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I call it music. Validating diverse music expressions in the classroom in Kenya

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Emily A. Akuno

I Call It Music

Validating Diverse Music Expressions in the Classroom in Kenya

Introduction

This chapter[1] proposes the integration of learners' community music activities with the classroom experiences, by articulating the social significance of the music of learners' experience. Informed by the author's experiences as a performer-educator, it presents the need to conceptualise music from the consumer-learner's perspective, with a view to bridging the community-classroom divide and contributing to a meaningful music classroom experience for learners and teachers alike.

Zake (1986) advises that Africa's cultures have music for every event of life, an indication of an abundance of musical moments and works. This ubiquity may not be to the advantage of the music learner, because it makes music something that everybody does. The challenge for the organisation of teaching in this context arises out of the diversity of musical expressions in the learners' environment, and their distinct elements that endear them to the learner on the one hand, and the requirements of a set curriculum on the other hand. A negotiation of this rift may lead to more productive music learning programmes, culminating in a more musically literate and culturally aware (intelligent) society. This article postulates that this can be achieved through a process of communal value acquisition (CVA), where the symbiotic relationship between the musician and his/her music leads to social recognition based on the value that their music is accorded by society. This recognition is a consequence of the cultural value and significance of the communal functions that the music graces and facilitates.

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[1] An earlier format of this paper was first presented as a Keynote address for the 28th EAS / ISME online Regional Conference in Freiburg, Germany, March 26th 2021

Background Information

Situated on the eastern coast of the continent of Africa, Kenya boasts a population of forty-three (43) cultural communities with distinct languages, some of which have several associated dialects and cultural activities. This results in diverse music-propelled cultural expressions and activities, which play a significant role in the culturally identifiable activities of the people of Kenya.

Having inherited a Western formal education system at independence in 1963, the successive governments in Kenya have articulated what education should entail to enable them to achieve their development agenda. These have not adequately articulated the place of culture in education, besides the indication that education is to broadly enhance culture (Kenya Institute of Education, 2002). However, government development plans, and especially the Vision 2030 (Government of Kenya, 2007) – with its three pillars of development that include the social pillar, and the 2010 constitution (Government of Kenya, 2010) that establishes culture as the foundation for the constitution – provide scope for music education planners to incorporate culturally relevant issues, procedures and content into the learning process.

Kenya's education system provides for the study of music at all levels of education. Music is presented as part of a larger arts programme in primary school that is not offered for examinations. At secondary school, it is an elective subject that learners may choose, leading to the possibility of pursuing it at post-secondary training. There are schools that, though they do not offer music as a curricular subject, provide opportunities for learners to engage with music in the overall school curriculum, often through participation in choral, instrumental and dance performance activities. One can say, therefore, that there is provision for learners to engage with music while at school and that the school system has the potential to influence the musical culture of the nation, thanks to the diversity of experiences availed to learners.

Song has traditionally been an engaging avenue for passing knowledge to children in Kenya (Zake, 1986). There is music that would accompany an individual through the various stages of intellectual, emotional and social development (Zake, 1986; Nketia, 1992). This abundance of music, pertinent to cultural events that mark transitions from childhood into adulthood and create communal cohesion, has survived social change brought about by adoption of formal learning and resultant forms of social and economic engagement.

The migration to urban centres and to regions occupied by people of different linguistic and hence cultural orientations has not only resulted in displaced populations, i.e., people removed from the security of the familiar. It has also created environments and communities of mixed-cultural heritage. These have people who may do the same thing in different ways and for different reasons, or do different things to serve a common purpose, and thus the diversity of culture. The individuals have, in these new spaces, found ways of

adapting so that they can retain something of significance to them in order to retain their identity. The performance of music continues to characterise this identity. This is evident in the day-to-day engagements of the people in mixed-cultural settings, where, for example, they import musicians from the village for important socio-cultural ceremonies in the city – like weddings – or engage a group that performs music from their mother linguistic and cultural communities.

The Kenyan soundscape, as observed by the author, has become, especially over the past ten years or so, a melange of musical expressions of diverse types, forms, origins and contexts of application. Whereas there are opportunities for music making in the community, the church and the school are prominent spaces for collective artistic development through music performance. Much of the learning is often activity or project focussed, such as an ensemble preparing to perform at a concert. Despite the specific objectives of such training, music knowledge and skills are transmitted through the experience of mastering musical works.

The music classroom's activities that follow a strict curriculum of, heavily, music-literacy-oriented activities, are often removed from these day-to-day applications of music. The school community music activities include choir, club, talent evenings and similar co-curricular learner-focused or initiated programmes. They capture numerous talented, passionate, and willing learners: the student musicians. Those who select music as a subject of study (towards examination), the music students, are often fewer. This contrast is starker at the upper levels of school where learners choose whether to study music towards their high school qualification or not. It is not uncommon to hear an acknowledged performer strongly opposing any suggestions that they should study music, with interesting reasons, one of which is often *'music is hard'*. This points to the fact that something happens in the classroom that does not resonate with the community's concept or practice of music and thus the need to understand how the community music concepts and experiences can colour the classroom music concepts and experiences.

Conceptual Position

The musical arts as practised in African communities are a significant component of human existence (Zake, 1986; Nketia, 1992). They involve humans in activities that rely on and foster interaction with others. They are shared experiences out of which there are common benefits, depending on the individual's engagement, participation, and immersion in the communal event that the musical arts grace. These benefits include socialisation and collaboration.

The participatory (Oehrle, 1993) and communal (Akuno, 2019) nature of the musical cultural expression leads to learning in, of, and through music by doing it alongside others.

It is the nature of the subject that it provides clues as to how it ought to be learnt, how the knowledge that it contains ought to be disseminated and assimilated; in other words, teaching and learning. In ensemble performance, for example, Agawu (2016) indicates that the success of the master drummer is tied to the solid and cohesive atmosphere created by the rest of the ensemble. Similarly, Nzewi (2019) explains how the solo finds anchor in the chorus in the call-and-response structured folk songs. The meaning and value of an individual part in an ensemble is dependent and hinged on the overall success of the others in the ensemble. The value of their role in the performance is tied to the value of their role in creating the ensemble. In isolation, they are of no communal significance. It is only when they are part of the community, part of the ensemble, that they contribute to creating, and are thus valuable to, the community. This imbues them with communal value. The musicians find credence as they occupy a social space, through what we shall call communal value acquisition (CVA). The music-making that facilitates CVA is a process that is important in defining the learners' lived music environment. It colours their concept of music.

CVA's implication and application are explained here below.

- It implies a social status imbued with an entity on account of their function in the socio-cultural structure of the community.
  The value of the music, musician or music resource is tied to their role in the community. Should they contribute to and be significant to the processes of the community, their value will be commensurate to that role.
- In terms of application, it is the process and act of becoming valuable as a consequence of integration in, and interaction with, the community.
  Communal value is acquired progressively as one engages with the community. Engagement with – and participation in – communal events happens at different levels. Whereas some of these engagements are age-specific, others may be related to one's professional or economic activities[2]. Participation in communal events leads to CVA for individuals.

As a communal activity, music is an avenue for developing CVA in societies where there is music for all the stages of life and accompanying socio-cultural activities (Zake, 1986; Nketia, 1992), be they ritual, work or entertainment events (Agawu, 2016). Music facilitates its makers' engagement with the community in a culturally significant and meaningful way

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[2] Growing up, I remember the way my grandparents held teachers with awe and respect, as those vested with authority in the community, whose opinion was always sought on matters that affected the village. Their value was associated with their profession as custodians of knowledge and shapers of minds, which is the way in which society perceived (valued) the teaching profession.

to the satisfaction of the community and the individual participant. As a context for communal value acquisition, it is significant to the individual whose value it enhances. Further, it is a sonic environment that enables individuals to learn, i.e., to acquire various sensibilities, sensitivities and abilities that constitute cherished values in society.

The meaning of music is jointly defined and created. It takes those who engage in it to gain meaning from its experience. This experience validates the music-makers' individually derived values. Participation in music is therefore a complete goal or objective of making the music. Participation is also, therefore, a valid aim of music education. In this way, music education becomes an avenue for creating social cohesion, because those who participate in it engage in a communal or group event that allows them to see each other's life and existence.

This communal-participatory nature of music gives rise to teaching and learning by engaging with music, effectively participating in it communally. It is supported by the structure of Kenyan communities' music-making endeavours and provides a point of departure for working towards validating the learners' music expressions. Once validated, these expressions become legitimate material for music instruction.

Problem

The focus of this article is the challenge for music education to enable learners to acquire communal value as a culturally significant outcome of formal music education. The selection of music content, the delivery of the articulated syllabus and learners' preferred music as they enable communal value acquisition are matters to ponder in order to ensure a socially significant music education.

Premise

This article starts from the premise that arts and culture are a basic literacy (Akuno, 2016a) that should be availed to everyone, because they facilitate an existence that is meaningful and fulfilling (Reimer, 1989). That there is a vast diversity and quantity of artistic expressions in the Kenyan learners' environment is both a blessing and a challenge because one may not see the need to study it if it can be readily accessed and experienced. Successful education requires that decision-makers be aware of the central humanising role that the experience of the arts plays in creating the social fabric of society (Nzewi, 2019).

The second premise is that the learner is a consumer of music and may already have established preferences before stepping into the music classroom. The author recalls instances where a learner has walked into class and clearly articulated why they wanted

to learn music. In individual performance instruction, it has often sounded like a desire to sound like their icons but camouflaged as a need to be able to perform a particular piece of music or in a named style. Though not all learners state what music they want to learn, that revelation is often encased in the *'why learn music'* statement. Educators should be keen to heed this because their appreciation of the why statement, or lack thereof, may mean the retention of a talented learner or could influence the school music programme in totality.

Educators' response to learners' expectations often determines whether, or not, they widen the learners' horizon in terms of engagement with the depth of what music entails. Engaging learners in ways that validate their experiences results in trust that can help us to meet both their needs and expectations. The author's observation is that engaged learners are also more likely to meet the requirements of the curriculum, as they find motivation in their successful learning activities.

Learners' Music

The following analysis of learners' selected music involvement and material is designed to provide a glimpse into what they call music. It is limited to high school learners in Kenya, with a time span of five years (2016–2020). High school learners are young people with a continually active creative life. In and out of school, they consume and generate music based on their understanding of the art and their need for the artistic expression with respect to the social activities in which they are involved.

The analysis below covers two common events in which young people participate that have a music component. From these, the style and type of music that is preferred by learners becomes evident.

The Talent Show – Community Music

One of the cultural activities that takes place in schools and colleges in Kenya is the talent show or talent night. On this occasion, learners display their artistic abilities, a large percentage of which represents song and dance. In this category, talent – good mastery of the instrument such as the use of the vocal apparatus, and evidence of serious rehearsal – is displayed. They demonstrate the amount of time and other resources invested in preparation for participation in the activity. A typical event will parade musicians, some of whom are budding or experienced song writers and cover artists.

Media houses, in a bid to cater for the youth and improve their ratings, host programmes that are shot and curated in schools. The programmes accommodate artistic expressions including poetry, dance and music, as well as a display of learners' school

academic activities. Two television shows come to mind, namely Kasuku Talent Show and Kubash[3].

Zilizopendwa at the Kenya Music Festival

The Kenya Music Festival's annual competitions include categories of performance that draw large numbers of entries and large audiences. One of these classes is an adaptation of popular music – referred to as *zilizopendwa*[4]. This category of songs covers secular and sacred pieces, by local (from Kenya) and international artists, arranged for and performed by female, male and mixed choirs. The entries for this class of presentation are open to learners from primary, secondary and post-secondary educational institutions.[5]

A look at the characteristics of the songs above provides insight into the learners' preferred music content:

Movement: In these pieces, the rhythmic body response to the music stimulus, dance, is prominent. Movement is an almost subconscious response to music in African cultures, where music and dance are constituent components of a musical act or object. The sampled recordings show a set of active, energetic individuals, whose creative energy finds outlet in dance. It is apparent that music which lends itself to movement ranks high on their preference list.

As visual stimuli, movement and choreography invite active participation in music, especially in communities where music-making is participatory. The stage shows herein described are activities of such a community. They attract a creative use of gestures and movements in interpreting the songs' music and text messages. Audience appreciation and pleasure often results in applause and joining the performance through dance.[6]

Harmonies: There is an attraction to harmonious sounds that does not escape the youth. In these songs, the organisation of sounds, both sung and played, results in a harmonic organisation that has categorised popular music in Kenya since the post-World War II era (Okumu, 1998), a date that marks the beginnings of Kenyan popular music genres as we know them today. The harmonic types and progressions are typical of contemporary popular music, sounds that have been in the Kenyan soundscapes since the days of

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[3]   Some presentations below demonstrate the learners' choice: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4eXrM_f60o [20.02.2021].

[4]   This Kiswahili term translates literally to "those that were loved".

[5]   Below are a few such performances. Note the audience's response to certain movements and sounds in each of the performances in the excerpts below:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1smsl9izQk; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fE1479TL1Bc https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8LGQV2mjGc; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfY2D3sHoXw [20.02.2021].

[6]   On June 1 2021, the President of Kenya joined a performance by standing up and dancing as the team sang. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmjkpODvb6g (see from 0.44 where the president dances) [20.02.2021].

gramophone recordings in East Africa with the works of Daudi Kabaka, Fadhili Williams, Fundi Konde and their contemporaries (Ondieki, 2010).

A conservative parallel thirds or consecutive 1st inversion vocal arrangement is common, with use of predominantly primary chords. These harmonies have ruled the airwaves from the mid-twentieth century days of the sole national broadcaster, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (Ondieki, 2010).

Melodies: With predominantly major tonality, conjunct melodies, small leaps and moderate range, the melodies render the songs easy to follow or engage with. The melodies are aligned to the lyrics by conforming to the tonal demands of the text. Where there are tonal languages, the accents and tonal inflection of the individual words are appropriately set to coincide with strong beats and high and low tones respectively. The songs in Lingala (a language from Congo in Central Africa that the author finds musical, to say the least) are popular in the *Zilizopendwa* classes.

The melodies are aesthetically engaging, even in their simplicity as described above. When we consider that the melody, with its tonal and rhythmic configurations are crucial to the making of a song, the beauty of a melody may be the song-maker in this cultural setting. A beautiful melody makes a song attractive and can hold a listener's attention. That beauty is one more ingredient which compels audiences to participate.

Structure: The popular song form – usually stanza, refrain, stanza, refrain, bridge, refrain – is characteristic of these songs; it is a form that is common in the *zilizopendwa* songs, as well as contemporary popular songs. Within this broad structure, the communal-participatory format of call-and-response that characterises indigenous music-making can be found even in the instrumental sections of songs, where there seems to be a call and answer or repetition of whole sections. This form ensures that the audience is not confined to a spectator role. Through these song structures, the indigenous African and Western classical forms merge at the micro and macro levels; so that, for example, the refrain is the response to the stanza that is the call.

The music of learners' preference can be deduced from the genres that they present at these events. The learner is exposed to popular music styles from the mass media, thanks to the numerous FM stations. These are rehearsed and presented at every available oppor-tunity, as seen in the talent show excerpts above, and it has an appeal that draws learners to it. From the brief analysis above, the common traits are aesthetics and access. These pieces conform to the learners' sense of beauty due predominantly to learners' socialisation or familiarity. Their accessibility makes them amenable to participation through singing along or dancing.

Both instances above demonstrate the songs' role in facilitating learners' communal value acquisition, and hence their philosophical and psychosocial significance. These songs' appeal is not just their beauty and danceable nature. Since music is an emblem of the community, the songs are emblems of the community of the performers. In the schools'

co-curricular setting, schools that have a music performance tradition stand out and give participating learners an importance that is associated with the community's value for the music. This CVA role of the music is of a fundamental value to educators because of the songs' inherent capacity to influence learners' decisions and attitudes. This has potential to affect learners' engagement with music – and the type of works that they generate as music – a potential that should be explored as we build formal music education structures.

Much of the music discussed above occurs in the context of competition and entertainment. For intra and inter schools' competitions, there are art songs, folk songs, popular song arrangements for choirs, small ensembles and solo performers as well as folk or cultural dances from Kenya and beyond. There are also instrumental classes for solo and ensemble performance (Musungu, 2014). For entertainment, learners present music that tends to be of a popular genre. Such songs are familiar because they are the sounds in the learners' social environment. The learners' activities in the process of generating this music range from general reproduction to specialised creation and production. These roles require and utilise different sets of knowledge and the skills to use that knowledge, notably a general, common set of skills for reproduction, and a more specialised, focused, high level-thinking set for creation.[7]

School Music

In contrast to the music experienced above, the music that is either explicitly mentioned or implied in the Kenyan secondary school curriculum is presented as concepts, skills and literature (Kenya Institute of Education, 2002). Learners are expected to engage with these through the listening to and analysing of African (Kenyan), Western and Asian music. The practice content of the curriculum is labelled basic skills, which is interpreted as music literacy and aural skills development. The development of these skills is frequently approached through a repertoire of a classical Western type (Mushira, 2010 & Owino, 2010), giving the impression that they are Western classical music-making concepts and skills. As presented in a recently concluded study, the study of music of a popular genre that characterises the learners' sound environment is not accommodated in the current curriculum (Otieno, 2021). However, this is the learners' music vocabulary.

Because of the continuing reliance on the inherited ways of formal music education and its materials, the syllabus is "skewed towards the Western classical traditions […]; students learn to play and sing the music of Western composers, memorise and use Italian

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[7] This might already be a pointer to the understood practice of a general music education towards a level of music literacy for the general consumer, while maintaining a specialised, professional training for a more elitist artist.

music terms and signs […] the bulk of resources […] being of western classical genres and types" (Monte & Mochere, 2019, p. 144). Similar concerns have been raised by Owino and Akuno (2019), situating this practice in the final decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century. With this inclination towards a music that is not in the learners' tradition and community of most learners, music education – as practised in the school – does not contribute to facilitating all the learners' communal value acquisition; something that indigenous music and its learning and practice has done in the past. This further alienates formal music education from the role commonly played by music in the community, that of enhancing participants' involvement in the activities of the society and thus assuring their value within the society. The author finds a rift and lack of continuity in music education's socio-cultural role. The author considers it crucial that learners are empowered and resourced sonically to experience music in ways that allow the music to play its socialising role in their lives.

The content labelled 'African music' in the syllabus focuses on traditional music styles, that is folk and cultural music and instruments. It is "limited to description and general survey, being based on viewing and listening to recorded materials" (Monte & Mochere, 2019, p. 144), and is reported to suffer from inconsistent practice and inadequate provision of time, only taught for examination purposes. This compromises skills development and mastery of techniques necessary for engaging appropriately with the African music genres and leads to an "imbalance of African cultural education, growth and development because the content of the music training is immersed in Western cultural idioms and practices" (Owino & Akuno, 2019, pp. 149–150). It also results in a time-bound alienation of learners whose study of music is historical and not current. Classroom music then appears irrelevant to their immediate needs of CVA, because the music studied in class does not have communal value to the learners.

Beyond the fact that "foreign culture is more accessible" (Olorunsogo, 2019, p. 164) – because it often comes already packaged for consumption – Western music has a broader documented history and is, from years of application in formal education, better packaged for the classroom. The challenges of creating legitimate resources and strategies for the utilisation of indigenous African sound sources in the formal educational setting is real. Since "what a society values will be depicted in their music" (Owino & Akuno, 2019, p. 151) – as seen in their language, instruments and dance – the use of African resources should result in statements of cultural value and significance of cultural expressions to the society. These start from definitions, where musicianship is perceived as the ability to behave musically (Akuno, 2016b), in order to enable educators to recast their teaching and learning activities towards a cultural grounding that embraces "modes of perception that ground learning and skills development" (Owino & Akuno, 2019, p. 153). If this music is valued by learners, a growing trend as seen in the *Zilizopendwa* account, it has a role in CVA, and may draw learners to the music classroom and learning experience.

In earlier decades of the twentieth century, the introduction of Western music and theory in the school lead to culture shock and questions on the appropriateness of the melodies (Mattar, 2019, p. 119). Teaching and learning this music is deficient in the context of African musical arts, indicated as "a composite cultural expression that comprises sound, movement and visuals" (Owino & Akuno, 2019, p. 149). Therefore, the rift between the learners' music and the school music persists due, primarily, to the cultural signifiers that the two spaces employ, and the resultant music that is an expression of those cultures.

Music literature that allows for participatory engagement is likely to draw learners into the music classroom. Participatory engagement in class is likely to engender a situation where the learner is empowered to take ownership for the learning process through practical work. This allows them to develop skills for a healthy engagement with music. Whether training is of a general or specialist type, the teaching practice of immersing learners in how music works reduces the alienation that many student-musicians experience when choosing to study school music.

This concern may not be specific to Africa and Kenya. If so, the decolonisation movement would be specific to Africa. Besides that, there are migrants the world over whose home-of-origin musical expressions remain relevant to their community activities. Over and above the cultural heritage, there is an active culture in which youth participate that has its particular language and expressions. The learners' vocabulary of experiences, and the expressions used for and with these experiences, remain significant contributors to their uptake of the teaching and learning profered by the school. The school's role in creating space for CVA is important for music education.

Conclusion – I Call it Music

The sounds, sound systems and sound structures that emanate from human action carry within them meanings that can be deciphered at various levels. The meanings render them valuable to various members of society, depending on the associations that are made with the sounds. In everyday living, sound accompanies people, often helping them negotiate the events of the day, that Nketia (1992) refers to as crises of life. People identify with sound systems and structures because of their presence in the environment, or due to the significance of the events whose negotiation they facilitate.

In the classroom – where knowledge and skills are developed, reinforced and/or disseminated, the complex combination of aural, visual and kinaesthetic emblems that people call music – become the more useful as they assist in the transfer of information and facilitate making meaning of experiences. A learner coming into class to study music needs to engage with these meaningful emblems as they make sense of other similar or different emblems, and thus build new knowledge on what is already known.

Often, groups of learners from multiple cultural backgrounds may not easily decipher the communication contained in each other's music. The classroom in Kenya's contemporary multicultural settings is a microcosm of experiences and expressions, i.e. cultural diversity. In reading the syllabus, the author is impressed that the focus of music teaching is not to teach them a particular type of music, because that is only a means to an end. It is a pathway to training the individual, the perceptions, the attitudes, the sensations and the memories. It is a means of imparting knowledge, building skills and developing a self-image. What better way of doing this than through the expressions that contain this information? This is the learners' music material, i.e. resources that the learner recognises as music. Such music would be of greater significance to the education agenda if it were of emotional and social value to the learner, and if it was part of the community's repertoire of significant emblems.

To do so, it is important to consider what Mattar (2019) refers to as a social function model of music instruction. The focus of social function model is on society. The social processes, the functions and problems are at the centre of the design of the curriculum. In this regard, CVA – as an integral process and outcome of music education – fits into the social function model of music education. The social function model reflects the concept of music as being aesthetically acceptable when it fulfils appropriate social functions, where a piece of music is acceptable in so far as it is good for a function, appropriate, culturally appealing, and not just beautiful.

Olorunsogo (2019, p. 171) advocates for learners to be exposed to music material from diverse cultures, calling for the acceptance and application of elements of multiculturalism and multidisciplinary practices. In recognition that the experience of music, a body of information of a cultural and linguistic nature, is a learning experience, it is necessary to ensure continuity of learning by reinforcing concepts with diverse materials. Learning that is facilitated by what learners call music is a building block on which to layer further music learning in the music classroom, and will be reinforced by utilising this music as a starting point. CVA fulfils the social function of music education.

So, can and should teachers validate learners' own music choices in the classroom? Perhaps that is not the question, but rather, how can teachers validate diverse music expressions in the classroom? They do this in order to legitimise the school as a place for learning music and learning through music for diversely attracted learners. They should do this by knowing what and how to bring music from the learners' environment as a valid tool for achieving the goals of music education. They should do this by setting more global goals for music education, goals that ensure that learning is focused on the holistic development of the individual, and in so doing, create continuity with indigenous goals of education. They need to do this to ensure that music education facilitates communal value acquisition through the selection of resources that are of communal value to learners and through the application of participatory approaches in teaching and learning. They would do this

in line with the social function model of music education, and because there is a body of sounds that learners call music. Out of this body of sounds, learners grow to understand and appreciate other bodies of sounds. They (teachers) should do this to unlock learners' learning by engaging them in learning through the music literature with which they are familiar, thereby moving from the known to the unknown.

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