



Active Music Learning in Church Commons: A Case Study of Angel Gabriel Nursery and Primary School, Ifitedunu

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Abstract

Music education in many Catholic mission primary schools has been predominantly teacher-centered, emphasizing rote repetition over active participation. As a result, pupils often sing the Commons of the Mass, the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*, without understanding their musical structure, cultural value or spiritual depth. This study is aimed at ensuring Catholic pupils are actively taught the Commons of the Mass through participatory and experiential learning approaches. Conducted at Angel Gabriel Nursery and Primary School, Ifitedunu, the research involved practical teaching sessions, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. The researcher taught pupils using active music learning methods such as imitation, rhythmic movement, singing, and creative response, allowing them to experience music as a process of discovery rather than mere recitation. Findings revealed that the Commons of the Mass foster experiential learning, improve retention, and promote values such as discipline, cooperation, and reverence. The study concludes that the Mass functions not only as a sacred space but also as a living classroom for holistic musical and moral education. It recommends that teachers in Catholic Mission schools be encouraged to adopt active and participatory teaching methods when teaching music to enhance active music learning.

Keywords: Active Music Learning, Angel Gabriel, Case Study, Church Commons, Ifitedunu, Nursery and Primary School



Introduction

Music education in Nigeria has always drawn from multiple sources: formal schooling, community practices, cultural festivals and religious spaces. While formal schooling provides structured instruction, it often struggles with shortages of trained teachers, limited resources and poorly implemented curricula (Oni, 2022). As a result, children's most consistent and meaningful experiences of music often occur in churches and communities, where participation is practical and social.

Pedagogy in music has, however, evolved. Traditionally, music in Nigerian schools was taught largely through rote methods, where teachers dictated songs and pupils repeated them without much room for creativity, exploration, or self-expression. This method, despite being effective in teaching songs quickly, has often been criticized for being teacher-centered and limiting the learner's active participation. Contemporary scholarship in music pedagogy increasingly emphasizes active music learning, a methodology that encourages learners to be co-creators of knowledge through participation, improvisation, movement, and collaboration. This approach draws inspiration from global music pedagogical frameworks such as Orff Schulwerk, Kodály, and Dalcroze Eurhythmics, all of which advocate learning by doing.

Recent Nigerian scholars have emphasized the need to move from passive instruction toward active engagement in music classrooms. In particular, Ojukwu & Onyiuke (2022; Ugoo-Okonkwo, 2013), have argued for transformative, student-centred instructional methodologies that promote participation, creativity, and sustainable music education practices. This study draws inspiration from such scholarship while focusing specifically on the foundational level of music education in a faith-based environment.

In this context, the Catholic Mass stands out as a rich pedagogical avenue. In the Catholic Mission Schools in Awka diocese, such as Angel Gabriel Nursery and Primary School, Ifitedunu, weekly Masses provide children with active exposure to music. Pupils participate in singing hymns, chanting responses, clapping rhythms, and even mimicking gestures of the choir or clergy. These activities embody principles of active learning, where knowledge is constructed through doing, observing, and interacting, rather than by passive listening alone.

Scholars have consistently highlighted the importance of situating music learning in everyday Nigerian life. Studies of informal and communal music learning demonstrate that meaningful pedagogy emerges when children learn in cultural and communal settings and when instructional approaches recognize these contexts as valid learning spaces. However, in many Catholic Mission Primary Schools today, Music education remains largely teacher-centered, relying heavily on rote learning rather than active participation. As a result, pupils often recite or sing the Commons of the Mass without fully understanding their musical structure, spiritual meaning, or educational potential. This passive mode of teaching limits pupils' engagement, creativity and appreciation of music as both a spiritual and cultural experience. Consequently, the Commons of the Mass, which could serve as a powerful tool for musical and moral



formation, are not being effectively utilized as learning opportunities. This study therefore seeks to demonstrate how adopting active music learning approaches such as singing, imitation, rhythmic movement, and creative response can make the teaching of the Commons of the Mass more effective and meaningful for young learners.

Active Music Learning

Active learning in music means engaging learners through performance, imitation, creation and reflection. Instead of memorizing abstract theory, children learn by singing, moving and experimenting. This approach aligns with constructivist theory, which holds that learners construct meaning through experience.

In Nigeria, active learning often takes place in informal settings. Olusoji (2020) discusses how children develop musical competence through apprenticeship under master musicians and by participating in communal practices such as drumming, call-and-response singing, and dance. These contexts encourage repetition, imitation, and gradual mastery. At Angel Gabriel School, pupils embody this principle during Mass as they join in hymns, clap rhythms and follow the choir.

Internationally, Green (2008) popularized the idea of informal music learning as a legitimate pedagogy. Nigerian scholars, however, contextualize it: Onyike (2021) emphasizes that active music learning in Nigeria must be grounded in communal participation, spirituality, and cultural identity formation.

The Mass

The Mass is the central act of worship in the Roman Catholic Church, commemorating the Last Supper of Jesus Christ with his disciples. It is both a sacramental celebration and a communal act of faith, where the faithful gather to participate in prayers, scripture readings, hymns and the sharing of the Holy Eucharist.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2019), the Mass is “the source and summit of the Christian life,” encompassing two principal parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Through these, the community listens to God’s Word, offers thanksgiving, and partakes in the Body and Blood of Christ (CCC, §1324–1327).

The Liturgy of the Word focuses on hearing and reflecting upon God’s Word through Scripture. It includes readings from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Epistles and the Gospels, followed by a homily (sermon) delivered by the priest. This section concludes with the Prayers of the Faithful, where the congregation intercedes for the Church and the world. According to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2011), the Liturgy of the Word “nourishes the faith of the faithful” and calls for active listening and response through psalms and acclamations.



The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the presentation of the gifts of bread and wine, symbolizing the offerings of the faithful. It culminates in the Eucharistic Prayer, during which the priest consecrates the elements, transforming them into the Body and Blood of Christ. The faithful then partake in Holy Communion, expressing unity with Christ and with one another. As explained by Pope Francis (2022) in “Desiderio Desideravi”, the Eucharist is not merely symbolic but a living encounter with Christ that calls for full, conscious and active participation.

Musically, the Mass contains structured sung elements known as the Commons of the Mass, **Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei**, which are often rendered in chant, polyphony, or vernacular styles. These chants form part of the Ordinary of the Mass, sung regularly in liturgical celebrations.

In Nigeria, the Mass has evolved as a site of musical indigenization, where Western liturgical forms are blended with African rhythms, languages and instruments to foster participation and cultural identity. Thus, the Mass is not only a ritual of worship but also a living pedagogical and cultural experience that shapes moral, spiritual, and musical development.

The Church Commons

The Commons are the fixed sung sections of the Mass: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. They are universal to the Catholic liturgy, though often adapted into local languages and styles. Each serves as a musical text, enabling children to learn melody, rhythm, and form in context. Ademiluka (2023) observes that communal worship creates stability in musical repertoire, ensuring continuity of learning and strengthening cultural identity within faith communities. The Catholic Mass is not merely a religious ritual; it is a pedagogical avenue where music, language, movement, and values converge. A common is a shared resource managed collectively by a community; everyone contributes to and benefits from the collective soundscape.

Children in particular find in the Mass an environment that blends structure with openness. Hymns are rehearsed yet participatory; responses are repetitive yet dynamic. Drumming and clapping emerge spontaneously, especially in Igbo liturgical settings. Ademiluka (2023) also notes that communal worship remains one of Nigeria’s most enduring contexts for music education, transmitting repertoire, rhythm and performance practices across generations.

At Angel Gabriel School, the weekly Mass functions as a school-wide workshop. Pupils rehearse responses, learn pitch control by following choirs, and build rhythm by clapping and drumming. These experiences demonstrate that the church commons is an informal classroom, shaping children’s musical growth.

Music in Education

Music is central to holistic education. Beyond artistic skill, it develops cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence, and social values. In Nigeria, studies show that music education in primary schools



contributes significantly to children's confidence, discipline and Communication (Ugwude, et. al. 2018). For young learners, music provides a medium for expressing creativity and building self-esteem.

However, in Nigeria, music often receives limited classroom time. Many schools treat it as secondary to core subjects. Yet, in religious contexts, music remains unavoidable. Every Mass demands active participation, giving children regular, structured exposure to music. Church-based music programmes also serve as a bridge between informal worship practices and formal educational structures, offering structured opportunities for youth development (Ogunyemi & Adenuga, 2021).

Thus, the Mass not only teaches children melodies and rhythms but also integrates values like reverence, cooperation, and attentiveness. Music becomes a tool for shaping both intellect and character.

Catholic Mission School

A Catholic Mission School is an educational institution established, owned, or administered by the Catholic Church, typically under the supervision of a parish, diocese or religious congregation. The mission of such schools extends beyond academic training to include moral, spiritual, and character formation consistent with Catholic values and teachings.

According to the Congregation for Catholic Education (2017) in *Educating to Fraternal Humanism*, Catholic schools aim to provide an education that integrates faith, culture, and life, thereby fostering intellectual growth alongside spiritual maturity. The document emphasizes that education in Catholic institutions is an extension of the Church's evangelizing mission and a means of forming individuals capable of contributing positively to both Church and society (*CCE, §§4-5*).

In Nigeria, Catholic mission schools have played a vital role in the development of formal education since the 19th century. Missionaries such as the Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritans) and the Society of African Missions (SMA) established the first Catholic schools as part of evangelization, combining literacy, music and religious instruction to promote holistic education. Following the government's takeover of mission schools in the 1970s and their subsequent return to church control in the early 2000s, Catholic schools have continued to maintain a reputation for discipline, academic excellence and faith-based learning (Catholic Education Service of Nigeria [CESN], 2020).

Music remains a distinctive and integral feature of Catholic mission schools. As Ojukwu and Onyiuke (2022) note, liturgical music and religious singing in such schools function both as acts of worship and as pedagogical tools. Pupils learn musical concepts, discipline and teamwork through active participation in Masses, choir rehearsals and hymn recitals. This process aligns with the broader philosophy of Catholic education, which seeks to form the "whole person," which is the mind, body and spirit, through active learning and spiritual engagement.



Thus, the Catholic mission school serves as both a learning environment and a faith community, where intellectual development, moral instruction and spiritual participation coexist harmoniously to produce well-rounded individuals.

Education and Identity Formation

Education in African philosophy is holistic because it develops knowledge, values, and identity simultaneously. Music is crucial to this process because it embodies culture. Songs carry language, history, and spirituality. Nzewi (2020) explains that cultural music education fosters social identity and belonging, as learners internalize values and traditions through communal participation in musical activities. At Angel Gabriel School, pupils develop not only musical competence but also religious and cultural identity. Singing Igbo hymns connects them to their heritage, while participating in liturgy teaches respect for tradition and authority. Thus, music in the Mass is not simply instructional; it is also formative. It cultivates identity, values, and a sense of belonging.

Theoretical Framework

Communal Pedagogy Theory

This study is anchored on Communal Pedagogy Theory, a concept rooted in African indigenous educational philosophy and music pedagogy. Communal pedagogy emphasizes that learning is a collective, participatory and culturally grounded experience rather than an individual or purely cognitive process. In African traditional societies, education is embedded within community life, where individuals learn through observation, imitation and active participation in communal activities such as music, dance and ritual. The theory posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction, shared responsibility and continuous engagement within the cultural environment.

Communal pedagogy draws from the idea that music is not merely a subject to be taught, but a lived experience. In this framework, the community itself functions as the classroom and every member, both young and old, participates in the process of teaching and learning. This approach aligns closely with the African philosophy of “I am because we are,” which places collective identity and interdependence at the center of education. Within this system, learners are not passive recipients of instruction but active contributors to the musical and cultural process.

In the context of the Catholic Mass, communal pedagogy becomes visible through the active involvement of children in the Commons of the Mass. During these moments of liturgical worship, pupils participate by singing, clapping, responding rhythmically and imitating the choir and clergy. These interactions embody the principles of communal pedagogy, as learning takes place through shared action, observation



and reflection. The Mass thus becomes both a spiritual and pedagogical avenue where children learn music naturally through participation, rather than through formal instruction alone.

Nigerian scholars such as Ojukwu & Onyiuke (2020) have emphasized that music learning in African contexts must be understood through communal and cultural lenses, rather than relying solely on Western pedagogical frameworks. They argue that the African learner thrives in environments where music is part of daily living, spirituality, and social experience. Similarly, Nzewi (2020) affirms that communal participation in musical activities promotes discipline, cooperation and cultural identity, making it a holistic form of education that integrates intellectual, emotional and moral development. These perspectives reinforce the idea that faith-based and communal settings like the Catholic Mass are legitimate learning spaces where music, values and culture converge.

Communal pedagogy also aligns with constructivist and sociocultural theories in its emphasis on active, experience-based learning. However, it goes further by embedding learning within the social and spiritual fabric of the community. While constructivism highlights personal meaning-making and sociocultural theory focuses on social mediation, communal pedagogy situates learning within shared identity, cultural continuity and collective responsibility. In this way, it reflects a distinctly African worldview where knowledge, art and spirituality are interwoven.

Applied to this study, communal pedagogy provides a framework for understanding how children at Angel Gabriel Nursery and Primary School, Ifitedunu, learn music not as an isolated classroom subject but as an integral part of their religious and communal life. Through singing, imitation, rhythmic movement and group participation, pupils experience active learning that shapes not only their musical ability but also their sense of belonging, reverence and cooperation. The theory underscores the importance of the teacher not as a transmitter of knowledge, but as a facilitator and participant in a shared learning process.

In summary, Communal Pedagogy Theory offers a culturally relevant and holistic lens for examining active music learning within the church commons. It validates the Mass as a living classroom where children acquire musical, social and moral knowledge through collective engagement. By situating learning within a faith-based community, the theory bridges formal and informal education, aligning with Nigeria's broader educational goal of producing learners who are not only intellectually competent but also culturally grounded and morally upright.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design, focusing on Angel Gabriel Nursery and Primary School, Ifitedunu, located in Dunukofia Local Government Area of Anambra State. The design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how children engage in active music learning within their natural environment, particularly during the Commons of the Mass.



The population for the study comprised pupils, teachers and the choir coordinator of the school. A sample of 50 pupils from Primary 5 to Primary 6, along with 2 teachers and one choir coordinator, was purposively selected. The pupils are between ten to twelve years old. This sampling method was considered appropriate because the selected participants are directly involved in musical activities and liturgical participation during school Masses.

Data were collected through direct observation and semi-structured interviews. The researcher taught the kids at two different occasions using active learning methods. Each of the sessions lasted about 45mins. Within this periods some rhythmic exercises and vocal training were done. Some liturgical songs were taught and rehearsed especially the Church Commons in Latin and Igbo. He observed three consecutive school Masses to study how pupils actively participated in singing, rhythm, imitation and movement during the singing of the Commons of the Mass. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers and choir coordinator to gather their insights on pupils' engagement and the educational impact of these musical activities.

The instruments for data collection included an observation checklist which focused on indicators such as participation, imitation, rhythm embodiment and an interview guide that explored teachers' and the coordinator's perspectives on music learning during Mass.

Data were analyzed thematically. Responses and observations were coded into themes such as participation, rhythm, imitation and values. These themes were then interpreted in light of the study's aim which is to understand how active music learning occurs through the Commons of the Mass and how it contributes to the musical, moral and spiritual development of pupils at Angel Gabriel Nursery and Primary School, Ifitedunu.

Findings

The findings from classroom observations and interviews at Angel Gabriel Nursery and Primary School, Ifitedunu revealed several key outcomes related to the pupils' active participation in the Commons of the Mass.

- Pupils demonstrated high levels of engagement during Mass, particularly in the singing of the *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*. Many children sang confidently, followed the rhythm of the choir and responded promptly to liturgical cues. Teachers reported that repeated exposure to these chants helped pupils internalize melodies and texts with ease.
- The pupils were observed imitating choir leaders, teachers and older pupils both during and after the Mass. This imitation extended beyond singing to include gestures, rhythmic clapping and coordinated movements. The act of imitation enhanced learning retention and encouraged self-confidence among pupils.



- Pupils' use of rhythmic clapping, drumming, and chanting improved their sense of timing and coordination. This rhythmic participation was spontaneous and joyful, reflecting an experiential approach to learning rather than a purely theoretical one.
- Musical participation was expressed physically through gestures such as kneeling, bowing and hand movements. This embodied form of learning helped children connect music with spirituality and emotional expression.
- Teachers observed noticeable improvements in pupils' discipline, attentiveness and cooperation. Through active involvement in the Mass, children demonstrated reverence, patience and respect for sacred spaces and authority figures.
- The researcher's teaching sessions using active learning methods such as guided singing, rhythmic games and call-and-response exercises proved effective. Pupils showed enthusiasm and improved retention when lessons were interactive and experiential rather than rote-based.

Discussion

The findings indicate that when Catholic pupils are actively engaged in the teaching and performance of the Commons of the Mass, learning becomes both meaningful and transformative. The pupils' ability to participate with enthusiasm, accuracy and spiritual understanding suggests that the Commons are not merely religious texts but powerful tools for musical and moral education.

The high retention observed among pupils affirms the effectiveness of participatory and experiential teaching methods. By involving pupils directly in singing, imitation and movement, the lessons appealed to multiple senses, auditory, visual and kinesthetic, enhancing comprehension and memory. This supports the view that active engagement helps learners construct knowledge through experience rather than passive listening.

Furthermore, the pupils' rhythmic involvement and imitation of choir leaders illustrate the communal nature of music learning within the church setting. The Mass functions as a living classroom where children learn through participation, observation and repetition. The findings also reveal that music instruction rooted in worship nurtures both cognitive and affective growth, fostering self-discipline, cooperation and respect for spiritual authority.

The observed outcomes validate the study's central aim which is to demonstrate that Catholic pupils can be more effectively taught the Commons of the Mass through active, experiential learning approaches. When teachers adopt participatory strategies rather than rote memorization, pupils not only grasp musical concepts more effectively but also internalize the spiritual and moral dimensions of the liturgy.

Overall, the study underscores that the Commons of the Mass can serve as both a pedagogical tool and a spiritual resource, aligning faith with learning. Encouraging the consistent use of active teaching methods



in Catholic mission schools will ensure that pupils experience music as a form of worship, cultural identity, and holistic education.

Recommendations

- Teachers in Catholic Mission Primary Schools should replace teacher-centered, rote methods with participatory and experiential approaches such as imitation, rhythmic games, call-and-response and guided performance. These techniques engage pupils more deeply and make the teaching of the Commons of the Mass more meaningful and memorable.
- The Commons of the Mass should not be reserved only for worship settings. Music teachers should incorporate them into classroom activities as practical tools for developing rhythm, melody and harmony while reinforcing spiritual and moral values.
- The Catholic Education Service and diocesan school boards should organize workshops and seminars to train teachers on active learning methodologies in music. Such capacity-building will help teachers effectively use liturgical music as a tool for holistic education.
- Since choir coordinators often guide pupils in liturgical singing, stronger collaboration with classroom teachers will ensure consistency between what children learn in Mass and what they practice in music lessons. This partnership will enhance musical competence and confidence.
- Schools should provide instruments such as drums, tambourines, and songbooks to support rhythmic and interactive learning. Access to these tools will encourage pupils to participate more actively and joyfully in musical activities.
- Pupils should be encouraged to reflect on the meanings of the songs they sing during Mass. Teachers can guide short post-Mass discussions to help pupils connect the musical experience to values like reverence, cooperation and service.
- The Catholic Diocese of Awka and other diocesan education boards should recognize and promote active music learning as part of faith formation. By officially supporting such methods, the Church can strengthen its role in shaping both the intellectual and spiritual lives of young learners.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how pupils at Angel Gabriel Nursery and Primary School, Ifitedunu engage in active music learning through the Commons of the Mass and how participatory teaching methods can make this process more effective. The findings revealed that when pupils are actively involved in singing, imitation, rhythmic movement and group participation, they learn not only the musical aspects of the Mass but also develop discipline, cooperation and spiritual awareness.



The study confirmed that the Commons of the Mass are not merely liturgical recitations but valuable pedagogical resources. Through repetition, imitation and embodied participation, pupils internalize melodies, rhythms and values naturally and joyfully. Active teaching methods allow them to experience music as both worship and education, bridging the gap between spiritual formation and skill acquisition.

Furthermore, the results emphasized that teachers' involvement and intentional use of participatory strategies greatly enhance pupils' retention and enthusiasm. When children are guided through methods that encourage creativity, movement and self-expression, they respond with higher motivation and improved musical competence.

In light of these findings, the study concludes that active learning should become central to music education in Catholic mission schools. The Commons of the Mass should be used deliberately as teaching materials through interactive and experiential approaches. By doing so, teachers will not only nurture pupils' musical skills but also instill in them moral values and spiritual depth.

Ultimately, the Mass itself stands as a living classroom a space where faith and education meet. Encouraging the consistent use of active and participatory teaching methods will ensure that Catholic pupils grow into well-rounded individuals, capable of expressing their faith creatively and culturally through music education.

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