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The Unheard Learner: Adolescent Musical Identity and Student Voice in Ghanaian Music Education

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Abstract
This review aims to bring adolescent musical life into clearer view within Ghanaian music education. Existing research has made contributions to curriculum reform, teacher preparation, and culturally grounded music making. However, it has given limited attention to adolescents as musical knowers who use listening, performance, and creative practices to construct identity and belonging across the school and community. This structured critical literature review synthesises Ghanaian music education scholarship with international research on adolescent musical behaviour, identity, informal learning, and student voice. Literature was identified through Google Scholar searches conducted between March and June 2026, supplemented by citation tracing, using search terms combined around Ghanaian music education, adolescent musical identity, informal learning, student voice, and jama; The 55 sources that met the inclusion criteria span the publication years from 1986 to 2025 and were organised around four analytical themes rather than summarised individually. The synthesis finds a persistent disjuncture between students' everyday musical practices and the knowledge privileged in formal music education. Jama, the communal musical practice of Ghanaian boarding schools, illustrates that students already create, transmit, and sustain complex musical knowledge informally, offering a concrete bridge from this problem to a student-centred alternative. Rather than treating out-of-school musical knowledge as a deficiency, the review concludes it is a pedagogical and epistemological resource for curriculum design, teacher education, and research. Centring student voice reframes Ghanaian adolescents as legitimate sources of educational knowledge rather than recipients of it, and offers music educators elsewhere a transferable question: whether formal curricula recognise the musical knowledge students already bring.

Key Terms: Adolescent musical behaviour, adolescent musical identity, Ghanaian music education, informal musical learning, student voice.

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INTRODUCTION

Ghanaian music education scholarship has long been concerned with how schools can provide music education that is culturally meaningful and educationally consequential. Researchers have examined the historical dominance of Western music theory in school curricula (Flolu, 1994; Flolu & Amuah, 2003; Komabu & Dawson, 2024), teacher preparation and competence (Agbenyo et al., 2021; Mensah & Acquah, 2021), the place of music-making in formal education (Arthur, 2014; Nii-Dortey & Arhine, 2019; Otchere, 2015), and the political history of curriculum reform efforts (Otchere, 2019). Taken together, this literature documents a field actively working to improve the quality, relevance, and cultural grounding of school music. Of the sources reviewed here that address Ghanaian music education directly, the great majority take the institution, curriculum, teacher, or examination as the unit of analysis; only a small number treat adolescents' own musical practices, preferences, or interpretations as a primary object of study, and fewer still ask what adolescents already know and do with music-making outside the classroom.

Research on Ghanaian children has shown that musical knowledge develops through socially embedded practices well before formal instruction begins. Playground songs, singing games, movement, and rhythmic activities can function as spaces of cultural transmission, participation, and musical learning (Addo, 1995; Dzansi, 2004). Avornyo and Baker's (2024) research on early childhood similarly demonstrates that musical development is connected to family and community understandings of play and learning. The adolescent years, however, remain less visible as a distinctive musical life stage within Ghanaian music education scholarship: the studies just cited establish that musical learning begins early and continues informally, but none extends that observation into secondary school, where the present review identifies a gap.

At the senior high school level, existing studies tend to focus on students' performance in examinations and formal music programs rather than on adolescents' own musical experiences, preferences, and participation. Research, for example, has examined teachers' assessments of poor performance and the challenges of preparing students for practical examinations (Acquah & Kwofie, 2021), and factors influencing the academic performance of music students in senior high schools (Adom, 2016). Such studies address important educational problems; however, their dominant frame is performance within formal schooling rather than adolescents' musical lives across school and everyday settings. Comparing these two bodies of literature highlights the imbalance directly: where the Ghanaian senior high school literature concentrates on what examinations and curricula require of students, the international literature on adolescent musical behavior concentrates on what music does for and with adolescents, including its connections to emotional regulation, peer relationships, identity formation, social belonging, and self-understanding (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003; Miranda & Gaudreau, 2011; North & Hargreaves, 1999; Rentfrow, 2012; Saarikallio, 2011). These literatures have rarely been read together in the Ghanaian context. If the dimensions of musical life documented in the international literature are absent from the conceptualisation of school music-making in Ghana, educators may risk treating students as recipients of musical knowledge rather than as people who already possess meaningful musical knowledge.

The purpose of this theoretical essay, accordingly, is to bring adolescent musical life into clearer view within Ghanaian music education by synthesising literature on Ghanaian school music-making alongside scholarship on adolescent musical behaviour, musical identity, informal learning, and student voice. The literature on musical identity provides a framework for understanding why students' musical preferences matter educationally. Hargreaves et al. (2017) distinguish between *Identity in Music*, which concerns identities associated with musical roles and communities, and *Music in Identity*, which concerns the ways music becomes incorporated into a person's broader sense of self. Both dimensions are relevant to adolescents because music-making can simultaneously describe what young people do and communicate who they understand themselves to be. Music-making may also function as a resource for agency and empowerment in identity construction, helping adolescents navigate social relationships and evolving senses of self (Saarikallio, 2019). In this review, *student voice* refers to the recognition of students as holders of knowledge about their own educational experience and as legitimate participants in decisions about that experience, ranging from being consulted for their opinions to collaborating in, or co-inquiring into, educational decision-making (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006; Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007).

The concepts of adolescent musical identity and student voice are connected through the idea of informal learning: because much of what adolescents know musically is acquired outside formal instruction, through listening, imitation, and social participation (Green, 2005, 2008), musical identity is formed substantially in spaces that schools do not directly shape. Culturally sustaining pedagogy provides the conceptual bridge between these ideas and formal schooling, arguing that educators should recognise and sustain the cultural knowledge young people already produce rather than treating it only as raw material to be formalised (Paris & Alim, 2017). Read together, these concepts frame the central issue this review pursues: whether the knowledge adolescents develop through their musical lives is recognised as legitimate knowledge from which formal learning can begin.

The review was organised around three questions: What does existing scholarship reveal about Ghanaian adolescents' musical lives? How does formal school music recognise or overlook the knowledge students develop outside school? What might a more student-centred approach contribute to Ghanaian music education? I argue that the central issue running through these questions is whether the knowledge students develop through their musical lives is recognized as legitimate knowledge from which formal learning can begin. This framing also creates a point of connection with music educators beyond Ghana: the problem of disconnection between school music-making and students' everyday musical lives is not uniquely Ghanaian, even though the historical and cultural conditions through which that disconnection has developed are context-specific.

METHODOLOGY

The review is best characterised as a structured critical literature review rather than a systematic or scoping review. Its purpose is to identify patterns across scholarship and use those patterns to develop an argument about adolescent musical identity and student voice in Ghanaian music education, rather than to produce an exhaustive or fully replicable account of every study on the topic. The review was undertaken to address a specific conceptual gap in Ghanaian music education scholarship: the limited sustained attention to adolescents as musical agents and sources of educational knowledge. The review therefore brought together two bodies of literature that are not always considered together: scholarship on music education in Ghana and international scholarship on adolescent musical behaviour, musical identity, informal learning, and student voice. This combination makes it possible to examine both the Ghanaian educational context and the broader theoretical claims needed to interpret adolescent musical experience.

Literature was identified through Google Scholar searches conducted between March and June 2026, supplemented by citation tracing from the reference lists of key sources. Search terms were combined using Boolean operators around the following concepts: Ghanaian music education*;* Ghanaian secondary or senior high school music*;* adolescent music*;* adolescent musical identity*;* music preference and social identity*;* informal music learning*;* student voice*;* culturally responsive or culturally sustaining music education*; and* jama *or* gyama in Ghanaian schools. No date restriction was imposed because the review needed to capture both the historical scholarship that established the Western-oriented character of Ghanaian school music curricula and recent publications addressing contemporary adolescent musical life. The sources ultimately retained span publication years from 1986 to 2025.

Sources were included when they (a) addressed music education in Ghana or adolescent musical behaviour relevant to the review questions; (b) examined musical identity, participation, informal learning, student voice, social belonging, or the relationship between school and everyday musical experience; or (c) provided theoretical or pedagogical perspectives directly applicable to the relationship between adolescent musical life and formal music education. The review considered peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters, and relevant theses and dissertations when they contributed directly to the review questions. Sources were excluded when they addressed music education only in ways unrelated to adolescent musical experience, student participation, musical identity, or the relationship between formal and informal learning. Studies focused exclusively on institutional administration, technical musical outcomes, or other educational populations were not used unless they provided a direct conceptual connection to the review.

A broader body of literature was initially identified through the search and citation-tracing process than was ultimately included in the synthesis. Consistent with the interpretive purpose of a structured critical literature review, sources were screened for their relevance to the

review questions and assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria described above. Sources that did not contribute directly to understanding adolescent musical experience, musical identity, informal learning, student voice, or music education in Ghana were excluded from further consideration. Applying these criteria across the searches and citation trails described above yielded the 43 sources retained in the final synthesis and listed in the References.

The analysis grouped the literature around recurring concepts and relationships rather than summarising each source independently. This process moved through three stages. First, sources addressing Ghanaian music education were read alongside sources addressing adolescent musical behaviour and identity to identify where the two literatures converged or left gaps in one another. Second, recurring concepts within and across both literatures were clustered into four analytic themes: adolescence as a distinctive musical life stage; musical preference, identity, and belonging; the disconnection between school and out-of-school music; and student voice as a source of educational knowledge. Third, *jama* was identified through this clustering as a concrete Ghanaian case that connected all four themes and could therefore serve as a contextual bridge between the diagnosis of disconnection and a student-centred alternative. This organisation shifts the review from an annotated list of studies toward synthesis and interpretation and forms the basis for the argument developed in the remainder of the article.

Adolescence as a Distinctive Musical Life Stage

Music, Emotion, and Social Life

What distinguishes adolescence as a musical life stage in the literature reviewed here is that music becomes a primary tool through which adolescents do the developmental work particular to this period: regulating emotion, negotiating peer relationships, and constructing an identity that is still in formation. Adolescence is a period of substantial physical, cognitive, and psychosocial change, and music-making can become important during this transition (World Health Organization, 2001). Existing research describes adolescence as a period in which music is closely intertwined with peer relationships, emotional experience, identity negotiation, and the development of personal taste (Brown & Hendee, 1989; Gowers, 2005; Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003). This literature complicates any conception of adolescent music as simply entertainment. Adolescents may use music-making deliberately to regulate mood, express feelings, remember experiences, and create a sense of continuity in their developing identities (Miranda & Gaudreau, 2011; Rentfrow, 2012; Saarikallio, 2011; Wells & Hakanen, 1991).

Bosacki and O'Neill (2015), for example, found that young adolescents engage with popular music in ways connected to emotional perception and everyday life. These findings suggest that listening itself can involve sophisticated forms of interpretation and agency. For music education, the implication is that students enter classrooms with relationships to music-making that are already emotionally and socially meaningful. This emotional dimension of students' musical lives also has implications for classroom practice. Edgar (2014) observed that music teachers regularly address students' social and emotional needs within educational environments, indicating that learners' personal and emotional experiences continue to influence their classroom experiences. Recognising the emotional significance of music in adolescents' lives may therefore help educators design learning experiences that connect more meaningfully with students' lived realities.

Music-making also operates through relationships. Shared musical taste can facilitate social connection and contribute to feelings of belonging (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Boer & Abubakar, 2014). North and Hargreaves (2007) opined that musical preferences can function as markers of lifestyle and social distinction, while Tarrant et al. (2002) connected musical behaviour to youth identity and group membership. Musical preference is therefore not merely a private matter of liking one song rather than another; it can be a social practice through which adolescents position themselves within peer groups and wider cultural worlds.

The body of scholarship reviewed above is drawn almost entirely from international, and predominantly Western, contexts, which is a limitation the review must acknowledge rather than assume past. Whether Ghanaian adolescents use music-making for emotional regulation and peer positioning in the same ways as adolescents studied elsewhere is, strictly speaking, an open empirical question, since few of the sources identified in this review test these functions directly among Ghanaian youth. Two considerations nonetheless support treating the general pattern as relevant to Ghana. First, jama itself, discussed in detail below, is a Ghanaian music-making practice that visibly performs the same functions

the international literature describes, binding house identity, competition, and peer solidarity to musical participation (Botchway, 2017). Second, Avornyo and Baker's (2024) work on Ghanaian family and community understandings of play and learning suggested that the social and developmental functions of music-making are not culturally exceptional to Western adolescents, even if their specific expression is shaped by Ghanaian institutions and traditions. The claim advanced here, then, is not that findings from other contexts transfer directly to Ghana, but that they identify functions of adolescent music-making worth investigating empirically in the Ghanaian case, and that jama offers preliminary, context-specific evidence that at least some of these functions do operate among Ghanaian adolescents.

It is also important not to treat adolescents as a single, homogeneous population, in Ghana or elsewhere. Previous research in Ghana has demonstrated that young people's educational and social experiences vary across dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, school context, and access to material resources (Dei, 2004; Kyei, 2026). Music-specific research likewise identifies variation in students' musical opportunities and participation. Dordzro (2012), for example, found gendered patterns in instrumental choice among Ghanaian school-band pupils. In addition, Dordzro (2026) found that gender, prior musical experience, private lessons, and access to instruments at home were associated with students' opportunities and experiences in senior high school ensembles. Religion also constitutes an important context for Ghanaian young people's musical lives, given the prominence of religious affiliation and church-based musical participation among adolescents (Fiagbedzi, 2017).

At the same time, digital and social-media platforms have also become significant contexts for young people's engagement with music in Ghana. Studies of children and youth in Ghana document social-media use for listening to and downloading music, as well as for learning, sharing, and performing music and dance (Kyei-Gyamfi, 2024; Kyei-Gyamfi & Kyei-Arthur, 2025; Markwei & Appiah, 2016). These practices are not uniform across young people. For example, Kyei-Gyamfi and Kyei-Arthur (2025) found significant gender differences in social-media entertainment, including music listening and downloading, while Kyei-Gyamfi (2024) documented social media as a space for musical and creative expression among Ghanaian children. These studies suggest that adolescent musical experience may be shaped by multiple social, institutional, cultural, and material contexts. Yet the literature reviewed here does not adequately explain how these dimensions intersect to shape musical identity among Ghanaian adolescents specifically. This gap provides further justification for empirical research that examines variation within the adolescent population rather than assuming a single, representative Ghanaian adolescent musical experience.

Musical Identity, Preference, and Belonging

The literature on musical identity provides a framework for understanding why students' musical preferences matter educationally. Hargreaves et al. (2017) distinguish between Identity in Music, which concerns identities associated with musical roles and communities, and Music in Identity, which concerns the ways music becomes incorporated into a person's broader sense of self. Both dimensions are relevant to adolescents because music can simultaneously describe what young people do and communicate who they understand themselves to be. For Ghanaian adolescents, these processes may occur within a highly dynamic musical environment. Popular genres including highlife, hiplife, Afrobeats, gospel, and dancehall circulate through radio, television, smartphones, and social media (Otchere, 2017; Souza, 2011). Musical preference can therefore connect adolescents to local cultural histories while also linking them to transnational musical cultures. A student's musical world may be simultaneously Ghanaian, regional, religious, global, peer-oriented, and intensely personal.

The educational significance of this complexity becomes clearer and more consequential when musical identity is considered as something shaped partly by institutional recognition, and when that recognition is connected explicitly to participation and motivation rather than treated only as an abstract concern. Saunders (2010) argued that musical identities are influenced by whether educational institutions recognise and value the musical practices that matter to students. Kelly-McHale (2013) similarly posited that teachers' beliefs about legitimate musical knowledge can influence how musical identities are expressed in classrooms. The mechanism connecting recognition to outcomes can be stated directly: when schools recognise only a narrow range of musical practices, students may learn that important parts of their musical selves do not count as knowledge, which plausibly affects their willingness to participate fully, their motivation to persist in formal musical study, and the quality of interaction between students and teachers

in the music classroom, even though the sources reviewed here document the recognition problem more thoroughly than they document its downstream effects on Ghanaian classrooms specifically.

This is not an argument for replacing formal musical study with students' preferred music. Rather, it is an argument about the starting point of instruction. Formal theory, notation, analysis, performance, and historical study can be deepened when they are connected to musical practices that students already understand. Green's (2005, 2008) work on informal learning provides a useful model: students' existing musical knowledge can become the foundation for formal learning rather than an obstacle that must first be removed.

School Music and the Problem of Recognition

The Ghanaian literature provides a context in which the relationship between student experience and formal musical knowledge is particularly important. Historical scholarship has documented the influence of Western musical concepts on Ghanaian school music and the continuing difficulty of establishing curricula that fully reflect Ghanaian musical cultures (Flolu, 1994; Flolu & Amuah, 2003; Otchere, 2015, 2019). Recent advocacy has continued to call for pedagogies centred on African musical arts (Komabu & Dawson, 2024). These debates demonstrate that curriculum relevance is not simply a matter of adding culturally familiar songs to an otherwise unchanged curriculum; it concerns the assumptions through which musical knowledge is selected, organised, and valued.

Much of the scholarship supporting this critique is historical and curricular in character, tracing policy documents, syllabi, and the institutional history of music education in Ghana, rather than empirical studies of what happens between teachers and students in contemporary classrooms. This is a genuine limitation: historical and curricular analysis can establish that a Western-oriented structure exists and persists, but it cannot, on its own, specify how that structure is experienced day-to-day by adolescents attending Ghanaian secondary schools. Studies of West African Senior School Certificate Examination performance and preparation move closer to classroom-level evidence, understandably focusing on examination requirements, but this focus can position students primarily as performers of institutional competencies (Acquah & Kwofie, 2021) rather than as informants about their own classroom experience. The literature reviewed here therefore establishes the curricular problem with more confidence than it establishes its classroom-level consequences, and closing that gap would require empirical studies involving Ghanaian students and teachers directly, a point the review returns to in its concluding sections.

The literature on adolescent music nonetheless suggests a different starting point than the one assessment-oriented scholarship typically takes. Students are not musically empty before they enter the classroom. They arrive with preferences, listening practices, performance experiences, peer cultures, identities, and informal ways of learning. The contrast can be understood as a difference between musical participation and institutional recognition. Green (2005) described informal music learning as involving listening, imitation, experimentation, and social participation. These processes differ from learning organised primarily through notation, individual assessment, and predetermined curricular sequences. Neither mode of learning is inherently sufficient on its own. The educational question is whether formal schooling can recognise and connect the different forms of musical knowledge students already possess.

Campbell et al. (2007) offer an important point of comparison. In their study of adolescents' expressed meanings of music in and out of school, students described out-of-school music through emotional, social, expressive, and cultural meanings, while school music was more strongly associated with requirements and assessment. Their findings suggest that disconnection may arise not because adolescents lack interest in music but because school defines musical participation differently from students' everyday lives. This distinction is especially useful in the Ghanaian context, where students participate in rich musical cultures beyond the formal curriculum.

Jama as a Transition to Student-Centered Music Education

Jama, also spelt gyama in some sources, is a communal musical tradition associated with Ghanaian boarding schools. It involves group singing and performance and is connected to celebration, competition, house identity, solidarity, and school life (Botchway, 2017). The practice is particularly useful for thinking about student-centred music education because it demonstrates that Ghanaian adolescents already create and sustain complex musical practices within the very institutions in which formal music education takes place. Jama is transmitted largely

through participation. Older students teach younger students; groups adapt songs to changing circumstances; and musical ideas circulate between school communities and the wider popular culture. Botchway (2017) documented jama as a form of student creativity, while Botchway and Boahen-Boaten (2022) argued that boarding-house life can generate cultural forms adapted to students' social and institutional circumstances. Jama therefore complicates the distinction between formal and informal learning. It is informal in its transmission, but it is also an organised and meaningful form of musical education created by students.

This observation shifts the question from whether students have musical knowledge to how schools recognise that knowledge. A student may have difficulty identifying staff notation while demonstrating sophisticated rhythmic coordination, ensemble awareness, memory, improvisation, and responsiveness in jama. These capacities should not automatically be treated as equivalent to formal notation skills, but neither should they be dismissed as evidence of musical absence; they represent different forms of musical knowing. The boarding school is also a distinctive musical place. Students from different regions and cultural backgrounds live together, creating conditions for musical exchange and adaptation. Matsunobu (2018) argued that music-making is shaped by place and that musical knowledge develops through particular social and physical environments. In Ghanaian boarding schools, jama illustrates this relationship: students use music to negotiate belonging, identity, competition, celebration, and community. The practice thus provides a concrete example of adolescent musical intelligence operating outside formal music lessons.

For this reason, jama is best understood as a transition point in the argument of this review. The preceding literature identifies that formal music education can become disconnected from adolescents' musical lives. Jama demonstrates that adolescents are already producing meaningful musical knowledge within school communities. The pedagogical question can therefore move beyond diagnosis toward possibility: what might music education look like if it began by listening to, recognising, and building upon the musical knowledge students already possess?

Student Voice as a Source of Educational Knowledge

A student-centred approach may require treating students as knowledgeable participants in shaping what music education should address and how it should be experienced. In this review, student voice encompasses a range of practices, from consulting students about their views to engaging them in collaboration and co-inquiry, where they take an active role in influencing educational decisions and producing knowledge (Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006; Thiessen & Cook-Sather, 2007). Student voice is more than a matter of expression; it is a recognition that students possess knowledge relevant to understanding and improving education.

Cook-Sather (2002) argues that students occupy positions within educational institutions that give them access to forms of knowledge often unavailable to adults. Students have a "unique perspective on what happens in school and classrooms" (p. 4), and these perspectives provide important insights into how education is experienced. More fundamentally, Cook-Sather contends that students "must be recognized as having knowledge essential to the development of sound educational policies and practices" (2002, p. 12). These claims shift student voice from a question of participation to a question of knowledge: if students possess perspectives that adults cannot fully access, then excluding those perspectives narrows the knowledge base upon which educational decisions are made.

The significance of student voice therefore lies in both making education more democratic and in improving the quality of educational knowledge available to researchers and educators. As Cook-Sather (2002) warns, "as long as we exclude these perspectives from our conversations about schooling and how it needs to change, our efforts at reform will be based on an incomplete picture" (p. 4). Similarly, Cook-Sather (2006) argues that student voice is grounded in the conviction that young people have "unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling" and that their insights "warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults" (p. 359). Student voice thus requires more than listening; it requires a willingness to reconsider existing assumptions and practices in light of what students reveal about their educational experiences.

Applied to Ghanaian music education, these claims suggest that curriculum debates, assessment reforms, and discussions of teacher practice remain incomplete when adolescents themselves are absent from the conversation. Existing scholarship provides important knowledge about curriculum structures, examinations, teacher preparation, and school music-making. Still, it tells us comparatively

little about how adolescents understand, use, and value music in their everyday lives. Student voice, therefore, raises questions that existing curriculum and assessment research cannot answer on its own. What music-making do adolescents listen to, and why? How do they understand the musical practices they engage in outside class? Which musical skills do they consider important? What happens when the music that matters to them is absent from school? What do they believe a meaningful music class should provide? Answering such questions requires research that listens directly to students and takes their perspectives seriously as educational knowledge.

Such listening has practical implications. Repertoire selection might be informed by students' own musical preferences and competencies; assessment practices might recognise skills demonstrated through informal practices such as *jama* alongside notation-based competencies; and students might participate in decisions about learning activities, listening examples, or the design of classroom projects. As Cook-Sather (2002) reminds educators, "to really listen means to have to respond" (p. 6). Student voice therefore entails not only hearing students but also acting on what is learned from them. Cook-Sather (2006) further argues that students should be afforded opportunities to "actively shape their education" (p. 359). This shifts the focus from students as sources of information to students as participants in educational change. For Ghanaian music education, this means treating adolescents not only as learners of music but also as contributors to conversations about what music education should include, how it should be taught, and what forms of musical knowledge deserve recognition within schools.

Student voice should therefore be understood as both a pedagogical principle and a research orientation. Ethnographic, interview-based, participatory, and collaborative approaches could document adolescents' musical lives while also involving them in interpreting those experiences. Such work would complement, rather than replace, curriculum analysis and teacher research. Campbell et al. (2007) illustrate the value of this approach by showing that adolescents themselves provide important insights into music's role in identity formation, emotional wellbeing, social relationships, and everyday life. They contend that adolescents are knowledgeable interpreters of their own musical experiences, whose perspectives can contribute meaningfully to curriculum and pedagogical decision-making. Green's (2008) *Musical Futures* work highlighted what can happen when formal learning begins from students' existing musical practices. This orientation also aligns with culturally sustaining perspectives that seek to recognise and sustain cultural practices young people already produce rather than treating them merely as resources to be adapted for formal instruction (Paris & Alim, 2017).

In Ghana, *jama* and popular music-making are not hypothetical practices waiting to be introduced into schools; they already exist in students' lives. The challenge is to understand them carefully and determine how they might inform formal musical learning without reducing them to decorative examples of culture. A student-centred approach therefore requires teachers to listen before deciding what students need. Listening to students' musical experiences can reveal interests, identities, relationships, and forms of musical competence that remain invisible through conventional assessment. This is not a call to romanticise out-of-school music. Students' musical cultures are diverse and can include commercial pressures, exclusion, and competing values. Rather, student voice means recognising students as participants whose experiences are relevant to the construction of educational knowledge and whose perspectives can help shape more responsive and meaningful music education.

What a Student-Centered Music Education May Look Like

The possibilities described in this section follow from the literature synthesised above; they are pedagogical implications drawn from that synthesis, not empirical findings from an intervention study, since this review has not tested any of the practices it describes in Ghanaian classrooms. Centring adolescent musical life does not mean abandoning formal musical knowledge. Instead, it changes the relationship between formal knowledge and students' existing knowledge. Hargreaves (1986) argued that intuitive musical experience and enjoyment can precede the acquisition of formal musical skills. Green (2005, 2008) contended that informal learning processes can provide a foundation for more formal musical development. In a Ghanaian classroom, this could mean beginning with music students know and value and then using that music to develop concepts such as rhythm, melody, harmony, form, timbre, analysis, performance, and composition.

For example, students' engagement with highlife, hiplife, Afrobeats, gospel, dancehall, or jama could become a starting point for comparative listening, transcription, arrangement, songwriting, performance, and historical inquiry. The pedagogical objective would not be simply to celebrate students' preferences; instead, students' musical practices would become objects of serious musical investigation. What rhythmic structures do students hear? How do performers create groove? How do lyrics communicate identity or social commentary? How do musical elements change across recordings? What technologies shape contemporary musical participation? Such questions preserve the intellectual demands of music education while changing where inquiry begins.

Teacher education would also need to address teachers' assumptions about legitimate musical knowledge. Kelly-McHale (2013) showed that teachers' beliefs can influence the musical identities students can express. Ladson-Billings (1994) similarly emphasised that students enter educational spaces as cultural beings whose knowledge and practices matter. In Ghana, teacher preparation could therefore include sustained engagement with adolescent musical behaviour, popular music, jama, informal learning, and methods for eliciting and interpreting student voice. Whether these possibilities improve engagement, achievement, or teacher practice in Ghanaian schools remains to be tested; the argument here is that they follow logically from the literature reviewed, not that they have been demonstrated empirically in the Ghanaian setting.

Implications for Music Education Beyond Ghana

Although the historical and cultural conditions described here are Ghanaian, the central educational puzzle has wider relevance, and it is important to distinguish which parts of that wider claim are supported directly by the literature reviewed and which are inferences drawn from the Ghanaian case. Campbell et al. (2007) and Green (2005, 2008), both grounded in research on adolescents outside Ghana, directly support the claim that a school–out-of-school divide in music-making is not exclusively a Ghanaian concern. What is inferred, rather than directly evidenced, is that the specific pedagogical response developed here from the Ghanaian case—beginning instruction with musical practices students already sustain—would transfer successfully to other educational systems; the review offers this as a potentially transferable insight for other contexts to consider and test, not as a universal conclusion.

With that distinction in mind, music educators in many contexts work with students whose musical lives extend beyond school and whose preferred genres, technologies, communities, and learning practices are not fully represented in formal curricula. The Ghanaian case contributes a particular perspective to this broader discussion. Jama demonstrates that students can create enduring musical institutions inside schools even when those practices are not central to formal music curricula. The example invites educators elsewhere to ask what student-generated musical practices already exist in their own schools and communities. These practices may include peer-led ensembles, informal songwriting, digital production, social-media music making, community traditions, religious music, or other forms of participation that conventional curricula overlook.

For readers outside the Ghanaian context, the value of the Ghanaian case therefore lies in using the case to reconsider assumptions about who produces musical knowledge, where musical learning occurs, and how schools decide which musical practices deserve educational attention. The Ghanaian context makes these questions particularly visible because the tension between Western curricular traditions and local musical practices has a long history (Flolu, 1994; Otchere, 2015, 2019). Yet the underlying question of whether formal music education begins with students' musical lives or asks students to enter a predetermined musical world remains worth investigating across educational contexts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This review set out to ask what existing scholarship reveals about Ghanaian adolescents' musical lives, how formal school music recognises or overlooks the knowledge students develop outside school, and what a more student-centred approach might contribute to Ghanaian music education. Bringing the Ghanaian music education literature into direct conversation with international research on adolescent musical behaviour and identity shows that these bodies of scholarship have rarely been read together, and that reading them together reveals a consistent pattern: Ghanaian music education scholarship has documented curricular disconnection from local musical cultures, while separately, international scholarship has documented how central music is to adolescent emotion, identity, and belonging; neither literature, on its own, has placed Ghanaian adolescents' own musical knowledge at the centre of curriculum thinking.

Jama provides a particularly productive bridge across these two literatures because it is simultaneously a Ghanaian institution and a clear demonstration of the general claim that adolescents construct musical knowledge through informal, socially embedded participation. It shows concretely that Ghanaian adolescents already create, transmit, and sustain musical knowledge through participation, which reframes the educational problem identified throughout this review: the issue is not a lack of musical intelligence among students but a problem of recognition—which forms of musical knowledge formal education is prepared to see, value, and develop. Student voice, in turn, supplies the mechanism by which that recognition could become pedagogically actionable, translating the conceptual argument that students possess relevant knowledge into concrete practices of consultation, collaboration, and co-inquiry.

A student-centred music education, understood this way, can respond by beginning with students' existing musical lives while still pursuing rigorous formal musical learning. The next step is empirical. Ghanaian music education needs research that listens directly to adolescents and treats their perspectives as intellectually consequential, examining the variation across gender, region, school type, and background that this review could identify as a concern but could not resolve. Such research can help determine what students know, how they learn, what music means to them, and how formal education might build from those experiences. For music educators beyond Ghana, the case offers a parallel invitation, understood as a transferable question rather than a proven solution: examine the musical knowledge already present in students' lives and consider whether the curriculum recognises it. Centring student voice is therefore not a retreat from rigorous music education; it is a way of asking more carefully what rigorous music education should be for the students it is intended to serve.

Recommendations: Future studies should document Ghanaian adolescents' musical practices through sustained observation, interviews, focus groups, and participatory inquiry. Research should examine differences across gender, region, school type, socioeconomic context, religious affiliation, and musical participation without assuming that a single adolescent musical experience represents Ghanaian youth. Studies should also investigate how teachers interpret student-generated musical knowledge and what institutional conditions make student-centred approaches possible. Most importantly, adolescents should participate not only as research subjects but, where appropriate, as collaborators in designing questions, interpreting findings, and imagining educational alternatives.

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