

# Exploring the Relationship between Critical Thinking and Shona Culture during Teaching and Learning of Young Learners (3-8) Year Olds.

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to explore the relationship between critical thinking in young learners and culture. The paper reports on some of the findings of a larger study. The participants were (25) teachers of the (3-8) year olds in five Zimbabwean primary schools and the learners they were teaching approximately (1000) learners. This qualitative interpretive research study was framed within the ambits of social constructivism. Data for this paper was done through video recording teachers teaching Mathematics, interviewing the teachers and observation of learners in the (3-8) year age range engaged in mathematical activities. Interpretation of data from interviews and observations was done through linking related issues or identifying similarities in the responses given by the twenty-five teachers or observed from their teaching or learner activities. Excerpts drawn from responses or observations made are presented verbatim under the different themes that emerged from the issues raised. Findings of this research study indicated that the development of critical thinking in young learners during teaching and learning is greatly influenced by their cultural backgrounds.

**Keywords:** critical thinking; young learners, culture

## I. Introduction

### Facilitating critical thinking skills in young learners

The teaching of critical thinking skills to young learners is a process which cannot be done overnight but may need purposeful instruction that helps learners acquire the skill. Many skills, including critical thinking, may develop through time, experience and cultural conditioning. In terms of developing 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, which includes setting up learners for lifelong learning, teaching critical thinking should be the core business (Ellerton, 2020). From an empirical point of view, critical thinking is whereby young learners are culturally liberated to think actively in any given situation. It is salient to examine the cultural influences on the acquisition of critical thinking skills during teaching and learning in a Zimbabwean rural context. The concept of critical thinking should not be context free. Ennis (1996) links the importance of contextual factors to an increase or decrease in the development of critical thinking.

Guo (2013) views culture as an abstract term that defines a broad range of activities in which individuals express themselves, and it is important because it tells us in different degrees what we are expected to think, say and how we are expected to behave in typical life situations. According to Hurst, Wallace and Nixon (2016), learning involves building knowledge on the contextual background that the learner brings to the classroom situation. Based on the given sentiments, not all cultures may afford learners the opportunity to think critically. For example, some Chinese cultural dimensions have been seen as barriers to the development of critical thinking. Guo (2013) contends that in China, where learners grow up engaged in passive learning, cultivating critical thinking is one of the most difficult tasks during teaching.

In a paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring report, Sun, Rao and Pearson (2015) indicated that young learners in rural areas of developing countries are usually disadvantaged in terms of early education as compared to their urban counterparts. The present research study sought to find out how culture influences the development of critical thinking skills in young learners during teaching and learning in the Zimbabwean rural context.

## II. Review of Related Literature

### 2.1 The Child's cultural environment

Children develop in several interlocking systems—in the context of their family, and within the interaction of settings such as the

home, school, and church (Russell, 2011). Every child is unique in interacting with the world around them, and what they invoke and receive from others and the environment also shapes how they think and behave. Children growing up in different cultures receive specific inputs from their environment (Crogman, 2017). For that reason, there is a vast array of cultural differences in children’s beliefs, behaviour and way of thinking.

Chikodzi and Nyota (2010) maintain that culture is a way of life for people and is the essence of who we are and how we exist in the world. They believe that culture emphasises beliefs and values which are often deeply rooted in a group’s history and traditions. Crogman (2017) noted that in South Africa, children’s diverse backgrounds within families, neighborhoods and socio-cultural environments provide them with varied experiences and opportunities to learn. Culture, however is not static but continuously changes, extended or transformed by the culture’s bearers.

Reviewing of related literature in this research study is going to be done based on the proposed model that assumes that the child’s cultural environment is made up of different cultural systems. The cultural systems include the family culture, language, religion and the instructional culture which is also embedded in the school culture. In order to really understand in what ways ‘culture’ impacts and influences a child, there’s need to examine culture in its various forms.

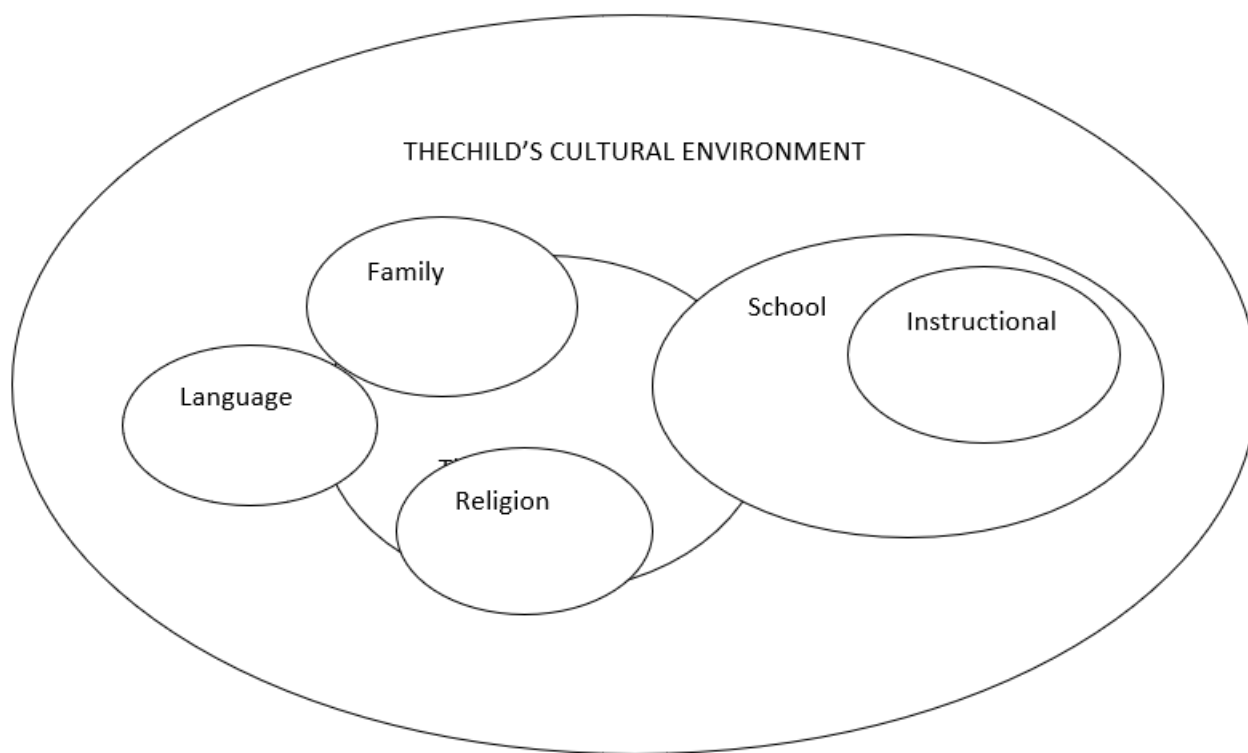


Fig 1: The Child’s cultural environment: Model proposed by the researcher Makonye L. & Nkomo S.(2023).

## 2.2 Family culture and critical thinking

The family setup plays a paramount role in the development of a child as children do not develop into competent adults, simply through the unfolding of their genetic endowment (Berk, 2000). Instead, they require direction and delimitation of their vast potential to develop into integrated individuals capable of living amicably in their society together with their fellows. Thus, the family is of unique importance to a child in that it provides a buffer and mediates between the child and the world (Wiredu, 1990). The family unit also ensures promotion of emotional, cognitive and other higher order needs amongst children to enable them to development to optimal potential (Seedat, Duncan & Lazarus, 2001). Differences regarding the well-being of children from various countries have stressed the importance and relevance for understanding the impact of culture in shaping children’s critical thinking skills in the Zimbabwean context. For instance, in Chinese culture, where parents assume much responsibility and authority over children, parents interact with children in a more authoritative manner and demand obedience from their children. Children growing up in such environments are more likely to comply with their parents’ requests, even when they are reluctant to do so (Ching, 2018). It is questionable if complying children develop to be critical thinkers within such culture.

The extended family system in Zimbabwe emphasises on the principle of ‘living together’ and the sense of ‘community of brothers and sisters’. Thus, the Zimbabwean notion of the family includes the whole lineage of the couple and their in-laws. Sometimes, people from the same village or the same region would call each other brothers and sisters (Sachs & Sachs, 2004). In every African traditional family, community-based solidarity pervaded every aspect of social life. Mwamwenda (1995), confirms that in societies with unilateral descent groups, functions of the nuclear family, in particular parenting, were not solely the responsibility of the biological parent but were shared across different individuals in the larger kin group, that is, the extended family

Zimbabwe is a family-centred society, whereby the family is on the fore, other groups coming later. In the Zimbabwean context the extended family is valued and it is the duty of the extended family to socialise children into a family culture. Guo (2013) posits that the degree to which the culture is individualistic or collectivistic has a bearing on the development of critical thinking. Generally, collectivism in Zimbabwe is valued where everything is seen as ours. For example, “*n’ombe dzedu*” meaning our cattle or “*vana vedu*” meaning our children. In an African study carried out in China, it was shown that the primary duty of a Chinese to his extended family is to provide the individual member with social, moral, spiritual and material support. This indicates that the cultural influences have a bearing on child development extended into critical thinking. It is questionable if children raised in the extended family system grow up to be critical thinkers since the system values affiliation to the group or family.

### 2.3 School culture and critical thinking

School culture is the set of shared values, beliefs and norms that influence the way learners, educators and administrators think, feel and behave in a school environment. School culture is an important element with regard to student effectiveness in schools (Dogan, 2017). Therefore, school culture can also have a positive impact on learner effectiveness in thinking critically. Every organization has a culture, that history and underlying set of unwritten expectations that shape everything about the school. A school culture influences the ways people think, feel, and act. Being able to understand and shape the culture is key to a school's success in promoting staff and student learning (Peterson, 2002).

Also, learners, parents, teachers, facilitators, administrators, and other staff members all contribute to their school's culture, some influences such as the society in which the school is located, the policies that govern how it operates, or the principles on which the school was founded influence the young learner's critical thinking. If educators and administrators are encouraged to build schools with a strong school culture, students' success will provide them with the opportunity for being lifelong learners and critical thinkers for the 21st century. The instructional culture of some teachers, which also might be a result of their cultural influence, may impede the development of critical thinking skills in young learners (Makonye, 2019).

### 2.4 Language and critical thinking

Language is one of the many ways through which culture affects development (Ching, 2018). Language is closely related to culture, but in reality its influence is often overlooked (Hadley, 2000). Nida (1998) suggests that language and culture cannot exist without each other, and languages not only represent elements of culture, but also serve to model culture. Ricci and Huang (2013) argue that cultural influences do affect thinking styles, shape personal thinking preferences, and have their grip on critical thinking strategies since it has been shown to affect individuals' thought processes, judgement, and decision-making and inhibit the ability to be unbiased. We know from research on adults that languages forge how people think and reason (Ching, 2019).

The language-culture dynamic exerts its influence on thinking, which could be very harmful to the learning process, meaning that critical thinking in itself is subjected to cultural influences, which cause thinking in itself to be shaped into such biases (Crogman, 2017). Levinson & Majid (2011) by looking at the differences in the thinking processes associated with the type of language spoken, found that language and culture influence cognition. Language is used to form concepts and categories, which are born by culture, and are influenced by their specific rules and choices in language usage. Davidson (1994) argues that in Japanese culture, critical thinking is inhibited due to a number of cultural demands, which do not encourage diversity of opinions as most of their education processes are based on rote memorisation.

### 2.5 Religion and critical thinking

Not too distant from family culture and language is culture that is derived from the religious beliefs and practices of a specific family. If a child grows up seeing a lot of time and effort being devoted to religion, prayer, ceremonies; that is the culture he or she might also adopt (Bajoria, 2019). Similarly, communities and their peculiarities also form part of the cultural exposure and inheritance of a child.

The method of teaching critical thinking skills requires learners to engage in independent thinking such as coming up with options, problem-solving, analysing and evaluating information. In an African research study conducted in Nigeria, Aboluwodi

(2016) confirmed that most teachers are still slaves of the colonial education tradition where the focus was to teach learners for examination purposes. Additionally, due to differences in origin and development in cultural systems, Chinese and Western cultures display different cultural traits that are attributed to the differences in their thinking dispositions. According to Miu-Chi (2012), New Zealand European learners were found to perform better than their Asian counterparts on an objective measure of critical thinking. The overall conclusion indicated that culture has an important influence on learners' practice of critical thinking. The present research study provided empirical evidence on how culture influences the teaching of critical thinking skills to young learners. Miu-Chi (2012) further argues that the influence of culture does not necessarily impede the application of critical thinking instruction in multicultural classes, but critical thinking instruction may be beneficial to the intellectual development of learners regardless of their religious backgrounds.

Guo (2013) submits that in Chinese collectivistic culture, harmony and cooperation among the group tend to be emphasised more than individual achievement or freedom. The development of critical thinking skills may be stifled because compliance with norms inhibits individual beliefs which are needed in critical thinking skills. Based on Guo's standpoint, submissiveness and the maintenance of pleasant social relations are valued more, and learners tend to be more active when interacting and sharing ideas amongst themselves. These cultural dimensions may thus have a great impact on the thinking dispositions in a variety of ways that may also become barriers to the development of good critical thinking skills. It is therefore likely that culture-based instructions may explicitly and systematically prepare young learners with knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for their development as critical thinkers.

Drawing from the aforementioned views on Chinese and Nigerian cultural traits, culture has proven to be related to the development of critical thinking skills in young learners. Actually, people from different cultures extract whatever fits into their personal world of recognition and then interpret it through the frame of reference of their own culture (Aboluwodi, 2016). Health (2012) admits that people from cultures different from others might find clues they could use in their own processes of critical thinking. The researcher was obliged to explore the relationship between critical thinking in young learners and culture during teaching and learning in the Zimbabwean rural context.

### III. Purpose of the Study

In the present research study, the focus was on how culture is related to the teaching of critical thinking skills. This was done with both teachers and young learners to find out the relationship between culture and the development of critical thinking skills since culture may influence how people think and solve problems. This research study therefore aimed at establishing the extent to which the teaching of critical thinking skills to early childhood learners in the (3-8) year age range in Zimbabwe is influenced by their cultural backgrounds.

### IV. Research Methodology

This research study employed the qualitative approach which involved an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world. A case study design which allowed the researcher to generate plausible information by observing young learners engaged in activities and observing teachers conducting Mathematics lessons has been adopted. The case study design has been found fitting to this particular research study because it is influenced by phenomenology. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) are of the view that the phenomenological researcher's central concern is that of returning to experiential meanings as dictated by the situation.

Permission was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to work with five schools in Zaka District. Each participant of the research who was eighteen years or above was provided with informed consent forms in which they provided their consent by undersigning. For all the (3-8) year olds who participated in the study parents or guardians were provided with consent forms and requested to provide consent by undersigning on behalf of them. The consent forms also assured the participants of their right to participate or withdraw from the study without harm. The schools in the study were selected for their convenience, since they were neighbouring schools and not far away from the tarred road, travelling costs were minimised during data collection.

Mathematics lessons were observed and an observation guide with behaviour traits attributed to critical thinking was used right across all the age groups under study. Learners' actions were recorded and the actions done by teachers to support the development of critical thinking skills were also noted. This means data was collected in natural settings. Wildman (2015) concedes that phenomenological research studies explore the essence of experiences of individuals or groups with first-hand accounts. Observation guides were used to observe young learners as they engaged in activities as well as teachers as they taught Mathematics to learners (3-8) year olds. The young learners were observed as they interacted and engaged in mathematical activities in groups ranging from (3 – 13) members per group to explore the critical thinking skills involved in what they said and

what they did. Characteristics of critical thinking were recorded. Video recording for the observations were done within a period of five weeks starting from school A to school E during the teaching of Mathematics. Gary (2011) suggests that the distinct feature of observation as a research process is its provision for an opportunity for the researcher to generate first-hand information from naturally occurring social situations.

The present research study also generated data through structured interviews with a predetermined list of open-ended questions. Gary (2011) submits that a structured interview can be easily administered, and the responses easily coded. The use of in-depth interviews permitted the researcher to obtain rich qualitative data which could not be acquired from observation alone. The researcher employed open-ended questions in which each teacher was asked questions once, while the assistant researcher was video recording the interactions. The video recordings of the interviews were meant to be analysed later to solicit data on how teachers nurtured critical thinking skills in young learners during the teaching and learning process. In order to enhance the chances of obtaining rich data, participants were allowed to respond in any language they felt comfortable with. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) admit that interviews with participants must be as explicit and as detailed as possible. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. To avoid disturbing lessons, all interviews were conducted in the classrooms of the respective teachers after the (3-8) year olds had finished their lessons. The advantage of using interviews was that the researcher further probed participants for more details based on each participant's response.

## V. Data Presentation and Discussion

Data from observations and interview has been presented verbatim in themes and analysed in relation to cultural traits displayed and their effects on critical thinking. This research study has established that the teaching of critical thinking skills to early childhood learners in the (3-8) year age range in Zimbabwe is influenced by their cultural backgrounds. The following data shows the behaviour traits that may stifle the development of critical thinking skills in young learners during teaching and learning. The behaviours exhibited are likely to be an extension from family culture where socialisation starts, extending to school.

### 5.1.2 EXCERPT 1: Socialised not to speak in the presence of adults

The behaviour traits shown by learners during teaching and learning reflected that what was acquired in the family culture might have extended into the school culture and finally interferes with a teaching culture that promotes the development of critical thinking skills.

#### Teachers X to an ECD A (3-4) year learner

*"You are not speaking; speak out the issues while you find where to place each of the items. I want to hear you speaking, speak, speak."*

#### Another Teacher Y to a Grade 1 learner:

*"You are not speaking; you count while speaking. Speak up, and you are just quiet with stones in your hands. Count, speak up."*

#### Teacher Z to an ECD B (4-5) year learner

*"Speak loudly. What shape is this?"*

#### Teacher W to a Grade 2 learner

*"Someone to help her; she is not speaking loudly."*

Emerging from the above excerpts is a cultural trait of not speaking loudly or reluctance to speak. It appears as if in the culture in which these learners were raised, they were socialised to be reserved. For example, in social interactive situations the concept of 'chimiro', meaning dignity is very important, especially among the Shona speaking people. It is likely that by speaking unwillingly or in low voices the learners think that they may lose their dignity. To quote one Shona saying "Kuzhangandira kunobvisa chimiro" Too much speaking causes loss of dignity. This acculturation seems not to be compatible with the development of critical thinking. Makonye (2019) is of the view that the promotion of critical thinking skills requires learners to engage in independent thinking such as coming up with options, problem-solving, analysing and evaluating. and this. All the activities that promote critical thinking are usually done through expressing oneself in a language. McGuire (2007) maintains that varied conceptions and misconceptions of critical thinking exist and are shaped by diverse cultures.



### 5.1.3 EXCERPT 2: Cultural uncertainty

**Teacher Y to a Grade1 learner:**

*“You are not speaking; you count while speaking. Speak up, and you are just quiet with stones in your hands. Count, speak up.”*

**Teacher to the rest of the class,** *“Let us be quiet.”*

Inferring from the above data, the learners are in a culture in which at one moment they are expected to do something and, in another moment, they are forbidden almost from doing the same thing. The learners end up being confused as to what their cultural expectations are. For example, in Shona culture children are not allowed to stand where adults are seated, but when in an overloaded bus children are not expected to seat while adults are standing. The same cultural confusion interferes with teaching and learning situations where at one moment learners are asked to be quiet and at another moment asked to speak up. It is clear that in this kind of confusion children may reach a stalemate whereby they are not sure whether to ask a question for clarification where they are not sure or not because at one moment they are asked to speak and the other moment they are silenced. In social constructivist perspective scholars view learning as an active process where young learners should learn to discover principles, concepts and facts for themselves (Li, 2012). This research study has shown that there is cultural confusion in which the young learners are reduced to passive learners which tends to stifle their critical thinking skills.

### 5.1.4 EXCERPT 3: Shy to speak

**Teacher to a Grade learner:** *“Don’t hide your face. Someone to help him.”*

**Learner reaction:** Kept quiet, not responding to the question only gazing at the floor.

The model has been proposed to clarify the position of the learner in his or her cultural environment. The child grows up in a cultural system where he or she is moulded or shaped into a cultural being. The child’s cultural system includes the family culture, language, religion and school culture which extends to the teaching culture. The way the child is moulded determines how the child learns, how the teacher teaches and the kind of skills the learner acquires. Cossette (2013) asserts that critical thinking is the focal point missed by many teachers because they teach memorisation with little time left for the development of critical thinking skills. The learners’ culture influences how they learn and how they are taught at school. Chikodzi and Nyota (2010) are of the view that culture has an effect on how a group of people learn. In Shona culture children are not allowed to stare or look directly at an adult when speaking. This may be the reason why they are seen to hide their faces. The presence of the researcher and the photographer could have affected learners’ participation because in the Shona culture, children are not encouraged to talk when adults are entertaining visitors.

**Grade 2 teacher to a learner who was not speaking loudly while giving an answer.**

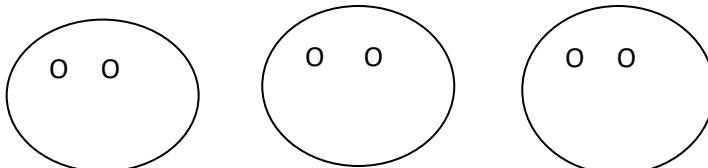
*“You are not speaking; speak out the issues while you find where to place each of the items, I want to hear you speaking, speak, speak.”*

Emerging from the teacher’s encouragement is the fact that the learners have been culturally socialised not to speak in the presence of adults. They are to be seen and not heard. For example, playing and talking while next to adults is a taboo in the Shona culture *“Chibvai pavanhu vakuru muinde kundotamba kure”* meaning, go and play away from adults. This indicates that a child cannot be expected to think critically when asked to answer a question in class in the presence of visitors when all along he or she had been sent to play away from adults. Makonye (2019) believes that young children cannot be expected to think critically when they usually play a passive role during teaching and learning or in real life situations.

### 5.1.5 EXCERPT 4: Chorusing answers

The current research study assumes that the chanting and chorusing of answers does not enhance critical thinking skills in young learners because they do not give room to think. The research observations made during teaching and learning indicated that teachers asked questions in which children were chanting answers as a class.

Sets of two



**Teacher W to a Grade 2 class:** *How many sets of two are shown in the given sets?*

**Class chorusing:** *three*

**Teacher W repeats the question:** *How many sets of two-oare shown in the given sets?*

**Class repeats the answer:** *three-e*

When learners are chorusing, it means there is no room to think critically and therefore are prone to imitating and doing certain things unconsciously. Rote learning does not capture learners' attention and therefore is less likely to enhance critical thinking skills (Makonye, 2019). Young learners may have greater chances to think critically if they are given materials or props to interact with or if they are afforded the opportunity to interact amongst themselves. Hamlin and Wisneski (2012) are of the view that when young learners interact and try things out, their critical thinking skills are enhanced as they explore different avenues to solve problems. Therefore, a school or instructional culture where children are led to chant answers does not promote critical thinking skills of the young learners since the children will be just parroting without thinking. Schunk (2012) maintains that critical thinking skills can be enhanced by using instructional strategies that actively engage learners in the learning process rather than relying on lecture and rote memorisation.

#### **5.1.6 EXCERPT 5: Non-questioning by young learners**

Empirical research also indicated that children may not ask questions due to shyness, fear of being laughed at by peers, or fear of appearing foolish if they fail to ask the questions properly and difficulty in forming the questions. Therefore, learners in Zimbabwean primary school classrooms seem to see their role as that of responding to teachers' questions rather than asking questions and this orientation may derive from the wider home culture experienced outside the classroom that does not fully embrace the challenging of older people in positions of authority by younger people. Relating to this speculation is what has been observed in this research study. Learners rarely asked questions during teaching and learning. Similarly, in all their observations of learning and teaching primary Mathematics in Zimbabwe in 2005, Mtetwa and his associates noted very few incidents of individual learners publicly asking questions for clarification or for further exploration on the mathematical concept under study. The culture of not asking questions extends from home to the classroom where learners cannot challenge or ask teachers to clarify or repeat what they would have said even though learners would have missed the point. In the aforementioned research study by Mtetwa and associates, learners who were observed asking questions were either asking administrative or procedural questions, for example, *'Should we use pencil or pen?'* (Mtetwa, 2005. p.259). It was observed in the research study during activities that on being given blocks one child rushed to do the sorting before instruction. The teacher shouted *"ibvapo iwe garapasi"* Meaning "You get away from there, sit down." This is likely to shutter any initiatives or all avenues for thinking critically by learners. In a study conducted in Nigeria, Aboluwodi (2016) pointed out that the culture of passivity is part of the larger society culture which emphasises conformity, hence the inability of learners to question other peoples' ideas

The culture of not asking questions in this research study indicated that no critical thinking was going on during teaching and learning of the (3-8)year olds. Questioning is one of the ways early childhood teachers are likely to ensure that learners are thinking critically or philosophising (Lipman, 2003). In a research study conducted at Oxford University, it was revealed that learners need to develop the skills of asking questions if they are to become effective critical thinkers (Hughes, 2014). Therefore the instructional culture where children are not given the opportunity to ask questions stifle the development of critical thinking skills in the 3-8 year olds.

#### **5.1.7 EXCERPT 6: Group Affiliation**

The children's cultural environment, especially the family culture and religion socialise the children to affiliate to a group by maintaining good relations and working together as a community. Guo (2013) is of the view that submissiveness and the maintenance of pleasant social relations are valued more, and learners tend to be more active when interacting and sharing ideas amongst themselves.

This research study revealed that young learners were not thinking or performing tasks independently during activities, indicating that children were not engaged in independent thinking but conformed to the group norms or group consensus. The following behaviour transcripts indicate that the (3-8) year olds were socialised to collectivism or communalism. In the Zimbabwean context, the community is viewed as the custodian of the individual, and one has to observe the norms and values of the community. Hence, Thumi and Horsefield (2004) maintain that, in the African mentality, the community as an entity remains, while individuals, as persons, come and go. Therefore, the Africans emphasise community life and communalism as a living

principle of which the basic ideology is community-identity. In line with the culture of communalism, affiliation to the group or living together as behavior traits of the (3-8) year olds has been observed in the particular study during activities.

A Grade 3 learner who was sitting between the group members and was writing for the group asked the group members.

*“Ndiyo here ndinyore answer?”* “asking group members. Meaning “should I write if it is the correct answer?” and shouted *“Tawana 12 pana 20”* Meaning “we got 12 by counting back from 20”

Africans regarded their living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among them, but as a deliberate act of God to make them a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life (Biko, 2006). Traditionally, African culture was prepared to make slower progress in an effort to make sure that there was agreement amongst all community members. For example, to discourage dissent in society, there is an African proverb “Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reasons to lament” (Nussbaum, 2003). In collectivism, group members are not expected to come up with new ideas or suggestions and this is prone to stifle the development of critical thinking skills in young children because learners are reduced to passivity. Freire (1970) admits that for learners to be critical thinkers and problem solvers, they must be active participants in their own learning as opposed to vacant minds waiting to be filled with preordained information. When learners are solving problems, as such, they exercise independent judgment and explore several avenues to the solution of the problem. Dewey (1938) is of the view that, instead of teachers filling the minds of young learners with skills that do not develop independent problem solvers, young learners should be actively involved in their own learning for them to solve problems.

#### 5.1.8 EXCERPT 7: Gender differentiation

The teaching culture in the current research did not display any gender differences in terms of promoting critical thinking during teaching and learning. Lesson observations also indicated that young learners were given the same tasks and no teacher displayed any cultural bias by showing differentiation in terms of gender during the teaching and learning process or during facilitation of activities. However, some family cultural traces of gender differentiation within the (3-4) year olds showing that girls were socialised not to play with boys were noted during teaching and learning.

Teacher: *“We join hands even with boys to make a circle, it does not matter. Tindo get hold of that boy’s hand we learn together.”*

Tendai: *“Aaah, don’t touch my hand you are a boy.”*

The socialisation that boys and girls should not play together has been shown in the presented data obtained from video analysis. In social constructivism, social interaction is expected amongst learners of different sexes so that scaffolding takes place. Development of critical thinking in young children is likely to take place as young learners interact amongst themselves in carrying out mathematical tasks without considering gender.

Teacher 1: *...gender used to affect girls...*

Teacher 2: *...gender, these days is no longer affecting much... Many people are equalising boys and girls*

The transcript data from interviews also indicates some of the views that teachers hold about critical thinking amongst young boys and girls. The results of the current research have no evidence consistent with the cultural perceptions held about boys and girls. The views given by teachers in interviews are in line with the observations made during the teaching and learning process. The way teachers conducted their lessons, activities given and nomination of learners to give answers did not show any gender differentiation. Young learners of both sexes therefore had equal opportunities to acquire critical thinking skills during teaching and learning.

Relating to the observed, equal opportunities in nurturing critical thinking skills in boys and girls is notion that globalisation has become so strong that individual countries cannot circumvent its impact. Zimbabwe, like other African countries, has become part of a global village where a lot of changes are taking place. Mpofu (2013) contends that globalisation has intensified poverty, created unemployment and promoted social integration in the majority of developing countries including Zimbabwe. The effects of globalisation include a shift from how girls used to be differentiated from their male counterparts in terms of educational opportunities. In the Zimbabwean context, boys used to be given first preference in enrolment, fees payment and provision of other resources needed at school and were culturally considered superior to girls in all activities. For example, Teacher 22 said: *...boys are better thinkers than girls...*

However, the sentiments that follow were given by the teachers of the (3-8) year olds during in depth interviews, concerning a paradigm shift from gender differentiation in fostering critical thinking skills amongst young learners:



Teacher 1: ...*being a boy or a girl does not matter. Any child can think critically...*

Teacher 3: ...*we cannot say these questions are for boys...*

Teacher 4: ...*if a child is able to think critically, it has nothing to do with gender*

Teacher 5: ...*all learners are the same...*

Teacher 6: ...*whether a boy or a girl, they have equal intelligence to think critically...*

Teacher 7: ...*gender does not affect critical thinking*

Teacher 12: ...*boys and girls also think equally the same...*

Teacher 13: ...*they should learn the same subjects...*

The interview transcript data reveals that most teachers do not consider culturally prescribed gender differences in their facilitation of critical thinking skills during teaching and learning, since learners of both sexes were given the same activities. The instructional culture in the current research study did not display any gender differences in terms of supporting learners to acquire critical thinking during teaching and learning. Lesson observations also indicated that young learners were given the same tasks and no teacher displayed any culturally biased behaviour by showing differentiation in terms of gender during the teaching and learning process. Even though the family culture in the Zimbabwean context may differentiate boys from girls in terms of their thinking capabilities, gender has been proven not to affect the facilitation of critical thinking skills during teaching and learning. It is common in Shona culture to hear boys being told not to think like women, "Hindava uchifunga pachikadzi? i", meaning, "Why do you think like women?"

However, in an Iranian research study conducted by Salahshoor and Rafiee (2016) to investigate the relationship between critical thinking and gender among Iranian learners it was revealed that males and females were not significantly different from one another in terms of applying critical thinking skills. In addition, Gadi, Baker, Alwi and Talib (2012) conducted a research study in Malaysia and found out that there was no significant difference between males and females in the level of critical thinking skills, indicating a null effect of gender on critical thinking. Therefore, it can be said that gender socialisation in the child's cultural environment has no effect on the development of critical thinking skills in young learners.

## VI. Conclusion

This paper explores the relationship between culture and critical thinking skills amongst the (3-8) years learners mainly focusing on the influence of culture on children's critical thinking during teaching and learning. The paper reviews related literature on the child's cultural environment based on the model proposed by the researcher. The study reveals that cultural traits that children bring from home and those found in the school interfere with the development of critical thinking skills in young learners. The paper shows how culture interferes with the development of critical thinking skills in children during teaching and learning. The children's cultural environment expects the children to abide by the norms and values of the community in order to be good social beings. However, most of the cultural traits that children bring into the classroom interfere with their development of critical thinking skills. Therefore, it is the duty of the teachers of the (3-8) year olds to take note of the cultural traits that may stifle the development of critical thinking skills in young children, and work to enhance the development of critical thinking in their teaching and learning.

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