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SUSTAINABILITY OF INDIGENOUS VISUAL ARTS IN SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN CLASSROOMS

ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing marginalisation of local heritage within formal curricula, which often prioritises Western-centric pedagogical models, this study explores the sustainability of Indigenous visual arts through a collaborative, practice-based intervention. Adopting a qualitative collaborative action research design, the research purposefully selected three Creative Arts teachers, three Indigenous Knowledge experts, and one academic researcher who engaged with learners in rural school settings to develop strategies for sustainable Indigenous visual arts instruction. The study generated robust data through participant observation, field notes, photographs, audio and visual recordings, and teacher reflective journals, which were subsequently analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings are organised around three interrelated themes. First, a shift from abstract, theory-driven instruction to embodied, artefact-based learning highlights the fundamental importance of observation, imitation, and repetition in Indigenous pedagogies, methods often overlooked in traditional formal assessment. Second, the study demonstrates the critical repositioning of Indigenous Knowledge experts as legitimate pedagogical authorities. This shift challenges dominant, Eurocentric notions of qualification by foregrounding mastery of practice and lived experience as essential instructional assets. Third, the research highlights the necessity of school–community collaboration in enabling the authentic and sustainable integration of Indigenous Knowledge, ensuring that art education remains culturally resonant. The discussion is framed through the lenses of Cultural Interface and Communicative Action Theory, illustrating how classrooms function as dialogic spaces where disparate knowledge systems are negotiated and co-constructed. Based on these insights, the study argues that long-term sustainability depends on a holistic approach that integrates transformative pedagogy, institutional recognition of Indigenous expertise, and active community partnerships. It concludes that such indigenisation not only enhances cultural relevance but also fosters the development of globally competent, culturally grounded learners, providing a transferable framework for educational decolonisation in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords

Creative Arts pedagogy; Visual arts; Indigenous Knowledge; Sustainability; Rural schools.

1. Introduction

More than two decades after South Africa's 1994 democratic elections, the school curriculum continues to advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011), yet its meaningful enactment in classroom practice remains inconsistent. Following the democratic transition, the education system introduced the Arts and Culture learning area for Grades R-9, now known as Creative Arts, which is formally taught and assessed in public schools. The subject encompasses dance, drama, music, and visual arts, including design and craft practices (DBE, 2011). Embedded within the curriculum is the expectation that teaching should connect with learners' lived experiences, including the imperative of valuing Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as a foundational pedagogical principle (DBE, 2011).

Despite this curriculum mandate, a gap remains between policy intentions and classroom implementation, as Creative Arts teaching often remains theoretical and influenced by Eurocentric paradigms (Mhlauli & Fikelepi-Twani, 2024). Teachers frequently rely on such approaches because of limited pedagogical support, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient access to Indigenous teaching resources (Blose & Gumbo, 2024). Consequently, locally available materials and community knowledge that could support culturally relevant and practice-based learning remain underutilised (South African Cultural Observatory [SACO], 2024). As a result, indigenisation efforts frequently depend on externally supported projects rather than becoming embedded within routine classroom practice.

Indigenous visual arts offer significant potential for addressing this challenge. Within AmaMpondo communities, cultural practices such as ukuthwalisa intombi and ukukhulisa amantombazana continue to rely on locally produced artefacts that embody cultural knowledge and identity. Artefacts such as imitshayelo yengca, izicamba, izithebe, isitya, and umtexo are not merely functional objects but also important carriers of Indigenous Knowledge. These artefacts provide authentic contexts through which learners can engage with curriculum concepts such as line, form, texture, and design while simultaneously strengthening cultural knowledge and practical skills.

This paper draws on an ongoing doctoral study aimed at indigenising Creative Arts instruction in the Senior Phase (Grades 7-9) across three South African schools. The overall study is positioned inside a Collaborative Action Research (CAR) framework that brings together Indigenous Knowledge experts, Creative Arts teachers, and an academic researcher in a process of educational transformation. The study was conducted in four successive three-month cycles. Each cycle included planning, implementation, observation, and evaluation (reflection) phases. Through this iterative method, participants collaborated to design, implement, monitor, and improve teaching and learning practices in response to insights gained throughout the study (Kemmis et al., 2014). The present paper focuses specifically on the first two CAR cycles, which concentrated on Indigenous visual arts due to their highly practical nature and their strong connection to local cultural traditions.

Although the initial intervention successfully facilitated the integration of Indigenous visual arts into classroom practice, it also exposed concerns about the long-term sustainability of the initiative. The implementation process relied heavily on researcher-provided resources and collaborative facilitation, raising questions about whether teachers could sustain such practices independently after the withdrawal of external support. These concerns reflect a broader challenge associated with curriculum indigenisation in resource-constrained rural schools, where limited access to materials, specialist expertise, and culturally relevant teaching resources can constrain ongoing implementation.

While existing research has demonstrated the value of integrating Indigenous Knowledge into education, much of this work has been situated within researcher-led initiatives and externally funded interventions. Consequently, less is known about how Indigenous visual arts can be embedded within everyday classroom practice and sustained over time by teachers and communities themselves. Understanding the conditions that support long-term sustainability is therefore critical if curriculum indigenisation is to move beyond short-term projects and become an integral component of Creative Arts education.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the sustainability of integrating Indigenous visual arts within rural Creative Arts classrooms beyond the lifespan of externally supported interventions. Specifically, it addresses the question: How can the integration of Indigenous visual arts be sustainably embedded within rural school contexts beyond the period of external researcher intervention? To explore this question, the study is informed by Creative Arts Pedagogy (Corcoran & Sim, 2009), which provides a framework for creative engagement, and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007), which foregrounds the lived realities, cultural practices, and knowledge systems of the AmaMpondo community.

2. Theoretical-Methodological Framework

This section explains the concepts and theories that inform the integration of Indigenous visual arts and sustainability, as well as the research orientation and principles that guide the generation and presentation of knowledge in the study.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the Creative Arts Pedagogy (CAP) framework developed by Corcoran and Sim (2009), which promotes creative thinking by shifting from a traditional process-product orientation towards a reflective-practitioner model. Within this approach, practitioners critically evaluate both their actions and the underlying assumptions informing those actions. CAP positions art as a medium through which learners express ideas, emotions, and experiences while developing critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities (Chishti et al., 2022). The framework, therefore, provides an appropriate pedagogical foundation for fostering creative engagement in visual arts education.

While CAP provides the pedagogical structure, this study is further framed by Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007). Indigenous Standpoint Theory challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies by foregrounding Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. Through this lens, creativity is understood not merely as the production of novel artefacts but as a practice situated within lived experiences, cultural protocols, community values, and ancestral knowledge systems. In the context of the AmaMpondo community, Indigenous Standpoint Theory ensures that Indigenous visual arts are interpreted from within local cultural realities rather than through externally imposed perspectives.

The study further draws on Indigenous conceptions of knowledge as relational and collectively constructed. Wilson (2008) and Wilson and Wilson (1998) argue that knowledge emerges through relationships among people, communities, the environment, and cultural practices. Within Indigenous visual arts education, learning occurs through interactions among Indigenous Knowledge experts, teachers, learners, and locally available materials. The production of artefacts such as imitshayelo yengca, izicamba, izithebe, isitya, and umtexo, therefore, represents more than the acquisition of technical skills; it embodies the preservation and transmission of communal knowledge and cultural identity.

The sustainability of Indigenous visual arts education is further understood through Afrocentric perspectives, particularly the principle of Ubuntu (Asante, 1991). Ubuntu emphasises interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and community well-being. From this perspective, curriculum sustainability is inseparable from cultural continuity and the preservation of community identity. Indigenous visual arts become sustainable when they remain embedded in the community's social and cultural practices rather than functioning as isolated classroom activities.

2.2 Methodological Framework

The methodological orientation of this study is informed by the practical nature of Creative Arts education. Nantwi et al. (2019) argue that effective arts instruction requires suitable teaching methods, materials, and opportunities for active participation. Consequently, the integration of Indigenous Knowledge in this study emphasises demonstration, participation, and hands-on engagement rather than reliance on theoretical discussion alone. Learning is therefore facilitated through the making of Indigenous artefacts using locally available resources.

Consistent with the reflective-practitioner orientation of CAP (Corcoran & Sim, 2009), the study adopts a methodological stance that values continuous reflection on practice. Teachers, Indigenous Knowledge experts, and an academic researcher collaboratively examine their teaching approaches, experiences, and decisions throughout the intervention. Reflection functions as a mechanism for refining practice and developing contextually responsive pedagogies.

The methodological framework recognises knowledge generation as a collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders.

Indigenous Knowledge experts, teachers, learners, and an academic researcher participate in the co-construction of knowledge through shared activities and dialogue. This approach aligns with Indigenous research principles that privilege community participation and collective knowledge production. A central methodological assumption of the study is that sustainable curriculum indigenisation depends on the utilisation of locally available resources. In rural contexts, the environment serves as a source of instructional materials and cultural knowledge. Sustainability is therefore achieved when classroom practice is grounded in community knowledge systems and natural resources, enabling Indigenous visual arts education to continue independently of external support. This overlap between school and community creates the conditions for Indigenous visual arts to become an enduring and self-sustaining pedagogical practice.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative Collaborative Action Research approach situated within the critical paradigm to investigate sustainable strategies for addressing recurring theoretical approaches to visual arts teaching amid calls to integrate Indigenous Knowledge (IK) into Creative Arts education. The study explored the sustainability of Indigenous visual arts in classroom practice by eliciting participants' perspectives and experiences regarding their capacity to continue incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing after the withdrawal of researcher support and resources. The critical paradigm was intentionally selected because it enables the interrogation of power relations and the transformation of oppressive structures that have historically marginalised IK within South African education (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). South African curricula have frequently privileged Eurocentric aesthetic values while overlooking the ontological and epistemological richness of local communities. Recent scholarship similarly advocates foregrounding Indigenous ways of knowing in educational practice (Cindi, 2021; Mhlauli & Fikelepi-Twani, 2024). Grounded in a subjectivist epistemology, the study views knowledge as socially constructed, culturally embedded, and value-laden. Indigenous Knowledge was therefore approached not as a static resource to be extracted but as a living system of meaning requiring dialogic and context-sensitive engagement (Keane et al., 2023). A key methodological contribution of the study was the integration of Habermas' (1985) Theory of Communicative Action as a guiding framework. Through this lens, educational emancipation was operationalised as a process of undistorted communication in which teachers, Indigenous Knowledge experts, an academic researcher, and learners participated in democratic knowledge production. This approach disrupted traditional hierarchies between academic expertise and Indigenous Knowledge experts, positioning participants as co-constructors of knowledge (Habermas, 1985; Kemmis, 2006). Accordingly, participants are referred to collectively as the Collaborative Action Research (CAR) team throughout this paper.

The framework further provided a mechanism for balancing Western academic rigor with the communal, oral, and practice-based traditions characteristic of Indigenous Knowledge systems.

The study employed a Collaborative Action Research (CAR) design, which is particularly suited to contexts seeking social transformation and collaborative knowledge production (Cornish et al., 2023). Through iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kemmis, 2006), the study moved beyond theoretical engagement into classroom praxis. This cyclical process enabled the continuous refinement of pedagogical strategies, with reflections from one activity informing subsequent learning engagements. Consequently, the methodology remained responsive to CAR team's experiences rather than being constrained by a rigid research structure.

The research was conducted in three purposively selected rural schools in the Alfred Nzo East District of the Eastern Cape. These sites were chosen because they represent under-resourced educational contexts where the disconnect between formal curricula and community knowledge is often pronounced (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The collaborative structure comprised three Indigenous Knowledge experts, three Creative Arts teachers, an academic researcher, and sixty-two Grade 7 learners. The learners included fifteen participants from School A, twelve from School B, and thirty-five from School C. This intergenerational learning community enabled the study to observe how knowledge circulated between schools and communities within formal educational spaces. Such contextual detail contributes to the thick description necessary for transferability in qualitative inquiry (Younas et al., 2023).

A notable methodological innovation involved transforming conventional focus groups into working focus groups. Traditional focus groups rely primarily on verbal articulation (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009), which may inadequately capture artistic and Indigenous forms of expression. In Creative Arts contexts, knowledge is frequently transmitted through observation, participation, and practice. By embedding data generation within artistic activities such as beadwork and weaving, the study aligned with arts-based and embodied methodologies (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Leavy, 2015). This approach reduced the performance anxiety often associated with formal interviews, allowing interactions to become more natural and authentic. The approach is further supported by Mhlauli and Fikelepi-Twani (2024), who emphasise the importance of practice-based engagement in Indigenous Knowledge transmission.

The sixty-two learners were divided into groups of six or seven. The intervention was conducted over six months and comprised two CAR cycles, each approximately three months long. Teaching and artefact construction sessions took place weekly at each school. As the CAR team engaged in artefact production, an academic researcher recorded field notes on interactions among learners, teachers, and Indigenous Knowledge experts. Informal conversations among members of the CAR team were also documented. Teachers maintained reflective diaries throughout the process, which were collected at the end of each cycle. In addition, photographs, audio recordings, and video recordings were captured during the sessions. These data sources were subsequently transcribed and analysed alongside field notes and teacher reflections.

The study utilised reflexive thematic analysis to examine the multimodal dataset.

Although initially guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, the analysis also drew upon their later conceptualisation of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021), which emphasises researcher reflexivity rather than rigid codebook procedures. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six recursive phases. The process began with familiarisation through immersion in photographic annotations, transcriptions of audio and video recordings, observational field notes, and teachers' reflective journals. Particular attention was paid to both spoken and unspoken forms of knowledge, including gestures, demonstrations, and artistic practices. Initial codes were generated around patterns such as intergenerational knowledge transfer, collaborative learning, and resistance to colonial forms of rote learning. Related codes were subsequently clustered into broader themes that reflect the intersections between oral narratives and material production. Through ongoing interpretive engagement with the data, themes contributed to the development of concepts such as pedagogical communalism. An academic researcher identified themes across the datasets from the three participating schools to ensure thematic coherence and the emergence of meaningful patterns. Continuous reflexive practice was maintained throughout the analytical process. She critically examined how her disciplinary background, prior experiences, assumptions, and positionality influenced data interpretation and theme generation. Analytic memos were maintained throughout coding, while emerging interpretations were discussed with the CAR team to challenge assumptions and explore alternative readings. This process enhanced transparency about the researcher's active role in knowledge production. For example, the theme *Artefact as Voice* illustrated how beadwork functioned as a medium through which the CAR team communicated identity and cultural meaning beyond verbal language. Thick description was subsequently employed to connect participant experiences with visual evidence generated through their creative work.

To ensure trustworthiness and rigour, the study employed multi-vocal triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple sources of evidence were triangulated, including participant observation, informal conversations, teacher diary entries, photographs, and audio and video recordings. This holistic approach captured both verbal narratives and embodied practices, providing a richer understanding of classroom praxis while strengthening the credibility and dependability of the findings.

This study makes three methodological contributions to research on Indigenous Knowledge and Creative Arts education. First, it advances Collaborative Action Research within a decolonial framework by integrating Habermasian communicative action with Indigenous collaborative practices, thereby promoting epistemic justice (Habermas, 1984; Kemmis, 2005; Smith, 2012). Second, it introduces the working focus group as a methodological innovation that accommodates embodied and material forms of knowing, particularly in contexts where knowledge is transmitted through practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

Finally, by centring the agency of teachers, learners, and Indigenous Knowledge experts, the methodology supports the development of sustainable communities of practice capable of continuing curriculum indigenisation beyond the lifespan of the research project (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999).

4. Empirical Analysis and Illustration

This paper draws on findings from a six-month Collaborative Action Research (CAR) intervention aimed at integrating Indigenous Knowledge (IK) into Creative Arts education through Indigenous visual arts. The intervention involved three Creative Arts teachers, three Indigenous Knowledge experts, one academic researcher, and sixty-two Grade 7 learners across three rural schools. The intervention sought to address teachers' reliance on theoretical approaches to Creative Arts instruction by introducing a practice-based and culturally responsive pedagogy. Learners participated in the creation of five Indigenous artefacts, namely isitya, isicamba/ukhuko, umtshayelo wengca, isithebe, and umtexo, using locally available materials such as grass and beads (Figures 1-4). Indigenous Knowledge experts led demonstrations of artefact production, while learners observed, imitated, and practised the various techniques. Throughout the two action CAR cycles, data were generated through participant observation, informal conversations, teacher diary entries, photographs, audio, and video recordings, and reflective discussions. The figures below illustrate the integration of Indigenous visual arts into classroom practice through the Collaborative Action Research (CAR) processes of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis, 2006). In accordance with established visual research ethics, identifiable facial features were digitally blurred to preserve learner anonymity and protect minor participants from potential identification during research dissemination (Wiles et al., 2008; Wiles et al., 2012; Korkiamäki & Kauko, 2023). Collectively, the figures provide evidence that integrating Indigenous visual arts is a viable and contextually responsive pedagogical approach when implemented through collaborative partnerships between schools and community knowledge holders.



Figure 1. Isitya and umtshayelo wengca.
Photo by author



Figure 2. Isicamba (grass mat) in progress.
Photo by author



Figure 3. Isitya (grass jar). Photo by author



Figure 4. Umtexo (beadwork belt). Photo by author

4.1 Presentation of Findings

In response to the research question:

How can the integration of Indigenous visual arts be sustainably embedded within rural school contexts beyond the period of external researcher intervention?

Three interrelated themes emerged from the analysis:

1. From theory-driven instruction to embodied practice.
2. Indigenous Knowledge experts as legitimate pedagogical authorities.
3. School-community collaboration as a foundation for sustainability.

These themes are interconnected and collectively demonstrate that sustainable indigenisation is not merely a curriculum initiative but a pedagogical, epistemological, and community-centred process.

4.1.1 Theme 1: From Theory-Driven Instruction to Embodied Practice

4.1.2 Findings

The cycles revealed that Creative Arts instruction had largely been constrained by resource limitations, resulting in the predominance of theoretical teaching approaches. The production of Indigenous artefacts such as isitya, isicamba/ukhuko, umtshayelo wengca, isithebe, and umtexo exposed the practical challenges teachers encountered when implementing Indigenous visual arts. One teacher explained:

“The school does not have the means to buy materials or to compensate people who will bring the grass from the mountains.” (Teacher C)

However, collaboration with Indigenous Knowledge experts demonstrated that many of the required resources were readily available within the local environment. Grasses were sourced from nearby marshy areas, while discarded plastic was repurposed as binding material. This enabled learners to engage directly in artefact construction through observation, imitation, repetition, and guided practice, while teachers also learned alongside them. Learners progressively developed practical competency in producing artefacts such as isitya, isicamba/ukhuko, umtshayelo wengca, and umtexo. Reflecting on this process, another teacher commented:

“Wow, it is possible. I was worried about getting materials. It means the Indigenous Knowledge experts could make things easy for the school to access these materials.” (Teacher A)

Field notes and classroom observations indicated high levels of learner engagement, particularly when learning moved beyond textbook-based instruction to practical application. For example, learners used the completed umtshayelo wengca to sweep the classroom before formal assessment, demonstrating an appreciation of the artefact's functional and cultural value.

4.1.3 Discussion

The findings suggest that Indigenous Knowledge is most effectively transmitted through embodied participation rather than abstract instruction. Consistent with Nakata's (2007) concept of the Cultural Interface, learning occurred through the interaction of Indigenous and school-based knowledge systems. Similarly, the emphasis on observation, imitation, and repetition supports Creative Arts Pedagogy's focus on experiential knowledge construction and demonstrates how locally available resources can contribute to sustainable curriculum indigenisation. The availability of local materials reduced dependence on commercially produced resources and highlighted the potential for Indigenous visual arts to become self-sustaining within resource-constrained contexts. The findings support Nantwi et al.'s (2019) argument that meaningful arts education is strengthened through practical participation rather than theoretical instruction alone.

4.2.1 Theme 2: Indigenous Knowledge Experts as Legitimate Pedagogical Authorities

4.2.2 Findings

The findings reveal a significant shift in how pedagogical authority was constructed within the classroom. Initially, some learners questioned the legitimacy of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) experts because they lacked formal teaching qualifications and did not teach through English, as reflected in one learner's comment:

"I wonder how these elders are going to teach in school since they do not speak English."

This perception reflected dominant assumptions that educational expertise derives primarily from institutional certification and linguistic proficiency. However, as the intervention progressed, learners and teachers increasingly recognised the IK experts' competence through their demonstrated mastery of artefact production, their ability to explain the cultural significance of Indigenous visual arts, and their use of Indigenous pedagogical approaches such as demonstration, observation, and repeated imitation. Their authority, therefore, became grounded in practical expertise, cultural knowledge, and relational trust rather than formal credentials. The collaborative nature of the study was further evident as IK experts taught primarily through the mother tongue while teachers supported learners by clarifying concepts in English, the language of instruction.

This shift in perception was reflected in Teacher B's observation that "the school should regularly invite elders to teach craft skills; it is really doable. My focus was more on language acquisition than the mastery of the skill."

The IK experts assumed central roles as facilitators, introducing materials, explaining their origins, and guiding learners and teachers through practical activities within an intergenerational learning environment.

At the same time, the experts themselves engaged in reciprocal learning by adapting traditional artefacts to contemporary contexts. For example, isitya, traditionally associated with ritual use, was reimagined as a jewellery box through ideas generated by learners and teachers. As one IK expert reflected:

“Ndandisoyika ukuzofundisa esikolweni olu lwazi kuba ndisithi andifundanga kanti ndizofunda izinto ezitsha” (“I was afraid to teach in school since I am illiterate, but in return I am learning new things.”)

Within Nakata's (2007) Cultural Interface, these findings illustrate a rebalancing of epistemic power in which Indigenous Knowledge Systems are recognised as valid and generative forms of knowledge rather than subordinate to Western educational traditions. From a Creative Arts perspective, the legitimacy of the IK experts was grounded in mastery of practice and participation in authentic learning activities (Rogoff et al., 2016). The findings, therefore, challenge dominant notions of Western credentialism and support decolonial arguments for recognising community-based knowledge holders as legitimate educational authorities, thereby contributing to greater epistemic justice within classroom practice (de Sousa Santos, 2015; Smith, 2012).

4.2.3 Discussion

The findings challenge dominant assumptions that legitimate pedagogical authority is restricted to formally qualified teachers. Instead, expertise emerged through demonstrated competence, cultural knowledge, and practical mastery. Indigenous Knowledge experts functioned as knowledgeable facilitators whose involvement enhanced the authenticity of learning experiences. This finding aligns with Indigenous epistemological perspectives that recognise community elders as knowledge custodians and legitimate educators.

4.3.1 Theme 3: School-Community Collaboration as a Foundation for Sustainability

4.3.2 Findings

While the teachers were concerned about obtaining natural materials for craft work, as Teacher C commented, “It is difficult to get these materials; the schools do not have money to compensate people who can go and fetch the grass on the mountains,” empirical evidence from the study demonstrated that collaboration extended beyond knowledge transmission to include resource mobilisation and collective problem-solving. When teachers expressed concerns about the affordability and availability of materials, Indigenous Knowledge experts worked with an academic researcher to identify and collect locally available grasses from nearby marshy areas and repurposed discarded plastic as a binding material.

This collaborative effort reduced dependence on externally sourced resources and demonstrated how communities can develop practical solutions to resource constraints commonly experienced in rural schools. Collaboration was further evident during the reflective stages of the intervention, where teachers, Indigenous Knowledge experts, and an academic researcher jointly conducted SWOT analyses to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with sustaining Indigenous visual arts education. Teacher B's recommendation that community elders should regularly visit schools to teach craft skills suggests that sustainable indigenisation depends on ongoing partnerships rather than short-term interventions.

Reflecting on the intervention, Teacher B stated:

“I have seen that the community and schools should work together. Since the day we started doing craft work with IK experts, learners' attendance has increased. I can see that these learners are passionate about doing craft work. The collaborative study not only indigenised Creative Arts education but also changed the learners' attitudes towards Indigenous Knowledge.”

Similarly, one learner commented:

“Before participating in this project, I thought learning was only about what happened at school, and I did not value Indigenous Knowledge. This experience has changed my perspective because I now understand that Indigenous craft skills can be used to generate income and help me meet some of my school needs.”

These findings indicate that school-community partnerships extend beyond knowledge transmission to foster entrepreneurship skills, resource mobilisation, and capacity building. Through the active involvement of Indigenous Knowledge experts, teachers, learners, and an academic researcher, the intervention strengthened learner engagement and enhanced access to locally available resources. Therefore, school-community partnerships emerged as an important mechanism for the sustainable integration of Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous visual arts within Creative Arts education.

4.3.3 Discussion

The findings indicate that sustainability is unlikely to be achieved through isolated teacher efforts or short-term research projects. Instead, sustainable indigenisation depends on enduring partnerships between schools and communities. Such relationships enable the sharing of expertise, access to local resources, and continued support for Indigenous visual arts practices long after external researchers have exited the project. Consistent with communities of practice theory, sustainability emerges when knowledge production becomes a shared responsibility rather than the sole responsibility of individual teachers.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that the sustainable integration of Indigenous visual arts depends on three mutually reinforcing conditions: practical, embodied learning experiences; recognition of Indigenous Knowledge experts as legitimate educators; and strong school-community partnerships. These elements collectively challenge textbook-centred instruction and create the conditions necessary for Indigenous visual arts to become embedded within everyday Creative Arts practice rather than remaining dependent on externally funded interventions.

5. Methodological Reflection

This study highlighted several important methodological insights for conducting decolonial and culturally responsive research. The integration of CAR with Indigenous Knowledge Systems demonstrated how qualitative inquiry can move beyond observation towards the co-creation of knowledge, while Nakata's Cultural Interface provided a useful lens for navigating the intersections and tensions between Indigenous and Western epistemologies. Reflexivity emerged as a central methodological practice, requiring continuous critical reflection on the researcher's positionality as a doctoral candidate and university lecturer, particularly regarding the power dynamics that persisted among the university, schools, and community participants. Adopting a co-learner stance through active participation in artistic activities helped foster trust and reduce perceptions of researcher authority. The study also highlighted the importance of methodological flexibility, as logistical challenges, including large participant groups, necessitated adaptations such as peer-mentorship structures and an ecumenical qualitative approach that better reflected Indigenous communal learning practices. Furthermore, the use of bilingual data collection tools emphasised the need to preserve Indigenous meanings and avoid conceptual loss during translation. Collectively, these experiences reinforced the value of relational, context-sensitive, and adaptive methodologies when conducting research in Indigenous and rural educational settings.

6. Final Considerations

This study demonstrates that the sustainable integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems into Creative Arts education is both feasible and educationally valuable when Indigenous Knowledge experts are positioned as active partners in teaching and learning. Beyond strengthening practical artistic skills, the findings show that Indigenous visual arts can serve as a vehicle for cultural preservation, identity affirmation, intergenerational learning, and community engagement. The study further contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonise education by challenging dominant knowledge hierarchies and validating Indigenous ways of knowing as legitimate sources of curriculum knowledge. Importantly, the findings suggest that the long-term sustainability of such initiatives depends on institutional commitment, policy support, and structured partnerships between schools and local knowledge holders.

Establishing formal pathways from school-based Indigenous arts programmes to FET and higher education opportunities may further enhance the social and economic value of Indigenous arts while supporting entrepreneurship and cultural continuity. Although the study is context-specific, it offers a promising framework for culturally responsive and community-centred education that may inform similar initiatives in South Africa and other Global South contexts. Future research should explore transferability and the long-term impacts of this framework across diverse educational settings.

Ethical Approval: The article is an extract from the preliminary findings of an ongoing PhD study. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Zululand, the Research Ethics Committee UZ-REC 0691 – 008 PGD 2023/46

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study, ensuring respect for the principles of confidentiality, voluntariness, and anonymity.

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