



Remodelling Musical Arts Education: An Outside Classroom Evolution Analysis

Thulani G. Zulu

University of Venda, South Africa

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Abstract

This study explores informal self-directed musical pedagogies in South Africa. Under apartheid, education policies were intentionally designed to marginalise people of African descent, and the enduring effects of these policies continue to influence the structure and accessibility of music education today. Contemporary national music curricula are under scrutiny for lacking innovation, cultural inclusivity, and the sustainable development of indigenous musical traditions. In contrast, there has been a significant rise in autodidactic musical practices, particularly among youth, who are creating successful, locally rooted popular music on global platforms. The study employs an exploratory qualitative methodology, utilising thematic content analysis of academic literature, digital media sources, and semi-structured interviews with five self-taught South African musicians. Framed by Music Mediation Theory, which posits that music serves as a transformative tool that fosters social cohesion and community welfare, the study examines the role of self-directed learning in addressing gaps in formal music education. Findings reveal that informal learning spaces mediated through community, family, and digital tools are the primary sites of musical growth, innovation, and identity formation for many South African youths. The convergence of institutional and informal learning methods offers valuable insights into how music education can adapt to sociopolitical, cultural, and technological shifts.

Introduction

This study explores the rise of informal musical arts education among indigenous and historically marginalised populations in South Africa, where the legacy of colonisation and apartheid continues to shape the education system. Despite post-apartheid reforms aimed at redressing inequalities within formal education, defined as structured learning within regulated institutions such as schools and universities (Chetry, 2024), substantive transformation remains limited. During colonisation and apartheid, formal education deliberately reinforced racial and cultural hierarchies, with music education as a key site of exclusion (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2018). Western classical music was institutionalised as the dominant canon, while indigenous African musical practices were marginalised, pathologised, or omitted entirely from the curriculum (Mugovhani, 2012; Drummond, 2015). Consequently, Black South Africans were systematically denied access to quality music education and meaningful representation of their cultural heritage in formal learning spaces. This historical marginalisation has entrenched persistent inequalities in both the structure and content of music education. Recognising this context is critical to reimagining an inclusive and culturally



responsive system that values and integrates informal, community-based, and culturally embedded musical practices.

Countermovement

In response to the exclusionary nature of formal music education, a dynamic countermovement has emerged among South African youth outside traditional institutional frameworks. Empowered by digital technologies, including smartphones, beat-making software, and social media, these young individuals engage in self-directed and peer-based learning to produce, perform, and share music (Akinwale, 2018). These practices depart from Western-centric models, offering culturally relevant, inclusive, and innovative approaches. Genres such as Amapiano, originating in townships and embedded in digital and communal culture (Oloruntoba, 2024), exemplify this informal educational movement as a medium for cultural expression, identity formation, and grassroots pedagogy. Informal education, broadly defined as learning outside institutional settings through lived experiences, social engagement, and self-initiated exploration (Chetry, 2024), has become crucial for transmitting musical knowledge. The growth of this countermovement underscores the need for educational systems that recognise and integrate alternative pathways of learning into broader discourse and policy.

Musical arts education for South Africa's predominantly Black population is declining, largely due to the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Despite democratic reforms post-1994, the system remains influenced by colonial structures, suppressing indigenous knowledge while promoting Western ideologies. Formal educational policies and curricula continue to prioritise Western methodologies, limiting inclusive, innovative, and culturally sustainable music education. These programmes often fail to meet the creative and cultural needs of under-resourced communities. In contrast, self-taught practitioners using digital technologies and cultivating local genres like Amapiano illustrate a shift toward more inclusive and relevant music learning. This study examines the evolution of musical arts education beyond formal classrooms, highlighting youth-led innovation, digital mediation, and culturally rooted genres that challenge historically Western-dominated models. Reshaping music education to integrate inclusive, innovative, and culturally sustainable practices is essential to redress colonial and apartheid-era exclusions and create an equitable, culturally responsive educational future for South Africa's majority population.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Music Mediation Theory, which examines how individuals and communities interact with music through mediating tools, technologies, and socio-cultural contexts (Strachan, 2017). The theory posits that musical meaning and learning are actively constructed through interactions among people, materials, and cultural systems (Drott, 2019). "Mediation" encompasses the processes and tools that shape musical experiences, including instruments, digital platforms, and cultural values (Wienczek, 2018). In South Africa, formal music education has largely followed Western-centric models, prioritising notation and hierarchical classroom structures. Yet a counter-evolution exists outside these structures, with genres like Amapiano employing digital tools for alternative mediation. Music Mediation Theory sheds light on how non-classroom environments foster innovation and cultural sustainability, examining how South African youth are reimagining music education in postcolonial, post-apartheid contexts.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed thematic content analysis to explore informal musical arts education in South Africa. Data collection integrated both primary and secondary sources, including semi-structured interviews with five self-taught youth South African musicians (ages 19-35), academic literature from databases such as Google Scholar and ResearchGate, policy documents, and digital



media content from YouTube. The interview participants included a guitarist, drummer, gospel singer, pastor-pianist, and music producer, all of whom were practising informal music education. Interviews were conducted in English and isiZulu, focusing on participants' understanding of formal versus informal education, their lived experiences with self-taught learning, and their perspectives on inclusivity, innovation, and cultural sustainability. Secondary data comprised peer-reviewed articles, books, and credible web sources addressing South African music education, autodidacticism, and digital learning. Thematic analysis followed Birman's (2016) qualitative methodology framework, using inclusivity, innovation, and cultural sustainability as coding lenses to identify patterns across data sources. This multi-source strategy enhanced research depth by providing both first-hand musician experiences and broader contextual understandings of South Africa's music education landscape. The study's limitation includes reliance on a small interview sample and the absence of comparative analysis with other postcolonial contexts. The English language editing was perfected using Papapal AI assistance.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Structural Barriers and Historical Inequities in Music Education Access

The data reveal persistent structural and socio-cultural barriers that mediate access to musical education opportunities in South Africa, rooted in apartheid-era policies and ongoing systemic neglect (Yende, 2023). These barriers manifest across economic, geographic, and ideological dimensions, continuing to exclude marginalised communities from formal music education pathways.

Mr Raphalalane, a 35-year-old pastor and self-taught pianist, provides a compelling account of how apartheid-era racial hierarchies influenced access to musical instruments. He remarked, "Playing a piano was mostly for whites or a few blacks. I'm not a racist. But I had a challenge because even my parents didn't support my playing the piano. In fact, they associated it with demons." This testimony highlights how colonial ideologies fostered cultural stigmas surrounding Western instruments within Black communities, where musical practices perceived as "white" were both inaccessible and culturally alienating. His experience exemplifies what Music Mediation Theory describes as negative cultural mediation, wherein tools, practices, and social values converge to discourage rather than promote musical engagement. The association of piano-playing with "demons" illustrates the extent to which colonialism infiltrated cultural consciousness, establishing internalised barriers that endured beyond formal legal constraints.

Sipho, a 29-year-old music producer, exemplifies persistent economic and geographic exclusion. He recounted, "My brother used to tell me that he wanted to study music one day. However, schools that taught music were often located in the suburbs. So, my father did not have the money for him to go there. That is why he went for production." This narrative underscores how apartheid's spatial segregation continues to influence educational access decades after democracy. Music schools remain predominantly in formerly white suburban areas, necessitating transport costs and fees that are prohibitive for township residents. Sipho's shift to self-taught production demonstrates how informal spaces compensate for formal educational limitations, aligning with scholarly recognition of digital innovation as a strategy to circumvent structural exclusion (Ndlela, 2020).

Economic exclusion extends beyond school fees. Khuliso, a 22-year-old drummer, stated, "If I wish there was a youth centre or something, like in Jozi, where the youth can be taught music. I feel that the government doesn't care and is not doing enough to help artists." His perception that "the government doesn't care" reflects a widespread distrust in educational systems that overlook artistic needs in townships. The lack of community music centres compels aspiring musicians to depend on personal resources and networks. Anele, a 25-year-old guitarist, similarly emphasised the scarcity of



resources, noting his continued reliance on informal mentorship despite years of self-directed learning.

These structural barriers are reinforced by curriculum designs that privilege Western epistemologies (Yende & Ndwamato, 2022). South African music education has historically favoured European classical traditions, music theory, and notation-based learning, thereby excluding the majority whose traditions are oral, improvisational, and community-based (Collins, 2002). This bias disconnects classroom content from learners' cultural realities, resulting in alienation, particularly among Black youth. The rigidity of formal education leaves little room for creative expression or the inclusion of local genres such as Kwaito, Gqom, and Amapiano. Despite their cultural significance, these forms rarely appear in curricula, reinforcing the notion that African musical traditions lack educational legitimacy.

Lufuno, a 19-year-old gospel singer, illustrates how structural exclusion operates interpersonally. She stated, "It is amazing how much I have improved ever since I left that school. Plus, the teacher didn't like me. I also hated her in return because she hated being challenged by students." Her improvement after leaving formal education suggests that the institutional environment constrained rather than facilitated her growth. Such hierarchical practices reflect broader patterns where formal settings suppress creativity through rigid authority. The cumulative effect is a dual system where formal education remains inaccessible or alienating, while informal pathways emerge as primary learning routes. This reflects what Durokifa and Ijeoma (2018) describe as neo-colonial educational structures perpetuating historical inequalities under the guise of universal standards.

Mr Raphalalane's comparison between church musicians and those with formal training supports the efficacy of informal education: "Sometimes you find that not learned musicians in my church play better than those coming from school." His church functions as an informal music school, exemplifying community-based mediation and demonstrating how marginalised communities establish alternative ecosystems when excluded from formal institutions.

The research gaps identified in the literature review are expressed through these experiences. The disconnect between policy and practice persists in a Western-centric curriculum despite post-apartheid transformation goals. Youth voices remain underrepresented in curriculum reform, and the pedagogical potential of digital tools is underexplored. These gaps collectively reinforce structural barriers, perpetuating a cycle in which formal music education remains irrelevant to the communities it aims to serve.

Digital Technologies as Mediators of Informal Music Learning

The data confirm that digital tools and platforms function as primary mediators of musical knowledge for South African youth who lack access to formal instruction. YouTube, music production software such as Cubase, and social media have transformed how aspiring musicians acquire skills, share knowledge, and build professional identities. This digital mediation represents a fundamental shift in pedagogical access, democratising music education previously gatekept by formal institutions.

Anele's learning journey exemplifies YouTube's role as an accessible educational resource. He stated, "I used to feel bad that I was not educated in music. Until someone told me I play more than a music teacher. I laughed. But I think YouTube helped me a bit." His shift from feeling inadequate to achieving competence through YouTube tutorials illustrates how digital platforms bypass traditional gatekeeping. The validation he received, comparing favourably to formally trained teachers, challenges hierarchies privileging credentials over demonstrated ability. YouTube enables self-paced learning, revisiting content as needed, and exposure to diverse teaching styles unavailable in any single formal programme.



The democratising influence of YouTube extends beyond individual learning to community building and knowledge exchange. The platform hosts tutorials across genres and skill levels. Unlike static textbooks, YouTube content evolves continually, incorporating new genres and techniques. For South African musicians, this means immediate access to tutorials on Amapiano production, African percussion, and township jazz, areas seldom addressed in formal programmes. Comment sections and response videos foster dialogical learning spaces where musicians exchange insights and cultivate supportive communities.

Sipho's experience with Cubase production software illustrates how digital tools enable both learning and creative innovation. He explained, "I used to watch my brother, who was very skilled in this. He used Cubase. It was popular at that time. Now he is older and has a family. I'm continuing the journey." His progression from observation to independent production illustrates intergenerational knowledge transfer outside formal structures. Identifying as a "modified version" of his brother, Sipho demonstrates how digital mediation allows continuity and innovation, blending inherited skills with new artistic expression.

Digital audio workstations like Cubase represent a major transformation in music accessibility. Historically, recording required expensive studios and technical expertise, excluding township musicians. Affordable or pirated digital software now provides professional-grade tools for home studios. This shift underpins the rise of Amapiano, where producers create globally successful music from bedrooms. The software's visual interface simplifies complex concepts such as layering, mixing, and mastering, making them more intuitive than traditional notation-based methods.

Khuliso acknowledged using "gadgets" for both learning and income generation, stating he can "pay rent and buy data" through music. This economic dimension of digital music-making is crucial. Online platforms enable monetisation via YouTube, streaming services, and social media without traditional gatekeepers. The transition from purely artistic pursuit to livelihood contrasts with formal music education's disconnection from economic realities. Informal digital learning also imparts entrepreneurship, marketing, and audience engagement skills alongside musical training.

Media-based data reinforce this shift. Guerra Music's (2025) video argues, "The future of music education lies with informal learning experiences. Music educators need to create space for informal learning to occur." This perspective recognises digital platforms' pedagogical transformation and urges formal institutions to learn from informal digital practices.

Yet, Lufuno's reflection introduces nuance: "Technology is building us and killing us at the same time." Her ambivalence captures digital platforms' double-edged nature. While technology democratises access and income generation, it also breeds competition, commodifies creativity, and creates precarious labour. Content abundance leads to market saturation, while algorithms prioritise engagement over artistry. The streaming economy pays minimal royalties, requiring vast audiences for sustainable income.

Social media extends digital learning beyond skill acquisition into cultural exchange and genre evolution. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter foster global conversations about Amapiano, allowing South African artists to reach international audiences while preserving cultural authenticity. Dance challenges and viral trends create participatory cultures where fans become promoters rather than passive consumers. This networked creativity embodies informal learning environments, empowering learners to direct their musical development (Ndlela, 2020).

Digital mediation also reconfigures the temporal and spatial dimensions of learning. Traditional education requires fixed attendance, while online platforms enable asynchronous, location-free



learning. This flexibility is vital for youth balancing work, family, and study. The ability to learn at unconventional hours removes barriers that rigid formal schedules impose.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital music education, exposing both promise and limits. While formal institutions struggled, informal learners accessed resources online. Yet, the pandemic revealed the digital divide, unequal internet access mirrors pre-existing socio-economic inequities. Participants' ability to afford data remains a privilege, creating new forms of exclusion even within informal learning spaces.

Music Mediation Theory conceptualises these dynamics, showing how digital technologies construct new musical meanings rather than simply transmit knowledge. Tools shape what can be created, how it sounds, and what counts as competence. Digital production privileges certain sonic aesthetics and technical skills that differ from acoustic traditions. Understanding digital mediation reveals how technology actively shapes contemporary musical culture rather than serving as a neutral conduit.

Mentorship and Community Networks as Cultural Continuity

The data indicate that peer mentorship, familial influence, and community spaces constitute essential informal learning environments that perpetuate musical knowledge across generations in South Africa. These interpersonal networks operate as alternative educational ecosystems, preserving cultural practices and transmitting skills outside formal institutions. Their significance challenges individualistic models prevalent in Western education, illustrating how African pedagogies prioritise communal knowledge production. All five interviewed musicians cited specific individuals who taught or inspired them, underscoring the centrality of social relationships in informal music learning.

Mr Raphalalane's dual role as learner and teacher exemplifies this reciprocity. A self-taught pianist who now instructs church youth, he serves as a cultural conduit between generations. His assertion that church musicians without formal education often "play better than those coming from school" affirms informal pedagogies and highlights the educational role of community spaces. Churches in South African townships function as de facto music schools, offering instruments, performance opportunities, and mentorship unavailable in formal education. This community-based mediation reflects indigenous African traditions emphasising learning through communal participation.

Intergenerational knowledge transfer within families appears prominently in participant narratives. Khuliso learned drums from his brother, motivated by family musical heritage: "My father used to play the piano. So, I asked my brother to teach me drums so that I could play with them at church." This account shows how musical knowledge circulates within kinship networks, with each generation adapting to contemporary contexts. The transition from father's piano to brother's drums to Khuliso's current practice demonstrates both continuity and evolution. The church situates this learning within broader community participation, where music serves spiritual, social, and educational functions.

Sipho's experience watching his brother use Cubase illustrates how family mentorship adapts to technological change. The informal apprenticeship model, where younger siblings observe and gradually participate, now incorporates digital tools. His commitment to "taking it forward" after his brother stepped back demonstrates how family networks ensure knowledge continuity despite life transitions. Anele's experience blends family-style mentorship with digital learning. He mentioned a mentor who "studies B. Com at Wits" but "has stopped playing," yet remains "my mentor." This relationship transcends formal teacher-student boundaries, creating ongoing supportive ties that persist despite changing circumstances. Anele supplements this guidance with YouTube tutorials, illustrating how informal learners blend traditional apprenticeship with digital resources.

Validation within informal networks plays a formative role in musicians' development. Anele stated, "Someone told me I play more than a music teacher. I laughed." This peer recognition provides



affirmation denied by formal credentialing. In contexts where institutional gatekeeping excludes marginalised populations, community validation becomes especially significant. Such evaluation focuses on expressiveness and audience engagement rather than theoretical or technical mastery, challenging Western standards separating technique from lived musicality.

The church emerges as a particularly significant community space across accounts. Mr Raphalalane teaches youth; Anele performs; Khuliso learned “at church.” Churches provide performance opportunities, access to instruments, feedback, networks connecting musicians, and spiritual frameworks that give meaning to musical practice. The integration of musical and spiritual development reflects holistic African philosophies, contrasting with Western education’s compartmentalisation.

Khuliso’s wish for “a youth centre or something, like in Jozi, where the youth can be taught music” expresses a desire to formalise mentorship while maintaining community ethos. His vision suggests hybrid institutions combining informal learning’s flexibility and cultural relevance with formal education’s resources. Media evidence reinforces these findings. Tasmania’s (2025) video *Passing on Culture* features a senior guitarist mentoring a young violinist, highlighting the fragility and importance of oral musical traditions.

The literature confirms that music and dance are often learned through participation in communal events rather than formal instruction (DeNora, 2003). Studies of Bapedi children in Limpopo show that observational and participatory methods effectively transmit musical knowledge. Peer mentorship networks create “communities of practice,” where newcomers observe experienced practitioners and gradually assume complex tasks. Geographic concentration of networks within townships produces musical microcultures where styles evolve. Amapiano’s rise from Johannesburg townships exemplifies how peer interaction drives innovation through collaboration and experimentation. Reliance on informal networks has limitations: mentorship depends on availability; geographic isolation restricts access; undocumented traditions risk loss; and internal hierarchies can reproduce exclusion.

Overall, peer mentorship, familial influence, and community spaces are foundational to South African music education. They offer culturally grounded, resilient, and adaptive pedagogical models that sustain creativity and continuity where formal systems fall short.

Cultural Sustainability and Identity Formation Through Informal Music Education

The data show that informal music education functions as a vital site for cultural sustainability and identity formation among South African youth, enabling them to maintain connections with indigenous traditions while innovating contemporary forms. This role extends beyond skill acquisition to encompass belonging, resistance to cultural erasure, and assertion of African epistemologies.

Lufuno’s practice of wearing traditional attire during performances illustrates the conscious fusion of cultural identity and music. She stated, “I like my culture. I wear traditional clothes during most of my performances.” This act asserts pride in traditions historically marginalised and symbolises hybrid identity through modern gospel fused with traditional aesthetics, an integration often discouraged in formal contexts that privilege Western norms.

The prominence of Amapiano demonstrates informal learning’s power to sustain emerging cultural forms. Originating in Johannesburg townships, Amapiano blends deep house, jazz, and lounge music with South African rhythms (Oloruntoba, 2024). Its global rise occurred entirely outside formal institutions, with self-taught producers and DJs developing distinct styles through peer collaboration



and digital tools. This innovation exemplifies how informal learning cultivates technological, entrepreneurial, and creative capacities (Ndlela, 2020).

Mr Raphalalane's mentorship of church youth shows how informal education sustains both cultural and spiritual traditions. He stated, "I also teach youth in my church how to play." His teaching conveys technical skills and moral values rooted in African spirituality. Music functions here as a means of social cohesion, moral guidance, and historical continuity. Participants' recollections also reveal apartheid's attempts at cultural erasure through the marginalisation of African musical forms. Mr Raphalalane's memory of parents linking piano-playing with "demons" exposes colonialism's psychological impact and the persistence of Western hierarchies in post-apartheid curricula. Informal education thus becomes an act of cultural resistance, preserving and renewing African traditions where institutions fail.

Sipho's continuation of his brother's musical legacy illustrates intergenerational cultural continuity. His music production both honours and reinterprets family heritage, contrasting with formal education's focus on individual achievement. This communal notion of music as shared inheritance reflects African values largely absent from Western frameworks.

Media evidence reinforces these findings. TEDx's (2025) presentation by Patricia Abdelnour highlighted music's social power: "When everyone got into the auditorium for the event, they were strangers. But through music, numerous people started to talk to each other." This aligns with participants' experiences of music fostering connection and resilience in townships marked by social fragmentation and economic precarity.

Participants also identified tensions between cultural sustainability and economic pressures. Lufuno's comment that "technology is building us and killing us" captures the conflict between authenticity and commodification. The global demand for "African sounds" creates opportunity yet pressures musicians to conform to market expectations, risking cultural dilution. The streaming economy's emphasis on quantity over artistry deepens this tension.

The gap between formal education and lived cultural realities remains striking. Curricula rarely include genres such as Amapiano or gospel, despite their cultural centrality, reflecting enduring colonial orientations. Participants' practices suggest alternatives: education grounded in community participation, oral tradition, and integration of spiritual and social functions.

The literature supports these findings. Indigenous South African music remains deeply connected to land and community, making cultural continuity essential (Ngoma & Fikelepi-Twani, 2024). Informal learning's adaptability enables these ties to persist amid technological change, while formal education often abstracts music from its social meanings.

Khuliso's observation that "we are now using gadgets to learn and play music" shows how technology can sustain culture rather than threaten it. Digital tools become mediums of expression, allowing tradition to evolve dynamically. Participants exemplify cultural preservation as active adaptation rather than static protection.

Language further reinforces this process. Sipho's use of isiZulu during interviews ensured cultural resonance and mutual understanding. Indigenous languages carry distinct pedagogical and philosophical values often suppressed in English-dominated schools. Informal education's linguistic flexibility maintains these connections, preserving the knowledge embedded in language.

In sum, informal music education operates as both pedagogical practice and cultural lifeline. It preserves heritage, fosters innovation, and strengthens identity where formal systems fall short. Through community mentorship, digital adaptation, and cultural affirmation, young South African



musicians transform informal learning into a powerful vehicle for cultural sustainability and creative self-determination.

Conclusion

This study confirms that informal learning, through community, family, and digital tools, is central to musical development, innovation, and identity formation among South African youth excluded from formal music education. Findings align with Music Mediation Theory, showing how social contexts and tools shape learning. Key themes include persistent apartheid-era barriers, the democratizing yet challenging role of digital technologies, peer mentorship sustaining intergenerational knowledge, and informal learning promoting cultural continuity.

Policy should recognise self-taught musicians through micro-credentials and support community music centres with instruments, digital tools, and mentorship. Hybrid programmes linking universities with informal spaces and employing self-taught instructors can broaden access. Curricula should include local genres like Amapiano and gospel, while educators adopt digital platforms and culturally responsive pedagogy. Informal mentors, church musicians, family teachers, and peers require recognition and support.

Ultimately, informal learning is a dynamic, culturally grounded system that complements formal education, fostering creativity, sustaining heritage, and advancing inclusive, socially relevant music education for South African youth.

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