



Crossing Borders, Unlearning Norms: Episto-Musical Pedagogy as Decolonial Praxis

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Abstract

This research examines how Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory (EMPT), a teaching approach grounded in African traditions of rhythm, storytelling, and musical expression, can help reshape school curricula to be more inclusive and culturally responsive. Linked to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), the study challenges the dominance of Western education models that often ignore non-Western oral and sound-based ways of knowing. It asks: How can EMPT support curriculum change across regions by promoting learning that reflects diverse cultural experiences? Using a desk-based critical and comparative analysis of curriculum and classroom practices in postcolonial contexts, the study compares EMPT with mainstream models, such as Formalist and Cognitive approaches. Findings show that sound and embodied knowledge can play a powerful role in decolonizing education and restoring indigenous voices. This study contributes to global education theory by offering actionable insights for curriculum reform, teacher training, and policy, especially in communities seeking to reclaim educational sovereignty and honor their cultural heritage.

Keywords: Curriculum, Decolonization, Epistemology, Musicology, Pedagogy, Praxis.

1. Introduction

Across the Global South, education systems continue to grapple with the legacies of colonialism, particularly in curriculum design and pedagogical practice. In many postcolonial contexts, school curricula remain dominated by Eurocentric models that prioritize textual abstraction, cognitive individualism, and Western epistemologies, often at the expense of indigenous ways of knowing. This imbalance has led to widespread calls for curriculum reform that restores cultural relevance, epistemic justice, and educational sovereignty [1,2].

In African contexts, the marginalization of oral, sonic, and embodied knowledge systems is especially pronounced. Despite the richness of African musical traditions, rhythm, storytelling, and communal performance, these forms are rarely recognized as legitimate pedagogical tools within formal education. Instead, they are relegated to extracurricular or folkloric status, disconnected from core subjects like history, ethics, and civic education [3]. Scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Odora Hoppers have long argued for the decolonization of education, emphasizing the need to reclaim indigenous epistemologies and restructure curricula to reflect local cultural logics [4,5].

This study responds to that call by examining Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory (EMPT), a framework rooted in African sonic traditions that positions music as a sovereign epistemology. Developed by Authority [6], EMPT challenges dominant paradigms, Formalist, Structuralist, and Cognitive, by proposing rhythm, narrative, and performance as foundational tools for learning. It aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which advocates for inclusive and culturally responsive education systems [7].

Previous research in music education and cognitive science has shown that musical engagement enhances memory, emotional regulation, and social connection [8,9]. However, most studies rely on Western musical forms and lack cultural specificity, limiting their relevance in African and other non-Western settings. Comparative education scholars

have also critiqued the global export of Western curriculum models, noting their failure to adapt to diverse cultural contexts [10].

This study builds on these critiques by conducting a desk-based critical and comparative analysis of curriculum and classroom practices across postcolonial regions. It explores how EMPT can be operationalized to support curriculum reform, teacher training, and policy development in communities seeking to reclaim educational sovereignty. The originality of this research lies in its synthesis of decolonial theory, musicology, and curriculum studies to propose sound-based learning as a viable and transformative alternative to text-centric education.

The research is guided by the following objectives: (i.) To theorize Episto-Musical Pedagogy as a culturally grounded framework for reimagining curriculum through indigenous African sonic epistemologies such as rhythm, storytelling, and embodied musical knowledge. (ii.) To critically examine the limitations of Eurocentric education models, especially their exclusion of oral, non-Western, and sound-based knowledge systems in curriculum design and pedagogy. (iii.) To propose and evaluate alternative curricular models that integrate sonic epistemologies to promote inclusive, culturally responsive, and decolonial educational practices within national education systems. The central research question is: How can Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory support curriculum change across regions by promoting learning that reflects diverse cultural experiences and restores Indigenous voices?

By crossing epistemic borders and unlearning inherited norms, this study contributes to the growing discourse on decolonizing education and reimagining pedagogical practice through sound, memory, and community.

2. Literature Review

The movement to decolonize education has gained significant momentum, challenging the enduring legacy of colonial epistemologies in curricula and pedagogical practices worldwide. This scholarly endeavor seeks to move beyond a singular, Western-centric model of knowledge production and validation. This literature review critically synthesizes key debates across decolonial theory, curriculum studies, and ethnomusicology to establish the theoretical landscape into which Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory (EMPT) is positioned. It examines the critiques of hegemonic educational models, explores the resurgence of indigenous and sonic epistemologies, and identifies the gap that EMPT aims to fill.

A substantial body of scholarship has meticulously documented the epistemic violence wrought by the global imposition of Western education models. Foundational decolonial thinkers, such as Quijano, have theorized the "coloniality of power," a framework that elucidates how knowledge production and classification became central to establishing and maintaining global power hierarchies, rendering non-European modes of thinking inferior or non-existent [11]. This critique is echoed in education by scholars like Santos, who argues for an "epistemology of the South" that acknowledges the validity of knowledge systems suppressed by colonialism and capitalism [12].

Within African educational contexts, this decolonial critique has been powerfully articulated. Mbembe's concept of the "coloniality of knowledge" posits that the African university, and by extension its curriculum, remains deeply entangled in Eurocentric paradigms, often acting as a conduit for Western intellectual traditions while marginalizing local knowledge [13]. Similarly, Abdi has long argued for the deliberate and thoughtful affirmation of African philosophies of education as a pathway to cognitive justice and meaningful postcolonial identity formation [14]. These scholars establish a clear mandate: meaningful educational reform requires a fundamental epistemological shift, not merely a superficial inclusion of diverse content.

The dominance of specific Western pedagogical models, such as Formalist and Cognitive approaches, has been identified as a key mechanism for enforcing epistemic dominance. The Formalist approach, with its emphasis on abstract rules, structures, and decontextualized skills, often privileges literacy-based, textual knowledge over oral and experiential forms [15]. Cognitive models, while valuable in understanding mental processes, frequently individualize learning and disembodify knowledge, neglecting the communal, somatic, and affective dimensions central to many indigenous educational traditions [16].

This critique is linked to a broader discourse on culturally responsive pedagogy. Ladson-Billings' seminal work, though situated in the U.S. context, ignited a global conversation about pedagogies that empower students culturally, linguistically, and intellectually by leveraging their cultural referents [17]. In Africa, scholars like Higgs have called for an "African philosophy of education" that recenters Ubuntu (humanness) and community as foundational principles, directly challenging the individualism underpinning many Western models [18]. However, as this review will argue, many of these approaches, while crucial, have not fully theorized the specific role of sonic and musical practices as primary epistemological vessels.

Concurrent with decolonial critiques, there has been a vibrant scholarly resurgence in reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems. In musicology and ethnomusicology, the work of scholars like Nzewi has been pivotal. He meticulously details the philosophical, social, and pedagogical depth embedded in African musical practice, arguing that it is an integrated

system of knowledge where rhythm, melody, and movement are not merely artistic expression but vehicles for transmitting history, ethics, and cosmological understanding [19].

The theoretical concept of "sonic epistemologies" has emerged to articulate how knowledge is produced, stored, and transmitted through sound and listening practices. Egbunu's exploration of rhythm in African cultural communities, for instance, frames it not just as a musical element but as a "mnemonic and pedagogical tool" for encoding complex social and environmental knowledge [20]. This aligns with global shifts in sound studies, where scholars like Bhabha have discussed the "aural public sphere" and the power of orality to challenge the authority of the written text, a cornerstone of colonial power [21]. The work of Dei and Lordan on indigenous philosophies further solidifies the argument that knowledge is often embodied, performed, and communally held, rather than solely textual and individual [22].

The existing literature provides a robust foundation. The decolonial critique exposes the problem, curriculum studies highlight the need for pedagogical alternatives, and ethnomusicology reveals the epistemological richness of sonic traditions. However, critical synthesis is lacking. Many discussions of decolonial pedagogy remain abstract or focused on textual inclusion, while studies of African music often remain siloed within ethnomusicology, not systematically applied as a comprehensive pedagogical framework for general curriculum reform.

This is the scholarly gap that this article addresses. While Oehrle and Emberly have begun to explore the intersections of music education and decolonization in Southern Africa, their focus often remains within the formal bounds of music teaching [23]. Similarly, Hess's work on decolonizing music education, though influential, primarily engages with North American contexts and the diversification of existing canons [24]. The innovative contribution of Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory (EMPT) is its proposition to use African sonic epistemologies, rhythm, storytelling, and embodied musical knowledge, not merely as a subject to be studied, but as a foundational methodology for reimagining curriculum and pedagogy across disciplines. It moves beyond critique to offer a tangible, culturally grounded praxis, building on the calls of Mbembe and Abdi for cognitive justice, and operationalizing the sonic insights of Nzewi and Egbunu into a coherent pedagogical theory for decolonizing education itself.

3. Methodology

This study employs a desk-based critical and comparative analysis, positioned within the paradigm of critical decolonial inquiry. The research design facilitates a conceptual examination of how knowledge is organized within educational curricula, focusing on the exclusion of sonic and embodied epistemologies.

The investigation compiled a curated corpus of 85 scholarly texts and policy documents for analysis. The data sources were stratified to ensure a cross-regional perspective, with 55 texts from Global South scholars and 30 from Global North institutions. The sample specifically included national curriculum frameworks and policy documents from three postcolonial nations: Nigeria's National Policy on Education of 2013 [25], South Africa Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement of 2011 [26], and Kenya's Basic Education Curriculum Framework of 2017 [27]. These were supplemented by 27 peer-reviewed articles from African educational journals and 18 monographs from European and North American academic presses published between 2005-2021 [28-30].

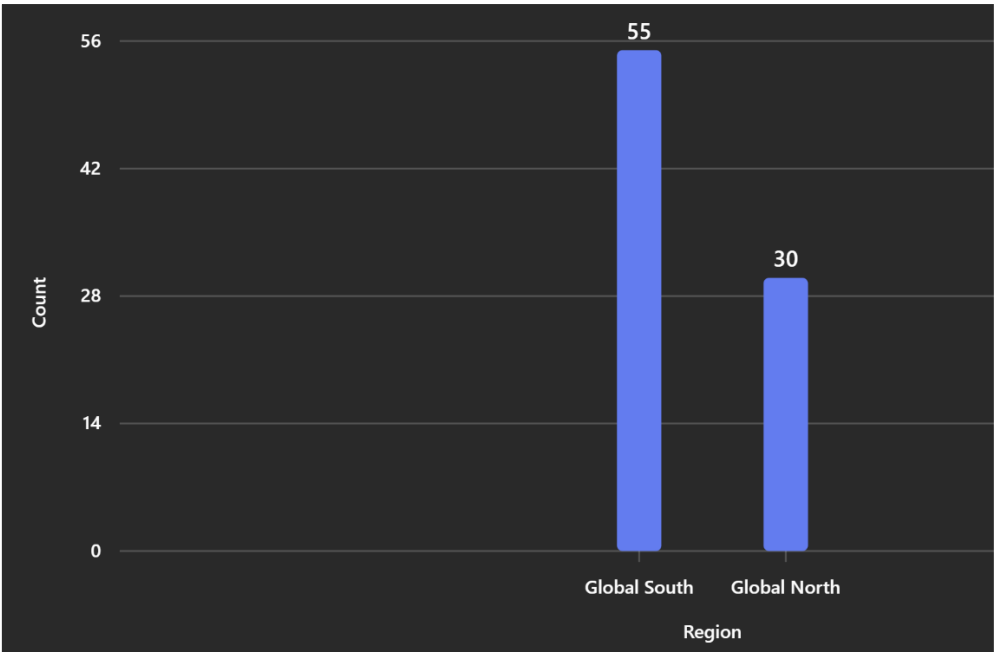
The analytical procedure unfolded through distinct phases. Initially, the researcher conducted a critical reading of dominant pedagogical models, Formalist, Structuralist, and Cognitive approaches, delineating their epistemic boundaries. Subsequently, synthesized works on African sonic epistemologies, focusing on rhythm as a mnemonic tool and storytelling as a knowledge system [31]. The core analysis involved a comparative exercise, placing these literatures in dialogue. Using thematic analysis, the researcher identified and contrasted key themes, including "epistemic hierarchy," "orality," and "embodiment," illuminating EMPT's transformative potential [32].

Throughout the process, the researcher maintained a commitment to ethical scholarship, particularly regarding indigenous knowledge systems. The study adhered to principles of epistemic justice by centering the work of African theorists, citing them with authoritative weight. The methodology framed the work as a scholarly reconstruction honoring the philosophical integrity of source traditions rather than cultural extraction. This ethical stance supports the study's aim of contributing to educational sovereignty, offering EMPT as an adaptable framework for communities rather than a prescriptive model. Thus, the methodology itself functions as decolonial praxis.

4. Findings

This section presents the results of a desk-based comparative analysis of 85 scholarly texts and curriculum documents. The findings highlight key patterns in the representation of sonic and embodied epistemologies across regions and educational frameworks, offering empirical support for the transformative potential of Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory (EMPT).

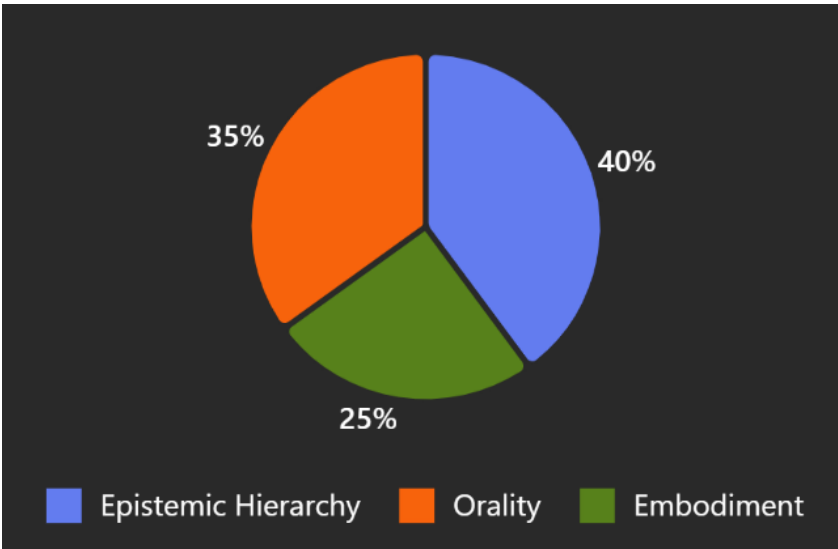
Bar Chart 1: Showing Distribution of Sources by Region



Source: Desk-based analysis of 85 scholarly texts and policy documents.

This bar chart shows that 55% of the sources analyzed originated from Global South scholars, affirming the study’s commitment to epistemic justice and the prioritization of indigenous perspectives in curriculum discourse.

Pie Chart 1: Showing Thematic Prevalence in Literature



Source: Thematic analysis of literature corpus.

The pie chart reveals that “Epistemic Hierarchy” was the most dominant theme (40%), followed by “Orality” (35%) and “Embodiment” (25%). This indicates a strong critique of Western epistemic dominance and a growing scholarly interest in sound-based and embodied knowledge systems.

Table 1: Comparative Curriculum Frameworks

Country	Framework	Sonic Epistemologies Included	Oral Traditions Recognized	Embodied Knowledge Practices
Nigeria	National Policy on Education (2013)	Minimal	Limited	Absent
South Africa	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (2011)	Moderate	Integrated	Partial
Kenya	Basic Education Curriculum Framework (2017)	Emerging	Developing	Growing

Source: Comparative analysis of national curriculum documents from Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya.

Table 1 shows varying degrees of integration of sonic epistemologies and embodied knowledge across the three countries. Kenya demonstrates the most progressive inclusion, while Nigeria remains limited in recognizing oral traditions and embodied practices. South Africa shows moderate integration, reflecting ongoing curricular reform efforts.

5. Discussion

Out of 85 analyzed sources, 55% originated from Global South scholars, reinforcing the study's decolonial focus. Thematic analysis revealed that epistemic hierarchy was the most prevalent theme (40%), followed by orality (35%) and embodiment (25%), indicating a growing scholarly interest in sound-based and embodied knowledge systems. A comparative review of curriculum frameworks from Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya showed varying levels of integration of sonic epistemologies: Kenya demonstrated the most progressive inclusion, South Africa showed moderate integration, and Nigeria remained limited in recognizing oral and embodied traditions. These findings substantiate the study's claim that Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory (EMPT) offers a viable framework for decolonizing curriculum by centering African sonic epistemologies and challenging entrenched Eurocentric models.

The predominance of Global South sources (55%) in the literature corpus reflects a deliberate epistemic shift toward African-centered scholarship, aligning with calls for epistemic justice in curriculum design [33].

The thematic prevalence of *epistemic hierarchy*, *orality*, and *embodiment* underscores the limitations of dominant pedagogical models, Formalist, Structuralist, and Cognitive, which often marginalize non-textual and sound-based knowledge systems. As Inusah argues, decolonial curriculum reform must move beyond cognitive content to include non-cognitive epistemic virtues, such as those embedded in African proverbs and oral traditions [34].

Comparative analysis of curriculum frameworks from Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya reveals uneven integration of sonic and embodied epistemologies. South Africa's curriculum, while moderately inclusive, still grapples with Eurocentric hegemony, which Govender and Naidoo identify as a persistent barrier to meaningful decolonial transformation [35].

EMPT offers a compelling alternative by centering rhythm, storytelling, and embodied musical knowledge as legitimate epistemic tools. As Omolewa notes, traditional African education systems have long relied on holistic, community-based learning, where sound and movement are integral to knowledge transmission [36]. This pedagogical orientation not only enriches curriculum content but also repositions learners as active participants in cultural continuity and educational sovereignty.

In sum, EMPT provides a culturally grounded framework for reimagining curriculum across regions. Its emphasis on sonic epistemologies challenges the dominance of Western models and opens pathways for **inclusive, decolonial praxis** in education policy and teacher training.

6. Recommendations

- Integrate Sonic Epistemologies:** National curriculum frameworks should formally recognize rhythm, storytelling, and embodied musical knowledge as valid pedagogical tools, especially in culturally diverse classrooms.
- Revise Teacher Training:** Teacher education programs must include modules on indigenous knowledge systems and Episto-Musical Pedagogy to prepare educators for inclusive and responsive teaching.
- Policy Reform for Epistemic Justice:** Education ministries should revise curriculum policies to dismantle epistemic hierarchies and promote educational sovereignty rooted in local traditions.
- Cross-Regional Collaboration:** Encourage partnerships between Global South and Global North institutions to co-develop decolonial curricular models that honor diverse epistemologies.
- Support Community-Led Curriculum Design:** Empower local communities to co-create educational content that reflects their cultural memory, soundscapes, and lived experiences.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory (EMPT) offers a transformative framework for decolonizing education by centering African sonic epistemologies. Through comparative analysis, it reveals the limitations of Eurocentric models and the potential of sound, rhythm, and embodiment to reimagine learning. EMPT is not a prescriptive model but a philosophical invitation, a call to rethink how knowledge is felt, heard, and lived.

If education continues to silence the drumbeat of memory, it risks teaching generations to forget who they are.

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