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CAREGIVERS' COMPETENCE IN USING PLAY-LEARN ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY SKILLS AMONG PRESCHOOLERS IN PRIVATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study identified the types of play-learn activities commonly used by caregivers to promote scientific inquiry skills among preschoolers in private primary schools in Southwestern Nigeria. It also assessed the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschoolers in the study area. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised 311 caregivers and 484 preschoolers in private schools in Southwestern Nigeria. The sample consisted of 108 caregivers and 360 preschoolers from 36 early childhood education centres. Two instruments designed by the researcher were used to collect data for the study. They were: "Questionnaire on Caregivers' Competence in Using Play-Learn Activities" (QCCUPLA) and "Play-Learn Activities Observation Check List" (PLAOCL). The 360 preschoolers were involved through structured classroom observations conducted by their caregivers. Informed consent was obtained from school authorities prior to data collection. Results of the study showed that the types of play-learn activities commonly used by caregivers included building blocks (88.9%), counting games (86.1%), group games (83.3%), creative arts (80.6%), shapes and object tracing (80.6%), sensory play activities (77.8%), puzzle play (77.8%), story-telling and dramatization (69.4%), bubble science (61.1%), sound (58.3%), and pattern recognition (55.6%) in Southwestern Nigeria. Results of the study also showed that the level of competence of caregivers in promoting play-learn activities was moderate, at 50.9%, in Southwestern Nigeria. Based on the findings, recommendations were made.

Keywords: Caregivers, competence, early childhood education, play-learn, preschoolers

1. Introduction

The world today is moving fast with technology; however, the ratio of students offering science subjects in secondary schools compared to art and commercial subjects is declining. The reason may not be far-fetched from the fact that the foundation of scientific concepts is not laid early enough. Furthermore, in this era of scientific and technological advancement, there is a need for a solid foundation in science and technology at the pre-primary level of education in

order to engage them at a younger age, catch-them-young, arouse their interest and prepare children for further studies in science and technology at a higher level of education (Ogundipe and Agboola, 2018). Teachers play a crucial role in a nation's development, particularly in raising the intellectuals and leaders of tomorrow who will sustain the nation's development, as education is the most valuable resource in any country and the cornerstone of its economic, social, and political strength (Taiwo, 2018). The success of any nation is dependent on the quality of teachers who lay the educational foundation that their future leaders will build upon, as today's youth will be tomorrow's leaders.

Science simply means the art of investigating, comprehending, and analysing the reality of life in which we live. It involves the use of observation, questioning, hypothesising, experimentation, analysis and arriving at the conclusion. Science aims at explaining natural phenomena and the laws that govern them; it improves our lives, advances our knowledge and continuously restructures and expands our understanding of the world. Children are holistic learners, and scientific activities give opportunities for them to expand their awareness of the world around them. Curiosity, observations, and questions may foster a discovery-oriented environment, which is essential for scientific learning. Young children are eager and inquisitive, so, as a teacher, the use of a play-learning environment makes it easy to harness this curiosity to increase their comprehension of science concepts. The National Research Council emphasises that young children are capable of scientific inquiry and that early, play-based science experiences are critical for developing science understanding later (National Research Council, 2012).

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the formal and informal education and care offered to children from birth to around eight years old (Okitsu et al., 2023). This period is crucial as it represents the most rapid phase of development in a child's life, with foundational skills in language, cognition, social-emotional, and physical domains being established. Quality ECE has been associated with a variety of favourable outcomes, including improved academic performance, social skills, and lower rates of delinquency and school dropout (Amadon et al., 2022). Early childhood education has gained increasing recognition in Nigeria and is currently a vital component of the educational system. Despite this recognition, access to quality ECE remains uneven, particularly in rural areas, with significant disparities in the availability of resources, trained personnel, and infrastructure (Adewusi et al., 2023). Quality ECE encompasses several components, including a well-structured curriculum, effective teaching strategies, and the use of appropriate learning materials. Among these components, early childhood educators' competency is critical, particularly in executing developmentally appropriate activities that promote children's cognitive and social development (Jaya et al., 2023).

Scientific inquiry abilities, in particular, are vital for children's development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity (National Research Council, 2012). However, the development of scientific inquiry abilities in preschoolers is sometimes hampered by insufficient teaching techniques and a lack of resources (Adebayo, 2016). Play-based learning is a potent technique in preschool science that capitalises on children's natural curiosity and problem-solving abilities. Learning via play makes science topics more accessible and enjoyable to youngsters who are already exploring the world in this manner. Learning science is a natural result of all of the activities and experiences that children participate in, in a play-learn classroom, and as they explore the classroom research areas, they will gain scientific skills and ideas. They, like actual scientists, will learn by interacting with others and the environment around them. Play-based learning, particularly in the early years, is seen as an important educational technique because it allows children to learn at their own pace, pursuing their interests and curiosities while simultaneously developing social skills such as collaboration, communication, and empathy. It places an emphasis on the utilisation of play as the primary mode of learning and within the framework of this approach, children are prompted to investigate, uncover, and acquire knowledge by means of activities that are organised according to their own interests and curiosities. Through this, there is an opportunity to participate actively in activities that challenge them to engage in critical thinking, carry out experiments, and develop problem-solving skills. For children to have a deeper understanding of the world that surrounds them, it is necessary for them to have these abilities, which are also considered necessary for their future education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Although play-based learning has been a successful strategy for developing scientific inquiry abilities in preschoolers in Southwestern Nigeria, its effectiveness is heavily reliant on caregivers' capacity to properly guide children through inquiry-based tasks as their expertise in early childhood education is critical to the development of scientific inquiry abilities in preschoolers.

Activities are designed around the child's interests and needs; children engage in hands-on experiences, exploring and learning through direct interaction; activities incorporate elements of play, such as imagination, creativity, and fun; children interact with materials, peers, and adults to learn and develop new skills; and the emphasis is placed on the learning process rather than the end product. Examples of play-learn activities: exploring textures, colours, and smells through play with materials like sand, water, or play dough, engaging in role-playing, using imagination and creativity to act out scenarios, creating art using various materials, such as paint, markers, or collage, exploring rhythm, tempo, and movement through music and dance, conducting simple experiments, such as growing plants or making slime, engaging in hands-on

cooking and baking activities to learn about measurements and following recipes and exploring nature, engaging in physical activity, and developing gross motor skills through outdoor play (Bentley, 2024). However, the effectiveness of play-learn activities to enhance inquiry skills depends on caregivers' competence and knowledge in designing and implementing these activities (Moyles, 2015).

Caregivers are experienced persons who consciously impact knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to the learners with the intention to bring out a positive change in the learners. They are trained individuals possessing a strong understanding of basic principles of behavioural analysis that enables them to teach effectively by facilitating learning and creating an enabling atmosphere for effective learner participation in classroom exercise (Igbozuruike & Chesa, 2020). They require training to acquire specific competence in early childhood education before becoming practising caregivers, because their job is considered to be robust and intense in some situations, considering the sensitivity of their roles, and intricacies and professionalism required for their job. Hence, caregivers should be competent individuals who are expected to mould and put the child on the path to studious or serious word building, alphabet construction and intellectual development activities. Competence in this context is a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that are reflected in the way of thinking and acting. The role played by caregivers in scaffolding preschoolers' scientific inquiry skills is very critical. By providing the highest degree of assistance, they can encourage children to explore, ask questions, and solve problems that come their way. For instance, caregivers can start by demonstrating how water can change states from solid to liquid and liquid to gas and then encourage children to replicate the experiment themselves, giving clues and asking questions, such as, what do you think will happen if we heat this ice cube and so on when introducing a new concept like properties of water to the children. Huang et al. (2020) explained that effective scaffolding requires caregivers to be attentive to the child's current level of understanding and adjust their support accordingly. Initially, the caregivers may need to offer more guidance to the child, but as the child gains confidence and competence, they should step back, in order to allow the child to take the lead. This progressive surrender of responsibility helps children to build and develop problem-solving skills and become more self-sufficient learners. Nevertheless, a significant number of caregivers in Southwestern Nigeria have difficulties in providing children with organised supervision and giving them the opportunity to explore freely as a result of a deficiency in both training and resources (Dearybury & Jones, 2020). According to Scheidecker et al. (2023), the fact that many caregivers themselves originate from low-education backgrounds may make it more difficult for them to present scientific ideas in a manner that is meaningful to the children they care for. Additionally, it might be challenging for caregivers to offer the individualised attention that is required for encouraging scientific inquiry via play when class numbers are big and there is a lack of sufficient teaching resources.

Preschoolers are naturally curious and enjoy exploring their surroundings; they have boundless energy and are constantly on the move; they have vivid imaginations and engage in pretend play; they begin to develop social skills such as sharing, taking turns, and cooperating with others; and they rapidly expand their vocabulary and improve their communication abilities. During this stage, children improve their gross motor skills (running, jumping, climbing) and fine motor skills (drawing, using scissors), as well as their problem-solving abilities, memory, and attention span. They also develop emotional regulation, empathy, and self-awareness, and learnt to cooperate, share, and take turns with others. Preschool education is important because it is the foundation for future learning and sets the stage for future academic success and helps children develop essential social skills, fosters emotional awareness, self-regulation, and empathy and helps children transition smoothly to formal schooling. This stage is a play age that requires a play-like learning method to enhance comprehension of ideas.

1.1. Statement of the Research Problem

Preschool education is a critical stage in which children develop cognitive and developmental skills and foundational skills such as scientific inquiry are introduced. In this regard, science education is essential for nurturing children's innate curiosity and cultivating their capacity for inquiry since it equips them to interact with the world, allowing them to investigate, pose questions, and make sense of their surroundings. However, the success of science education at this level is heavily dependent on the competence of early childhood caregivers, who are tasked with delivering foundational knowledge in ways that are both engaging and effective. Despite the importance of scientific inquiry skills in preschoolers' education, some caregivers may face challenges in effectively using play-learn activities to enhance skills among preschoolers because they still rely on traditional teaching methods (Adeyemi, 2009). This incompetence may hinder the development of critical thinking, problem-solving abilities and creativity skills among preschoolers, ultimately affecting their future academic performance and societal contributions. This study aims to examine caregivers' competence in using play-learn activities to enhance scientific inquiry skills among preschoolers.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to assess caregivers' competence in using play-learn activities to enhance scientific inquiry skills among preschoolers in Southwestern Nigeria. Therefore, the specific objectives of this study are to:

i. identify the types of play-learn activities commonly used by caregivers to promote scientific inquiry skills in preschool children in Southwestern Nigeria; and

ii. assess the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children in the study area.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

i. What are the types of play-learn activities used by caregivers to promote scientific inquiry skills in preschool children in Southwestern, Nigeria?
ii. What is the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities to promote scientific inquiry skills among preschoolers in Southwestern Nigeria?

2. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised 311 caregivers and 484 preschoolers in private schools in Southwestern, Nigeria. The sample for the study consisted of 108 caregivers and 360 preschoolers who were selected from 36 early childhood education centres using a multistage sampling procedure. Three states (Ondo, Ekiti and Osun) were selected from the six states in Southwestern, Nigeria using simple random sampling technique. In each of the three senatorial districts in the selected states, one Local Government Area (LGA) was selected using a simple random sampling technique, making a total of three LGAs. In each of the LGAs, twelve (12) early childhood education centres were purposively selected. In each centre, three (3) caregivers and ten (10) preschoolers were selected using purposive sampling technique making a total of 36 early childhood centres, 108 caregivers and 360 preschoolers, which constituted the sample for the study. Two questionnaires were used as instruments for data collection; they were titled: Questionnaire on Caregivers' Competence in using Play-Learn Activities (QCCUPLA) and Play-Learn Activities Observation Check List (PLAOCL). Questionnaire on Caregivers' Competence in Using Play-Learn Activities (QCCUPLA) was a projective Likert rating scale instrument which was used to seek information on Caregivers' Competence in Using Play-Learn Activities among preschool children. QCCUPLA has three sections; Section A consisted of caregivers' demographic information such as school, qualification, age and gender. Section B consisted of 10 items on caregivers' competence level. Play-Learn Activities Observation Check List (PLAOCL) was used to identify the types of play-learn activities commonly used by caregivers that can promote scientific inquiry skills in early childhood centres. PLAOCL has two sections; Section A contained demographic information such as name of school, Section B consisted 20 items of different types of play-learn activities that can promote scientific inquiry skills among preschoolers. Each item was based on U= Utilize; NU= Not Utilize. To ensure the reliability and accuracy of the data, the QCCUPLA and PLAOCL were trial-tested using an inter-rater reliability tool and reliability coefficients of 0.79 and 0.76 were obtained, respectively, and were adjudged high enough to be considered reliable for the study. The research questions were analysed using frequency counts, percentages, and means.

3. Results

Research Question One: What are the types of play-learn activities commonly used by caregivers to promote scientific inquiry skills in preschool children in Southwestern Nigeria?

In order to answer this research question, data collected on the 20 items of various play-learn activities using the observation checklist were subjected to descriptive analysis using frequency, percentage, and mean statistics, taking into consideration the utilisation of the play-learn activities. The results are presented in Table 1.

Utilized = U; Not Utilized = NU

TABLE 1: Descriptive analysis of the types of play-learn activities commonly used by caregivers to promote scientific inquiry skills in early childhood education centres in Southwestern Nigeria

S/N	Play-learn activities	Utilization	
		U	NU
		f (%)	f(%)
1.	Creative arts	29(80.6)	7(19.4)
2.	Building blocks	32(88.9)	4(11.1)
3.	Sensory play activities	28(77.8)	8(22.2)
4.	Sand and water area	10(27.8)	26(72.2)
5.	Puzzle play	28(77.8)	8(22.2)
6.	Counting games	31(86.1)	5(13.9)
7.	Shapes and object tracing	29(80.6)	7(19.4)
8.	Science experiment	16(44.4)	20(55.6)
9.	Group games	30(83.3)	6(16.7)
10.	Melting of ice cubes	10(27.8)	26(72.2)
11.	Air and wind	10(27.8)	26(72.2)
12.	Planting seeds	10(27.8)	26(72.2)
13.	Plant transplanting	11(30.6)	25(69.4)
14.	Rocks and soils	10(27.8)	26(72.2)
15.	Bubble science	22(61.1)	14(38.9)
16.	Magnetic exploration	9(25.0)	27(75.0)
17.	Freezing of water	10(27.8)	26(72.2)
18.	Story-telling and dramatization	25(69.4)	11(30.6)
19.	Sound	21(58.3)	15(41.7)
20.	Pattern recognition	20(55.6)	16(44.4)

Results in Table 1 show the descriptive analysis of the types of play-learn activities commonly used by caregivers to promote scientific inquiry skills in preschool children in Southwestern Nigeria. Considering the highest percentage for utilisation in each item, it can be deduced from the table that building blocks = 88.9%, counting games = 86.1%, group games = 83.3%, creative arts = 80.6%, shapes and object tracing = 80.6%, sensory play activities = 77.8%, puzzle play = 77.8%, story-telling and dramatization = 69.4%, bubble science = 61.1%, sound = 58.3%, and pattern recognition = 55.6% are the types of play-learn activities commonly used by caregivers to promote scientific inquiry skills in preschool children in Southwestern Nigeria.

Research Question Two: What is the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children in Southwestern Nigeria?

In order to answer this research question, data collected on the ten items measuring the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children of the instrument were subjected to descriptive analysis of frequency and percentage and were scored such that "Strongly Agree" (SA) response was allotted 4; "Agree" (A) response was allotted 3; "Disagree" (D) response was allotted 2; and "Strongly Disagree" (SD) response was allotted 1. The 10 items were used to measure the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children in the study area. Responses to each item were computed and the minimum and maximum scores obtained in this scale were 10 and 40 respectively. Responses of the respondents considering the level of competence of caregivers using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children on the scale 10–19 were adjudged as having a "Low" level; responses on the scale 20–27 were adjudged as having a "Moderate" level, and responses on the scale 28–40 were adjudged as having a "High" level. The summary of the results is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Descriptive analysis of the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children in Southwestern Nigeria

S/N	Level	Range	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1.	Low	10-19	30	27.8
2.	Moderate	20-27	55	50.9
3.	High	28-40	23	21.3
Total			**108**	**100.0**

N = 108

Results in Table 2 show the descriptive analysis of the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children in Southwestern Nigeria. Considering the highest percentage, it can be deduced from the table that the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children was moderate at 50.9% in Southwestern Nigeria.

4. Discussion of Findings

Findings of the study showed that building blocks, counting games, group games, bubble science, shapes and object tracing, story-telling and dramatization, creative arts, sound, sensory play activities, puzzle play and pattern recognition, are **the** types of play-learn activities commonly used by caregivers to promote scientific inquiry skills in preschool children in Southwestern Nigeria. The results are consonant with the findings of Halpenny (2020) who posited resources such as block and building materials, water tables, rulers, wall charts, and other outdoor play activities could help a lot in play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children. It was noted that children who were encouraged to take part in play-study sports together with role-playing, model building, and natural interaction had an advanced comprehension of fundamental scientific ideas. The study emphasised that through play, children learn how to observe, classify, measure, and explain their results, all of which can be vital skills in scientific investigation. The results indicate that incorporating play-based pedagogical approaches in early childhood education may substantially improve children's engagement in scientific thinking and investigative processes.

Results of the study further indicated that the level of competence of caregivers in using play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among preschool children was moderate in Southwestern Nigeria. The result implies that caregivers could only use play-learn activities that promote scientific inquiry skills among the children at moderate level. The result in a way supports the findings of Adebayo, A. (2026) who underscored that play has an important role in early formative years training, in particular in promoting the improvement of scientific inquiry abilities. Their competence, which encompasses abilities, information, and practices, is essential in nurturing younger children's interest, exploration, and understanding of scientific principles.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, findings of the study have shown that strengthening caregivers' competence through targeted training, workshops, and provision of adequate learning materials is essential for optimising the benefits of play-based learning in

private schools. Investing in caregiver capacity will not only improve the quality of early childhood education in Southwestern Nigeria but also lay a strong foundation for children's long-term academic success, particularly in science.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

i. There is a need for the government and proprietors of schools to organise training for early childhood educators in science-based activities in order to provide science experiences and improve their knowledge of pedagogical approaches in facilitating science activities in preschool centres.
ii. The government should ensure that the policies associated with science learning are brought to reality by providing science corners, children's textbooks for science and workbooks in addition to other resources to enable educators carry out these activities with ease, especially in public preschools.
iii. Private school owners should ensure that there is adequate play-learn activity equipment for children in various centres.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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