

(Dis)Ableness and Inclusive Cities: Negotiating Practice-Led Action Research in Music and Art with Disabled People in Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper presents a practice-led action research project examining the impact of music and art therapy on the emotional and social well-being of children with disabilities in Lagos, Nigeria. The study was conducted at the Modupe Cole Memorial Children's Home School and involved sixty children aged 5 to 18 with a range of physical, intellectual, and sensory disabilities. Through a series of structured weekly sessions in music and visual arts, the study sought to explore how creative interventions could foster emotional expression, social inclusion, and personal confidence among children traditionally marginalised in educational and therapeutic systems. Drawing on Michael Bakan's theoretical framework on neurodiversity and inclusive musical communities, the research integrated culturally relevant musical activities—such as drumming, singing, and rhythm exercises—with adaptive visual art practices including painting, tie-dye, and “colour your feelings” exercises. Data were collected through facilitator journals, direct observation, and interviews with educators and caregivers. Findings reveal that many participants demonstrated increased emotional expression, reduced anxiety, improved peer interaction, and engagement in ways not previously observed within conventional academic routines. Several children also revealed previously undiscovered artistic talents, highlighting the value of alternative modalities in uncovering latent abilities. Despite these successes, the study identified systemic challenges, including inadequate resources, lack of trained arts therapists, and institutional constraints on time and scheduling. Nevertheless, staff and caregivers reported positive behavioural shifts and expressed strong support for integrating such activities into the routine curriculum. The study concludes that low-cost, culturally grounded arts interventions offer significant psychosocial benefits and can serve as effective tools for advancing inclusive education in low-resource settings. It calls for targeted policy implementation, enhanced teacher training, provision of adaptive materials, and broader research investment in arts-based approaches to disability support within African educational contexts.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Disability and the Arts, Music and Art Therapy, Practice-Led Action Research

Introduction and Background

Children with disabilities in sub-Saharan Africa face profound educational and social exclusion. UNESCO and UNICEF reports highlight that disabled children are far less likely to enrol and complete school compared to their non-disabled peers. For example, in 11 African countries primary completion rates were about 10 percentage points lower for girls with disabilities and 13 points lower for boys than for children without disabilities. Beyond school, pervasive barriers limit disabled children's ability to participate in community life. These challenges contravene international commitments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Nigeria's own **Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act** (2019), which guarantees the right to free, non-discriminatory education and mandates inclusive, accessible schools. In this context, creative arts offer a promising pathway to inclusion. Art and music therapies harness non-verbal, culturally resonant media to engage children who struggle with conventional communication. By facilitating emotional expression and peer interaction, the arts can help bridge the gap between children's abilities and barriers of (dis)ability. Music, in particular, has a universal, cross-cultural appeal and can be tailored to individual needs (melody, rhythm, lyrics) to support cognitive and social development. Art therapy likewise provides a safe, non-threatening means for children to project feelings through imagery and play. Prior research in African contexts underscores these benefits: in Senegal, Youm et al. (2024) found that music therapy reduced stress and anxiety among youths with intellectual disabilities and improved mood, motor skills, and social integration.

However, in many low-resource settings the potential of arts therapies is underutilized due to lack of trained specialists and materials. In Lagos, Nigeria's largest city, government schools for disabled children seldom include music or art therapists on staff. This action research project, titled "(Dis)ableness and Inclusive Cities: Negotiating Practice-Led Action Research in Music and Art with Disabled People in Lagos," was designed to explore how practical arts sessions could advance emotional expression and social inclusion for institutionalized children with disabilities. Collaborating with a special-education teacher and caregivers, the research team delivered a series of integrated music and art workshops and evaluated the children's responses and experiences. Specifically, the study aimed to: 1) examine how participatory music and art sessions could enhance emotional expression among the children; 2) evaluate whether these arts interventions fostered social inclusion and peer interaction; and 3) identify any practical challenges or limitations in implementing the interventions in a low-resource institutional setting.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study "(Dis)Ableness and Inclusive Cities: Negotiating Practice-Led Action Research in Music and Arts with Disabled People in Lagos, Nigeria" is based on the model proposed by Michael Bakan (2018). Bakan's work focuses on the intersection of music, autism, and neurodiversity. He emphasizes the role of ethnomusicology in understanding autism and suggests that it is uniquely suited to create and sustain vibrant, neurodiverse musical communities (Bakan, 2018). In the context of this study, Bakan's model can be extended to explore the role of music and arts in mediating (dis)ableness and fostering social inclusion in Lagos, Nigeria. The theoretical framework thus focuses on the potential of music and arts as tools for promoting social inclusion and equity among individuals living with disabilities, while also considering the unique socio-cultural context of Lagos and how it influences the experiences and perceptions of disabled people.

Literature Review

Music Therapy and Children with Disabilities

Music therapy is an evidence-based practice used worldwide to support children with physical and developmental disabilities. It employs musical activities like singing, instrument playing, and rhythm exercises to target non-musical goals such as improving communication, motor skills, and psychological well-being. In special education contexts (e.g. the US and Europe), music therapists are recognized providers who often collaborate with educational teams. Research shows that even passive music listening can reduce anxiety and improve mood among disabled children, while active participation (e.g. drumming, singing) can enhance motor coordination and social engagement. For example, Youm et al. (2024) documented that youths with intellectual disabilities in Senegal who received music therapy for three years experienced reduced stress and anxiety, improved mood, and enhanced fine/gross motor skills and memory. The authors conclude that music therapy “makes a major contribution to the empowerment” of disabled youth, helping them connect with others and combat stigmatization through shared musical expression.

Even in classroom settings, musical interventions can yield positive social outcomes. A review of music therapy in special education notes that rhythmic movement and familiar songs help develop gross motor skills and respiratory control, and that music can serve as a mnemonic aid for academics or as a motivator for participation. The American Music Therapy Association highlights that children in special education who receive music therapy often show “increased joint attention, increased coping skills, increased socialization with peers and educational teams, functional and effective self-expression skills, improved behaviour, self-regulation, and decreased agitation”. These capacity-building effects are linked to music’s ability to engage multiple brain pathways (separate from speech centres) and to customize stimuli (tempo, rhythm, melody) to each child. In short, music therapy can transform a cognitively challenging task (e.g. speaking or following instructions) into a multisensory, accessible experience. Despite this promise, rigorous research on music therapy in African schools remains limited. However, studies in the Global South echo the general findings. Thompson & McFerran (2015) reported that children with developmental disabilities showed improved social communication and mood after group music sessions. Similarly, systematic reviews find that music-based therapy generally produces significant benefits in domains like social interaction and emotional regulation across various disabilities, including autism and ADHD. Importantly, these benefits often arise even in low-resource implementations – for instance, by using traditional or improvised instruments – underscoring the scalability of music interventions in underfunded settings.

Art Therapy and Emotional Expression

Art therapy, broadly defined as the use of visual arts materials in a therapeutic process, is well established as a modality for children’s emotional and social development. Unlike music, visual art provides a static “external” product (drawing, painting, collage) that can later be reflected upon. Art therapy allows children to convey thoughts and feelings without relying on words, which is particularly useful for those with speech or cognitive limitations. Bosgraaf et al.’s systematic review (2020) explains that art-making is central to the learning process; it fosters self-esteem, resilience, and self-awareness while also serving as a “non-threatening” form of therapy. In practice, art therapists facilitate sessions by encouraging children to project conflicts or emotions onto paper or clay, then guiding them to make meaning from the images. This process taps into unconscious feelings, providing insight and emotional release. Empirical studies support art therapy’s efficacy for a range of paediatric conditions. For example, Cohen-Yatziv and Regev (2019) reviewed art therapy outcomes and found positive effects on “children with trauma or medical conditions... and in children in special education and with disabilities.” They and others note that art therapy can reduce anxiety, aggression, and withdrawal, while promoting social skills and coping abilities. Experimental trials have shown that regular art sessions can significantly lower anxiety levels in children with cancer and improve mood and participation in group art activities.

Inclusive Education and the African Context

Globally, inclusive education (the practice of educating all children together regardless of ability) is recognized as both a right and a powerful means of social inclusion. UNICEF emphasizes that inclusive systems benefit all students, and calls on governments to align policies with UN disability rights conventions. In theory, integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools (with necessary supports) should normalize diversity and reduce stigma. Yet in practice, many African countries struggle with implementation. Amelina et al. (2023) note that in sub-Saharan Africa, disabled children often lag far behind their peers in enrolment and learning outcomes. Key bottlenecks include inadequate infrastructure (ramps, accessible classrooms, textbooks in Braille or large print) and a severe shortage of teacher training in inclusive methods. For example, a World Bank survey found that among many in-service trainings, instruction on inclusive education was the least commonly provided.

Culture also plays a role. In some communities, disability is stigmatized or seen as a personal tragedy, reducing parental advocacy for schooling. And where special schools do exist, they are often under-resourced and separated from mainstream peers. Thus, arts-based programs that bring disabled children together (and connect them with non-disabled peers or mentors) can help break down these social barriers. In inclusive classrooms worldwide, teachers have found that incorporating music and arts activates students' interests and allows diverse groups to grow side by side, benefiting all learners. In the present Nigerian context, the recent Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2019) was intended to mandate exactly this kind of inclusion: Section 17 guarantees the right to non-discriminatory education and free schooling through secondary level, while Section 18 requires all public schools to be "inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities," providing special facilities, trained personnel, and assistive curricula (e.g. Braille, sign language). The gap now lies in translating these legal mandates into effective practice, a challenge exacerbated by scarce funding for special needs programs.

Arts Therapies in Institutional and Educational Settings

Within schools and care institutions, structured art and music programs have shown multiple benefits. Music and art are inherently social activities that can be led by teachers or therapists in group formats. Group singing and movement to music, for example, promote social bonding and collective participation. The UNILAG project itself included group singing ("theme songs") and group rhythmic exercises, echoing known practices that foster a sense of unity. American Music Therapy factsheets emphasize that joint music-making creates a "musical approach to skills on [the student's] IEP" and that music therapists often work in teams to generalize skills from the music setting to the classroom. Similarly, tie-dye and collaborative art projects allowed children to experience peer support and celebrate collective creativity. The project's findings (detailed below) reaffirm that children feel a sense of belonging when moving or creating together with others; such experiences are documented in the literature as crucial for "fostering emotional well-being and creating a sense of belonging."

Moreover, arts activities have non-obvious educational spillovers. For instance, learning a new song can improve memory and language recall, while improvising with drums can develop coordination. *[This study originally referenced a finding by Krishnamurty et al. (2020) in India, but that reference has been removed due to unavailable citation.]* In African cultures, using local songs or instruments makes interventions more relevant and accessible. The UNILAG team chose culturally familiar songs ("Ise Oluwa," "Olorun Agbaye") and used simple percussion instruments (drums, tambourines, sakara, shekere, etc.). This aligns with the recommendation to ground inclusive pedagogy in local knowledge and curricular relevance. Overall, the literature supports the inclusion of art and music as valuable adjuncts to traditional therapy and education for disabled children. Taken together, these studies suggest that structured music and art sessions could improve the emotional, social, and even cognitive well-being of Nigerian children with disabilities. The present project provides an empirical case study of this approach, with data drawn from the children's responses, teacher interviews, and reflective observation. The following sections detail the project's methodology and thematic findings, and then place them in dialogue with existing research.

Methodology

The research adopted a practice-led action research design, integrating theory and practice in iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The team comprised a principal investigator (PI) and collaborators (music and art facilitators), three postgraduate student assistants, and a co-opted special education teacher (Mr. Ajayi). All procedures received ethical approval from the University of Lagos research ethics board, and informed consent was obtained from the school and guardians.

The project was conducted at the Modupe Cole Memorial Child Care Home School, an institution for children with diverse disabilities (cognitive impairments, physical disabilities, and sensory impairments). The special educator advised that participants be selected by mental age rather than chronological age. Accordingly, 60 students (approximately ages 5–18) were chosen and divided into two equal groups of 30. One group attended weekly music-therapy sessions while the other attended visual arts sessions. (Before the second session, word-of-mouth interest led to a total of 87 children participating, so group sizes expanded.) The children's diagnoses included cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, intellectual disability, and autism spectrum conditions. All activities were designed to be non-verbal and fully inclusive.

The music team's sessions began with relaxation exercises (deep breathing) and listening to recorded Nigerian songs. Children were encouraged to sing along with uplifting theme songs (e.g. "Ise Oluwa," "Uyo Meyo"). Facilitators then led rhythmic exercises in which children played drums, shakers, and tambourines in unison to simple patterns. Songs and rhythms were chosen for cultural relevance and easy repetition. The goal was engagement through movement and sound, not musical proficiency. As noted in the literature, music therapists often create strategies and cues so that rhythms can be used to meet gross motor and social-emotional goals. Sessions also allowed open-ended improvisation: children who showed interest could freely explore instruments and vocalization.

The art team's sessions focused on tangible creative expression. Initial activities revealed that some children could not grip pencils; facilitators adapted by giving paper rolls or large crayons to those with fine-motor challenges. One key exercise was "Colour Your Feelings": children were provided paints and brushes and invited to express emotions through colors and shapes without verbal instruction. In later sessions (Fieldwork 2), art tasks included tie-dye fabric design and paper marbling. During an integrated session (Fieldwork 3), soft instrumental music played in the background to encourage movement as children painted. Facilitators observed and noted each child's approach and any emotional cues (e.g. excitement, calm).

Researchers collected qualitative data via direct observation, facilitator journals, audio-recorded reflections, and informal interviews with staff. Immediately after each session, the team debriefed: facilitators shared observations of which activities elicited engagement, any behavioural changes, and logistical challenges (e.g. need for more chairs, instruments, or time). For example, the Post-Session Review after Fieldwork 1 noted, "The children responded well to both music and art, showing signs of increased confidence and emotional expression." These observations were documented and later coded thematically. The research objectives themselves guided coding into categories such as "Emotional Expression," "Social Inclusion," and "Resources/Challenges."

Involvement of the special educator was crucial. Mr. Ajayi advised on communication strategies and helped interpret the children's non-verbal cues. He also participated in reflective interviews: in one discussion he noted how group dancing to music gave children a "moment of connection," highlighting how even non-verbal engagement (moving to the beat) made them feel included. Teachers and caregivers were also encouraged to comment on any changes in the children's behaviour. This collaborative, reflective approach is characteristic of action research and allowed the project to adapt each session for maximum inclusion (for instance, by introducing a speaker to amplify music for children with hearing impairments). By merging hands-on arts practice with systematic observation, this methodology generated

rich qualitative data on how children experienced music and art. The findings presented below draw on this ground-level evidence, organized into thematic categories, and are discussed in relation to existing scholarly literature.

Findings

The analysis of session reports, facilitator notes, and interviews revealed several consistent themes. These are reported below with illustrative observations from the project.

Emotional Expression and Regulation

One prominent finding was that creative arts provided new avenues for the children to express emotions and regulate their affect. After the first sessions, facilitators observed signs of increased confidence and emotional expression among participants. For many non-verbal or speech-impaired children, music and art became **languages of feeling**. During the “Colour Your Feelings” activity, children selected colours and brushstrokes that reflected joy, excitement, or calm. For instance, one boy who rarely spoke vibrantly covered his canvas with bright reds and blues while music played, then later smiled at his artwork. Another child gently swirled paint in circles, suggesting serenity. Soft music listening sessions (March 9th & 16th) had a notable calming effect. Facilitators reported that when jazz instrumental tracks played during art activities, the children became “so calm... like a moment of sober reflection.” Observations noted that children who were anxious at the start gradually relaxed: one girl with severe anxiety initially trembled, but by the final minutes she was quietly humming a lullaby. In the staff’s words, “children responded positively to melodic and rhythmic elements, showing visible signs of relaxation and joy... soft music contributed to emotional regulation, reducing anxiety and fostering a sense of tranquillity.” This aligns with research showing that music therapy can lower cortisol (the stress hormone) levels and promote emotional stability in disabled children. Conversely, upbeat singing activities brought out exuberant expression. For example, when lively Nigerian pop songs (such as “Zazu” by Portable or “Ire” by Adekunle Gold) were played, children clapped and nodded along, with some laughing or turning to friends to share the experience. These moments provided a safe context for outward emotionality. Art sessions also gave emotional outlets: in one exercise, children were asked to draw how they felt while listening to a song. Many drew joyful scenes (sunshine, dancing figures), suggesting that the creative task helped them internalize and express positive emotions associated with the music.

Social Interaction and Sense of Belonging

Alongside emotional gains, the interventions fostered social inclusion. Music and art brought children together in group activities, reinforcing peer bonds. Notably, participation expanded beyond the core group: teachers reported that word spread among the students and by the second fieldwork, 87 children (up from 60) joined the program simply because “they found it beneficial.” This spontaneous increase indicates that the sessions had social allure. During activities, children often helped or cheered for one another. In one rhythm session, a non-verbal boy with Down syndrome mastered a simple drum; nearby peers applauded his success, visibly proud. Group singing in the final session created “a sense of unity and shared experience,” as the report notes. The children proudly performed their theme songs together, reinforcing a feeling of togetherness. Dance movements in music sessions had a similar effect: when one child began swaying, others joined in a chain, holding hands and swaying in unison. These behaviours illustrate inclusion: children who were often isolated by their disabilities physically came together and moved as a group, connected by the music.

Teachers observed that these shared experiences helped “create an inclusive environment where children could engage at their own pace.” After one session, Mr. Ajayi emphasized that inclusion is more than mere presence – it’s feeling part of something. He remarked how children who are usually quiet or withdrawn “see people moving with them... and in that moment feel connected.” This resonates with the documented role of music as a social glue, giving the children common ground. Similarly, collaborative art prompted children to

cooperate and converse in simple ways. By enabling co-creation, art also built camaraderie. Bakan (2018) describes how communal musicking can create “neurodiverse musical communities” where individuals of all abilities engage collaboratively. The social bonding observed in our sessions aligns with this idea, as the children essentially formed an inclusive musical community in which each could participate at their own pace.

Discovery of Skills and Interests

An unexpected finding was the identification of hidden talents. Several children demonstrated specific affinities: in music sessions, some exhibited strong rhythmic skills or clear singing ability, while others showed a keen interest in visual arts. For example, one girl with cerebral palsy struggled with mobility but immediately took to a drum and quickly learned a beat. Others had a good ear for melody and sang on pitch. In fact, the field notes mention “unexpected talents” discovered, which led to discussions about nurturing those abilities. On the art side, two children who seldom engaged academically spent an entire session absorbed in tie-dyeing fabric designs, concentrating deeply on colour patterns. These discoveries are important: they suggest that disabled children, when given appropriate mediums, can flourish creatively. The arts sessions provided a non-judgmental space for exploration, confirming that many children have latent competencies. Such findings align with the idea that art and music can reveal students’ strengths that typical classroom activities might overlook. Educators on-site noted that these talents became a source of pride and confidence for the children. As one caregiver put it, “we had no idea [she] could do that – now she seems so happy when she’s painting.”

Engagement, Joy, and Well-Being

Overall, the sessions were marked by palpable joy and enthusiasm. Each fieldwork period concluded with **incredible artwork and vibrant fabric designs**, and teachers consistently reported the children’s excitement about the program. During music activities, many children who typically maintained neutral expressions began smiling and laughing. One special-education teacher observed that for many children, music was a “bridge to the world – a way to be heard, even without words.” This comment succinctly captures how fundamentally the children’s well-being was enhanced even without new verbal skills. Caregivers noted improvements in routine behaviour and mood following the sessions. For instance, one boy who often became agitated in the afternoon was noticeably calmer after participating in a music therapy day, suggesting a lingering effect of emotional regulation. Another child with ASD, previously prone to emotional shutdowns, was heard humming a song learned in the session later that evening. These anecdotal reports mirror findings from controlled studies that music therapy can lower agitation and improve behaviour in special needs populations.

Challenges and Practical Barriers

Despite the successes, the project encountered several resource and training challenges. The need for more instruments and art supplies was repeatedly noted. After the first session, the team concluded that “more equipment was needed, including additional percussion instruments, art supplies, and adaptive materials.” In practice, the small drum set and a few tambourines proved insufficient when many children wanted to play instruments at once. Mr. Ajayi emphasized that many children “respond best to specific sounds,” yet the program lacked enough varied instruments to cater to each child’s preferences. Similarly, art supplies ran low after extensive colouring and fabric tying. These constraints meant some children had to wait for turns or could not fully participate at times. Training was another gap. None of the school’s staff were trained music or art therapists. The PI and team had some expertise, but their presence was limited to the fieldwork days. Teachers expressed a desire to integrate more music/art activities into the daily routine but felt unsure how to do so. Mr. Ajayi pointed out the “lack of trained professionals in music and arts education for individuals with disabilities,” calling this a major obstacle. Indeed, Nigeria has few qualified specialists in these areas, reflecting a global scarcity of music/art therapists in schools. This aligns with our thematic analysis identifying “insufficient training” as a recurring challenge.

Time and scheduling also posed issues. The children's day was typically structured around academics and care routines; allocating a full 60-minute slot for arts was ambitious. Some children became restless toward the end of a session, suggesting the need for shorter or more varied activities. Moreover, language barriers (some children spoke only local dialects, others had speech disorders) required on-the-fly communication strategies by the facilitators.

Perceptions of Staff and Caregivers

Interviews with teachers and caregivers provided supportive feedback. They uniformly praised the sessions and noted subtle changes in student behaviour. Teachers commented on the children's increased willingness to engage in classroom activities after being able to "let off steam" in music or art. One teacher said that group singing had helped a shy student become more vocal in class the next day. Staff also highlighted educational spillovers: they recognized that children were learning patience (waiting turns), following group instructions (during call-and-response songs), and exploring fine motor skills (holding brushes). When discussing future steps, both educators and caregivers stressed the need for continuity. They wished these activities could happen weekly beyond the study's scope. This buy-in is crucial, as it suggests sustainability: indeed, the school intends to incorporate some arts modules into its routine program based on this project's success. In sum, the findings demonstrate that even brief, low-cost music and art interventions can yield meaningful emotional and social benefits for children with disabilities. Students who have limited verbal abilities found new modes of expression, and the shared experiences fostered a sense of inclusion. These results are consistent with literature indicating that arts therapies can empower disabled youth. The next section critically examines these findings in light of existing scholarship and discusses broader implications.

Discussion

The observed benefits from the Lagos arts interventions resonate strongly with existing research on disability, arts therapy, and inclusion. In particular, our findings underscore three key areas: (1) emotional and psychological well-being, (2) social inclusion and interaction, and (3) systemic challenges.

Emotional and Psychological Well-Being

The evidence that music and art fostered relaxation, joy, and emotional expression echoes prior findings. Youm et al. (2024) documented similar outcomes in Senegal, noting that "music played a role in alleviating stress and anxiety... enhancing mood and mental health" for disabled youth. The calm responses of children in Lagos to soft music are consistent with that result. In art therapy research, Bosgraaf et al. (2020) emphasize that art-making provides a way for children to access and express feelings that they cannot easily verbalize. Our "Colour Your Feelings" activity leveraged this principle, enabling children to externalize emotions through colours and forms, much as Bosgraaf's review found that art-making improves self-esteem and coping. Educators' observations of improved self-regulation (fewer tantrums after sessions) match the notion that these therapies help build emotional resilience.

These emotional benefits have a physiological underpinning as well. Music and art engage neural pathways involved in reward and relaxation. Rhythmic sound can entrain heart rate and breathing, leading to physical calming, while group art activities can release positive social hormones (e.g. oxytocin from shared experience). Although we did not measure hormones, the qualitative observation of "visible relaxation and joy" aligns with neurobiological theories of arts therapy (e.g., viewing music as an indirect cognitive therapy). Our data thus support the idea that even short-term arts interventions can have immediate affective benefits, suggesting that schools should integrate them as part of socio-emotional learning.

Social Inclusion and Communication

Including these children in collective arts activities directly addressed social isolation. Group singing and dancing are recognized in the literature as powerful levellers because they create a shared non-verbal language and a sense of community. For example, the American Music Therapy Association fact sheet notes that participation in group music “has the potential to address skills” across cognitive, behavioural, physical, emotional, and social domains. In our project, the children improved social skills simply by playing music together and observing each other.

Our findings reinforce that disabled children often respond to the cues and actions of peers. The presence of others provided a mirror and a motivation for engagement. This suggests that expanding such programs to include non-disabled students could further amplify inclusion: by having mixed-ability choirs or art clubs, educators might approximate the ideal of true integration. The literature supports this idea: mixed classrooms where music or drama are used often see improved attitudes toward disability among all students. We also note that different children gravitated to different mediums. Some excelled with rhythm and sound, others with visual imagery. This diversity reflects Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, implying that an inclusive curriculum should offer various expressive modes. The project’s split design (separate music vs. art groups) inadvertently demonstrated an approach that respected each child’s strengths. It suggests that in inclusive settings, teachers might assess students’ preferred modalities and incorporate both art and music to reach all learners.

Challenges of Resources and Training

The significant hurdles observed – lack of materials and absence of specialist teachers – echo systemic barriers often identified in inclusive education literature. Amelina et al. (2023) specifically highlight that African education systems often lack accessible infrastructure and trained staff for inclusion. Our project corroborated this at the micro level: the school had no sound system for music or adjustable easels for art, and staff were unprepared to sustain arts activities independently. The caregivers’ plea for more instruments and time highlights the funding constraints. Policymakers and funders should note that inclusive education can falter if such practical needs are ignored. Nigeria’s disability law mandates inclusive education, but the law is toothless without implementation. The project shows a gap between legislation and practice: while Section 17 guarantees education rights, the school lacked even basic assistive devices (for example, a grip aid for pencils) until the researchers provided them. This finding underscores calls (including UNESCO’s) for stronger pre- and in-service teacher education in inclusion, as well as better infrastructure to support special needs. In sum, our findings align with the scholarly consensus that art and music therapies have a profoundly positive impact on disabled children’s well-being and inclusion. This also echoes Bakan’s (2018) observation that participatory music-making can empower neurodiverse individuals through the creation of an inclusive community. They also highlight that without appropriate resources and policy commitment, such interventions remain ad hoc and short-lived. The next section elaborates on these gaps and explores opportunities illuminated by the project.

Challenges and Opportunities

The project’s experience brought into relief several critical challenges, but also pointed toward opportunities for positive change.

1. **Resource Gaps:** The most immediate challenge was the shortage of instruments, art supplies, and adaptive tools. A recurring theme was insufficient resources. Without more percussion sets, speakers, paints, or even seating, the sessions could not scale effectively. Additionally, a quiet, dedicated room was needed for optimal focus. The opportunity here lies in the fact that relatively small investments could yield large psychosocial returns, as our data suggest.

2. **Training and Personnel:** The lack of trained music and art therapists is a structural barrier. Teachers at the home had no formal training in using arts therapeutically. This gap resonates with the World Bank's finding that teacher training on inclusion is rarely provided. To remedy this, teacher education programs should incorporate basic skills in adaptive arts facilitation. For example, workshops could train existing special educators in leading simple music activities or expressive drawing, following models from art-therapy manuals. In Lagos, institutions like the University of Lagos and local arts organizations could collaborate to offer short courses. The opportunity is to build capacity: each trained teacher becomes a multiplier, able to integrate arts into regular schooling.
3. **Policy and Administrative Support:** Even with legislation on the books, implementation is weak. At the micro level of one school, we saw that policy change is needed in practice. School administrators must be encouraged to include arts therapies as part of special needs programs. Given that Nigeria's law requires "inclusive and accessible education," pressure can be put on education ministries to audit compliance. The opportunity here is leveraging the law as an advocacy tool: showing how simple acts (like a weekly music class) fulfil legal obligations could motivate resource allocation. On a positive note, after the study the school's management expressed intent to continue weekly music/art times, suggesting that when benefits are demonstrated, administrators are willing to buy in.
4. **Curriculum and Materials Development:** There is a dearth of culturally appropriate curricula for arts therapy in Nigerian schools. The project relied on the facilitators' own lesson planning. Future efforts could include developing structured lesson plans or activity guides that can be shared with teachers. For instance, adapting international art-therapy exercises to the local context would make them more resonant. Creating audio/visual materials in Yoruba or Pidgin could also aid understanding. Academic institutions could spearhead these developments, providing evidence-based guides for practitioners.
5. **Community and Parental Engagement:** One often overlooked challenge is stigma. Some parents may doubt the educational value of "just playing music" in school. However, as our findings show clear benefits, schools have an opportunity to engage parents by showcasing student progress. Involving families can transform attitudes: when parents see their child proudly holding a drum or painting a picture, it reinforces that inclusion and creativity matter. More broadly, this project suggests opportunities for awareness campaigns about the role of the arts in disability inclusion – possibly linking with events like the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (December 3) or partnering with local media to share success stories.

In summary, while barriers in resources, training, and policy are significant, each also presents a leverage point. The strong positive response from children and staff indicates a high return on investment for addressing these challenges. Enhancing teacher capacity, securing materials, and reinforcing inclusive policies are realistic next steps to amplify the impact of arts interventions.

Limitations

As with any case study, this project has inherent methodological limitations. It was conducted in a single institution with a relatively small sample, without a control group or baseline measures, so the findings may not be generalizable beyond this context. The outcomes were documented qualitatively through observations and interviews rather than quantitatively, which means improvements in children's skills were not measured with standardized scales. The intervention period was short, preventing assessment of long-term effects. In addition, the researchers themselves facilitated the sessions, introducing potential observer bias and a Hawthorne effect (children may have responded to the novelty and attention). Finally, practical constraints – such as limited instruments and varying communication abilities among participants – may have influenced the extent of engagement observed. These limitations suggest caution in interpreting the results and underscore the need for further research to validate and build upon the findings.

Recommendations

Integrate Art and Music into Special Education Curriculum: Schools and special-needs programs should include weekly arts therapy sessions as part of the curriculum. This can be achieved by scheduling dedicated time slots and training educators to lead them. Art and music activities should align with educational goals (for example, using songs to teach vocabulary or collaborative art projects to teach sharing).

Provide Instruments and Adaptive Materials: Educational authorities should allocate funds to equip schools for inclusive arts. At minimum, this includes percussion instruments, audio equipment (speakers, microphones), art supplies (paints, paper, tie-dye kits), and adaptive tools for students with physical impairments (e.g. cushion grips for pencils, switch-accessible sound devices). NGOs and corporate sponsors can also be solicited to donate materials. Even simple instruments like drums or shakers can be transformative when shared in a classroom.

Train Educators in Arts Facilitation: Teacher-training colleges and special education programs should incorporate modules on arts therapies. Short professional development workshops can teach teachers how to adapt music and art for various disabilities (e.g. using color-coding for children with hearing impairments, or tactile materials for visually impaired students). Collaborations between educational institutions and arts therapists (from universities or professional associations) can develop certification courses for in-service teachers.

Strengthen Inclusive Education Policies: Government agencies must enforce the Disability Act's provisions on schooling. Ministries of Education should monitor inclusion practices, ensuring each special school has at least one trained arts educator or therapist as recommended by Section 18 of the law. Policies should mandate accessible infrastructure and curricula (e.g. Braille, sign language) so that arts education is meaningful for all. Dedicated funding for arts-based interventions in special education budgets would signal governmental commitment.

Foster Partnerships and Community Programs: Universities, disability advocacy groups, and community arts organizations should form partnerships. For example, a university music department could partner with a disability school to run a community music therapy clinic. Local artists and musicians can volunteer in programs, bringing visibility and expertise. Community concerts featuring students can raise awareness and reduce stigma around disability and inclusion.

Encourage Parental and Peer Inclusion: Schools should invite parents to observe or even participate in sessions. Seeing their children succeed in a creative task can increase parental support. Additionally, inviting non-disabled peers (from nearby mainstream schools) to join in collaborative events can promote empathy and social integration beyond the institution's walls. Inclusive events such as joint art exhibitions or school concerts reinforce the idea that all children belong together in the community.

Support Further Research: Finally, the promising outcomes here warrant more systematic study. Educational researchers should conduct controlled trials of arts therapies in Nigeria and similar contexts to quantify long-term benefits on learning, behaviour, and well-being. Such evidence will further justify policy shifts. Also, exploring digital adaptations (e.g. music apps, online art tools) could extend the reach of arts interventions given resource constraints.

Implementing these recommendations would operationalize the gains observed in this project. Combining education, healthcare, and social services is essential. As the World Bank notes, disability-inclusive education requires "a comprehensive ecosystem approach," and arts therapies represent a vital piece of that ecosystem.

Conclusion

This practice-led action research in Lagos demonstrates that music and art therapy can have tangible, positive effects on children with disabilities in institutional care. Through structured sessions of singing, drumming, drawing, and painting, the children in this project experienced greater emotional expression, relaxation, and enjoyment. More importantly, they felt included: moving and creating in a group helped them connect with peers and caregivers in ways that classroom lessons did not allow. Even children with severe impairments found ways to communicate – their smiles and engagement testified to the impact. These qualitative outcomes align with global studies showing that the arts can empower disabled youth and foster social inclusion.

Yet the project also highlighted systemic gaps. Without external support, the school's capacity to sustain arts interventions is limited by equipment shortages and staff training needs. The contrast between Nigeria's progressive disability laws and the on-the-ground reality of under-resourced schools points to a policy implementation gap. Addressing this will require action on multiple fronts: equipping classrooms, training educators, and solidifying legal commitments to inclusive, arts-rich education. In the spirit of action research, this report is itself a call to action. The evidence suggests that relatively simple, low-cost arts activities can uplift the lives of vulnerable children. It is incumbent on policymakers, educators, and communities to seize this opportunity. By integrating art and music into inclusive education in Lagos and beyond, we can ensure that every child, regardless of ability, has a voice and a place in the cultural life of the city.

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