

Teacher Improvisation and Systemic Challenges in Indigenous Music Education within the CBE Framework in Nyandarua County, Kenya

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Cite this article in APA

Masaa, R., Ndonye, M., & Mochere, J. (n.d.). Teacher improvisation and systemic challenges in Indigenous music education within the CBE framework in Nyandarua County, Kenya. *Journal of music and creative arts*, 5(1), 22–43. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jmca.v5i1.1099>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 17.06.2026

Accepted: 10. 07.2026

Published: 03. 08.2026

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Abstract

This study explored how teachers improvise in indigenous music education within the CBE context in Nyandarua County, Kenya, and the constraints they encounter. Although Competency-Based Education (CBE) has incorporated indigenous music to instil cultural identity, creativity and competency, integrating this instruction in resource-limited rural schools continues to face challenges due to a gap between curriculum policy and its implementation. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design, purposively selected 30 primary school teachers from 10 sub-counties (Kinangop North, Kinangop South, Kipipiri, Ol Kalou, Ol Jorok, Gathanji, Njabini, Engineer, Mirangine, and Ndaragwa), and was grounded in the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy framework. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and were analysed thematically. The results show that teachers relied on improvisation to maintain continuity in teaching. The practices developed to sustain curriculum continuity and engage learners were driven by severe institutional constraints during the curriculum transition. The research findings indicate that teacher-improvised instruction is important in the face of adverse circumstances, but cannot replace systematic investment. Sustainable implementation of indigenous music education within the Competency-Based Education (CBE) framework requires sustained, system-wide, and equitable pre-service teacher preparation, teacher professional development, and resource allocation to build institutional capacity and ensure effective implementation of the CBE framework with an indigenous music learning approach. This study adds to the literature by illustrating how teacher improvisation enables indigenous music instruction in a context of limited resources, whilst concealing systemic shortcomings in CBE delivery.

Key terms: Competency-Based Education, curriculum implementation, Indigenous music education, institutional constraints, systemic accountability, teacher improvisation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The integration of Indigenous Music Education into Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) poses several challenges, particularly in under-resourced schools, where a significant gap remains between policy and practice.

Nyandarua County is an appropriate setting for this study because it is predominantly rural (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2019). At the national level, Competency-Based Education (CBE) requires teachers to use indigenous knowledge and resources in teaching and learning (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD], 2017). However, previous studies on CBE indicate that teachers, particularly in rural schools, face several challenges in implementing it, including inadequate preparation, a lack of instructional materials, and insufficient institutional support (Akala, 2021; Tindowen et al., 2017).

Moreover, most residents identify with the Kikuyu ethnic group, which has a wide range of traditional musical styles, including *gĩcandĩ*, *ndũmũ*, songs, dances, and performance art (Kenyatta, 1938; Nketia, 1974). In addition, the Nyandarua County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP III 2023/2027) prioritises the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge as part of the county's development agenda (County Government of Nyandarua, 2023). For these reasons, the study will be conducted in Nyandarua County to examine how Indigenous Music Education can complement Kenya's CBE policy in schools. However, further research is needed on how primary school teachers use Indigenous Music Education and improvised resources to address shortcomings in the formal education system. Although Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) encourages the use of indigenous knowledge systems to enable students to gain skills, knowledge, and competencies while fostering social awareness, confidence, culture, creativity, and collaboration (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD], 2017), the CBE curriculum has proven challenging in most rural primary schools.

Indigenous Music Education is a constituent of the Creative Arts learning area within the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), which is underpinned by the philosophy of Competency-Based Education (CBE). Competency-Based Education focuses on achieving learning outcomes through experiential, learner-centred, and developmental processes. It emphasises cultivating competencies or proficiencies that enable learners to demonstrate mastery of knowledge and skills, attitudes and values, and interpersonal and collaborative skills in appropriate settings (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD], 2017). The Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) is the national curriculum for basic education in Kenya, developed by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) based on the Competency-Based Education (CBE) philosophy (KICD, 2017). Therefore, while Competency-Based Education (CBE) is merely a philosophical underpinning of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), the latter is applied through the former as a pedagogical strategy. This is the main difference between the two educational concepts, as although they are used interchangeably, they are fundamentally dissimilar. This essay discusses Indigenous Music Education and Competency-Based Education (CBE) and their role in learning music.

Indigenous Music Education is the aspect of music education that addresses knowledge, practices, and the making of musical instruments passed down through generations and performed within local communities. These practices are often oral traditions, demonstrated and transmitted from one community member to another, and they serve various purposes, including the preservation of societal values, history, culture, and relations (Nketia, 1974; UNESCO, 2003). In the Competency-Based Education (CBE) framework, Indigenous Music Education enables learners to explore their indigenous musical

traditions and develop the appropriate competencies through learning experiences that focus on skills such as creativity, communication, collaboration, and cultural awareness.

The successful realisation of Indigenous Music Education is hindered by inadequate teacher preparation, a lack of Indigenous musical instruments and materials, poor infrastructure and insufficient institutional support. Teachers have resorted to improvisation in areas such as modes of teaching, teaching and learning materials, musical activities and the use of community cultural resource persons. These improvisations indicate the extent to which teachers face shortcomings in their preparation and practice. These limitations can stem from a policy-practice gap, which arises when policies are not fully realised in practice. For example, in Kenya, there is a disparity between the objectives of the Competency-Based Education (CBE) reforms and the teaching and learning that actually take place in schools, particularly in Indigenous Music Education. Although teachers resort to improvisation to realise the CBE objectives, this practice conceals deeper policy-practice gaps.

The study is grounded in the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), which advocates using students' culture, language, knowledge, and community resources as pedagogical tools to enhance learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). It treats students' culture as an educative resource to be used in classroom interactions and in teaching and learning processes. It therefore seeks to integrate indigenous knowledge systems into the formal school curriculum. This includes local music genres, indigenous musical instruments, and community cultural resource persons.

Although studies on the realisation of CBE and on teacher readiness, preparation, and resources have been undertaken, there remains limited information on how teachers improvise Indigenous Music Education, particularly in a rural Kenyan setting. Most studies have addressed the general issues of CBE realisation, neglecting those of Indigenous Music Education and teacher improvisation. This study sought to fill this research gap by examining how primary teachers improvise Indigenous Music Education within Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), with a specific focus on how such improvisation manifests, the institutional constraints involved, and how this practice supports CRP and the sustainable realisation of Indigenous Music Education. The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework underpinning this study. It reviews concepts and frameworks related to Indigenous Music Education, Competency-Based Education, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, teacher improvisation, and institutional constraints. Section 3 describes the methodology used in the study. It further highlights the research context, target population and sample size, research design, and data analysis procedures. Section 4 presents the findings and discussion, and Section 5 contains the conclusion, recommendations, and implications for teacher education, policy, and the sustainable realisation of Indigenous Music Education.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous Music Education and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Although Indigenous Music Education has been introduced in Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) to foster cultural identity and build competencies and creativity, its application in primary schools remains poorly understood. Translating curriculum intentions into classroom practice is challenging, especially because teachers are expected to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into a formal education system that demands systematic content delivery and evaluation. This reflects a policy-practice disconnect between

the recognition of Indigenous knowledge in curriculum frameworks and its implementation in daily classroom experiences. To understand the sustainability of culturally responsive music teaching, it is important to clarify what Indigenous Music Education means and how it is understood and applied within Competency-Based Education (CBE).

Indigenous Music Education is the teaching and learning of indigenous musical traditions, practices, instruments, performances, and cultural meanings developed, sustained, and passed down by indigenous communities. In indigenous cultures, traditional musical knowledge is typically transmitted orally and learned through apprenticeship, participatory learning, and performance, in contrast to Western traditions, which often rely on written notation and standardised methods of transmission (Nketia, 1974; UNESCO, 2003). Indigenous Music Education, therefore, extends beyond the development of musical skills to encompass culture, social relationships, history, and community values. This perspective positions indigenous music as a knowledge system that supports learners' understanding of their (indigenous) cultural settings.

The literature on culturally responsive pedagogy is globally significant as a foundation for understanding the educational value of indigenous knowledge. Ladson-Billings (1995) states that effective pedagogy celebrates learners' cultures while fostering academic success, and Gay (2018) argues that learners' cultural experiences should be used as tools for teaching and learning. Campbell (2018) emphasises the need to recognise a variety of musical traditions and to foster inclusive classrooms that disrupt dominant Western musical practices in music education. These studies are valuable for revealing the connection among culture, identity, and meaningful learning. However, the focus has largely been on the theoretical significance of cultural responsiveness and diversity. Comparatively, little has been written about the adaptation and implementation of indigenous musical knowledge in specific classroom settings.

Importantly, the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy align with traditional African ways of transmitting musical knowledge from one person to another. Observation, participation, imitation, and apprenticeship, which are characteristic of Indigenous African music-learning practices (Nketia, 1974; Nzewi, 2007), can be linked to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy because they are grounded in students' cultural contexts (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

African scholarship provides empirical and conceptual foundations for grounding Indigenous Music Education in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy by affirming that African musical knowledge is relational and participatory (Nketia, 1974) and that music education among Indigenous Africans is an integrative process of knowing music, culture, identity, and community (Nzewi, 2007). This scholar argues that Indigenous music is not merely an art form but a legitimate educational system. These perspectives complement learner-centred approaches that emphasise authentic, contextual learning experiences. However, much African literature documents musical traditions and their cultural interpretations and meanings, while only a few empirical studies examine how these knowledge systems are negotiated in current formal school settings.

These culturally responsive principles are evident in Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE), which emphasises learner-centred, contextual learning through the use of indigenous knowledge and experience (KICD, 2017). CBE is a method for learning and demonstrating knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes in

real-life contexts, and CBC is a curriculum framework that supports the implementation of CBE in Kenya's basic education system (KICD, 2017). Indigenous music is included in CBE, enabling learners to develop skills and competencies, including creativity, communication, collaboration, and cultural awareness, through engagement with local music. Current research on CBE in Kenya indicates that the success of curriculum reform depends on teacher readiness, professional development, and instructional resources (Okeyo & Mokua, 2023; Koros & Achieng, 2023; Cherotich et al., 2023). These studies offer valuable information about the process of curriculum implementation; however, they have mostly addressed general problems associated with CBE implementation without taking into consideration the particular issues of Indigenous Music Education implementation. Thus, there is a lack of studies on teachers' perceptions of Indigenous musical knowledge, its incorporation into the teaching process, and the negotiation of curriculum requirements within the context of local culture.

Overall, the reviewed work shows that Culturally Responsive pedagogy offers a conceptual framework for understanding Indigenous African Music Education. In contrast, African studies reveal that this pedagogical approach to learning has been practised through observing, interacting, imitating, and participating in community activities. However, the challenges of implementing Indigenous Music Education within the CBE context in Kenya have not been examined in depth, particularly in rural primary schools. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the engagement of primary school teachers from Nyandarua County with Indigenous Music Education in the CBE context, shedding light on how indigenous knowledge is understood, adopted, and applied in Kenyan classrooms. It contributes to the growing debate on culturally relevant music education by highlighting the relationship between curriculum requirements and indigenous knowledge systems.

African Music Education and Curriculum Tensions

The integration of indigenous learning into formal schooling remains a persistent challenge in music education, as many school curricula adhere to Western approaches. Today, educational reforms around the world are emerging to promote culturally relevant programmes and recognise the importance of indigenous knowledge (UNESCO, 2003; Campbell, 2018). Nevertheless, in many cases, traditional music education still prioritises written notation, standardised assessment, and teacher-centred systems, creating contradictions between curriculum expectations and indigenous music traditions.

These tensions can be better understood through the lens of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), which holds that teaching and learning should begin with learners' cultural knowledge and experience (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). From this perspective, Indigenous African Music Education is not an exception to effective pedagogy; rather, it is a manifestation of it, with learning taking place within the context of students' cultural knowledge and practices. Building on the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, African scholarship affirms that Indigenous Music Education has been inherently responsive to culture throughout its development. According to Nketia (1974), African music is transmitted through observation, participation, and imitation, and is subsequently performed through song and dance. Nzewi (2007) views Indigenous African music as an educational system that aims to develop competence in music-making and to nurture creativity, cultural identity, and social responsibility. This body of research makes a significant contribution to the field by recognising authentic music as a genuine knowledge system rather than merely a form of art. Nevertheless, the studies highlight the importance of recording African musical

traditions and promoting their inclusion in educational processes. Yet, they lack sufficient empirical evidence on how teachers can balance authentic and formal training in contemporary classrooms.

These principles are integrated into Kenya's Competency-Based Education, which emphasises learner-centred instruction, experiential learning, and the use of local knowledge and experience in learning (KICD, 2017). Current literature on CBE indicates that contextualisation is important for achieving desired competency-based learning objectives (Koros & Achieng, 2023; Cherotich et al., 2023). However, research on curriculum implementation as a whole is limited in its ability to establish how Indigenous Music Education is applied in classroom practice. As a result, there is insufficient evidence on how teachers balance Indigenous music with the requirements of the formal curriculum in primary schools.

Collectively, the literature review highlights that Culturally Responsive Pedagogy offers a theoretical basis for interpreting the educational significance of Indigenous Music Education. In contrast, African scholarship provides an empirical foundation for discussing the mechanisms by which culturally responsive instruction has been practised through observational participation, imitation, and communal performance. Nevertheless, despite the general recognition of the pedagogical benefits of Indigenous African music, the reviewed literature offers limited evidence on how teachers navigate the tensions raised by such practices in actual music classrooms. This research fills this void by exploring the methods primary teachers in Nyandarua County use to incorporate Indigenous Music Education into the Kenyan Competency-Based Education, thereby enriching the existing literature on culturally responsive music education and the integration of indigenous knowledge.

Teacher Improvisation in Indigenous Music Education

In this study, teacher improvisation is defined as the teacher's creative adaptation of teaching approaches, tools, and musical activities to suit practical classroom situations while preserving both cultural and educational aspects. Indigenous Music Education is the teaching and learning of the music systems of communities, including musical knowledge, tools, and practices, that learners acquire through active practice and experience. Competency-Based Education (CBE) is an educational system in which the primary focus is on acquiring competencies.

International research frames improvisation as part of adaptive expertise, enabling teachers to adapt creatively to unpredictable classroom challenges. From the perspective of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), teachers' improvisation practices encompass "using their knowledge and skills to respond to students' cultural knowledge, experiential knowledge and community knowledge" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 83; Gay, 2018). Thus, CRP offers a conceptual framework linking adaptive expertise and music educational practice in indigenous African music learning, in which improvisation is understood as a practice-informed response to opportunities to experience, participate, imitate, and perform within one's local cultural community, rather than as an individual, innovative act.

Music education research links improvisation to flexibility, reflective practice, experimentation, and responsive teaching (Biasutti, 2015; Sawyer, 2017). Taken together, this literature helps to understand improvisation as a professional skill of educators rather than merely a musical ability. Nonetheless, the global perspective on improvisation is strongly shaped by the Western educational tradition, in which improvisation is understood as invention and sudden problem-solving. Such a conceptualisation does not

provide sufficient grounds for explaining improvisation in indigenous knowledge systems, where music creation is usually collective and rooted in cultural and community identity. Hence, the global literature offers important theoretical insight but does not explain how teachers use improvisation in culturally oriented music education.

Building on the idea proposed by Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, African scholarship has established that improvisation is an inherent aspect of Indigenous Music Education. According to Nketia (1974), African musical knowledge is passed down through observation, participation, performance, and replication. At the same time, Nzewi (2007) asserts that creativity in African music is realised through communal participation and enculturation rather than individual innovation. Generally, the pedagogical perspectives described above align with the principles of learner-centred education. In particular, Nketia (1974) and Nzewi (2007) contend that indigenous African music is transmitted through participation, observation, imitation, and creative alteration, making improvisation a repository of musical learning. This idea is significant because it frames improvisation as a pedagogically important process. Nonetheless, African literature has largely focused on documenting native musical traditions, performance styles, and cultural values rather than on how these concepts are implemented in current classrooms. Even if the literature demonstrates the cultural legitimacy of improvisation, it does not explain how educators incorporate indigenous musical practices into their work, given formal schooling requirements such as curricular frameworks, evaluation standards, and institutional demands.

These culturally responsive principles are reflected in Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE), which promotes learner-centred, experiential, and contextualised learning by integrating local knowledge and creativity into classroom practice (KICD, 2017). According to KICD (2017), teachers are encouraged to draw on local musical resources and cultural contexts when teaching Creative Arts, as creativity and cultural awareness are essential to education. Implementation studies highlight several issues with teachers' preparedness, instructional materials, and curriculum demands (Oduor & Orodho, 2021; Waweru, 2022). While teachers often adapt available resources to meet classroom needs, research on these adjustments as pedagogical improvisations remains limited, particularly in Indigenous Music Education. Thus, it remains unclear whether teacher improvisation constitutes purposeful, culturally responsive teaching or a means of coping with the system's limitations. From the viewpoint of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, teacher improvisation is further justified because it allows educators to respond to students' cultural backgrounds and musical traditions, thereby making learning more contextual and authentic (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018).

In general, the reviewed literature highlights teachers' improvisation, either as an innovative pedagogical approach or as part of professional development. In the international literature, improvisation is regarded as an adaptive expertise for addressing emerging challenges (Biasutti, 2015; Sawyer, 2017). African scholars emphasise its role in transmitting musical knowledge from one generation to another through observation, performance, participation, and imitation (Nketia, 1974; Nzewi, 2007). Kenya's Competency-Based Education promotes learning-centred, learner-responsive instruction that incorporates indigenous knowledge into the curriculum. However, research is needed to determine how primary school teachers use improvisation to teach indigenous Music Education within formal learning institutions.

This study seeks to address the knowledge gap by examining how primary school teachers in Nyandarua County, Kenya, experience teaching Indigenous Music within the CBE programme. Furthermore, the study offers insights into the interconnection among the teacher's imaginative capacities, cultural knowledge, and the current realities of institutions implementing Indigenous Music Education in modern classrooms in Kenya.

Institutional Constraints in Indigenous Music Education

Global scholarship has consistently identified institutional support as essential to effective music and arts education. Adequate preparation, professional development, curriculum support, instructional leadership, and resources enable teachers to implement learner-centred and culturally responsive pedagogies (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). From the perspective of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), support entails providing the material and immaterial resources that enable teachers to draw on their students' cultural resources (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). By extension, the responsibility for curriculum responsiveness is not borne solely by teachers but also by educational institutions. While the reviewed literature offers a comprehensive understanding of music education in institutional settings that foster high-quality music learning environments, most of it originates in contexts with established resources. This may limit the applicability of the findings to resource-limited settings, where music teachers may need to rely more on local cultural resources and less on formal structures to facilitate effective learning.

Drawing on the conceptual framework of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, African scholars conceptualise institutional support as encompassing both the provision of resources and the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems as foundational to education. Nzewi (2007) states that colonial education excluded African indigenous musical knowledge, whereas Akuno and Human (2024) argue that legitimate music education must incorporate indigenous knowledge systems into its curricula and teacher training. These arguments extend the concept of institutional support beyond the mere provision of resources to include cultural legitimacy and community participation. However, African literature has focused predominantly on curriculum change and cultural conservation, with limited empirical data on teachers' classroom experiences. Consequently, although the literature supports Indigenous Music Education, there is limited information on how teachers navigate institutional constraints during curriculum implementation.

The culturally responsive values are evident in Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) agenda, which is committed to achieving learning-centred, contextual, and competency-based education through local knowledge, creativity, and authentic learning experiences (KICD, 2017). These tenets offer teachers opportunities to draw on local cultural knowledge and resources when teaching Creative Arts. UNESCO (2024) likewise agrees that including culture and indigenous knowledge in education promotes learners' engagement and the conservation of cultural heritage. Despite these measures, implementation is hindered by insufficient teacher training, limited teaching materials, and unequal access to education (KICD, 2017; UNESCO, 2024). In particular, rural educational institutions often lack classroom materials and instruments for teaching Indigenous Music Education.

Although Kenyan studies indicate that teachers often use locally available materials to enhance instruction, little is known about the implications of this practice for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). In CRP, resourcefulness in teaching practice reflects teachers' ability to respond to their students' cultural needs despite restrictive institutional environments (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, the extent to

which teachers can navigate these challenges while remaining attentive to the cultural authenticity of Indigenous Music Education needs further exploration.

Together, the cited literature demonstrates that institutional support is essential to effective, culturally responsive music education. International research identifies the organisational preconditions for high-quality arts education (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). African scholarship highlights the importance of institutional endorsement of Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural legitimacy (Nzewi, 2007; Akuno & Human, 2024)—Kenya's Competency-Based Education philosophy incorporates these principles by prioritising contextualised, learner-centred instruction.

Nevertheless, there is limited information on how teachers navigate institutional barriers to Indigenous Music Education in Kenyan primary schools. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the experiences of primary school teachers in Nyandarua County. The paper outlines the methodology, findings, discussion and implications for teacher education, policy and practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995) and later expanded by Gay (2018). CRP holds that teaching and learning occur “through the lens of students’ cultural references and not through the lens of culture as some additional variable to be incorporated into instruction” (Gay, 2018, p. 132). In other words, CRP views students’ learning through their cultural identities, prior experiences, community knowledge and practices, and ways of being. It recognises the importance of students’ cultural backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge for academic achievement, cultural competence, and social justice (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). In music education, CRP manifests through learning by observation, participatory action, modelling, apprenticeships, performances, and community events (Nketia, 1974; Nzewi, 2007). Notably, these cultural practices resonate with Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) philosophy articulated in the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD, 2017). CBE promotes learner-centred, experiential, and contextual learning by utilising indigenous knowledge and local content. Therefore, the study adopted the CRP perspective to understand teachers’ integration of Indigenous Music Education amidst institutional constraints.

In addition, CRP informed the development of the study procedures and research instruments. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed from the key constructs of culturally responsive teaching identified by Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2018). The interview questions were designed to elicit respondents’ experiences and perceptions regarding the integration of learners’ cultures, Indigenous musical knowledge and skills, local musical instruments, community cultural cadres, and culturally relevant interactions in Indigenous Music Education. Similarly, the classroom observation checklist was designed in line with the principles of culturally responsive practices. As a result, the checklist included items such as learner participation, use of Indigenous songs and musical instruments, contextualised interactions and instruction, improvisation, and community involvement. Finally, document analysis was conducted using lesson plans, schemes of work, and learner records to reveal how teachers used Indigenous musical knowledge to meet the objectives of competency-based education. Indeed, CRP guided the construction of the content and structure of the research instruments. The thematic analysis of the findings (interviews, observations, and field notes) was also informed by CRP principles. Initially, ideas emerging from the

study's findings were organised into major themes using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) coding procedures. As a result, the following conceptual categories were identified: Indigenous cultural knowledge and skills, teacher improvisation, learner and community participation, and institutional constraints to implementing Competency-Based Education (CBE). In this case, CRP provided a sensitising framework (Bowen, 2006) that helped to understand respondents' accounts of using learners' cultures, Indigenous musical knowledge and skills, and local musical instruments as pedagogical resources to mitigate the lack of teaching materials, inadequate professional preparation, and institutional support.

By using CRP as an analytical framework, this study sought to interpret teacher improvisation in Indigenous Music Education beyond personal pedagogical preferences, revealing how teachers draw on learners' cultures, Indigenous musical knowledge, and local musical instruments to address the challenges of providing quality music education. Concurrently, the study aimed to demonstrate how institutional factors moderate the integration of CRP to achieve a positive learning outcome. As a result, the study found that teacher improvisation, along with the use of Indigenous cultural knowledge, musical skills, and locally available musical instruments, was used to compensate for the lack of professional preparation and institutional support. However, CRP could not solve the problem of CBE's inappropriate implementation, which constrained respondents from fully delivering Indigenous Music Education.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore primary school teachers' lived experiences of improvisation and the challenges they encountered when teaching Indigenous music within Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) structure. The phenomenological approach was well suited to the study's objectives, as it seeks to understand how participants make sense of their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was informed by the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which holds that reality is socially constructed through participants' experiences and interactions within educational settings (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2015).

The research was conducted in Nyandarua County, Kenya. It is a predominantly rural area where Kikuyu Indigenous music has long played an important role in local life. It is regarded as an integral part of their culture (Kenyatta, 1938; Nketia, 1974). The county exemplifies the resource challenges faced by many rural Kenyan schools, including a lack of teaching materials and infrastructure for implementing the curriculum (County Government of Nyandarua, 2023; Kaime, 2012). These factors created favourable conditions for this research to analyse how teachers implement Indigenous Music Education despite various constraints.

The study population comprised 3,225 registered public primary school teachers across Nyandarua County's ten sub-counties (TSC, 2025). Official TSC teacher staffing records and school lists were used to construct the sampling frame, which provided information on the distribution of teachers across the county. A purposive maximum-variation sampling approach was used to select 30 teachers (3 per sub-county) from the sampling frame, based on the following criteria: teaching Creative Arts, having at least 1 year of experience implementing the CBE, and incorporating Indigenous Music into their teaching practices. This selection ensured geographical and contextual diversity while minimising selection bias. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018).

Although phenomenological research commonly uses relatively small samples (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018), including 30 participants in this study was deemed appropriate because it enabled representation across the county and yielded rich descriptions of teachers' lived experiences. Data collection and initial analysis were conducted concurrently. Immediately after each interview, new codes were compared with those from previous interviews to determine whether the new data provided additional information. The researchers concluded that thematic saturation was reached when subsequent interviews did not yield any new codes, categories, or interpretations regarding teachers' improvisation, institutional constraints, and Indigenous Music Education (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018).

Demographic data on participants were collected through background questionnaires administered before interviews. Most participants were female (66.7%) and aged 31–40 (70.0%). In addition, most held diplomas (83.3%) and had no formal training in music education. Therefore, these demographic factors were not compared statistically, but they informed the context. Data were collected using three complementary research methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis, thereby enabling methodological triangulation. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, allowing participants to express their views on implementing Indigenous Music Education within the Competency-Based Curriculum. The interview questions focused on teacher preparation, improvisation practices, the level of institutional support, resource availability and challenges encountered during implementation. Each interview lasted approximately 30–35 minutes. As requested by participants, interviews were not recorded, and only detailed field notes were taken during the interviews and revised immediately afterwards.

Classroom observations were conducted using a structured observation checklist covering instructional approaches, student engagement, resource use, activities involving Indigenous music, and the use of real or improvised instruments. Observations took place during regular Creative Arts classes to document standard classroom practices. Document analysis was conducted alongside interviews and observations, drawing on teachers' lesson plans, study syllabus, students' exercise books, and curriculum guidelines. This approach was used to understand how Indigenous Music Education was incorporated into lesson and classroom planning, how it aligned with the Competency-Based Curriculum requirements, and how it could be modified in light of institutional constraints.

The instruments used in this study, comprising interview guides, observation checklists and the document analysis schedule, were developed from relevant literature on Indigenous Music Education, Competency-Based Education, culturally relevant pedagogy and qualitative research methods. University supervisors vetted the instruments to ensure they were relevant and clear before piloting with five Creative Arts teachers from neighbouring Laikipia County, which has educational characteristics distinct from those of the study. The findings of the pilot were used to refine the interview questions, observation indicators and document analysis procedures, thereby enhancing the credibility and applicability of the study tools.

The data were examined using thematic analysis in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-step model: becoming familiar with the data, producing initial codes, creating candidate themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a final report. Coding was conducted on interview notes, observations, and documentation. Findings from the three data sources were then compared to enhance credibility through triangulation. Guided by Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), the analysis

focused on how teachers applied Indigenous knowledge, cultural community resources, and available materials to enhance learning despite institutional constraints. The cross-case analysis identified a recurring pattern in which teachers relied on creative adaptations to address the scarcity of training, teaching resources, and institutional support.

The Kabarak University Research Ethics Committee (KUREC), together with the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), granted permission for the research before data collection began. Written consent was obtained from each candidate after they were informed of the research purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the measures to maintain confidentiality. In addition, participants' anonymity was ensured by assigning identification codes, and research records were stored on password-protected computers and in locked cabinets.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of teachers' experiences implementing Indigenous Music Education under the constraints of Competency-Based Education (CBE) in Kenya. The findings, derived from thematic analysis, are organised into two themes: (1) improvisation techniques teachers use to sustain Indigenous Music teaching and (2) institutional barriers that impede curriculum implementation.

Theme 1: Improvisation Mechanisms in Indigenous Music Instruction

Table 1 below shows the percentage of participants who mentioned each improvisation mechanism in the interviews. Participants often reported more than one improvisation strategy, so the percentages do not sum to 100 per cent. Frequency counts are presented only to indicate the prevalence of themes and do not support statistical inference. The third and last song we talk about is Prof. Omari's "Tamaa". In the song, greed is roundly condemned as the source of all evil. The song is a reminder that life would be much simpler if people learnt to live within their means. According to the speaker, it does not matter whether one has enough or not; they are likely to be blinded by untamed desire for more. All the images in the songs are locally sourced and they communicate powerfully to the audience who can only relate with them too well.

Table 1: Indigenous Music Education, Mechanisms of Teacher Improvisation

Improvisation Mechanism	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Use of improvised (homemade) musical instruments	28	93.3
Engaging community elders and cultural resource persons	27	90.0
Incorporation of local cultural experiences in teaching and learning	24	80.0

As shown in Table 1 above, making musical instruments was the most commonly reported strategy, followed by inviting community cultural resource persons and drawing on learners' own cultural experiences in the classroom. Classroom observations provided evidence of the regular use of these

practices during Creative Arts lessons, and the school's schemes of work and activity records also documented their use. The three data sources suggest that teachers employed a variety of improvisation strategies to sustain Indigenous Music instruction despite a lack of institutional support.

Using Improvised Musical Instruments

The most commonly reported practice is the use of improvised musical instruments. Most interviewees stated that genuine Indigenous musical instruments are non-existent or inadequate in their educational institutions. To compensate for this deficit, teachers designed their teaching materials from locally sourced materials such as gourds, plastic containers, tins, sticks, bamboo, wood, wire, and bottle caps. Classroom observations corroborated these statements: in most institutions, students used improvised rattles, shakers, drums, and other percussion instruments during singing, rhythmic activities, and dances. The findings of the document analysis supported these observations, as there were very few authentic Indigenous musical instruments listed in the inventory and few instances of lesson plans that included authentic tools.

One of the participants expressed their view by saying:

"I do my best, but when our learners hear the beautiful rattling sounds during the wedding ceremony, they know that this sound is not the actual sound from the instruments." (Teacher T9).

Another teacher made a point by stating:

"We are using plastic containers to produce the drums because the students still need to practise the rhythm even when we do not have the traditional instruments in the school." (Teacher T3).

Educators used improvised musical instruments because they could not obtain traditional Indigenous instruments, as evidenced by interview data, observations and documentation. Using locally sourced materials enabled practical classroom activities, but teachers consistently emphasised that improvised instruments could not match the sound quality, craftsmanship or cultural significance of authentic Indigenous musical instruments. The findings suggest that improvisation was used primarily to address resource constraints and was not regarded as a preferred teaching method. This perspective aligns with Campbell (2018) and Schippers and Grant (2016), who argue that live, authentic musical resources are integral to maintaining Indigenous musical traditions and supporting culturally connected music learning.

Engaging Community Cultural Resource Persons

Additionally, teachers turned to local knowledge bearers to overcome the limitations of their training. Several participants reported inviting well-respected elders, traditional musicians, or dancers from their community to teach Indigenous songs, dances, storytelling, and the use of musical instruments. Classroom observations showed successful engagement of community resource persons in practical and cultural activities. In addition, documents such as lesson plans, co-curricular activity programmes, and school event schedules clearly indicated community members' participation in cultural days and music festival preparations.

One teacher observed:

"When we organise music festivals or cultural days, we invite an elder who knows the songs and dances better than we do. Learners become more confident because they are taught by someone who grew up with the traditions." (Teacher T15).

Another teacher added:

"Some songs cannot be adequately explained in textbooks. Elders help learners understand the meaning, the dance movements, and when those songs are traditionally performed." (Teacher T27).

Community cultural resource persons complemented teachers' practical knowledge of Indigenous Music, as evidenced by interviews, classroom observations and school documents. The elders shared not only songs and dances but also accounts, historical knowledge, cultural meanings and performance contexts that were not recorded in textbooks. The results indicate that community involvement had a positive effect, making classroom learning more authentic and helping to address teachers' lack of practical preparation. The results align with the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018), which emphasise the educational value of community knowledge, and with UNESCO's (2024) recommendation on the participation of communities in protecting ICH through education.

Using Learners' Cultural Experiences

Teachers also reported integrating learners' cultural experiences into classroom instruction. Interview participants explained that they frequently linked music lessons to ceremonies, weddings, storytelling traditions, harvest celebrations, church gatherings and other familiar community events. Classroom observations showed that learners participated more actively when lessons drew on songs, dances and rhythmic patterns already encountered in their communities. Document analysis likewise revealed that lesson plans incorporated local songs, folk narratives and community performances as instructional examples.

One teacher remarked:

"It is easy for students to sing songs when I connect them to the ceremony they have attended at home, because they already know what the song is about." (Teacher T22).

Another teacher explained:

"Many learners already know these songs from their grandparents. I simply build on their village experiences." (Teacher T6).

In all three data sources, teachers have consistently linked their classroom practice to students' cultural traditions, including ceremonies, traditional storytelling, religion, and local celebrations. According to respondents, students have been more active in classes where the music learnt in school was recognised

as inspired by their socio-cultural environment. The data analysis indicates that referencing students' cultural experiences has increased their participation in classes and positively influenced the context for learning Indigenous Music. This interpretation seems logical, as it is consistent with the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015), which regard students' cultural backgrounds as the basis for learning, and with Competency-Based Education.

Overall, evidence from interviews, classroom visits and text analysis shows that teachers used complementary forms of improvisation to sustain Indigenous Music instruction despite limited institutional support. Improvisation enabled teachers to implement the curriculum by drawing on available materials, community cultural skills and learners' prior learning experiences. However, the results also indicate that poor teacher preparation, resource constraints and a lack of institutional support largely drove these improvisational practices. Therefore, improvisation proved to be an efficient classroom practice and a sign of the systemic challenges facing the implementation of Indigenous Music Education within the Competency-Based Education system.

Theme 2: Institutional Barriers in Indigenous Music Education

In Table 2 below, we summarise the institutional obstacles highlighted by participants in the interviews. The sum of the percentages exceeds 100 per cent because multiple challenges were identified. The figures are presented to illustrate the prevalence of the themes in the qualitative data, not for statistical comparison or inference.

Table 2: The Institutional Challenges of Implementing Indigenous Music Education

Constraint	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Insufficient practical training in indigenous music	30	100.0
Theoretical teacher preparation, overreliance on it	28	93.3
Poor teacher confidence in teaching instruments and performance	22	73.3
Trouble incorporating competencies into work performance	20	66.7
No indigenous musical instruments available	28	93.3
Lack of organised teaching materials	27	90.0
Strong dependence on improvisation	24	80.0
Limited audio-visual learning resources	22	73.3
Difficulty adapting from 8-4-4 to CBE instructional approaches	25	83.3
Inadequate retraining on competency-based music instruction	26	86.7
Mismatch between curriculum expectations and school preparedness	24	80.0
Limited institutional support during the transition	22	73.3

According to the data in Table 2, 30 of 30 participants reported insufficient teacher training as the leading institutional barrier. This was followed by insufficient theoretical training for 28 participants and the unavailability of Indigenous musical instruments for 28 participants. The lack of teaching resources for 27 participants and insufficient professional development in Competence-Based Education for 26 participants were the next barriers. Classroom observations and document analysis also confirmed these findings, revealing a scarcity of teaching resources, limited professional development opportunities, and widespread use of improvised teaching practices. The three data sources combined reveal more than just material constraints of institutions; they indicate weaknesses in both teacher preparedness and curriculum support.

Insufficient Preparation of Teachers

The results revealed that insufficient teacher preparation was a significant institutional barrier to the effective implementation of Indigenous Music Education through Competency-Based Education (CBE). The majority of participants reported that the pre-service teacher education programme emphasised music theory rather than practical training in Indigenous songs, dances, traditional musical instruments, and a performance-based curriculum. As a result, many teachers felt they were not adequately prepared to teach Indigenous Music Education.

The problem has been consistently highlighted in interview data. For example,

One teacher said:

"At the teaching college, we studied a lot of music theory, but we rarely learned to perform traditional songs or play traditional instruments. I had to learn most of these skills myself when I started my teaching career." (Teacher T21).

In similar remarks, another participant said:

"Most of the training was theoretical. We studied the significance of Indigenous music, but our practical experience was limited. As a result, it is difficult for us to teach performance activities." (Teacher T6).

Classroom observations showed that several teachers preferred not to conduct practical demonstrations that required expertise in Indigenous music and instead based their classes and lessons on singing, simple rhythm exercises, and other improvised activities. Additionally, an analysis of the documentation indicated that few Indigenous music activities were planned for lessons, and that the documents concerning teachers' professional development included few references to their training in Indigenous music and competency-based education.

The results show that inadequate preparation for teaching undermined teachers' confidence and practical skills in delivering Indigenous Music Education within the Competency-Based Education (CBE) environment. The data indicate that, although the participants were dedicated and developed their knowledge through self-experience, they acknowledged that self-efficacy cannot substitute for formal pre-service and in-service training courses. Many had to compensate for the absence of necessary knowledge and skills through improvisation.

These results are corroborated by the KICD report (2017), which identified teacher competence as the most important factor in implementing Competency-Based Education. This aligns with the UNESCO report (2023), which argues that teachers' lack of preparation is a significant hindrance to curriculum reform. In the context of Culturally Responsive Teaching, the findings suggest that educators need both pedagogical competence and cultural knowledge to implement Indigenous Music Education effectively (Gay, 2018). Rather than being perceived as individual weaknesses, the participants' experiences reflect a broader systemic failure in teacher education and professional development. Overall, the findings indicate that insufficient teacher training extends beyond individual teachers' experiences and encompasses systemic

flaws in teacher education and practice. This led teachers to improvise when teaching Indigenous Music, even without practical experience.

Inadequate Teaching and Learning Resources

The results indicate that a lack of teaching materials was a significant institutional limitation that hindered the effective use of Indigenous Music Education.

Most participants reported a lack of authentic Indigenous musical instruments, teaching resources, and audiovisual materials, leading to considerable improvisation. Classroom observations showed that practical lessons were conducted mainly with improvised percussion instruments made from locally available materials. At the same time, a review of school records and archives revealed that authentic Indigenous musical resources were practically non-existent.

One of the participants mentioned

"Our school does not have any authentic instruments, so we are forced to think of creative solutions using cans and plastic containers, with the understanding that practical classes need to continue either way." (Teacher T19).

Another teacher commented:

"I sometimes borrow instruments from local elders when students have to prepare for their music competitions, as our school does not own them." (Teacher T6).

Access to audiovisual aids was yet another factor impeding effective teaching. As one participant put it:

"Many students have never even seen some of the traditional instruments. I am forced to rely on pictures, drawings, and demonstrations." (Teacher T20).

The research findings affirm that teachers had to devise ways to continue teaching classes. Still, students could not engage with the authentic sound, performance techniques, and cultural implications of Indigenous Music. It was not the teachers' choice but a lack of facilities that forced them to improvise. The findings support other research demonstrating the importance of having real musical sources. They corroborate prior research indicating that the use of authentic musical resources plays an important role in both the practical application and the dissemination of Indigenous music knowledge (Campbell, 2018; Schippers & Grant, 2016).

This study aligns with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, which holds that meaningful learning involves not only students' lived experiences but also access to authentic cultural resources (Gay, 2018). Likewise, UNESCO (2022) argues that intangible cultural heritage is protected through formal education pedagogy only when suitable cultural materials and collaboration with local communities are in place. Thus, the continued reliance on improvisation indicates deeper structural inequalities within educational institutions that hinder the effective implementation of competency-based education and mask its flaws through teachers' ingenuity.

Challenges in Implementing Competency-Based Education

Findings also showed that teachers faced various problems when incorporating Indigenous Music into Competency-Based Education (CBE). Most respondents reported difficulties with retraining after curriculum reforms, making the switch from the 8-4-4 curriculum, and reconciling curriculum expectations with what was available in schools. Classroom observations showed that teachers were often forced to modify learning activities by sourcing materials from their environment to meet curriculum requirements. At the same time, document analysis indicated that sustainable professional development and institutional support were lacking following the implementation of CBE.

According to one participant's explanation:

"Curriculum makes demands on students, but we do not have the means or even the expertise to teach them." (Teacher T15).

A different participant added:

"Even if we are supposed to apply CBE, the follow-up training has been inadequate. Most of what I do is driven by my own initiative and experience." (Teacher T24).

These results indicate that not only teacher competency and resource limitations, but also system-related shortcomings in curriculum implementation, hinder the effective application of Indigenous Music within CBE. Teachers were expected to provide practical, student-centred instruction despite limited opportunities for professional development and institutional support. As a result, many teachers used their ingenuity and improvisation to bridge the gap between the curriculum's recommendations and classroom realities.

The findings corroborate the arguments of the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD, 2019), which emphasises the need for ongoing teacher capacity building, the provision of necessary learning resources, and a supportive environment to attain competencies. Similarly, the OECD (2020) asserts that curriculum development will be successful if it goes hand in hand with coherent investments in teacher training, learning resources and institutional support. Furthermore, the findings support the idea of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, which holds that implementing culturally relevant pedagogy depends not only on teacher commitment but also on the necessary institutional frameworks (Gay, 2018).

Subsequently, these results suggest that teachers' reliance on improvisation indicates broader gaps in implementation across the educational system. Despite demonstrating their ability to sustain Indigenous Music education, their adaptive strategies have compensated for systemic deficiencies in teaching-channel development, curriculum support and institutional readiness.

In summary, the findings from the interviews, classroom observations and document analysis reveal that institutional barriers to Indigenous Music Education are deeply interconnected. Inadequate teacher training, insufficient access to authentic resources, and problems with the implementation of Competency-Based Education led to increased improvisation among teachers. However, improvisation highlighted

ongoing weaknesses in teacher training, resource provision and the support provided by educational institutions.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The research explored how educators impart Indigenous Music Education within Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) despite obstacles posed by the institutions involved. The study found that teachers can use three improvisation methods: making improvised instruments, drawing on local cultural resources, and incorporating students' experiences into lessons. Nonetheless, the findings indicate that improvisation transcends pedagogical ingenuity. Teachers' inventiveness is not necessarily proof that the institutional sphere is ready for CBE. Instead, their improvisation is a means to address shortcomings in the school education system, including teacher training, the provision of teaching materials, curriculum implementation, and educational support. Thus, improvisation serves as a coping strategy that provides teachers with the resources they need.

Examining the results from the perspectives of both Competency-Based Education and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy indicates that successful Indigenous Music Education depends on teachers' commitment to these pedagogies and on adequate institutional support. To implement Indigenous Music Education effectively, teachers need the required level of cultural competence, access to authentic materials, and a favourable institutional framework that supports learner-centred education. If these structural concerns are not addressed, effective implementation of Indigenous Music Education within CBE will remain vulnerable and depend largely on particular teachers rather than on the sustainability of educational institutions.

Recommendations: The results imply several recommendations for the effective implementation of Indigenous Music Education within the Competency-Based Education framework. First, teacher-training institutions may revise their music-teacher preparation procedures to place greater emphasis on Indigenous musical skills and knowledge. Teacher training programmes may include not only theoretical components but also practitioner training, through which teachers could learn directly from musicians, instrument makers, dancers and other community members.

Second, the Ministry of Education, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), and providers of teacher professional development should develop a framework for ongoing in-service training in Indigenous Music pedagogy within the Competency-Based Education model. This will significantly enable teachers improve their knowledge and professionalism in practical music performance, culturally relevant teaching, and the assessment of music competencies, as well as their use of Indigenous knowledge in teaching practices.

Additionally, educational institutions and the ministry should improve access to instructional resources by providing financial support to acquire teaching tools, including authentic materials such as Indigenous musical instruments, culturally appropriate teaching materials, and electronic archives of audio and video recordings of local music. Furthermore, partnerships should be formed with schools, museums, cultural centres and communities. Lastly, education policy must make space for community participation in Indigenous Music Education. Curriculum implementation guidelines should explicitly recognise traditional artists, musicians and holders of cultural knowledge as educational partners whom teachers can engage to

support classroom curriculum and instructional planning, assist with teacher preparation, provide resources to enhance the curriculum, and help protect Indigenous musical heritage. In conclusion, strengthening Indigenous Music Education within Competency-Based Education requires shifting the emphasis from teacher improvisation to a system-wide institutional model that incorporates practical teacher training, Indigenous cultural resources, ongoing professional development and strong community-based connections. This would improve curriculum implementation and help preserve and pass on Kenya's musical cultural legacy.

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