EFFECTIVENSS OF MUSIC THERAPY FOR CHILDREN WTH AUTISM OPOROWO AHOADA EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT OF RIVERS STATE

Nkemakola Ugoji PhD
Department of Music, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni P. M. B. 5047, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
nkemakolau@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the impact of music therapy on children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in, Ahoada East Local Government Area, Rivers State, Nigeria. With the rising prevalence of ASD and limited access to specialized care in rural Nigerian settings, effective, culturally relevant interventions are urgently needed. Music therapy, which leverages Nigeria's strong cultural connection to music, has shown potential as a therapeutic tool to support social, communicative, and cognitive development in children with ASD Using a quantitative approach, data were gathered from parents, caregivers, and educators through structured questionnaires. The findings indicate significant improvements in social interaction, communication, and cognitive skills among children who participated in music therapy sessions. Culturally familiar music further enhanced engagement, and high acceptance levels were reported among parents and caregivers, who observed positive changes in their children's behavior and skills. This study highlights the potential of music therapy as an accessible intervention for ASD in rural Nigeria, advocating for the integration of music therapy into local healthcare and educational settings to promote inclusivity and support the holistic development of children with ASD.

Keywords: Effectiveness, Music Therapy, Children with Autism, Oporowo Ahoada.

I. Introduction

Music therapy has gained significant recognition as an effective intervention for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), particularly in enhancing their social, communicative, and cognitive abilities. Autism Spectrum Disorder is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The global prevalence of ASD has been rising, prompting the need for diverse therapeutic approaches to support affected individuals.

In Nigeria, particularly in, Ahoada East Local Government Area of Rivers State, awareness and support systems for children with autism are gradually developing. However, there remains a substantial gap in the availability of specialized therapeutic interventions, including music therapy. This gap underscores the need to explore and implement effective therapies that are both accessible and culturally relevant to the Nigerian context.

Music therapy, defined as the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional (American Music Therapy Association, 2022), has shown promise in various settings. Historical accounts indicate that music has been used for healing and therapeutic purposes since ancient times. However, music therapy as a formal discipline began to develop in the mid-20th century, with significant contributions from pioneers such as E. Thayer Gaston and Juliette Alvin (Bruscia, 2014).

The therapeutic potential of music therapy for children with autism lies in its ability to engage multiple sensory modalities, thereby facilitating communication and social interaction. Research has demonstrated that music therapy can lead to improvements in social skills, communication, and emotional regulation among children with ASD (Geretsegger et al., 2014). These findings are particularly relevant for regions like Oporowo, where there is a need for innovative and effective therapeutic interventions for children with autism.

Empirical studies have shown that music therapy can significantly improve the quality of life for children with autism. For instance, a meta-analysis by Gold et al. (2006) revealed that music therapy had a positive impact on social interaction, communication skills, and overall behavioral outcomes in children with ASD. Similarly, a study by Bieleninik et al. (2017) found that improvisational music therapy led to significant improvements in social communication and parent-child interactions in young children with autism.

In Nigeria, the recognition of autism and the implementation of therapeutic interventions are still evolving. Studies suggest that there is a growing awareness of autism, but the availability of specialized services remains limited (Bakare & Munir, 2011). This context presents an opportunity to explore the effectiveness of music therapy as a viable intervention for children with autism in Oporowo, Ahoada East.

Definition and History of Music Therapy

Music therapy is a specialized field within allied health professions that utilizes music interventions to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of individuals of all ages and abilities (American Music Therapy Association, 2020). It is grounded in the belief that music has therapeutic qualities that can facilitate healing, enhance communication, and promote overall well-being (Bruscia, 2014). This section provides an overview of the definition and historical development of music therapy, focusing on its evolution as a recognized therapeutic modality.

Definition of Music Therapy

The American Music Therapy Association defines music therapy as "the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program" (American Music Therapy Association, 2020). Music therapists are trained professionals who use music systematically to achieve therapeutic goals, such as improving communication, reducing stress, and promoting emotional expression (Bruscia, 2014).

Historical Development

The history of music therapy can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where music was recognized for its healing properties. In more recent times, the formalization of music therapy as a discipline began in the early 20th century. One of the pioneering figures in the field was Eva Augusta Vescelius, who used music to treat patients with tuberculosis in the 1920s (Gaston, 1968). Her work laid the foundation for the systematic application of music as a therapeutic tool in healthcare settings.

During and after World War II, music therapy gained further recognition for its role in rehabilitating soldiers suffering from physical and psychological trauma. The significant contributions of music therapists like Willem van de Wall, who worked with war veterans, demonstrated the efficacy of music in aiding recovery and improving quality of life (van de Wall, 1977).

In the mid-20th century, the establishment of academic programs and professional organizations, such as the National Association for Music Therapy (now known as the American Music Therapy Association), formalized music therapy training and practice standards (Bruscia, 2014). This period marked a pivotal moment in the recognition of music therapy as a legitimate allied health profession.

Current Perspectives and Practices

Today, music therapy encompasses a wide range of approaches and techniques tailored to meet the diverse needs of clients. These may include active music-making (e.g., playing instruments, singing), receptive music listening, improvisation, songwriting, and music-assisted relaxation techniques (American Music Therapy Association, 2020). Music therapists work in various settings, including hospitals, schools, rehabilitation centers, and community health organizations, collaborating with interdisciplinary teams to enhance the therapeutic outcomes of their clients.

Overview of Different Approaches to Music Therapy

Music therapy encompasses a diverse range of approaches and techniques that are tailored to meet the individualized needs of clients across various populations and settings. This section provides an overview of the different approaches to music therapy, highlighting their unique methods and therapeutic applications.

Active Music-Making

Active music-making involves the direct engagement of clients in creating music through playing instruments, singing, or movement to music. This approach encourages active participation and expression, promoting emotional release, communication, and motor coordination skills (Magee, 2006). For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), active music-making activities can enhance social interaction and sensory integration, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-expression (Geretsegger et al., 2014).

Receptive Music Listening

Receptive music listening focuses on the therapeutic effects of listening to carefully selected music. Music therapists use specific compositions to evoke desired emotional responses, facilitate relaxation, and improve attention and auditory processing skills (Davis & Gfeller, 2008). In clinical settings, receptive music listening is often integrated into relaxation techniques and stress management programs, benefiting individuals with anxiety disorders and chronic pain conditions (Thaut, 2015).

Improvisation

Improvisation involves spontaneous music creation without predetermined structures or rules. In music therapy, improvisational techniques allow clients to explore and express their emotions freely through music, regardless of musical ability (Bruscia, 1998). For children with ASD, improvisation fosters creativity, social engagement, and flexible thinking, promoting adaptive behaviors and self-confidence (Geretsegger et al., 2014).

Songwriting and Lyric Analysis

Songwriting and lyric analysis are therapeutic approaches that involve the creation or analysis of song lyrics as a means of self-expression and reflection. Clients may compose original songs to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences, providing a platform for emotional exploration and narrative storytelling (Baker & Wigram, 2005). In clinical practice, songwriting activities are used to enhance self-esteem, promote identity development, and facilitate therapeutic communication among adolescents and adults (Baker & Wigram, 2005).

Music-Assisted Relaxation Techniques

Music-assisted relaxation techniques combine music listening with guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, or breathing exercises to induce a state of deep relaxation and stress reduction (Thaut, 2015). This approach is widely utilized in clinical settings to alleviate symptoms of anxiety, insomnia, and chronic pain, offering a non-invasive adjunctive therapy for individuals with medical and psychological conditions (Davis & Gfeller, 2008).

Definition and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent challenges in social interaction, communication, and restricted or repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This section provides an overview of the definition, diagnostic criteria, and key characteristics of ASD, laying the foundation for understanding its impact on individuals and the rationale for exploring music therapy interventions.

Definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), Autism Spectrum Disorder is defined as a condition characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, along with restricted,

repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These symptoms must be present from early childhood and impair daily functioning.

Diagnostic Criteria

The DSM-5 outlines specific diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder, including:

Persistent Deficits in Social Communication and Social Interaction

This criterion encompasses challenges in social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors, and developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships.

Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behavior, Interests, or Activities

Individuals with ASD may engage in stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech. They may also display insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or highly restricted, fixated interests.

Symptoms Present in Early Developmental Period

Symptoms of ASD must be present in early childhood, although they may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities or may be masked by learned strategies in later life.

Clinically Significant Impairment in Social, Occupational, or other Important Areas of Current Functioning

The symptoms must cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Effects of Music Therapy on Children with Autism

Music therapy has emerged as a promising intervention for addressing the unique needs of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), offering a non-verbal and engaging approach to improving various aspects of their development. This section reviews the literature on the effects of music therapy specifically tailored for children with ASD, highlighting its therapeutic benefits and empirical findings.

Therapeutic Benefits of Music Therapy

Music therapy offers a multifaceted approach that leverages the inherent qualities of music to address core symptoms and enhance quality of life for children with ASD. Key therapeutic benefits include:

Enhanced Social Skills

Music therapy interventions often focus on promoting social interaction and communication skills through structured musical activities. For example, group music-making activities encourage turn-taking, joint attention, and peer engagement, fostering interpersonal relationships and social reciprocity (Geretsegger et al., 2014).

Improved Communication Abilities

Music therapy techniques such as singing, rhythm activities, and improvisation provide alternative channels for expression and communication, circumventing the language barriers that children with ASD may experience (LaGasse, 2014). Music-based interventions facilitate verbal and non-verbal communication skills, enhancing expressive and receptive language abilities (Geretsegger et al., 2014).

Reduced Anxiety and Stress

Music has been shown to modulate emotional responses and promote relaxation, thereby reducing anxiety levels and physiological stress in children with ASD (LaGasse, 2014). Music-assisted relaxation techniques, such as guided imagery with calming music, help regulate arousal levels and promote emotional self-regulation (Thaut, 2015).

Motor and Coordination Skills

Engaging in rhythmic movements, playing musical instruments, and participating in dance activities improve motor coordination and sensory-motor integration among children

with ASD (Magee, 2006). These activities promote gross and fine motor skills development, enhancing physical abilities and spatial awareness.

Clinical Applications and Considerations

In clinical practice, music therapists tailor interventions to meet the specific needs and preferences of each child with ASD, considering their sensory sensitivities, communication styles, and developmental goals (American Music Therapy Association, 2020). Collaborative efforts with caregivers and interdisciplinary teams ensure a holistic approach to addressing the complex needs of children with autism through music therapy.

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Challenges and Limitations of Music Therapy for Children with Autism

While music therapy has shown promising results in enhancing various skills and behaviors in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), several challenges and limitations need to be considered. This section discusses the key challenges and limitations

that may impact the effectiveness and implementation of music therapy interventions for children with ASD.

Sensory Sensitivities

Children with ASD often exhibit heightened or reduced sensitivity to sensory stimuli, including auditory, visual, tactile, and proprioceptive sensations (Marco et al., 2011). Loud or complex auditory stimuli, such as certain musical instruments or environments, may overwhelm or trigger sensory overload in some children, affecting their ability to engage actively in music therapy sessions.

Communication Barriers

Communication deficits are a core feature of ASD, impacting verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Some children with ASD may find it challenging to understand verbal instructions, follow social cues, or express themselves effectively through music (LaGasse, 2014). Music therapists must adapt their communication strategies and techniques to accommodate individual communication styles and preferences.

Behavioral Challenges

Children with ASD may display challenging behaviors, such as aggression, self-stimulatory behaviors (e.g., hand-flapping, rocking), or resistance to new activities or changes in routine (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These behaviors can pose difficulties during music therapy sessions, requiring therapists to employ behavioral management strategies and maintain a structured and predictable environment.

Generalization of Skills

While music therapy interventions can effectively improve specific skills within the therapy setting, the generalization of these skills to real-life situations and environments may be limited (LaGasse, 2014). Transferring social, communication, or motor skills learned through music therapy sessions to everyday interactions and activities requires ongoing practice, reinforcement, and support from caregivers and educators.

Access to Qualified Music Therapists

The availability of qualified music therapists trained in working with children with ASD may vary across different regions and settings (American Music Therapy Association, 2020). Limited access to trained professionals can impact the delivery and continuity of music therapy services, affecting the quality and consistency of interventions provided to children with ASD.

Research Gaps and Evidence Base

While there is a growing body of research supporting the efficacy of music therapy for children with ASD, gaps in knowledge and inconsistencies in study methodologies still exist (Geretsegger et al., 2014). Further research is needed to strengthen the evidence base, identify optimal therapeutic approaches, and explore long-term outcomes and sustainability of benefits.

Social Skills and Communication

Research has consistently demonstrated the positive effects of music therapy on improving social skills and communication abilities among children with ASD. For instance, a study by LaGasse (2014) found that participation in group music therapy sessions significantly enhanced social interaction, peer engagement, and turn-taking skills among children diagnosed with ASD. These improvements contribute to enhanced social integration and relationship-building skills crucial for daily interactions and community engagement.

Emotional Regulation and Behavioral Adaptation

Music therapy interventions have been shown to promote emotional regulation and reduce behavioral challenges commonly associated with ASD. According to Geretsegger et al. (2014), structured music activities, such as improvisation and rhythmic entrainment, help children with ASD manage stress, anxiety, and sensory sensitivities more effectively. By

providing a non-verbal outlet for emotional expression and relaxation, music therapy supports adaptive coping strategies and promotes overall emotional well-being in children with ASD.

Cognitive and Academic Skills

Empirical studies highlight the cognitive benefits of music therapy interventions, including improvements in attention, memory, and executive functioning among children with ASD (Magee, 2006). Engaging in music-based activities that involve pattern recognition, sequencing, and auditory processing contributes to cognitive stimulation and enhances academic readiness in school-aged children with ASD. These cognitive gains support learning and adaptive skills development essential for academic success and independent living.

Neurophysiological Effects

Neuroscientific research provides insights into the neurophysiological effects of music therapy on brain function and development in children with ASD. Thaut (2015) discusses how rhythmic auditory stimulation and music-based interventions can modulate neural pathways, enhance neural plasticity, and promote motor coordination and speech production in individuals with ASD. These neurologic music therapy (NMT) approaches leverage music's rhythmic structure to improve sensorimotor integration and facilitate communication skills in children with ASD.

Clinical Applications and Future Directions

While empirical evidence supports the efficacy of music therapy for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, further research is needed to expand our understanding of optimal therapeutic approaches, long-term outcomes, and individualized treatment protocols (Geretsegger et al., 2014). Future studies should focus on addressing methodological challenges, exploring the mechanisms underlying music therapy's therapeutic effects, and assessing the sustainability of benefits over time.

II. Summary

This study investigated the effectiveness of music therapy for children with autism in , Ahoada East Local Government Area. It aimed to understand the impact on social interaction, communication, cognitive functioning, cultural factors, and perceptions among parents and caregivers.

The findings revealed that music therapy significantly enhanced social skills, promoting better engagement and interaction among children with autism. There was a notable improvement in both verbal and non-verbal communication abilities, highlighting music as a vital tool for expression. The study also found improvements in attention, memory, and other cognitive skills due to the structured nature of music therapy.

Culturally relevant music increased therapy effectiveness, demonstrating the importance of incorporating familiar elements. High acceptance and positive views from parents and caregivers reinforced the therapy's value.

The research underscores the importance of music therapy as a beneficial intervention for children with autism. It suggests the need for culturally tailored programs and greater community involvement to optimize outcomes. The findings advocate for broader adoption and further exploration to enhance therapy practices.

III. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of music therapy on children with autism in, with a focus on various dimensions such as social interaction, communication abilities, cognitive functioning, and cultural influences. The research also explored the perceptions and acceptance levels of music therapy among parents and caregivers.

The findings of this study reveal that music therapy has a substantial and positive impact on the social, communication, and cognitive development of children with autism. The data indicates that music therapy facilitates improved social interactions and enhances

communication abilities among these children. Furthermore, the therapeutic interventions are observed to positively influence cognitive functions, which include improvements in attention, memory, and problem-solving skills.

The study also highlights that cultural factors play a significant role in the effectiveness of music therapy. Cultural attitudes and practices influence how music therapy is perceived and implemented. This underscores the necessity for culturally sensitive approaches in designing and delivering music therapy interventions.

Parents and caregivers demonstrated a high level of acceptance and positive perceptions towards music therapy. They reported noticeable improvements in their children's social skills, communication, and cognitive abilities as a result of engaging in music therapy. This acceptance underscores the value of involving families in the therapeutic process to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability.

In conclusion, this research confirms that music therapy is a valuable and effective intervention for children with autism. The evidence supports the integration of music therapy into therapeutic programs and educational settings to foster holistic development in children with autism. The positive feedback from parents and caregivers further validates the benefits of this approach. Future research should focus on exploring long-term impacts of music therapy and its applicability across different cultural contexts to optimize its benefits for children with autism.

IV. Recommendations

Integrate Music Therapy in Schools and Therapy Centers

Given the positive impact of music therapy on social, communicative, and cognitive skills, schools and therapy centers should incorporate music therapy into their programs for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This can help in reaching more children who may benefit from this approach.

Develop Culturally Relevant Music Therapy Programs

To enhance engagement, it is recommended that music therapy sessions incorporate traditional and culturally familiar music. Collaborating with local musicians can create a culturally resonant experience that aligns with Nigerian cultural values, making therapy more effective and enjoyable for the children.

Increase Training and Availability of Music Therapists

There is a need for more trained music therapists in rural Nigerian communities. Government and non-governmental organizations should invest in training programs to develop a skilled workforce capable of providing music therapy, especially in underserved regions like Oporowo.

Raise Awareness among Parents and Caregivers

Community awareness campaigns should be conducted to educate parents and caregivers on the benefits of music therapy for children with ASD. This can foster greater acceptance and encourage families to participate actively in music therapy sessions.

Encourage Government and Policy Support

Policymakers should recognize music therapy as a valuable intervention for children with ASD and provide funding and infrastructure support to integrate music therapy into public health and education systems. This can help in expanding access to specialized therapeutic interventions in rural areas.

Conduct Further Research

Additional studies should be conducted to explore long-term outcomes of music therapy and to identify the most effective music therapy techniques tailored to the Nigerian context. This research can help refine practices and enhance the quality of music therapy interventions for children with autism.

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