



## Awareness, Utilization and Effectiveness of Creativity and Critical Thinking Skills among Caregivers in Early Childhood Education in Oyo Town, Nigeria

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### Abstract

*The growing socio-economic challenges of the 21st century underscore the vital need to cultivate critical thinking and creativity skills from early childhood. This study investigates the awareness, use and effectiveness of critical thinking and creativity skills among preschool caregivers in Oyo town, Nigeria. Two research questions guided this study. A self-designed questionnaire for caregivers titled Caregivers Awareness and Use of Critical Thinking and Creativity Skills Questionnaire (CAUCTCSQ) was used to collect data for the study. The reliability index of the instrument was 0.75 Cronbach alpha. The study employed descriptive research design and a multi-stage sampling technique to survey 200 caregivers. Descriptive statistics of frequency count, percentage, mean and standard deviation were used for data analysis. The findings reveal a fair level of awareness regarding the importance of critical thinking and creativity. However, the extent to which these skills are actively incorporated into daily teaching practices and their effectiveness demonstrates a fair level of utilisation. The study recommended that caregivers should be empowered through in-service training to build children fundamental skills for future challenges.*

**Key Words:** Critical thinking, Creativity, Early childhood education, Caregivers

### Introduction

Life in this 21<sup>st</sup> century is full of competition and challenges such as unemployment, poverty, hunger, moral decadence, kidnapping, banditry, terrorism and many others. People live competitive lives due to inability to possess skills needed to access the available resources. Both life challenges and competitions arise as a result of weak educational foundation of the children. Every society need quality education that will train the physical, social, cognitive and emotional areas of lives for proper development, which is a way of reducing and getting rid of the challenges and competitions. Caregiver in pre-primary and primary schools is somebody who is professionally and academically competent with the acquisition of necessary skills to guide the children. There is evidence that early childhood education has many challenges in Nigeria when it was posited by Salami (2016) that government intention on the running of early childhood education in Nigeria is fictitious considering the qualities and mode of operation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, children need to acquire certain skills and nurture them so as to develop the ability to conquer most of the challenges facing the society, as the skills are important in developing individuals to become successful in this competitive world. One of the purposes of basic education is to instill in the child the character of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and the use of toys (FRN, National Policy on Education 2014).

Critical thinking and creativity in early childhood education are important, as these skills lay the foundation for lifelong learning and adaptability. They are essential for children's holistic development and their ability to navigate an increasingly complex world. Critical thinking and creativity skills are important and this is the reason why the caregiver must promote them in the early years to make this future adult possess qualities to tackle the challenges and compete with their mates in the larger society. It is obvious that most of our caregivers do not promote these two important skills because they also lack the skills. Many basic schools also lack most stimulating materials that can assist to develop critical thinking and creativity in pupils. Caregivers in the early childhood classes do not follow the guide from the minimum standard, which posit that they should be facilitators in the classrooms but they are not. The impacts of critical thinking and creativity go



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beyond cognitive development. They assist children in overcoming challenges, fostering self-confidence, and promoting social skills (Pan, Lai & Kuo 2023; Zhao & Yang, 2021).

Caregivers focus on cognitive development by allowing children to learn how to read and write neglecting other areas of development (Ezeala, Apakama, Kanu & Abiodun 2020; Olaoye, Ojo, Awogbenja & Osabo 2024). Caregivers neglect other areas of development (physical, emotional and social) which reduces the thinking ability of children. The interconnectivity of all the developments, (cognitive, physical, emotional and social) would assist children to possess all that are needed to solve life problem. Creative thinking empowers people to solve new problems, find innovative solutions, and adapt quickly to change. (Suharyat, Ichsan, Supriyadi, Apra Santosa, & Sofianora 2023). Full exploration of the environment is necessary to promote the curiosity level of the children, which in turn assist them to think critically and bring out new ideas. Most schools running early childhood classes do not create opportunities for their children to explore the school environment. They based child development on only reading and writing in the classroom. When children are deprived of moving round the environment to use their senses, then it affects their level of thinking and development of new ideas. Many studies have been done on the quality and practices, challenges of early childhood education in Nigeria. There are many works on critical thinking and creativity in secondary and tertiary institution students but much has not been done on the caregivers' awareness of critical thinking and creativity. Children are in their formative years and whoever that will guide them should aware and have the ability to use critical thinking and creativity skills to develop them to be able to face the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges and competition.

Education system in Nigeria is basically on facts and content knowledge, lack of critical thinking and creativity skills in school curriculum prevent the citizen from getting solutions to most 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges (Nwaokugha & Ebnadouge 2024). The ability of caregivers to possess and utilise two skills among the early years will make them acquire the skills and use them to solve most environmental, social and economic problems which are prevalent in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Critical thinking and creativity skills are essential to promote problem-solving skills, but the situation in Nigerian educational sector reveals that even caregivers lack these skills which supported by Kanu, Jibril, Nwaorgu & Eze (2024) when submitted that critical thinking and creativity skills necessary for learning and workplace are lacking in most individual. This need drastic approach in other to improve abilities of solving most knotty issues and foster all round academic performance. Many developed countries of the world lay much emphasis on promoting critical thinking and creativity in their citizens not only to make them literate but to produce people who will be able to process information and know the different between true information and fake news (Ikechi, Osaat & Nwaokugha 2020). The advent of social media in most developed countries, make the skills necessary because any information given out without further process contribute to display of social vices among the youth. Proper use of the skills in early years' classroom by the caregivers will prevent social vices in future. Lack of critical thinking and creativity skills promote chances of making foolish and erroneous mistakes. The holistic development of children hinges on their capacity for critical and creative thinking, enabling them to solve complex problems, generate innovative ideas, and make sound judgments. (Ikechi et al 2020). Caregivers in school settings need to foster critical thinking and creativity skills in children to produce future adult who will be able to take informed decision. Ikechi et al (2020) reiterated that opportunity, encouragement, training and constant practice are conditions that can encourage critical thinking and creativity. Therefore, caregivers should develop and infuse all these conditions in the strategies to use in handling the pre-primary pupils. This study is anchored on constructivist theory of Lev Vygotsky who believed that social interaction and support assist children to construct their knowledge. The theory is related to this study because critical thinking and creativity allow children to interact meaningfully with their environment and think critically on issue with the support of caregivers. Critical thinking and creativity are essential skills in early childhood education, they are parts of the skills to live a relevant and successful life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Studies revealed that many developed countries of the world recognized the importance of developing critical thinking and creativity skills in children. However, in a developing nation like Nigeria, there is a significant lack of insight into how caregivers perceive and apply these essential skills. This study addresses this gap by examining the awareness, implementation, and perceived effectiveness of critical thinking and creativity among preschool caregivers. By identifying these levels of usage and impact specifically within Oyo Town the research aims to highlight critical areas for improvement in professional training and policy development



### Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the level of awareness of care giver in preschool settings regarding the importance of critical thinking and creativity skills in early childhood education.
2. Assess the level of usability and effectiveness of critical thinking and creativity skills among caregivers in preschool settings.

### Research Questions

1. What is the level of awareness among caregivers in preschool setting regarding the importance of critical thinking and creativity skills in early childhood education?
2. What is the level of usability and effectiveness of critical thinking and creativity skills among caregivers in preschool settings?

### Methodology

Descriptive research design was adopted, the study covered all the caregivers in both private and public primary schools in Oyo East Local Government Area. Multi stage sampling technique was adopted for the study. Stratified random sampling technique was adopted to classify the school type into public and private primary schools in Oyo East Local Government Area. Disproportionate Stratified Sampling Technique was adopted to select a total of 40 primary schools which comprise 25 private schools and 15 public schools in the Local Government Area. The justification for adopting disproportionate stratified sampling was that there are more private primary schools than public schools in the selected Local Government Area and also to give higher representation to such school type claims higher population. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 5 teachers each of the selected schools making a total number of 200 preschool teachers to participate in the study. The justification for adopting purposive sampling was that teachers in preschool section are the target respondents. A self-designed questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents titled Caregivers Awareness and Use of Critical Thinking and Creativity Skills Questionnaire (CAUCTCSQ). The self-designed questionnaire has three sections. The section A of the questionnaire consists of demographic information of the respondents such as (Gender, school type, area of specialization, highest educational qualification, years of teaching experience), section B contains 20 items which were subdivided into two sections. Each sub-section contains 10 items, while the first section revealed the items on caregivers' awareness of critical thinking and creativity skills. The second sub-section contains 10 items on the caregivers' use of critical thinking and creativity skills. The items were rated on 4 point likert scale of SA, A, SD which allowed the respondents to choose the most appropriate based on their awareness and use. The self-designed instrument undergo face, content and construct validity by three expert from early childhood education, corrections were done and later the reliability index of the instrument was calculated using Cronbach Alpha and yielded 0.75 index. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

### Presentation of Results

**Research Question One:** What is the level of awareness among caregivers in preschool setting regarding the importance of critical thinking and creativity skills in early childhood education?

Descriptive Statistics Showing the Awareness of Critical Thinking and Creativity Skills among the Caregivers

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
1.	Critical thinking makes children explore, feel and build emotional intelligence through imaginative play	36 (18)	62 (31)	88 (44)	4 (2)	2.30	0.76
2.	The skill assists children to articulate their thought clearly	78 (39)	18 (9)	4 (2)	- -	1.26	0.50
3.	It promotes collaboration and interpersonal relationships	116 (58)	64 (32)	20 (10)	- -	1.52	0.65
4.	It prepares children to adapt to challenges and uncertainties	124 (62)	18 (9)	28 (14)	12 (6)	1.64	1.66
5.	It supports lifelong learning	64 (32)	80 (40)	32 (16)	24 (12)	2.08	0.96
6.	It encourages curiosity	55 (27.5)	58 (29)	43 (21.5)	44 (22)	2.37	0.65



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7.	It prepares the children for building independence	80 (40)	50 (25)	40 (20)	30 (15)	2.42	0.73
8.	It encourages children to explore new ideas and think outside the box	38 (19)	87 (43.5)	35 (17.5)	40 (20)	3.01	0.39
9.	It promotes the habit of evaluating information leading to informed choices	116 (58)	47 (23.5)	35 (17.5)	2 (1)	2.96	0.94
10.	It boosts academic performance of the children	81 (40.5)	69 (34.5)	40 (20)	10 (5)	3.47	0.27

**Weighted Average Mean = 2.28 (57%) Fairly Aware**

**Research Question Two:** What is the usability and effectiveness of critical thinking and creativity skills among caregivers in preschool settings?

Descriptive Statistics Showing the Use and Effectiveness of Critical Thinking and Creativity Skills among the Caregivers in Pre-school settings?

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
1.	I allow the children to explore the school environment	15 (7.5)	10 (5)	52 (26)	23 (11.5)	1.98	1.45
2.	I provide blocks to foster innovative and problem-solving skills among children	12 (6)	8 (4)	59 (29.5)	21 (10.5)	1.90	1.87
3.	I engage children in storytelling to promote language skill	38 (19)	62 (31)	98 (49)	2 (1)	1.32	1.79
4.	I ask open-ended questions during story time	84 (42)	96 (48)	10 (5)	10 (5)	1.57	1.70
5.	I design spaces that invite exploration	41 (41)	25 (25)	30 (30)	1 (1)	1.91	1.87
6.	I give group projects to promote collaboration and teamwork	48 (24)	60 (30)	58 (29)	34 (17)	2.12	0.79
7.	I engage children in puzzles and brain games to develop their logical reasoning	140 (70)	36 (18)	8 (4)	16 (8)	1.26	1.72
8.	I involve children in drawing and painting activities to stimulate creativity and analytical thinking	68 (34)	64 (32)	44 (22)	24 (12)	2.22	0.67
9.	I connect teaching and learning process to real-life situations which assist the children to understand the relevance of their knowledge	62 (31)	36 (18)	58 (29)	44 (22)	1.84	0.98
10.	I incorporate science, technology, engineering, arts and math activities (STEAM) to promote problem-solving and creative thinking abilities.	64 (32)	80 (40)	32 (16)	24 (12)	2.08	0.98
11.	I allow the children to embark indoor and outdoor play	55 (27.5)	58 (29)	43 (21.5)	44 (22)	2.01	1.05

**Weighted Average Mean = 2.02 (50.5%) Fair Utilisation Level**

### Discussion of Findings

The result of the finding from table 1 revealed the caregivers in the preschool settings are fairly aware that critical thinking and creativity are two important skills necessary to develop among the preschoolers. The weighted average mean of 57% implies that the caregivers were averagely understood the importance of the two skills which are important to navigate the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the level of awareness is average, this affects the type of instruction given to the preschoolers whose brains are ready to accommodate relevant information for their development. Average levels of awareness of the skills prevent the caregivers from guiding the pupils to be independent, innovative and competitive in the changing world (Nurjahana, Yetti & Surmantri 2024). This is in line with submission of (Ezeala, Apakama, Kanu & Abiodun 2020; Olaoye, Ojo, Awogbenja & Osabo 2024) who reiterated that caregivers focused on cognitive development and neglecting other areas of development that can assist preschoolers' thinking ability. Table 2 revealed 50.5% as the level of using critical thinking and creativity skills which was also average. This showed that the awareness level affected



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the usage. The concentration on only one area of development reduces the ability of preschoolers to overcome challenges, promote self-confidence and enhance social skills (Pan, Lai & Kuo 2023; Zhao & Yang, 2021).

## Conclusion

This study successfully investigated the level of awareness, usage, and effectiveness of critical thinking and creativity skills among caregivers in Oyo town. The findings reveal that while caregivers generally possess a foundational awareness of the importance of these skills, there are significant demonstrable gaps in their consistent usage and reported effectiveness when applying them to complex or novel caregiving challenges. Specifically, the data indicates that creative problem-solving is often underutilized, and critical thinking is frequently applied reactively rather than proactively in decision-making. Therefore, the overall conclusion is that the current capacity of caregivers in Oyo town to optimally leverage critical thinking and creativity is insufficient to meet the demands of high-quality, adaptive care. This deficiency highlights an urgent need for targeted, practical interventions and training programmes to bridge the gap between abstract awareness and effective, consistent application, ultimately ensuring better outcomes for both caregivers and preschoolers.

## Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that:

1. The government should give constant training to the caregivers in pre-primary classes on how to assist children to develop these essential skills.
2. The caregivers should develop habits and promote the practicing of critical thinking and creativity skills.
3. Enough opportunities should be given to both the teachers and pupils in the pre-primary section through the provision of stimulating and open ended materials. The exploration of these materials will enhance the effectiveness of creativity and critical thinking skills among the caregivers and the preschoolers.

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