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African Literature in School Libraries and Students' Multicultural Understanding in Nairobi City County, Kenya

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Abstract: *This study examined the relationship between students' exposure to African literature in secondary school libraries and their reported multicultural understanding in Nairobi City County, Kenya. A descriptive cross-sectional design combined questionnaires from students in Forms 1-4 with interviews with five language teachers and five librarians in five schools. Schools were selected purposively, and students were selected randomly within classes. Of 539 questionnaires distributed, 505 were usable (93.7%). Questionnaire data were analysed descriptively and through reading-frequency comparisons, while interview accounts were analysed thematically. Only 21.4% of students read African literature often or very often, although 60.2% visited their libraries daily or weekly. Most respondents (60.4%) considered African books important or very important for learning about their culture. Frequent readers reported higher multicultural-understanding scores than infrequent readers (M = 3.62 vs. 3.31; d = 0.38). Staff described constraints related to acquisition, visibility, and examination-orientated reading. Because the design was cross-sectional, the group difference is interpreted as an association. The study recommends collection renewal, clearer shelving and displays, and reading programmes jointly developed by teachers and librarians.*

Keywords: *Literature, Libraries, Multiculturalism, Reading, Representation, Kenya*

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1 Introduction

The educational value of a culturally diverse library collection is partially dependent on whether students interact with and read the books in the collection. A school can have a library and have African authors in its collection but may not give learners equal access to them, relate them to their experiences and discuss cultural differences. This distinction is crucial in the context of multicultural education, where the structuring of learning is not the only concern but also the inclusion of a variety of content. Banks (2014) places cultural representation in the broader context of equity, prejudice and pedagogy. In this view, the school library is a part of the environment in which learners encounter various voices of culture.

International research gives literature an important, but conditional, place in this process. Lee (2024) examines the potential of multicultural children's literature for engaging across cultures when used in reflective classroom practice. In a similar vein, Nieto (2017) calls for a multicultural education that goes beyond mere recognition of diversity. These views focus on the context in which students read texts. Selection, interpretation, and discussion are opportunities for educational engagement, as is the inclusion of a culturally relevant text in a collection.

Representation is a concept in African literary scholarship that involves language, cultural authority and the movement of knowledge. Ojaide (1992) connects African literature to cultural identity, and Marzagora

(2015) looks at the marginality of African-language literatures in dominant literary and scholarly frameworks. Novels are not the only means of cultural expression, as poetry, drama, and oral traditions also play a part. Prahlad (2005) describes folklore as one of the significant areas of cultural memory and meaning. These arguments pose questions for the school library: which African texts and forms do learners have access to, and which do not?

Institutional conditions can make it difficult for school libraries in Kenya to fulfil their educational role. Mutungi et al. (2014) highlight the challenges of resourcing, policy support, and operation of public secondary school libraries in Nairobi County. Muthee and Wamae (2021) likewise linked organised school support and regular reading opportunities to the development of a reading culture in Kiambu County. At the same time, Kuppens et al. (2018) demonstrate that Kenyan teachers' attitudes towards multicultural education are influenced by issues of diversity and national unity. The provision of libraries, reading habits, and the pedagogical approach to cultural difference should thus be treated together.

The gap explored here is the experience of African literature in this institutional setting. General studies of library provision leave unanswered questions as to whether students can locate African texts, how often they read them, and what their perception of their cultural relevance is. These experiences can be correlated with the students reported cultural understanding and can be used to guide collection development and reading programmes in the varied school context in Nairobi.

This study investigated African literature in five secondary school libraries in Nairobi City County. Its central argument is that representation should be understood through availability, practical access, visibility, and supported use. It examined four research questions:

1. To what extent is African literature available, accessible, and visible in the selected secondary school libraries?
2. How do students perceive the relevance of African literature to their cultural identity and lived experience?
3. What is the relationship between students' exposure to African literature and their multicultural awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity?
4. What challenges do schools, teachers, and librarians face in acquiring and promoting African literature?

The study contributes an account of student responses and staff perspectives that connects collection provision with reading experience. Its focus is the sampled schools and students' reported perceptions of African literature's cultural contribution.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Multicultural education theory and the school learning environment

This study is informed by multicultural education theory as defined by Banks (2014) and Nieto (2017). The theory provides a basis for examining how educational institutions represent cultural groups, whose perspectives are made available to learners, and how school practices support students' engagement with cultural differences. It does not view multicultural education as simply the inclusion of diverse content but also how the learning environment allows students to engage with, make sense of, and talk about the content.

This study is based on three aspects of multicultural education: content integration, prejudice reduction, and equity pedagogy (Banks, 2014). These dimensions are especially important in the context of the representation of African literature in the school library and the students' interaction with culturally diverse texts. Content integration emphasises the diversity of African viewpoints in library resources, prejudice reduction emphasises the potential of reading and discussion to challenge stereotypes, and equity pedagogy emphasises the scaffolding and opportunities that support students' access to and interpretation of texts. Nieto (2017) also notes that acknowledging diversity is not very useful if the institutional routines remain focused on a limited set of viewpoints. In the context of school libraries, it becomes relevant to students' experience of African literature when applied to the concepts of availability, visibility, discoverability, and supported use. The theory thus informs the questions and interpretation in this study, but the cross-sectional design does not allow the researcher to test whether library provision or reading brings about changes in students' understanding.

Empirical and pedagogical literature also cautions against the assumption of uniformity of benefits. D'hondt et al. (2021) explore the concept of multicultural education and ethnic discrimination and school composition, emphasising the need for context to understand educational outcomes. Lee (2024) discusses the role of multicultural literature for transnational students' engagement across cultures. These studies provide evidence for the study of students' reactions and the context of reading. They do not imply that the mere existence of a wide variety of literature automatically means that prejudice will be lowered or intercultural competence will be enhanced.

Recent reviews highlight this distinction. Aifang et al. (2024) synthesised 16 studies on multicultural literature in English-language education and found that the common themes were intercultural awareness, teacher mediation, and limited text availability. Al-Afifi et al. (2026) examined 28 classroom-based studies involving secondary and upper-secondary students and identified learning, reflection, and experiencing as researched

practices of learning about culture. Neither review establishes that collection diversity alone is sufficient to improve students' cultural understanding. Their research findings suggest a consideration of the selection and discussion of texts in relation to their availability.

2.2 African literature and cultural interpretation

African literature can be used to depict social relationships, history, values, and cultural experience, but it is not a single, shared African identity. Ojaide (1992) relates literary expression to cultural identity, and Marzagora (2015) highlights the differential recognition and circulation between languages. Sithole (2021) also challenges the marginalisation of African-language literatures. The discussions indicate that meaningful representation requires sensitivity to diversity in African writing and to the languages and experiences that institutional collections make available.

Genre is another level of representation. Prahlad (2005) places folklore in the histories and challenges of African cultural knowledge. Printed fiction should not be the only art form considered; oral narratives should be included. A reading programme focused on a limited number of novels or short stories might not be as familiar to learners as other forms of reading. The educational question has to do with the diversity of cultural expression that students experience in their reading experiences.

Interpretation also matters. Ojaide (1997) makes a case for the need to consider cultural context in the teaching of African literature. Learners may be able to identify the cultural significance of a text without close identification with the characters or understanding of the unfamiliar reference. They can be helped to investigate such differences through contextual explanation and discussion. This distinction is helpful for the present study because learning about culture is related to relating personally with characters and appreciating other cultures, but they are distinct responses. Evidence of one response should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of the others.

Reader-response studies help qualify assumptions about identification. In a study of high school literature circles, Tan and Mante-Estacio (2021) found that students judged texts as culturally relevant when experiences, feelings, and characters' actions seemed relatable to them. Ridley's (2025) analysis of a book group involving younger immigrant- and refugee-background pupils showed that students sometimes resisted a teacher's proposed connection to a seemingly relevant text. These studies differ in age group and setting from the Nairobi sample but together show why cultural learning and personal identification should be reported separately and why students need room to interpret or question representations.

2.3 Kenyan evidence on libraries and reading

Mutungi et al. (2014) examined the functioning of public secondary school libraries in Nairobi in the context of resourcing and institutional support. Their results confirm that there is a difference between library presence and library effectiveness. The present research takes this concern further as it examines how students experience a specific body of literature, namely, whether there is a perception of variability and accessibility of African texts and whether they are incorporated into regular reading. This focus also prevents the general discussion of library facilities being regarded as the equivalent of a general discussion of cultural representation.

Recent evidence from Kenya suggests that library use is influenced by the availability of resources and supporting services. Ireri and Ocholla (2025) conducted a study on information-literacy services in 30 secondary schools (20 in Nairobi and 10 in rural areas) and surveyed 382 students in the two samples. They mentioned library orientation and user education as the available programmes and identified the needs of existing resources, access time, and professional support. Although their study did not measure African literature reading or multicultural understanding, it highlights the importance of discoverability and guided access in this context.

Muthee and Wamae (2021) investigated ways of enhancing reading culture in secondary school students in Kiambu County. They start with school support and organised reading opportunities as a point of departure for thinking about the promotion of reading and the acquisition of reading materials. The implication for African literature is that decisions related to holdings and readership must be made to increase them. Teachers and librarians can influence the books that are recommended, the amount of time spent on reading, and access to books outside of the exam context.

Kuppens et al. (2018) add another dimension by examining the attitudes of teachers in Kenya towards multicultural education. They explain that learning about culture is related to institutional and social problems, that is, the conflict between recognition and unity. The library can supply materials for this work, but the role of the library should be seen in the context of teaching and school life. Combining student questionnaires with teacher and librarian interviews provides a way to explore these relationships without assuming that intentions and experiences coincide.

2.4 Conceptual framework

This study is based on the theory of multicultural education and a conceptual framework that centres on four conditions of students' experience of African literature: availability, accessibility, visibility, and promotion. Availability is the presence and apparent

adequacy of African literature; accessibility is the degree to which students can actually access the collection; visibility is the extent to which students notice and can find relevant materials; and promotion is when there is deliberate support for the collection, such as displays and recommendations, lessons, and reading programmes. These conditions, when taken together, can be used to understand students' reading frequency and reported cultural learning in the context of Banks's (2014) focus on content integration and equitable educational practice and Nieto's (2017) focus on institutional conditions.

The framework is not a proven causal sequence but rather an organising lens for understanding the evidence. Student perceptions of variety and discoverability are not a physical audit of the collections, nor is the independent effect of promotion measured by interview accounts. The framework allows for the connection of reported access to African literature with students' engagement and perceptions, while maintaining a separation of these types of evidence.

3 Methodology

3.1 Design and setting

The study employed a descriptive and cross-sectional design with quantitative and qualitative evidence. Structured questionnaires were administered and used to collect data from students on their use of libraries, frequency of reading and perception of African literature. Semi-structured interviews were held with language teachers and school librarians to get their views on collection practices, reading support, and institutional constraints. The quantitative analysis was carried out on the students' answers, while the contextual explanations were collected from the staff interviews and added in the process of interpretation.

The study was carried out in five secondary schools in Nairobi City County, Kenya (three public and two private schools). There were two boys' schools, two girls' schools and one mixed school. Three of the schools were boarding schools, one was a day school, and one had both day and boarding facilities. The schools offered varying institutional settings in which to explore students' experiences of African literature.

3.2 Population and sampling

The target population comprised students in Forms 1–4, language teachers, and school librarians in Nairobi City County secondary schools. A list of secondary schools was obtained from the Nairobi County Director of Education and used to identify eligible schools. The five schools were purposively selected because they had fully functional libraries and represented variation in sub-county, school category, ownership, gender composition, and boarding arrangements. The three public schools comprised one national, one extra-county, and one county school. Language teachers and school librarians were purposively selected as key informants for the semi-structured interviews because of their direct involvement in language teaching, reading promotion, and library management.

The student sample was 539, calculated using Cochran's (1977) formula for proportions with $Z = 2.32$, $p = .50$, and a margin of error of .05. Of the 539 questionnaires distributed, 505 were returned, and all were usable, giving a 93.7% response rate. The five schools contributed 129, 100, 92, 87, and 97 usable questionnaires, respectively. All five selected language teachers and five selected librarians participated in the interviews. The student sample was allocated proportionately across the participating schools according to their student populations. Within each school, the allocation was distributed as evenly as possible among the classes available during data collection; a small remainder was allocated to one class. Students were selected at random from the class list for each class available using a random-number generator.

3.3 Instruments and measurement

The student questionnaire included categorical items on library visits, frequency of reading African literature, and types of literature read, together with agreement items on discoverability, variety, cultural understanding, relatability, and school promotion. Open-ended questions asked students what they learned about culture and how schools could strengthen such learning. The exposure item referred specifically to reading books by African authors from the school library.

The exposure item (Q3) asked how often students read books by African authors from the school library. Responses were coded 1 = very often, 2 = often, 3 = occasionally, 4 = rarely, and 5 = never. Frequent readers comprised categories 1 and 2 (n = 108); infrequent readers comprised categories 3–5 (n = 397).

For the analysis, reported multicultural understanding was operationalised as the equally weighted mean of four questionnaire items: Q7, "Books by African authors help me understand my culture better"; Q8, "I can relate to the characters and stories in African books"; Q11, "Reading African books has helped me understand other cultures better"; and Q12, "Books by African authors help students respect other people's cultures."

Each item was coded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with no reverse scoring. The composite was calculated as (Q7 + Q8 + Q11 + Q12)/4 and had both a possible and an observed range of 1–5. Complete responses to all four items and a valid Q3 response were required for the comparisons; all 505 cases met these requirements, and no imputation was used. Scores of at least 4.0 were classified as high for the categorical comparison, with lower scores classified as low/moderate. This threshold denotes an average response of at least "agree", rather than an established level of intercultural competence. The score combines

perceived own-culture learning and identification with understanding of and respect for other cultures.

The separate importance item (Q9) asked, "How important are African books for learning about your culture?" Responses ranged from 1 (not important) to 4 (very important). Q9 was analysed separately and was not included in the four-item outcome. Its wording concerns African books as resources for cultural learning.

The interview schedules covered selection and acquisition, organisation and display, reading promotion, classroom use, collaboration, and institutional constraints.

3.4 Data collection procedure

The questionnaires were administered by a research assistant to the students in classrooms independently. Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with teachers and librarians. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and structured notes were made. Open-ended student responses were summarised to aid in the interpretation of the questionnaire findings.

3.5 Validity and reliability

The instruments were tested in one secondary school in Nairobi City County, and the wording, sequence and structure were adjusted according to the feedback. The questionnaire and interview schedules were reviewed for content coverage and appropriateness by experts in educational research and multicultural education. The test–retest stability was examined in the pilot with the questionnaire given twice over a 14-day period, but no test–retest coefficient was reported. The pilot school was not part of the main study, with 56 students, one teacher and one librarian participating in it. Fifty-six students completed the first administration, and fifty students completed the second administration.

In the final data set, the four-item outcome had a Cronbach's α of .688 (N = 505). This suggests modest internal consistency and caution should be used when interpreting the composite score that includes cultural learning, identification, and respect. It does not render the score one-dimensional and does not make it a measure of intercultural competence. Reliability estimates for the entire questionnaire battery were not utilised as a proxy for the reliability of this outcome.

3.6 Analysis

The questionnaire responses for 505 students were summarised using frequencies, percentages, means and sample standard deviations. Combined percentages were calculated from the counts and rounded once. For items allowing more than one response, percentages used the 505 students as the denominator and could sum to more than 100%. Responses were complete for the reading-frequency item, the cultural-importance item, and all four items in the multicultural-understanding score. Quantitative analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 30.

Welch's independent-samples *t-test* compared mean scores using a two-sided significance level of .05. The mean difference was defined as frequent minus infrequent readers, with its 95% confidence interval calculated using the Welch–Satterthwaite degrees of freedom. Cohen's *d* was the mean difference divided by the pooled within-group standard deviation, calculated by weighting each group variance by its $n - 1$ degrees of freedom. No small-sample correction was applied. This standardiser was used for the effect size; the test and confidence interval retained Welch's unequal-variance standard error.

The 2 × 2 table of reading group and score category was analysed using an uncorrected Pearson chi-square test. The number of cells expected in all cases was greater than 5. The association was summarised by Cramér's V. Analyses were unweighted and did not account for clustering of students within schools or for covariates. Reported p values and confidence intervals are thus nominal, exploratory comparisons based on a student-independence assumption.

Interview transcripts and structured notes were read, coded, and categorised into themes related to acquisition, discoverability, promotion, and institutional constraints. Student comments explained the significance of the answers to the questionnaires. Patterns in the questionnaires and themes of the staff were contrasted in the interpretation to find points of convergence and possible explanations. This integration did not test statistical mediation or causal pathways.

3.7 Research permissions and ethics

The researcher received an official research authorisation and ethical clearance from the Kenyatta University Ethics Review Committee (KUERC), a research licence from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and permission from all the five schools involved before the fieldwork. The purpose and confidentiality of the study were explained to all participants. Participants were also informed that they were free to withdraw at any time without penalty and that their participation was voluntary. Parental/guardian consent was facilitated by the administration of the participating schools. Students gave assent prior to filling out the questionnaires, and teachers and librarians gave informed consent prior to being interviewed.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Availability and visibility in students' reading experience

Library visits were relatively common, but frequent reading of African literature was less so. As seen in Table 1, 304 (60.2%) of the students visited their library daily

or weekly, while 108 (21.4%) read African literature often or very often. Another 336 students (66.5%) read African literature occasionally or rarely, while 61 students (12.1%) said they never do.

Table 1: Library visits and frequency of reading African literature

Frequency	*n*	%
Library visits		
Daily	101	20.0
Weekly	203	40.2
Monthly	54	10.7
Rarely	147	29.1
Total	505	100.0
Reading African literature		
Very often	26	5.1
Often	82	16.2
Occasionally	167	33.1
Rarely	169	33.5
Never	61	12.1
Total	505	100.0

Note. *N = 505 for each distribution. Percentages are rounded independently*.

These sample-level distributions distinguish opportunities to use a library from reported engagement with African literature. Frequent library attendance was much more prevalent than frequent reading of African texts. As a cross-tabulation of these behaviours is not presented, the comparison does not establish how individual library visits translated into reading choices.

Staff accounts provided a better understanding of this pattern. Teachers described exposure as being organised around set books, classroom readers and timetabled literature lessons. Librarians also noted that students frequently chose African texts if they were related to classroom activities. The accounts suggest that school routines provide a major avenue for access to reading and that they can also be directed towards required texts. The need for organised support for reading, as emphasised by Muthee and Wamae (2021), is pertinent here, as there may be a need to offer more opportunities to read and to actively encourage reading with a wider range of reading choices.

There was not an equal exposure to genres. Short stories were selected by 305 students (60.4%), novels by 164 (32.5%), poetry by 106 (21.0%), plays by 103 (20.4%), and oral literature by 96 (19.0%). These percentages reflect multiple responses, as students could select more than one literary form. They also do not reflect the proportions of various genres in the libraries. The significance of short stories may be attributed to the fact that they are used in the school reading programme, but the study did not directly investigate the reasons for students' selection of genres.

The relatively low reported exposure to oral literature is pertinent to the larger issue of representation. Prahlad (2005) views folklore as one of the important sources of cultural knowledge and therefore emphasises visibility and inclusion of oral and other less frequently reported types of knowledge in reading and classroom discussion. These results are not meant to imply that these forms were absent in the collections that participated, but rather, students' self-reported experiences with these forms.

The students' perceptions of discoverability and variety were mixed (Table 2). Approximately half indicated that they were able to easily locate African books, and a comparable proportion reported that they had sufficient diversity of African books. About one-third chose the neutral option for each statement, suggesting that positive perceptions were common but not shared by all respondents.

Table 2: Perceptions of collections, cultural relevance, and promotion

Statement	Disagree *n* (%)	Neutral *n* (%)	Agree *n* (%)
African books are easy to find	82 (16.2)	173 (34.3)	250 (49.5)
There is adequate variety	88 (17.4)	170 (33.7)	247 (48.9)
African books help me understand my culture	96 (19.0)	167 (33.1)	242 (47.9)
I relate to characters and stories	113 (22.4)	185 (36.6)	207 (41.0)
My school makes sufficient promotional effort	182 (36.0)	156 (30.9)	167 (33.1)

Note. N = 505 per item. "Disagree" combines "strongly disagree" and "disagree"; "agree" combines "agree" and "strongly agree." Statements are abbreviated. Percentages use the combined counts and may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Neutral responses are not necessarily a sign of poor provision but can be a result of limited knowledge, mixed experiences or difficulty in judging the statement. Staff accounts do, however, help to explain why students may be experiencing collections unevenly. Librarians reported differences in shelving, classification and display, and teachers reported the need for classroom guidance. These concerns are like those raised by Mutungi et al. (2014) in their operational challenges. While not specifically focusing on African literature, Ireri and Ocholla (2025) also emphasise access, availability of resources and professional guidance in Kenyan secondary-school libraries.

The results all suggest differential access and visibility. Many of the respondents visited the library regularly, but few read African literature regularly.

The distinction between visiting a library and reading a particular collection is also relevant to Ireri and Ocholla's (2025) findings from Nairobi and Tharaka Nithi: orientation and user education were among the services available, yet the authors identified a need for current resources and professional support. Their study did not measure reading of African literature, so it provides context for access and guidance rather than a direct comparison of reading frequencies.

Staff accounts indicate that collection planning should therefore consider not only what is acquired but also how materials are organised, signposted, recommended, and connected to classroom reading.

4.2 Cultural relevance and identification

Students distinguished, in their responses, between learning about culture and identifying with literary characters. Agreement that African books helped them understand their own culture was recorded for 242 students (47.9%), compared with 207 (41.0%) agreeing that they related to characters and stories. Neutral responses were also substantial: 33.1% for cultural understanding and 36.6% for relatability (Table 2). The difference is descriptive and was not subjected to a reported paired comparison.

On Q9, which explicitly asked about African books for learning about one's culture, 124 students (24.6%) selected 'very important' and 181 (35.8%) important. Together, these were 305 respondents (60.4%). A further 157 students (31.1%) selected 'somewhat important'. The item used a four-category importance scale, distinct from the five-category agreement items. A majority therefore valued African books as resources for cultural learning, although fewer reported learning benefits or personal connections.

Open-ended responses referred to cultural learning in terms of values, traditions, community histories, origins and taboos. These accounts provide an explanation of what students understood when learning about their own culture. The value of literature was often seen as gaining knowledge of social practices and social meanings and did not require seeing one's own experience in a character. This distinction can be illuminated by reference to Ojaide's (1992) discussion of literature and cultural identity.

Contextual explanation and comparison were described by teachers as a means of enabling students to cope with unfamiliar settings and experiences. Their accounts reinforce Ojaide's (1997) focus on reading African literature in the cultural context. They also propose reasons for not using only the criterion of relatability in the selection of texts. A text can be unfamiliar and still be of educational value if students are given opportunities to explore the meanings of the text and make respectful comparisons with their experiences.

Perceived relevance was therefore uneven: many learners recognised cultural value, while fewer reported personal identification. Wider reading choices and contextual discussion respond to these differences. The evidence describes current perceptions of relevance; identity development was not tracked over time.

This pattern can be considered alongside Tan and Mante-Estacio's (2021) study, in which high school students identified familiar experiences, feelings, and character actions as features of culturally relevant texts. The Nairobi findings likewise make personal

connections worth examining, but the two studies used different questions and do not establish the same level of relatability. Ridley's (2025) study of a younger book group also shows that an anticipated connection may be resisted; it does not measure how common that response is among Nairobi students.

4.3 Reading frequency and reported multicultural understanding

Frequent readers had a higher mean four-item score (M = 3.62, SD = 0.77, n = 108) than infrequent readers (M = 3.31, SD = 0.80, n = 397; Table 3). Welch's test showed a statistically significant difference, t (173.90) = 3.57, p < .001. The mean difference was 0.30, 95% CI [0.14, 0.47], with Cohen's d = 0.38, indicating a modest difference. The effect-size and confidence-interval estimates were calculated from unrounded observations and therefore need not exactly match calculations based on the displayed two-decimal group summaries.

Table 3: Multicultural understanding by frequency of reading African literature

Reading group	*n*	*M*	*SD*	High *n* (%)	Low/moderate *n* (%)
Frequent Often or very often	108	3.62	0.77	43 (39.8)	65 (60.2)
Infrequent Occasionally, rarely or never	397	3.31	0.80	95 (23.9)	302 (76.1)

Note. *N = 505. M = mean; SD = sample standard deviation. Scores are means of Q7, Q8, Q11, and Q12 on a 1–5 scale. Percentages use the reading-group totals. High denotes a score ≥ 4.0; low/moderate denotes a score < 4.0. Test results are unadjusted for school clustering and covariates.*

High scores occurred among 43 of 108 frequent readers (39.8%) and 95 of 397 infrequent readers (23.9%); the corresponding low/moderate counts were 65 (60.2%) and 302 (76.1%). The uncorrected Pearson test showed an association between reading group and score category, χ^2 (1, N = 505) = 10.79, p = .001, and Cramér's V = .15. The association was small, and most respondents in both groups scored below 4.0. Because this categorical comparison applies a selected cut-off to the same underlying score, it should be interpreted as a supplementary description rather than independent confirmation of the mean comparison.

The results encompass learning and identification in one's own culture as well as perceived learning and respect of other cultures. The group difference is thus not an independently judged measure of empathy, prejudice or behaviour towards peers, but rather a general perception of the cultural contribution of literature. There may be a relationship between reading frequency and perceived benefit: students who value cultural learning may be more likely to read African literature. Their shared self-report format is a further reason to interpret the association cautiously.

Interviews with staff were used to describe educational practices that could help to contextualise the association. Teachers reported using African stories to introduce cultural practices and encourage students to compare respectfully, while librarians reported displays that were designed to help students move towards a broader selection of texts. Student comments also linked reading to learning about other communities and valuing differences. Although the study was conducted in a different age group and setting, Lee (2024) provides a good example of classroom responses to multicultural literature, which is useful for this discussion of cultural boundaries. The present accounts do not show that any practice produced the quantitative difference.

The study did not examine the independent contributions of content integration, equity pedagogy, or other educational practices. Furthermore, the group comparisons should be interpreted as exploratory because they did not account for school clustering or other potentially influential factors.

Al-Afifi et al. (2026) conducted a review of classroom practices in developing intercultural competence of secondary and upper-secondary students. They are interested in teaching practices, which is not the focus of the present study, which compares self-reported reading frequency and cultural perceptions. The review thus helps to place the findings in the broader context of educational research but does not provide evidence that the difference observed was due to reading or that the reported score reflects intercultural competence.

4.4 Constraints on acquisition and sustained reading

The most common barriers were the condition of books, peer interest and perceived curriculum priorities (Table 4). 213 students (42.2%) chose poor condition or outdated books, 203 (40.2%) chose low peer engagement, and 201 (39.8%) chose a perceived preference for western literature in the curriculum. These are students' reported experiences and perceptions, not an independent evaluation of the curriculum or the physical condition of all collections.

Table 4: Student-reported barriers to finding or reading African books

Barrier	*n*	%
Poor condition or outdated African books	213	42.2
Low engagement or interest among peers	203	40.2
Perceived preference for Western literature in the curriculum	201	39.8
Lack of awareness of available African books	198	39.2
Difficulty locating books in catalogues or on shelves	138	27.3
Limited availability of African books	135	26.7
Lack of visibility or promotion within the library	109	21.6
Insufficient promotion by teachers and librarians	104	20.6
Negative perceptions or stereotypes	93	18.4
Access difficulties related to library policies or location	90	17.8

Note. N = 505. Multiple responses were permitted; percentages are of students and do not sum to 100%.

Another practical problem was discoverability. 138 (27.3%) students reported difficulties in finding books in catalogues or on shelves, and 198 (39.2%) students reported that they were not aware of the African books available. These are related but different problems: a student might not be aware of the books available or might be aware of them but not know how to locate them. These findings indicate that there is a need for more information on the library holdings, more guidance for readers and more uniformity in the organisation of the materials. The promotion item emphasised the importance of considering support from the students' perspective. Table 2 shows that 167 (33.1%) agreed that their school made enough effort to promote African books, 182 (36.0%) disagreed and 156 (30.9%) were neutral. This does not imply that schools did not engage in any promotional activities. It implies that these were not always perceived as sufficient, which is significant if they are meant to be visible and usable.

Librarians reported that budgets were tight, there were competing procurement priorities, and some newer titles were difficult to acquire. This can be explained by the presence of concerns about the provision and the condition of the books in their accounts. They also reported that perceived student demand was a factor in selection. Teachers indicated that there were limited copies of some texts, examination pressures and difficulties in getting students to read voluntarily outside of the curriculum. Some indicated that students might be initially discouraged by unfamiliar language or settings, but that contextual explanations could help students engage with the texts.

The qualitative results did not reveal a general formal restriction on access to African literature. Indirect constraints were generally reported by librarians as being related to procurement and school priorities and reading habits. This separation focuses on resourcing and implementation, not on a restrictive policy that the evidence does not support. It also links to the work of Mutungi et al. (2014) on institutional support and Muthee and Wamae (2021) on organised reading opportunities.

The constraints reported were generally echoed in student suggestions. The themes that emerged from the open-ended question on improvement were the need for more African books, better shelving and signage, and more awareness and reading activities. Collection renewal and collaboration were also highlighted by teachers and librarians. These accounts address the fourth research question by highlighting interrelated material and organisational challenges. The need to acquire books is still relevant, but the decision to acquire books must also consider how the students will find and use the acquired books.

The issue of low peer engagement is also echoed in the study by Muthee and Wamae (2021) in Kiambu County, where examination pressures were noted to affect the engagement of peers, and they recommended that peer engagement be encouraged through libraries and reading clubs. The present finding is about the barriers students reported to African literature, while their study was about reading culture in general. Neither study establishes that a particular peer activity would improve reading engagement.

4.5 Educational implications and limitations

Representation is an experience of provision and uses across the four research questions. The conditions surrounding the collection are described by perceived variety, discoverability, and promotion; the conditions of engagement are described by reading frequency; and the cultural items are described by perceived educational value. Taking these dimensions individually allows for some practical areas of improvement to be discovered

and prevents the use of one indicator as proof of the others.

The five-school sample does not allow for generalisation to other secondary schools in Nairobi City County or Kenya. Responses were self-reported and may be subject to recall and socially desirable responding. The study was conducted without a physical collection audit or circulation analysis, so the results cannot be used to determine the percentage of African literature in the holdings or to confirm reading via borrowing records. Ten staff interviews gave contextual accounts from a limited number of professional viewpoints.

The group comparisons were not adjusted for school context, student characteristics, and other factors that might affect reading and cultural learning. The nominal p values and confidence intervals may overestimate precision, as students were grouped into five schools and individual responses were considered independent. The four-item score demonstrated modest internal consistency ($\alpha = .688$) and was a composite of related but distinct perceptions. It is not to be understood as a measure of intercultural competence but rather as a broad reported cultural-benefit score. The cross-sectional design also does not allow for determining the direction of the association.

The practical value of the study is that it places student experiences in dialogue with the constraints described by teachers and librarians. Future studies should integrate collection audits and circulation data with well-defined indicators of cultural learning and explore trends over time. More schools and analyses that take clustering into account will help determine if the reported relationship holds true in other institutional contexts. Guided discussion also deserves further investigation as a potential factor in students' interpretations of culturally unfamiliar texts.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Students' experiences of African literature varied across the five participating schools. Regular visits to the library were more common than regular reading of African texts, and variety and discoverability were mixed.

African books were often appreciated by students for their cultural information, and less often for personal identification with characters.

Students who reported frequent reading of African literature had higher mean scores on the four-item measure of reported multicultural understanding. The difference was small, and the cross-sectional comparisons were not adjusted and do not prove causation.

The challenges of acquisition and promotion were book condition, limited budgets, lack of awareness, reading motivation, and examination-oriented routines.

The results confirm that coordinated attention to collections, discoverability, and reading support is needed in the participating schools. They offer a foundation for enhancing students' access to African literature but do not address the impact of these changes on cultural understanding.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Librarians should review the condition and range of African literature in their collections and improve shelving, signage, displays, and reader guidance so that students can identify and locate available titles. Student interests and existing holdings should inform these decisions.
2. Teachers and librarians should collaborate to provide a range of African texts and support students in exploring their cultural and historical contexts, including perspectives that may be unfamiliar to them.
3. Schools should provide regular opportunities for reading and reflective discussion, including library time and reading activities, and evaluate students' accounts of cultural learning using clearly defined measures.
4. School leaders and boards of management should support collection renewal and reading opportunities through appropriate resources. Teachers and librarians should also consider student requests and peer recommendations when planning acquisitions and promotion.

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