. In the South-East context, incorporating instruments such as ogene, udu, and ekwe, alongside traditional performance practices, enables learners to engage with music as lived experience rather than abstract theory. This transformation aligns with

contemporary music education frameworks that advocate for experiential, participatory, and culturally responsive learning (Campbell, 2020). Through ensemble performances, storytelling, apprenticeship models, and community engagement, students in Unity Schools can develop: cultural competence, creative expression, emotional intelligence and social cohesion. Thus, indigenous music pedagogy becomes not merely instructional but transformational, reshaping both the learner and the learning environment. This study, therefore, investigates how revitalising cultural identity through indigenous music pedagogy can form a model of sustainable educational practice within Unity Schools in South East Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In many Nigerian schools, music education neglects indigenous traditions and instead privileges Western musical forms. Despite the significant role of Unity Schools in Nigeria's educational architecture, several pressing issues remain unresolved, for instance, the adoption of imported or generic teaching models that inadequately reflect the rich cultural diversities of Nigeria. It has been observed that students in Unity Schools in South East Nigeria increasingly lack exposure to their own musical heritage in formal instruction, thereby weakening their cultural identity and belonging. Thus, indigenous music traditions, which are a vital repository of cultural identity, are marginalised or underutilised in the school pedagogy. In Unity Schools in South East Nigeria, there seems to be a lack of empirically tested models for integrating indigenous music pedagogy in a way that transforms school practices and sustains student engagement and local relevance. The sustainability of educational practices in Unity Schools in this area is compromised by a reliance on externally driven curricula, weak community linkages and inadequate harnessing of local cultural resources, and without a transformational model that embeds cultural identity, participatory pedagogy and continuity. This Unity Schools risk perpetuating superficial "unity" without substantive cultural inclusion and may fail in their mandate for national integration and sustainable educational development. Therefore, this study tends to investigate how Unity Schools in South East Nigeria can revitalize cultural identity through indigenous music pedagogy in order to develop a sustainable, transformative educational model that bridges cultural relevance, student engagement and institutional resilience.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent does the incorporation of indigenous music pedagogy strengthen cultural identity of students in Unity Schools in Nigeria?

2. In what ways can indigenous music pedagogy serve as a transformational model for sustainable educational practices in Unity Schools in Nigeria?

### **Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for collecting data on participants' perceptions and practices in natural settings without manipulation of variables (Nworgu, 2015). This design was considered suitable because the study sought to examine teachers' views on indigenous music pedagogy and its role in enhancing cultural identity and sustainable practices. The study was conducted in Unity Schools located in South-East Nigeria, a region with rich indigenous musical heritage and strong cultural identity. The population comprised all Cultural and Creative Arts teachers in Unity Schools within the region. A sample of 60 teachers was selected using purposive sampling, justified by the need to engage respondents with relevant expertise in music and cultural education. This sample size is considered adequate for survey studies where the population is specialised and homogeneous (Creswell, 2018). The sample of the study consisted of 60 cultural and creative arts teachers drawn through a purposive sampling technique. A 20-item questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. The instrument was structured on a 4-point Likert-type scale, on which the respondents reacted. The items in the questionnaire were weighted as follows: Strongly Agree (SA)-4 points, Agree (A)- 3 points, Disagree (D) -2 points and Strongly Disagree (SD) -1point.

The criterion of acceptance is 2.50. The instrument was first validated by two senior lecturers, one in the cultural and creative arts and music department and the other in measurement and evaluation, all from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The Cronbach Alpha, Coefficient method was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. It yielded a coefficient of 0.81. A total of 16 copies of the instrument were administered and retrieved, and focused group discussion was conducted. The data was analyzed using mean scores and standard deviation. Any item statement with a mean rating of 2.50 and above was accepted value, while any item statement with a mean rating less than 2.50 was rejected.

### **Results**

The results of the data collected from the study are presented in Tables 1 and 2 according to the research questions.

**Research Question 1:** To what extent does the incorporation of indigenous music pedagogy strengthen cultural identity of students in Unity Schools in Nigeria?

**Table 1: Mean response of male and female teachers on the extent of how incorporation of indigenous music pedagogy strengthen cultural identity of students in Unity School in Nigeria.**

S/N	Item	<u>X</u> 1	Sd2	X2	Sd2	<u>X</u> 3	Dec.	
1	Students become proud when they learn and perform the indigenous music of their culture	3.09	.30	3.16	.37	3.13	.35	A
2	Learning one's culture's music helps in feeling more connected to my community.	3.73	.47	3.79	.42	3.77	.43	A
3	Students identify themselves more as members of my cultural group when engaged in indigenous music.	3.18	.40	3.16	.37	3.17	.38	A
4	Performing indigenous instruments makes students appreciate our cultural heritage.	3.73	.47	3.84	.37	3.80	.41	SA
5	Students believe their cultural music is as important as popular Western music.	3.18	.40	3.16	.37	3.17	.38	A
6	Students feel more confident about their identity when they can play indigenous musical instruments.	3.73	.47	3.79	.42	3.77	.43	SD
7	Students prefer music lessons that include local musical traditions to those that only teach Western music.	3.18	.40	3.11	.32	3.13	.35	A
8	Students' participation in indigenous music classes increases their sense of belonging at school.	3.27	.47	3.11	.32	3.17	.38	A
9	Students' attitudes towards other cultures in Nigeria improve because of exposure to indigenous music from different groups in school.	3.73	.47	3.84	.37	3.80	.41	SA
10	Indigenous music learning makes students value their culture more than before.	3.64	.50	3.84	.37	3.77	.43	SA
Cluster Mean		3.32	.09	3.38	.03	3.36	.07A	

KEY: X1 = Mean for male                      SD1 = Standard deviation for male  
X2 = Mean for female                      SD2 = Standard deviation for female  
X3 = Total mean                              SD3 = Standard deviation for female.

The result presented in Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviations on the extent of how incorporation of indigenous music pedagogy strengthens students' cultural identity in Nigerian secondary schools.

Table 1 indicates that items 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 16 had overall mean score of 3.13, 3.17, 3.17, 3.13, 3.17, 3.07, 3.03, 3.33, 3.07 and 3.00 with standard deviations of .35, .38, .38, .35, .38, .25, .18, .18, .25, .00. The mean scores fall under the decision of agree, based on the real limit of numbers. On the other hand, items 2, 4, 6, 9, 11 and 15 had an overall mean score of 3.77, 3.80, 3.77, 3.80, 3.77 and 3.77 with a standard deviation of .43, .41, .43, .41, .43 and .43, which fall under the decision of strongly agree, based on the real limit of numbers. The cluster mean is 3.36 with a standard deviation of .09. Based on the results from Table 1 above, it is evident that all the items listed above show incorporation of indigenous music pedagogy and how it strengthens students' cultural identity in Nigerian secondary schools.

**Research Question 2:** In what ways can indigenous music pedagogy serve as a transformational model for sustainable educational practices in Unity Schools in Nigeria?

**Table 2:** Mean response of male and female teachers on ways indigenous music pedagogy can serve as a transformational model for sustainable educational practices in Unity Schools in Nigeria?

S/ N	Item	<u>X1</u>	Sd 2	X2	Sd2	<u>X2</u>	Dec.
11.	Students are more motivated to attend music class when it involves indigenous music activities.	3.18	.40	3.00	.47	3.07	.45A
12	The use of indigenous music in teaching helps maintain student interest and engagement over time.	4.00	.00	4.00	.00	4.00	.00SA
13.	Students' creativity in music is enhanced when they learn indigenous musical styles.	3.00	.45	3.11	.46	3.07	.45A
14.	Unity schools should use indigenous music pedagogy to design participatory lessons rather than purely lecture-based.	3.18	.75	3.52	.51	3.40	.62A
15.	Teachers receive training in indigenous music pedagogy and apply new teaching methods as a result.	3.36	.50	3.42	.69	3.40	.62A
16.	Learning indigenous musical traditions encourages students to explore new musical ideas.	3.27	.65	3.47	.61	3.40	.62A
17.	School's culture of teaching will change (become more inclusive, collaborative, culturally grounded) once indigenous music pedagogy is introduced.	3.00	.63	3.11	.32	3.07	.45A
18.	It is believed that indigenous music learning will help students in future music opportunities.	3.18	.40	3.00	.47	3.07	.45A

19.	Teachers' use of indigenous instruments and rhythms makes music lessons more engaging.	3.00	.63	3.11	.32	3.07	.45A
20.	Schools need to establish partnerships with local cultural musicians or communities as part of music pedagogy.	3.09	.30	3.11	.32	3.10	.31A
		<b>3.45</b>	<b>.03</b>	<b>3.45</b>	<b>.00</b>	<b>3.45</b>	<b>.02A</b>

The result presented in Table 2 shows the mean response of teachers on the ways indigenous music pedagogy can serve as a transformational model for sustainable educational practices in Unity Schools in Nigeria. Table 2 indicates that items 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20 had overall mean score of 3.07, 3.07, 3.40, 3.40, 3.40, 3.07, 3.07, 3.07 and 3.10 with standard deviation of .45, .45, .62, .62, .62, .45, .45, .45, and .31 which fall under the decision of agree, based on the real limit of numbers. The cluster mean is 3.45 with a standard deviation of .02. This means that all the items listed above are ways indigenous music pedagogy can serve as a transformational model for sustainable educational practices in Unity Schools in South – East, Nigeria.

### Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that incorporating indigenous music and cultural pedagogy in teaching music serves as a tool for identity reclamation, as it helps to increase identity-awareness and pride, improves attitudes toward other cultures, gets students to be more connected to their communities, deepens students' understanding of cultural values and history, and helps them feel a sense of belonging in school among others. The findings of this study are in line with the work of Agbabiaka & Albert (2023) and Onwekwe (2024), who assert that decolonising African musical language through indigenous composition fosters identity and cultural sustainability. Based on the above, the present researcher concludes that integrating indigenous music pedagogy in the teaching and learning of music in Unity Schools will facilitate students' reconnection with their cultural heritage, thereby reinforcing identity, sparking home-based revival point towards cultural and educational sustainability.

The other findings indicate that ways indigenous music pedagogy can serve as a transformational model for sustainable educational practices in Unity Schools in Nigeria include sustained engagement, participatory teaching methods, community partnerships, cost effectiveness, improved student motivation, and inclusive culture, among others. The findings of this study are in line with those of Adedeji (2024), Nnam, & Nmadu (2024), who assert that schools that engage

local musicians, parents and culture bearers anchor programmes in community life, which supports continuity beyond project phases and sustainability. Based on the above, the present researcher concludes that sustainability in Nigerian schools demands institutional capacity, local engagement and practices that can be sustained.

## **Conclusion**

This study underscores the immense promise of revitalising cultural identity through indigenous music pedagogy as a transformative model for sustainable education in Unity Schools in Nigeria. By connecting music pedagogy to the cultural lifeworld of students, Unity Schools can deepen students' sense of identity, strengthen inter-cultural respect, enhance motivation and engagement, and embed pedagogical practices that are responsive, locally anchored and sustainable. When schools move beyond imported paradigms and embrace culturally grounded pedagogy, they become more than centers of knowledge transfer; they become agents of cultural and educational renewal. For Unity Schools, whose foundational mission includes national unity, such a model not only addresses academic aims but also cultural, social and sustainability imperatives. The key challenge is institutionalising and scaling the model so that it becomes part of the school's DNA rather than a pilot project. In doing so, Unity Schools can reposition themselves as vibrant cultural-educational hubs, promoting identity, belonging and sustainable learning.

## **Recommendations**

1. Unity Schools should incorporate indigenous musical traditions (songs, instruments, rhythms) from diverse Nigerian ethnic groups into their music curriculum and extra-curricular programmes.
2. Teacher professional development programmes should include modules on indigenous music pedagogy, cultural responsiveness and participatory teaching practices.
3. Schools should establish partnerships with local cultural practitioners (musicians, instrument makers, elders) to co-design music pedagogy, mentor students and build community engagement.
4. Budgetary allocations for music programmes should prioritise acquisition and maintenance of local instruments, training of staff and scheduling of culture-rich music activities.
5. The Ministry of Education/Schools authority should develop a replicable indigenous music pedagogy framework for Unity Schools, including curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, resource banks, and monitoring mechanisms.

6. Schools should integrate indigenous music activities into the school calendar (e.g., cultural-music festivals, regular music sessions, community-school concerts) to ensure sustainability rather than episodic implementation.
7. Monitoring and evaluation systems should be put in place to assess student engagement, cultural identity outcomes, pedagogy transformations and institutional sustainability of music programmes.
8. School leadership should promote inclusive culture recognising music traditions of all major Nigerian ethnic groups within the Unity School, as a way of furthering integration and mutual cultural respect.
9. Community and parental involvement should be actively encouraged through music events, instrument workshops and cultural nights, fostering home-school linkage, cultural revival and sustainability.
10. Further research should explore longitudinal impacts of indigenous music pedagogy on students' academic performance, identity formation, inter-cultural attitudes and school sustainability, across multiple Unity Schools and contexts.

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