

An African Sense of Folk Music as Essential Tool for Rehabilitation of Speech and Language Impairment in Children

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Abstract

Speech and language impairment can be seen in both adults and children but, statistics have shown that speech and language impairments are more common among children. These impairments are initially noticeable between the ages of one to five or basically, preschool age. While it is true that some cases of speech and language impairment in children are clinically dependent, some others can be resolved without drugs. Systematic application of psycho, motor and emotional activities has in some cases proven to be remedial to speech and language impairment. Music is one of the human activities that possesses the power to permeate into psychics, and emotions and influence attitudinal or behavioural changes in human beings. The administration of appropriate music and musical activities to a client with some health challenges has resulted in the restoration of mental, emotional, social and physical well-being. This study, therefore, examines the potential of Nigerian folk music in enhancing both the development and treatment of speech and language fluency in children. The focus is on the role of children's folk music; particularly, songs attached to folktales, play songs and dance in the correction of speech and language difficulties in children. Data for this study were gathered via interviews, participants, observational methods and a review of archival materials. The study suggests that children's engagement in folk music; folktales playing songs and dance has proven to be a substitute or alternative to drugs for the rehabilitation of some children with a speech-language disorder. It was observed that the therapeutic power of folk music for children goes beyond speech and language treatment. Rather, it enhances mental, emotional, and physical

stability and general well-being. The study recommends creating awareness in Nigerian communities to understand the therapeutic benefits of engaging children in folksongs activities even in this digital age. Trained music therapists and researchers are encouraged to pay attention to these cultural practices and the constructive curative powers inculcated in the traditional children's playground and songs involved, to harness health benefits therein for humanity.

Keywords: Speech and language impairment, Music therapy, Folk music, Children's play songs.

Introduction

There are different challenges faced by children as they develop and grow in the first few years of their lives. Speech and language impairments are part of some common challenges that are noticeable as a child grows. Although every child has his or her peculiarity in development, there is a basic development that is expected at a certain age for every child. Speech and language development are some developments in children that are expected to be fully developed at the ages of six and seven. When speech and language skills are not progressively developing in a child, at the ages of two and three, it is an early indication of impairment. And, it is a call for concern for the immediate family. When this delay in speech and language development lingers up to age six and above, it has become a serious problem that needs remedial rehabilitation. Kahn (2019) stresses that speech and language disorders can affect adults and children but, early treatment can correct these conditions.

By implication, an early intervention programme is the best approach to this problem since skills in the developmental domain typically advance during the first three years of a child's life. This development includes cognitive, physical, social, emotional, speech-language and coordination skills. While some speech and languages impairment in children are clinically dependent, some sorts and phases of these impairments in children can be improved or resolved, through engagement in some behavioural management and psycho-rehabilitation therapy. Music as an emotional stimulant and communicative art expression has functioned in various capacities as a therapeutic tool, not only for the correction of speech and language impartment but also, for general wellness and optimal human existence. Music making has the power to change significant psychological conditions such as mood,

concentration, stamina, state of motivation and even, the improvement of important factors in mental ability.

Incidentally, music-making is part and parcel of the whole existence of an average indigenous Nigerian. Music is a vital aspect of every Nigerian ethnic culture and it functions as the foundation on which children's play and folktales are built. Engaging in traditional folktales and playing a song for children in Igbo communities are developmental activities which are consciously cultivated into the growth development of children. This is not peculiar to Igbo culture alone, it is a common practice across every other cultural and language group in Nigeria. Every stage of a child's growth has music that accompanies it in most indigenous communities as expressed by Sunday-Kanu (2015), when a child grows the first teeth; the family celebrates it with folk songs, and when the first step is taken for a walk, a song accompanies it to encourage the child to take some more steps. Babies' first haircuts also have songs to accompany them. Varieties of the folk song go on and on like that in accompanying every facet of a child's life. Every event and occasion in the life of the Awkuzu child is usually followed up with one folk tune or the other. (pp. 231-234).

Folk music and playing songs in children's playgrounds take into consideration, the developmental sequences of children. Some sorts of considerations are seen playing out in the ages and developmental stages of children. From the chanting songs at the birth of newborns to the pounding rhythms in their mother's kitchen and the soothing songs of a lullaby, children gradually develop indigenous musical taste. Having the ability to feel and respond to cultural tunes, recognition of familiar melodies and learning to sing and dance, the child's participation with peer groups begins. Children's play in indigenous Nigerian cultures encourages all-inclusiveness in children's participation in folk songs and play songs. The inclusiveness in children's play enhances the therapeutic effect on children participants who may have one or two impairments. Engaging with peers in a playground reduces some level of stigmatization. Children with impairments may hardly notice their deficiencies as they engage with their peers in musical activities, which offer gradual therapeutic benefits. Hence, they continually achieve muscular strength, emotional stability and verbal proficiency like every other child.

While engaging in children's play and folksong, some children with impairments are observably seen, making moves effortlessly at the

playground, and learning to do what other children are doing. In some cases, they are seen gradually constructing and playing similar musical instruments seen with other children, making efforts to reproduce melodic tones and rhythms used in play songs. As they imitate their peers in the playground, some children with impairment unconsciously surpass their inadequacy. As children develop to engage in different musical styles, melodies, rhythms and dance, difficulties in concentration span lessens, while the construction of ideas and motor activities are on the increase. Over time, they improve in vocalization, language skills, constructive ability and initiation of ideas. Nwokenna and Anike (2012) affirm that children have developmental learning needs which go hand in hand with the rapid expansion of activities in the early years. Music plays an important role in the life of a child. It encourages balanced development. Music is increasingly in a broader context as an influence on the cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social aspects of children's lives as a support programme (pp. 251-252).

In the same line of thought, Modeme and Sunday-Kanu (2014) argue that health professionals have used music within a therapeutic relationship to address the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of individuals; including adults and children. They opine that music brings you to a state to unite with the feeling thus helping you to realize its nature and live with it, which practically transforms your nature. Music affects the primary brain of humans – the limbic brain. This is the part of the brain responsible for the physical condition of the body as well as maintaining the internal balance which keeps one alive (2014, p. 129). Nigerian ethnic folk music on children's playgrounds is believed to have functioned and continues to offer therapeutic intervention to children with speech and language impairments. Folk music as a therapeutic tool presents the potential to render some positive effects on children's development; not only in speech and language development management but, in the overall wellness of children.

Music as a Therapeutic Tool: An African Experience

Before the origin of terms known today as 'music therapy' and its emergence as a course of study in Nigerian universities, the use of folk music for treatment and healing process has been in existence from ancient African society till date. According to American Music Therapy Association (2015) report, the earliest known reference to music therapy appeared in 1789 in an unsigned article in *Columbian Magazine* titled 'Music Physically Considered'. The first recorded music therapy

intervention in an institutional setting (Blackwell's island in New York) and the first systematic experiments in music therapy were conducted in the 1800s (as cited in Umeoekchukwu, 2015, p. 66). While the term music therapy may be relatively strange to indigenous people living in Nigerian communities, the application of music and musical material in the rehabilitation or healing of disabilities in humans has been with the culture for ages, and the people understood its importance. Mereni (2007) states that the word therapy was derived from the Greek word *therapeia* which means curing or healing. The Oxford English dictionary defines therapy as 'treatment intended to relieve or heal a physical disorder or illness. Therapy in the context of this study is perceived as the application of remedial rehabilitation, healing procedures or curative interventions for treating illness or restoring health. It implies the treatment of mental or emotional and physical problems using psychological methods.

Over the years, music-making has been in use as a therapeutic tool for the improvement of the mental, emotional and physical states of humans. Its power to change significant psychological conditions such as mood, concentration, vigour, stimulation, and overall improvement in physical and mental abilities cannot be underestimated. The American Therapy Association (2011) argues that music therapy is a 'clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individual goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional' who has completed an approved music therapy programme. This notion of credentialed professionals selecting and piloting musical activities involved contradicts the practices in Nigerian traditional societies. A 'credentialed professional' is not a prerequisite to achieving successful music therapy as practised in Nigerian traditional communities. Rather, individual engagement and participation in communal musical activities and sometimes in some sacred musical activities result in harnessing therapeutic benefits. Individual participation in communal musical activities is the key. Although, the individual's participation may be active or passive (reactive); active in the sense that the disabled individual is actively involved in the musical activities of the people, functioning as part of those playing, dancing or singing. Passive or reactive on the other hand, entails the engagement of the disabled individual's mind in a repetitive rhythmic or melodic circle until he or she gradually starts responding and eventually graduates to participating with peer groups and communal musical activities.

In traditional African society, music-making is a human and mind-healing-oriented process which has lived with the people from the beginning. To trace the history of music as a therapeutic tool in Africa will mean to trace the existence of the people and music in the African cultures. Archival resources show that music has been functioning as a healing tool in African communities long before 1789. Although the American Music Therapy Association (2015) claimed that the earliest known reference to music therapy appeared in 1789, Africans have humanity wellness as the foundation of their music-making before this time. Sonic effects and musical vibrancies are made with the wellness and reconstruction of human society in mind. This means that the production of musical sound is not tilted towards the production of refined and synthesized sounds for fantasies or economic values. Rather, the rationale for sound production for music-making is centred more on humanity's consciousness. From the instrument construction stage to the compositional stage and performance practices of African folk music, considerations are attached to the health implications of the musical materials used. This can be observed in the healthy materials for instrument construction, healthy vibrancies emits from sounds and rhythms produced, and sound qualities that resonate with the peoples' cultures. All these considerations are put together to ensure the provision of wellness of the mind and society ordering.

According to Nzewi (2006), a healthy mind is a primary intention as well as capability of an African musical arts creation or performance practice. Nzewi believes that peculiar musical structures and instrumental ambience are rationalized to produce desired effects on the mind as well as the body of human persons, and sometimes animals. Nzewi's line of thought supports that Nigerian traditional musical practices possess therapeutic qualities that when applied to human activities, especially in children's play, offer improvement in the health state of the participant. Frequent participation in a folk song has incredibly worked on the speech and language skills of its participants following the tonality nature of African songs. Contours of African melodic lines are guided by the community's speech and language patterns. Tonal music characterizes the cultural music of most sub-Saharan African cultures, and it is an identifiable feature in all Nigerian ethnic music. The replicating of the community's speech patterns in both melodic and rhythmic constructs has shown huge success in some speech and language development and rehabilitation in children. Children observably, improve their vocalization as they engage regularly in the use of children's folk music in their plays.

In contradiction to the view of the American Music Therapy Association [AMTA] (2011), which holds that music therapy is applied by trained and certified music therapists, no trained personnel is needed to achieve music therapy in children's play. The use of different music therapeutic methods and sessions as proposed or planned based on individual peculiarity or special needs is never considered in children's play since the inherent principle of the play encourages inclusive participation. In the Igbo ethnic culture, for instance, no adult is involved in children's play activities. Children simply imitate the music pattern seen in adult groups. They construct their play musical instruments, design their play style, dance steps, dance formations and songs to suit their play. No special coach or director directs children's play for harnessing its therapeutic powers, nor are children with disabilities selected separately to engage in special music. Folk music in African society encourages all-inclusiveness, and the same trend is seen in children's play. Folk music is communally owned by all members of the community and all are expected to participate or contribute therein. No single person can claim ownership of folk music activities and all benefits from its therapeutic properties. Hence, restriction or separation of an individual from participating in communal musical activities based on physical and emotional disabilities is uncalled for in the Nigerian experience. Restrictions to performance may only be seen in the account of cases such as sacred music performances belonging to cult groups, age-grade music activities and some women's dance groups.

Inclusive participation in children's play has been shown to proffer improvement in the speech and language skills of children who are having challenges with pronunciation and communication. Beyond speech and language skills, folk music activities benefit its participants by improving their health across various domains; cognitive function, motor skills, emotional and effective development, behaviour and social skills, and quality of life. These are achieved because Nigerian indigenous musical structures are humanity oriented. Virtually all musical activities tilt towards helping individuals with some sort of disabilities and general wellness. Hence, children within the same neighbourhood, irrespective of speech disability or not are collectively engaged in children's play songs and folktales. Folktales, play songs and dance activities positively affect children's brain development and also help in shaping their emotional and physical well-being. This is not peculiar to children's folk music, in most sub-Saharan African musical cultures, folk music is often seen to be part

of the people's lives from cradle to grave. It is highly functional not only in the cultural event but also, in the life and whole existence of the people.

There has been an insinuation that healing got from participation in folk music practices is 'healing by chance' as expressed in Umeokechukwu (2015). He recounts that controllability is one of the marks of a scientific process. Music therapy is a controlled and repeatable process. The ability to diagnose specific treatment methods with guided use of music, written down and controlled music therapy intervention differentiates it from the traditional music healing and/or healing by chance gained from a musical activity like listening to music (p. 64). The above assertion especially 'healing by chance' is unacceptable in a culture that has structured humanity and societal consciousness in its folk music practices. Does this imply that healing by music stops happening when music is not written down and guided by a so-called music therapist? The above assertion presents a horrendous way to describe traditional healing through folk music practices. In addition, it appears a demeaning way to different healings got from folk music practices and that which is got from the so-called scientific controlled healing with music therapists. The obvious point is that there is a clear understanding of healing taking place while participating in folk music practices, be it by chance or planned. Children's folk music practices in their playgrounds have presented significant speed in speech and language development, as well as, rehabilitation in children.

Music as a therapeutic tool applies to both adults and children with certain disabilities such as autism, cerebral, palsy, down syndrome, mental retardation, and attention deficit disorder. Participation in children's play songs alone naturally increases a child's alertness. The simple provision of an avenue for children with speech impairment and communication difficulties to regularly participate with their peers in folk music practice, their capabilities and interactions are gradually shaped. Particularly, playing songs and rhymes concentrates more on children's behavioural changes in their speech patterns and language skills. This is one of the reasons folk music has remained a vital tool and the most prominent aspect of children's playgrounds in Igbo ethnicity and all Nigerian ethnic cultures. Musical interventions in children engage more in fun game activities fortified with instrumental music, dance and folk song. The incorporation of these musical activities helps in strengthening balance, coordination, endurance and flexibility needed for improved speech-communication and motor skills. Having understood the

functionality of African music and its rhythmic effects on human health and society, particularly, in children's speech and language development, Umeokechukwu (2015) advocates for the consideration and inclusion of African musical elements and styles in the academic curriculum of music therapy in the Nigerian universities. In his terms, 'training of Nigerian music therapists should be designed with African cultural elements to suit the need of the society' (p. 80). This will ensure productivity in harnessing the maximum therapeutic constituent of folk music for wellness, and above all, for optimal speech development and language mastery in children.

Speech and language impairment in Children

Speech and language abilities are part of human characteristics which are developed at the early stage of human growth. Speech and language proficiency is the most accepted basic method for human communication and interactions. Although, other forms of communication exist including music, gesture, drawing, drama and print. However, the cultural background of a child plays a huge role in the speech skill and the language the child develops to speak or communicate. Communication skills in children gradually develop from gestures to muttering speeches and then to structured language. In some cases, abnormalities in a child's development may occur, causing delay or distortion in the child's speech and language advancement (Kahn, 2019; WebMD, 2021; Medical Encyclopedia, 2022).

Speech and language disorders in children are related cases yet, they are different in the way they affect individuals. Kahn (2019) states that speech disorders can affect the way a person creates sounds to form words. A certain voice disorder may also be considered a speech disorder. He emphasizes that people with speech disorders are aware of what they want to say but they are unable to articulate their thoughts in speech. In the same manner, the Medical Encyclopedia (2022) confirms that speech disorders are different from language disorders in children. It explains that a speech problem is a condition in which a person has a problem creating or forming speech sounds needed for communication. This makes a child's speech difficult for others to understand. On the other hand, a language disorder is used to describe someone who is having difficulties in making meanings of messages received and is unable to send out constructive or meaningful messages to others. This explains the difficulty in expressive and receptive language. Either way, issues of concern arise when a child is noticed to have trouble in expressive language or receptive

language. Common speech and language disorders in children include phonological disorders, articulation disorders and voice disorders. Some of these may develop as a result of motor speech disorders medically referred to as *apraxia* and *dysarthria*. While *apraxia* is believed to be caused by damage to the part of the brain related to speaking, *dysarthria* is motor speech disorder which results from weakness of muscles in the mouth, face or respiratory system. Weakened muscles in the mouth may make some movements required for speech difficult. Thereby, presents difficulty in forming speech sounds, in more serious cases, it hinders the person's ability to speak. (Medical Encyclopedia, 2022, Kahn, 2019, WebMD, 2021).

Speech and language impairments can be present in both adults and children but, they appear to be more common in preschool-aged children. However, some speech and language disability cases are redeemable when early therapeutic intervention is applied. Early management of musical activities seems to have more promising benefits. Speech and language deformities are initially noticeable in children between the ages of one to five years old. The three major categories of speech impairment as itemized by WebMD (2021) include fluency disorder, voice disorder and articulate disorder. WebMD further explains these categories. First, it states that fluency disorder is noticeable when a child repeats a sound or a phrase over and over before he or she forcefully utters the intended words or phrase. The unusual repetition of sounds or rhythms inhibits fluency in the child's communication and interactions with others. This is commonly referred to as stuttering or stammering. The second category known as voice disorder is said to be experienced when there is a problem or an alteration that occurs in the airflow between the lungs, vocal cord, throat, mouth, nose and lips. Voice disorder is said to mainly occur as a result of acid reflux, cancer of the throat, damage in the nerves, damage of muscles of the vocal cords resulting from overuse of vocal cords and autism. Voice disorder means a child has an atypical tone of voice. Vocal production of pitches, tone qualities and volumes by a child are typically unusual. The third category which is the articulation disorder is observed when a child has distortion while pronouncing certain sounds or fully omits sounds.

Some of these speech and language disorders in children may be caused by the abnormal formation of facial muscles and the inability of the brain to communicate effectively with the speech muscles. In some other cases, the disorders may be attributed to genetic abnormalities, emotional

stress, infections or other sources. Whatever the case may be, speech and language impairment naturally trigger the emotional disorder in both the child concerned and the immediate family members. This can lead to depression, less self-esteem and anger in persons or children with speech-language disorders. Such problems as stuttering or involuntary repetition of sounds are found to be more intensified by emotional stress. However, to avert this disability from following a child into adulthood, early intervention and treatments are required to correct the reversible speech and language disorders during childhood. Since it is believed that early developmental milestone records from one to five years of age, involving children in rehabilitation activities with the motive to improve and correct any speech or language disorder dictated early becomes very vital. Although, some speech and language therapy may be medically dependent; involving the use of drugs and injections, some other cases like stammering may only need engagement in some psychological and physical activities like singing to improve.

Music is one of the most effective mental, emotional and physical engagement activities that can aid in a child gaining balance in both speech and language advancement. Engaging children in music full of fun activities, be it in the informal traditional community setting, with the use of folk songs, or in the office of credentialed professional music therapists, both methods have proven to increase speech and language improvement in children. However, one can argue that children's speech and language skills may improve faster if musical activities involved in their treatment are drawn from their cultural background, and in a language most familiar to them.

Nigerian Folk music as speech and language therapy

Irrespective of age, time and culture, music is the closest to speech as a preferred means of communication in virtually all human society. Music is an expressive art form; it is an expression of the performer's or composer's idea. The musical expression can be in a sonic form via instrumental music, verbal or vocal form through song, and or in gesture form via dance. While dance is perceived as visual music, instrumental music is perceived as sonic dance. Either way, every musical work is an expression of human thought or ideas that are well articulated to communicate meaning to the target audience. Every musical work makes extensive use of basic elements of communication such include, originator or the encoder, the medium or channel and the receiver or decoder. In folk music making, thoughts and ideas are communicated through cultural

connotations and signifiers that are inbuilt into the sonic ambiances, limbic movements and textual contents or vocalizations. Only people belonging to the same ethnic culture or language group can decode communications shared through cultural or lingual connotations in a musical expression. This is why folk music is said to be ethnically bound.

In reception, spectators decode or make meaning of the music based on the culture and language involved; the textual contents, familiar tone qualities and their cultural signifiers. Folk music in Nigeria functions within the context of the culture that owns it. So, the making of musical meanings depends heavily on the cultural context of the music performance. Folk songs and musical practices are considered communal property because folk music in Nigeria emerges from collective cultural experiences of the community's life. They function within the context of cultural events, occasions and seasons acknowledged by the community. Cultural diversity in Nigeria plays out in the multi-cultural ethnicities in the country. Each ethnic group has folk music peculiar to them. The folk music of these various ethnic groups differs by their cultural background, belief system and idioms. Yet, all folk music in Nigeria gear towards achieving a common purpose in the community's life where they exist. Ultimately, folk music practices in the Nigerian ethnicities focus on enhancing wellness and socio-cultural harmony. According to Mereni (1964), traditional music is a cultural indicator, which contributes to the continuity and stability of social mores. In like manner, Sunday-Kanu (2016) states that folk music in Nigeria is found in form of dance, songs, instrumentals or a combination of all. Folk songs are full of meanings, idioms and proverbs to help the younger ones develop their communication ability. Thereby, they learn how to apply some wise sayings, idioms, proverbs and myths of the old to blend their speeches (p.67).

Folk music in Nigerian ethnic cultures is characterized by tonal blends in both melodic lines and rhythmic constructs. Tonal inflexion as applied to both vocal music (songs) and instrumentals is often borrowed from the language pattern of the people. The rise and fall of language tone in most African folk songs reflects the speech contour and model of the language group. Nigerian indigenous languages are tonal as seen in most sub-Saharan African cultures. This basic characterization is common in folk songs and children's play songs. Nketia (1975) notes that "whatever the scale used in the making of African music, attention must be paid as far as possible, to the intonation of the texts" (p. 184). This implies that

song texts are moulded or tilted toward the speech pattern of the people. This helps children with impairment to gradually cope with the speech pattern and language skills as they participate in folktales and songs. The textual contents of most Nigerian folk songs are easily converted to speech, and they retain the same meaning as in the song. Agu (1999) confirms that, for a melody to convey an intelligent message, such melody should connect properly with the speech tone of its text; and must follow the same motion as the tonal movement of the wording. Thus, every word has its peculiarity in pronunciation, even when they share the same spelling, they still have different tonal marks which determine the meanings. In Nigerian indigenous languages, tonal marks give meaning to words and song texts alike. In the Igbo language, for instance, one word can mean four or five different things. The appropriate meaning in a sentence can only be distinguished with tone - marks (high, middle or low), when written or intonation in speech and while singing. Consequently, any alteration in the tonality of a word affects the contextual meaning of that word thereby, distorting the whole sentence or musical phrase (Sunday-Kanu & Modeme, 2013).

Nketia (1975) affirms that the most far-reaching influence is exerted by the verbal texts to which songs are set. African traditions deliberately treat the song as though they were speech utterances. The internal divisions that mark musical phrases within a song tend to correspond closely to grammatical units of the structure. That is, a musical phrase may be conterminous with a sentence, a clause, a phrase, or even a word that functions as a complete utterance (p.177). Nketia further argues that it is not uncommon to use rapid delivery of texts, special interjections, exclamations, and vocal grunts when performing or rendering folk songs. A combination of speech and song or, interjection and song that occurs at intervals characterizes the music practices of sub-Saharan Africa. The convention that governs the combination of speech and song in Nigerian folk songs is highly practised in children's folk tales and play songs. During folktales, the narrator may change from speech to song at a different point in the narrative. Spectators who in most cases are children are active participatory listeners. They engage with the narrator in songs at some points within the song interludes since songs accompanying folktales are usually in call-and-response form. The songs are highly repetitive thus, repetition of these songs and their derivative intonations or tonal marks from the language pattern helps children to learn, and produce sounds that are vital to speech and language advancement. The

repetition of songs mostly appears in two formations; circles and cyclic repetition. While cycles in the context of this study refer to the repetition of the exact melodic lines as heard, cyclic repetition implies repetition with some minor alterations in the melodic lines. Every piece of music has a systematic arrangement, movement, timbre, rhythms, tempo and style which make up its overall plan or structure. Forms in Nigerian musical practices offer a great range of structures revolving from repetitions, overlapping and cyclic or recurring modes which aid in fulfilling its intent.

Sunday-Kanu (2012, p. 56) explains that cyclic repetition form is another musical form that often characterizes Nigerian folk music. The form is based on constant repetition of a single short section informing of call and response but, the repetitions are not usually exact rather, as the movement progresses, variations are developed either in the melody, text, or rhythmic structure on both call section and that of response section. The repetition gradually changes and evolves while getting either more forceful or dawdling depending on the disposition of the performers. Call and response are by convention involving all participants in both folktale songs and children's play songs. This makes children actively participate in the songs including in their speech utterances and interjections. Most of these songs are also characterized by conventional short melodic lines which make it easier for children to commit to memory. Not only do children memorize these songs, but they also, internalize the speech pattern and interjections inculcated in the song texts. The repetitive nature of these short melodic lines encourages children's imitation of speech pattern over and over again until it is fully registered in their brain and subconscious mind. This enables any child with a speech impairment to improve his or her speech and language skills; mastering how to pronounce and reproduce such words or phrases involved in the song texts helps a long way.

Agu (2006) asserts that since whatever children learn at this early stage of life is well registered in their subconscious mind, Music is purposefully utilized in most learned experiences organized for children to help them discover and develop their personalities (as cited in Forchu, 2012, p. 213). In addition, it is believed that beyond learning through music, African music inculcated therapeutic elements that are capable of improving the state of health and learning simultaneously. Thus, while children participate in folk music activities, they are not only gaining social-cultural knowledge but are also, unconsciously receiving some therapy for both emotional and physical stability. Onyeji and Onyeji (2012)

argue that African traditional music is rationalized and valued as an agency for community therapy. Its healing power has been explored and employed by various traditional societies for the spiritual and physical well-being of the people. Thus, music is a source of psychical massage, emotional and mental stability, and spiritual and physical healing that have transcended time and space (p. 27).

Nwokenna and Anike (2012) affirm that playing a musical instrument reshapes the brain. This doesn't mean it changes the overall shape of the brain but rather, the coordinated use of the fingers can alter the brain's ability to distinguish touch input from different fingers on the same hand. To appreciate this fact and the astounding implication, we need to understand how the brain normally processes touch (tactile) input from the skin (p. 255). It has been noted that music with a strong rhythmical element as seen in African music can affect heartbeat rate and breathing. This is due to its ability to promote the release of endorphins or natural painkillers. It has been found to help in reducing muscle tensions, promote relaxation, and enhance communication skills, physical coordination and entire behavioural changes (Umeoekchukwu, 2015). Children's engagement in folktales, folk songs and dances in their plays provides health benefits even without the children's consciousness. In most Nigerian ethnicities, particularly, in Igbo ethnic culture, children who regularly engage in folk songs, riddles, folklores, folktales, moonlight play and children's play have proven to be more emotionally and physically stable than those who do not. In addition, they noticeably have increased fluency in both speech-language development, mastery of cultural values and general communication skills.

The potency of rhythms, song texts, repetition styles and short melodic forms characterized in children's play songs and other folk music activities provide a ground for the application of music therapy on developing children. Play song activities provide movements that involve both the large muscle and the finer muscles thereby, making coordination of the parts of the body very effective and speeches very perceptible. Sunday-Kanu (2015) claims that music is a medium of artistic expression through which the intellectual and socio-cultural development of a child is achieved. Musical activities play vital a role in the life of every child, an African child is not an exception to this fact. In Nigeria particularly, children's involvement in musical traditions and activities of their communities is nurtured conscientiously from the cradle. Folk music aids children's cultural development and also enhance cognitive, motor

activities and sensual development which enables their execution of social and cultural responsibilities with or without adult supervision (p. 227). The enjoyment of playing songs and folklore as a child and member of a community is very vital in children's life. It does not only create room for bonding and social-cultural maturity but, functions also, as a therapeutic intervention tool that aids vocalization, and the emotional and physical well-being of children.

Conclusion

Folk music has over centuries been used immensely as means of enhancing both speech and language proficiency, including cultural maturity in children. It is vital at the early age of children's lives irrespective of speech and language impairments or not. Inclusive participation of children in folk music activities appears more productive in children's health than, the separation of children with speech and language impairment from others. The therapeutic implications and application styles inculcated in children's folk songs are culturally structured to enhance developmental speed and treatment of speech and language impairment. It nurtures children with learning difficulties to focus their attention, increase their concentration span and initiation of ideas. Over time, improvement in general vocalizations and communication skills are achieved following imitation of others and repetition of song texts used in play songs. Regular participation in children's play is enough to arouse a child's attentiveness, alertness, focused attention, imitation and reproduction of sounds or rhythms heard. Consequently, children's folk music activities in Nigerian ethnic cultures are considered much more than just songs and play, rather, it is a key player in the development and mastery of speech and language skills.

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