ESWOCHY

Exploring the Role of Social Work-Related Initiatives for Life Skills Education of At-Risk Youth in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explores the role of social work-related initiatives in promoting life skills education among at-risk youth in Nigeria, where over 60% of the population is under 30, yet many young people remain trapped in cycles of poverty, conflict, educational exclusion, family breakdown, and weak state welfare provision. Despite the existence of state interventions, implementation has consistently fallen short, leaving non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as the main providers of psychosocial support and life skills education for at-risk youth. The study examines how social work-related initiatives contribute to life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria. It pursues four objectives: to clarify the contextual meanings of life skills education, at-risk youth, and social work-related initiatives; to apply Critical Social Work and Person in Environment (PIE) theory in analysing structural factors shaping support for at-risk youth; to investigate the experiences of practitioners and beneficiaries; and to recommend strategies for strengthening life skills education through social work interventions. It is framed theoretically by Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment perspective. A qualitative, exploratory design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with program facilitators and beneficiaries recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis supported by MAXQDA. The findings revealed that NGO-led social work-related initiatives are central to delivering life skills education to at-risk youth in Nigeria. Life skills education is fundamental in helping young people navigate structurally constrained lives. Youth vulnerability was found to be structurally produced, shaped by poverty, conflict, family breakdown, and the near-total exclusion of disabled and LGBTQ+ youth from interventions. When built on community co-design and culturally grounded delivery, these initiatives produce real and observable change. However, a significant professionalisation gap exists, with most practitioners lacking formal social work qualifications and the profession remaining absent from third sector, schools, hospitals, and policy spaces where it is most needed. The study concludes that the third sector delivers meaningful support to Nigeria's most vulnerable young people, but the absence of professional social work infrastructure limits consistency and sustainability. It recommends that government establish career pathways for social workers in public institutions, fund NGOs as long-term implementation partners, and shift programme evaluation toward psychosocial rather than purely enrolment-based outcomes.

Keywords: At-risk youth; life skills education; social work-related initiatives; non-governmental organisations (NGOs); youth vulnerability; social work practice in Nigeria; professionalisation gap.

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Chapter One:Background of the Study and Problem Statement

This chapter introduces the study and establishes the context within which the research is situated. It begins with the background of the study, which sets out the demographic, structural, and policy environment shaping the lives of at-risk youth in Nigeria. The chapter then presents the statement of the problem, the research aim, objectives, and questions, an overview of the research methods used in the theoretical and empirical parts of the study, the significance of the study for policy, practice, and knowledge, definitions of the key terms used throughout the thesis, and finally an outline of how the rest of the thesis is organised.

Background of the Study

Nigeria has one of the world's most youthful populations, with over 60% of its estimated 230 million people under the age of 30 and a median age of roughly 18 years (ActionAid Nigeria, 2025). While earlier national baseline data from the National Bureau of Statistics estimated approximately 64 million young people aged 15–35, this figure is based on the 2012 National Youth Survey and remains one of the most widely cited national-level youth demographic estimates (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Despite this demographic advantage, many Nigerian youth are trapped in cycles of poverty, under-education, unemployment, violence, and exclusion (Abubakar, 2025; Okoli et al., 2024; Virk et al., 2023). The National Youth Policy (2019–2023) recognises this and calls for strategic investment in youth development initiatives that are inclusive, equitable, and transformative, seeking to foster an enabling environment for young people to reach their potential through education, training, and employment (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development (FMYSD), 2019).

In Nigeria, these pressing issues of poverty, increased numbers of unaccompanied or street children, inadequate education, and high rates of out-of-school children underscore the urgent need for practical life skills education for sustainable development (Kiss et al., 2022; Oyekan et al., 2023; Garba et al., 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 1997), life skills are defined as capacities for adaptive and positive behaviour that assist people in efficiently handling the demands and challenges of everyday life. At-risk youth in Nigeria are often those living in rural or conflict-affected regions, from low-income families, out of school, internally displaced, or exposed to harmful social norms (Lawrence & Adebowale, 2023; Amoo et al., 2020; Yusuf & Nasirudeen, 2024; Kiss et al., 2022). These youths face limited access to guidance, mentorship, and structured learning environments where essential life skills such as communication, problem solving, decision-making, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and leadership can be developed (Garba et al., 2021; Singh & Agarwal, 2024; Akpan & Udoh, 2022). The economic, psychological, emotional, and social crises that this population faces are often produced by family, state, personal, and relational pressures, and life skills are essential in helping young people navigate

these conditions (Filges et al., 2020). Studies by Unimke et al. (2025), Prajapati et al. (2017), Oyeyemi et al. (2024), and Akpan and Udoh (2022) have shown that imparting life skills education to young people provides them with agency to address their challenges, helps them maximise their potential, and contributes to both self and national development.

Life skills development in young people has been shown through empirical studies to improve life outcomes among youth in marginalised and disadvantaged areas, including out-of-school children and nomadic children (Nwokedi et al., 2023; Unimke et al., 2025), to reduce violence among adolescents and foster peace, and to support adolescent sexual health knowledge, thereby contributing to reductions in the rate of Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and other sexually transmitted infections. Life skills development is therefore vital for young people, particularly in Nigeria, where socioeconomic challenges and educational disparities are widespread (Singh & Agarwal, 2024; Garba et al., 2021). However, life skills education remains undervalued in mainstream schooling, and Nigeria's youth policies often struggle with implementation gaps.

Social work-related initiatives, led mainly by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based groups, youth networks, and community-based groups, have increasingly become significant actors in addressing the challenges faced by at-risk youth in Nigeria (Garba et al., 2021). Although the Nigerian government has developed several youth-focused policies and intervention frameworks aimed at promoting youth development and social inclusion, the implementation of these policies has remained weak and inconsistent, particularly in marginalised and underserved communities (Akinyemi & Mobolaji, 2022; Oxfam in Nigeria, n.d.). Nigeria's youth policy architecture, including the National Youth Policy, was designed to support the development and participation of young people; however, several studies highlight that these policies often fail to translate into meaningful structural change due to institutional weaknesses, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inadequate funding (Omoju et al., 2023; Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026).

Studies on social policy and social work practice in Nigeria highlight that social welfare delivery is frequently carried out by NGOs and community-based organisations rather than through coordinated national social protection systems (Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026; Amadasun, 2020). This reflects broader structural challenges within Nigeria's social development landscape, where government programmes often remain short-term, politically driven, and inadequately resourced, thereby failing to address the deeper social and economic drivers of youth vulnerability (Okoli et al., 2024; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2024). Consequently, NGOs have emerged as primary actors in grassroots social welfare provision, filling critical gaps left by limited government implementation while providing practical resources, psychosocial support, and life skills education to at-risk youth in hard-to-reach communities (Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026, 2026; Garba et al., 2021; Ngwu & Iwuagwu, 2022). Through these community-driven initiatives, NGOs contribute not only to individual youth empowerment but also to broader efforts aimed at strengthening resilience and social inclusion among marginalised

populations in Nigeria. These initiatives are crucial in providing practical, values-based, and psychosocial support systems, resources, and opportunities in hard-to-reach areas that can equip youth to thrive in unstable contexts (Nwokedi et al., 2023; Bello & Tukur, 2021).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing recognition of youth vulnerability and the rapid expansion of NGO-led interventions, three interlocking problems continue to limit the effectiveness of life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria, and together they form the core problem this study seeks to address.

First, although the Nigerian government has produced a National Youth Policy and several supporting frameworks, implementation has consistently fallen short, leaving the responsibility for psychosocial support, life skills education, and youth welfare provision to NGOs, faith-based groups, and community-based organisations operating without sustained state backing (Akinyemi, 2017; Omoju et al., 2023; Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026). The state's withdrawal from its welfare obligations has deepened the structural conditions that produce youth vulnerability rather than addressing them.

Second, professional social workers, who are the practitioners most equipped by training and ethical orientation to respond to the complex psychosocial and structural needs of at-risk youth through needs assessment, case management, advocacy, and the person-in-environment perspective, are rarely engaged at scale within youth development programming in Nigeria (Amadasun, 2020; Gray & Amadasun, 2024). The social work profession in Nigeria continues to face issues of professional recognition, institutional support, and workforce development, with a shortage of trained and licensed professionals restricting their integration into social welfare programming (Oyebamiji, 2025; Okoye & Onalu, 2023). As a result, many youth-focused interventions are designed and delivered by individuals from unrelated professional backgrounds, by volunteers, or by community facilitators, even though the issues being addressed often demand specialised social work expertise (Gray & Amadasun, 2024).

Third, there is a significant empirical and academic gap. Peer-reviewed documentation of how social work-related initiatives are actually operationalised to reach Nigeria's most vulnerable young people is largely absent. Existing accounts sit predominantly in donor reports and internal evaluations rather than academic literature, meaning that there is limited empirical evidence on the methods, effectiveness, and sustainability of these programmes, and limited understanding of how core social work principles such as trauma-informed care, structural advocacy, and the person-in-environment framework are integrated, or excluded, from intervention design.

Taken together, these three gaps mean that the actors carrying the heaviest weight of youth welfare provision in Nigeria, namely NGOs and community-based organisations, are doing so without the professional infrastructure, policy backing, or peer-reviewed evidence base that would allow their work to

be fully understood, sustained, and scaled. This study therefore explores how NGO-led social work-related initiatives contribute to life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria by documenting the types of interventions implemented, analysing their roles in supporting youth development, and identifying gaps in policy and practice. In doing so, the study highlights the potential contribution of the social work profession in strengthening the design, implementation, and sustainability of such initiatives.

1.3 Research Aim

The major aim of this research is to explore the contribution of social work-related initiatives to life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria.

1.4 Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are:

- To examine the overall and contextual meanings of the concepts of life skills education, at-risk youth, and social work-related initiatives in Nigeria.
- To apply the theory of Critical Social Work and Person in Environment (PIE) in analysing the structural factors affecting support for at-risk youth.
- To investigate the experiences of practitioners and beneficiaries of social work-related initiatives.
- To recommend strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of life skills education through social work interventions.

1.5 Research Questions

The main research question guiding the study is:

What is the role of social work-related initiatives in providing life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria?

The following sub-questions further guide the research:

- How are social work initiatives and life skills education understood within the context of Nigerian at-risk youth?
- What are the critical structural factors affecting the lives of at-risk youth in Nigeria?
- What are the experiences of target groups, both practitioners and beneficiaries, of social work-related initiatives in Nigeria?

1.6 Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory design comprising a theoretical and an empirical component. The theoretical component was developed through a structured review of peer-reviewed and grey literature published between 2016 and 2026, drawn from databases including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and African Journals Online, alongside reports from organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank. This literature was examined through a thematic synthesis used to conceptualise the key terms, map the structural drivers of youth vulnerability, and establish the theoretical framework of Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment perspective that guides the analysis.

The empirical component generated primary data through semi-structured interviews with 27 participants, comprising 17 programme facilitators and 10 beneficiaries recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Practitioner interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, while beneficiary interviews were conducted face-to-face by trained research assistants in Nigeria. The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis supported by MAXQDA software. The full methodological procedures, including the study setting, sampling strategy, ethical considerations, and measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigour, are presented in detail in Chapter Three.

1.7 Significance of the Study

1.7.1 Significance for Policy

This study contributes to policy discussions on youth development in Nigeria by identifying the gaps between policy intentions and actual practice in life skills delivery for at-risk youth. The evidence generated provides a foundation for advocating the integration of life skills education and social work expertise into national youth and education frameworks, and for strengthening the case for the formal recognition and inclusion of social work professionals in government and community-based programmes.

1.7.2 Significance for Practice

For practitioners, including social workers, educators, NGO staff, and community leaders, the study clarifies which life skills are most relevant to at-risk youth in Nigeria and which delivery approaches are most effective in reaching them. By drawing on both practitioner and beneficiary perspectives, the findings support more responsive, context-sensitive, and interprofessional approaches to programme design and implementation.

1.7.3 Significance for Knowledge

Academically, the study addresses a clear gap in the peer-reviewed literature on social work-related life skills initiatives in Nigeria, contributes context-specific empirical evidence, and applies Critical Social

Work theory to a Global South setting. By centring the voices of practitioners and young people, it contributes to participatory, bottom-up knowledge production and lays a foundation for further research.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

1.8.1 Life Skills Education

In this study, life skills education refers to structured learning that builds the psychosocial abilities, including communication, decision-making, problem-solving, emotional regulation, and coping, that enable young people to manage everyday challenges and respond to structural disadvantage (WHO, 1997).

1.8.2 Social Work-Related Initiatives

In this study, social work-related initiatives are organised programmes, typically led by NGOs and community-based organisations, that apply social work principles such as psychosocial support, advocacy, and empowerment to address the needs of at-risk youth. The term "related" is used because most such programmes in Nigeria are not led by professionally trained social workers.

1.8.3 At-Risk Youth

In this study, at-risk youth refers to young people aged 15–30 whose socio-economic, family, and community circumstances, including poverty, educational exclusion, displacement, conflict, abandonment, or street involvement, increase their likelihood of adverse outcomes without adequate intervention or support.

1.9 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into six chapters. Chapter One has introduced the study by setting out the background, statement of the problem, research aim, objectives, and questions, the significance of the study, and the definitions of the key terms. Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature and presents the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the study, drawing on Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment perspective. Chapter Three presents the methodology, including the qualitative exploratory design, study setting, participant selection, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, reflexivity, and the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigour. Chapter Four presents and interprets the findings from the practitioner and beneficiary interviews, organised around the five themes that emerged from the data. Chapter Five discusses these findings in relation to the existing literature and the theoretical framework. Chapter Six concludes the thesis by summarising the central findings, drawing out implications for policy, practice, and knowledge, offering targeted recommendations, and proposing directions for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter situates the study within existing scholarship by examining the intersection of life skills education, youth vulnerability, and social work practice in Nigeria. It explores how structural inequalities necessitate a shift from individual-focused interventions to critical, empowerment-based strategies. The chapter begins with conceptual definitions of life skills education and at-risk youth, then examines the structural determinants of youth vulnerability and the professional and institutional gaps in Nigeria's social work response. Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment framework are then introduced as the theoretical lenses guiding the study, followed by an empirical review of state-led and NGO-led interventions, the conceptual framework, and a summary of the gaps the study addresses.

2.1 Literature Search Technique

A structured search of peer-reviewed and grey literature published between 2016 and 2026 was conducted in line with expectations for currency in social science research (Ridley, 2012; Booth et al., 2021). Databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and African Journals Online (AJOL), alongside reports from organisations including UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank. Search terms covered life skills education, at-risk youth, social work initiatives, social work in Nigeria, and NGO interventions for young people, with priority given to Nigerian-focused studies, though relevant international literature was included where local evidence was limited.

The search revealed a significant dearth of peer-reviewed literature specifically addressing social work-related initiatives for life skills education of at-risk youth in Nigeria, which supports Amadasun's (2020) observation that formal social work services in Nigeria are constrained by weak legal recognition and inadequate state support. To address this gap, the review was expanded to include grey literature and forward snowballing of reference lists from relevant studies.

2.2 Conceptualising Key Terms: Life Skills and At-Risk Youth in Nigeria

2.2.1 Life Skills Education: Beyond Behavioural Adaptation

Life skills education is defined as the development of psychosocial abilities including critical thinking, emotional regulation, and decision-making that enable individuals to navigate the demands of daily life (WHO, 1997; Oyeyemi et al., 2024; Unimke et al., 2025). Within the Nigerian context, empirical evidence suggests that these interventions are vital for improving the internal psychological state of at-risk youth. For instance, targeted training in psychosocial abilities has been shown to significantly reduce depressive symptoms and anxiety among adolescents in Lagos (Oyeyemi et al., 2024), while mastery of problem-solving and communication skills correlates with a decrease in violent tendencies in high-risk neighbourhoods such as Calabar (Unimke et al., 2025).

Beyond individual psychological benefits, life skills foster agency and resilience, allowing marginalised youth to move from passive adaptation to active social participation (DeJaeghere & Murphy-Graham, 2022; Singh & Agarwal, 2024). In environments such as Nigeria, defined by structural inequality, life skills education serves as a tool for young people to navigate and challenge oppressive social conditions rather than merely adjust to them.

2.2.2 The Nigerian Context: The Delivery Gap

Despite being formally included in the national curriculum, life skills education in Nigeria remains weakly implemented within the formal school system. This gap is largely driven by structural challenges such as corruption, chronic underfunding, inadequate learning resources, and a severe shortage of trained personnel capable of delivering psychosocial and developmental support to students (Yusuf & Aderibigbe, 2020). As a result, life skills education often exists more in policy documents than in actual classroom practice. This implementation failure has unequal consequences, as it is most severe in rural communities and low-income urban areas where schools are already under-resourced and students are more likely to lack access to quality education and support systems. Consequently, many at-risk youth in these settings remain excluded from structured opportunities that could enhance their coping skills, resilience, and overall development (Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026).

This persistent delivery gap in the formal education system (National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS). (2024)) has created space for the third sector, particularly non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations, to play a central role in providing life skills training. These organisations have increasingly become key actors in reaching marginalised groups who are often outside the coverage of state services, including out-of-school youth, unaccompanied minors, children living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, and girls affected by early marriage (Akpan & Udoh, 2022). Through targeted interventions such as mentorship programmes, psychosocial support, and empowerment training, NGOs help to fill critical service gaps left by the state. Empirical evidence further shows that these non-formal programmes are essential in strengthening the coping mechanisms and adaptive capacities of vulnerable youth, particularly in displacement and conflict-affected contexts where government support systems are weak or absent (Garba et al., 2021).

2.2.3 At-Risk Youth in Nigeria

The term at-risk youth identify young people exposed to socio-environmental conditions such as extreme poverty, educational exclusion, conflict, and a lack of social protection that significantly increase the probability of adverse life outcomes (Yusuf & Nasirudeen, 2024; Filges et al., 2020). While traditional definitions emphasise vulnerabilities such as school failure, substance abuse, and delinquency (Filges et al., 2020), in the Nigerian context these risks are frequently interrelated and cumulative; for example, street

involvement often functions as a precursor to child labour, exploitation, and systemic neglect (Lawrence & Adebowale, 2023; Amoo et al., 2020; Yusuf & Nasirudeen, 2024; Kiss et al., 2022).

In Nigeria, youth aged 15–35 are disproportionately affected by risks that are primarily structural rather than individual (Virk et al., 2023; Adeniyi & Olomola, 2021; Lawrence & Adebowale, 2023). Consequently, the at-risk label must be applied with caution to avoid pathologising the individual. Critical Social Work (CSW) reframes risk as a socially constructed condition rooted in unequal power relations and post-colonial governance failures (Amadasun, 2020; Umar & Maaji, 2025). Rather than asking what is wrong with the young person, a critical lens investigates the systemic conditions that maintain their vulnerability (Virk et al., 2023).

The high rates of poverty and youth unemployment in Nigeria underscore a structural trap in which struggle is the result of systemic inequality rather than a lack of entrepreneurial effort or individual capacity (Chidi, 2025). These failures are exacerbated by large coverage gaps in social security, high levels of corruption, and the exclusion of rural communities from development plans (Kicsi et al., 2024; Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026). Effective social work practice must therefore shift its focus from fixing individual deficits to transforming the oppressive structures and uneven development that constrain Nigerian youth (Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026; Gray & Amadasun, 2024).

2.3. Structural Determinants of Youth Vulnerability in Nigeria

Youth vulnerability in Nigeria is shaped by deep structural conditions, the weakness of government social support systems among the most consequential, which has created sustained reliance on social work and related services to fill the resulting welfare void (Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026). The labour market offers few stable employment pathways even for university graduates, and many young people are pushed into precarious informal work such as street trading and point-of-sale (POS) agent banking as a means of subsistence (Amadasun, 2020; NBS, 2024). Within this context, household priorities are dominated by immediate survival needs, particularly food security, with rising food prices and inflation further constraining the capacity of families to invest in education or skills development (Ahmed & Tochukwu, 2024). This sustained material pressure undermines not only economic stability but also young people's cognitive capacity, concentration, and emotional regulation. From a social work perspective, life skills education in this environment cannot be treated as a neutral educational activity but must be approached as a structured, professionally guided, and trauma-informed intervention designed to equip young people to navigate an unstable and exclusionary labour market.

These inequalities are compounded by structural deficiencies in the Nigerian state, particularly within the education system. Approximately 10.5 million children are out of school in Nigeria, reflecting a significant access gap that disproportionately affects children from low-income backgrounds (UNICEF, 2024). Even

within the formal system, learning often remains rote-based, prioritising memorisation and examination performance over the development of practical competencies such as problem-solving, communication, and digital literacy. Consequently, many young people leave school without the foundational skills required for everyday life or work (Azubuike et al., 2024). This widening gap between formal educational provision and the practical demand of contemporary life elevates the role of community-based programmes and social work initiatives as essential providers of the life skills the school system has consistently failed to deliver.

These challenges are further deepened by widespread insecurity and ongoing conflict in Nigeria, often described as state-driven vulnerability, in which violence and displacement weaken or completely break down the informal systems that normally protect young people (Umar & Maaji, 2025). Armed attacks, banditry, and community violence, especially in northern regions, have disrupted everyday life and damaged key social institutions including schools and community support systems. As a result, many young people lose access to safe learning environments, family stability, and basic social support. Nigeria now has one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally, with about 10.5 million children affected, largely due to insecurity, poverty, and weak infrastructure (UNICEF, 2024). In addition, displacement into IDP camps further exposes youth to poor living conditions, limited education, and increased risks of exploitation and poor mental health (Olufadewa et al., 2024). Together, these conditions push many young people into long-term social exclusion and deepen their overall vulnerability.

Gender further deepens youth vulnerability in Nigeria, particularly for girls who face multiple layers of disadvantage shaped by cultural expectations, social norms, and insecurity (Amadasun, 2021). These entrenched roles limit girls' independence and restrict their access to education, employment, and broader social opportunities (UNICEF, 2024). Early marriage, particularly in northern Nigeria where about 30% of girls are married before 18, contributes to early school dropout and reduced long-term economic independence (UNICEF, 2024). These vulnerabilities are further worsened in conflict-affected areas, where girls face higher risks of gender-based violence, forced marriage, and exploitation (Isola & Tolulope, 2022; Njoku & Akintayo, 2021; Svallfors et al., 2024), while digital exclusion also limits their access to learning and economic opportunities (Ezekwe & Enweani, 2019). Consequently, professional social work-related life skills are not merely extra-curricular but are a critical prerequisite for providing marginalised youth with the strategic tools and resilience needed to survive and challenge these subordinate conditions.

2.4 The Professional and Institutional Gap in Nigeria's Social Work Response

Globally, social work is a state-regulated profession that provides structured welfare and protection services to at-risk populations through formal training, ethical accountability, and integration into public welfare systems. In Nigeria, however, this institutional infrastructure is largely absent. Social work-related initiatives operate as a fragmented mix of NGO projects, religious outreach, and community efforts rather than a coherent, state-funded system (Amadasun, 2020; Okoye & Onalu, 2023). These initiatives are rooted

in the same principles that guide the social work profession, including social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity, articulating a commitment to challenging inequality and promoting liberation. The actualisation of these principles in practice is, however, constrained by organisational contexts, resource limitations, professional cultures, and broader political-economic structures. Social work in Nigeria faces challenges including inadequate funding, shortages of trained professionals, limited professional recognition, and weak integration into social policy frameworks (Oyebamiji, 2025; Okoye & Onalu, 2023; Amadasun, 2020; Gray & Amadasun, 2024). These constraints are not incidental but reflect political choices about the value accorded to social welfare, the priority given to addressing marginalisation, and whose interests dominate in resource allocation. While the Nigerian government routinely references social welfare in its policy documents, financial commitment to the sector remains insufficient to translate intent into operational delivery (Eshiotse et al., 2023). The burden of care has consequently shifted onto the private sector, with NGOs and international agencies performing roles the state has effectively abandoned, often resulting in inconsistent and unsustainable interventions (Nnadi et al., 2025; Odoom et al., 2023).

2.4.1 Life Skills as a Social Work-Oriented Response

A significant conceptual gap exists between conventional vocational training programmes and social work-grounded life skills interventions for youth. Traditional vocational models are largely shaped by a human capital perspective, where young people are treated primarily as individuals to be trained and equipped with skills for entry into the labour market. While this approach may improve employability in theory, it often fails to address the deeper structural conditions that produce and sustain youth exclusion, including unemployment, corruption, weak institutions, and limited state protection (Osaiyuwu, 2023; Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026). As a result, many young people remain trapped in cycles of informal work and economic instability even after completing such programmes.

In contrast, a social work-oriented approach goes beyond skills acquisition to engage with the broader social realities that shape young people's lives. It is grounded in critical pedagogy, which emphasises awareness building and encourages young people to question and reflect on the social, economic, and political systems that affect them. This includes developing what Freire (1970) describes as critical consciousness, the ability to recognise and challenge structural inequalities rather than simply adapt to them. In the context of at-risk youth in Nigeria, this approach is particularly relevant because it helps young people understand the systemic barriers, including inequality and corruption, that limit their opportunities. It thereby positions life skills education not only as a tool for employment but also as a means of empowerment, agency, and social change (Amadasun, 2020; Gray & Amadasun, 2024).

2.4.2 The Professionalisation Gap: Exclusion and Underutilisation

The most critical failure in current youth development is the underutilisation of professional social workers in programme design and leadership. In Nigeria, social work is frequently misinterpreted as charity that can be performed by any well-meaning facilitator rather than as a specialised discipline and profession (Gray & Amadasun, 2024). Consequently, many initiatives are led and implemented by individuals from backgrounds and disciplines that do not include professional training in trauma-informed care or complex psychosocial needs analysis (NILDS, 2024; Amadasun, 2020).

The historical lack of legal backing for the profession has resulted in a proliferation of programmes that function as political optics or patronage rather than genuine pathways to development (ActionAid Nigeria, 2025). Without the involvement of professionally trained social workers, whose practice is grounded in ethical engagement, rapport-building, and sustained trust with service users, these interventions often struggle to achieve meaningful and consistent participation from marginalised populations. In many cases, young people and vulnerable groups already hold low trust in state-led or externally driven programmes, and without the relational and psychosocial competencies that social workers bring, such initiatives risk limited engagement and reduced effectiveness over time.

Addressing these gaps requires a shift toward interprofessional collaboration in which social workers occupy central roles alongside educators and policymakers. This ensures that life skills education is not reduced to vocational instruction but delivered through a lens of clinical rigour and structural advocacy (Ngwu & Iwuagwu, 2022). While professionalising the social workforce is not a panacea for Nigeria's deep-seated structural issues, it is a critical prerequisite for shifting the youth development paradigm. By integrating professional standards, initiatives can move beyond reactive, short-term "mopping up" exercises toward a model of strategic advocacy. This professional lens provides the systemic analysis required to navigate and challenge the institutional barriers that perpetuate youth marginalisation, ensuring that interventions are transformative rather than merely palliative.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks, Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment framework. Critical Social Work provides the primary analytical lens through which youth vulnerability, life skills education, and social work practice in Nigeria are understood, positioning structural inequality rather than individual failure as the root cause of marginalisation. The Person-in-Environment framework complements this by insisting that any meaningful intervention must address not only the individual but also the broader environmental and structural conditions shaping their life. Together, these frameworks provide a coherent theoretical foundation for examining how social work-related initiatives can move beyond surface-level skills delivery toward genuinely transformative, rights-based practice with at-risk youth in Nigeria.

2.5.1 Critical Social Work

This study is theoretically anchored in Critical Social Work, a paradigm that fundamentally rejects the pathologising of the individual and instead locates human challenges within restrictive social, economic, and political environments. Critical Social Work evolved from the liberatory educational philosophy of Paulo Freire (1970), whose concept of critical consciousness challenged the idea that education is ever neutral, arguing instead that it functions either as a tool of oppression or as a means of liberation. Building on this, scholars including Jan Fook (2016), Karen Healy (2022), Robert Adams (2017), and Lena Dominelli (2017) developed Critical Social Work into a practice framework that moves away from person-changing models focused on individual adaptation and toward system-informed practice oriented around empowerment, structural advocacy, and professional partnership.

In the context of this study, Critical Social Work provides the analytical lens through which life skills education is understood not as a response to individual deficiency but as a structured intervention in structurally produced conditions. The perceived absence of life skills among at-risk youth in Nigeria is not a failure of character or personal motivation; it is a direct consequence of systemic exclusion, poverty, conflict, and inadequate state welfare provision that limits young people's navigational capacity, that is, their ability to move through and act upon the constrained environments they inhabit (Adams, 2017; Dominelli, 2017). From this perspective, the social worker or practitioner is not a manager of casualties but a professional partner who works alongside young people to build the agency, critical consciousness, and resilience needed to understand and challenge the systems shaping their lives.

Critical Social Work as applied in this study operates through four interconnected principles. First, critical consciousness, drawn from Freire (1970), positions life skills education as a means of enabling young people to analyse the structural factors affecting their lives and develop the internal capacity to act upon them, rather than simply adapting to circumstances. Second, power, reflectivity, and partnership, as argued by Fook (2016) and Healy (2022), require practitioners to continuously examine the power dynamics inherent in their relationships with service users, acting as facilitators rather than experts, and ensuring that young people are co-creators of their own development. Third, process-driven empowerment, as defined by Adams (2017), understands empowerment not as an outcome to be delivered but as an ongoing process through which individuals and communities gain increasing control over their own lives, making it directly applicable to life skills programming that seeks to build long-term navigational capacity. Fourth, anti-oppressive practice, as developed by Dominelli (2017), insists that professional social work must actively name and challenge the intersecting structures of poverty, gender inequality, displacement, and cultural marginalisation that constrain opportunity, shifting the focus of intervention from individual behaviour change to structural transformation.

2.5.2 The Person-in-Environment (PIE) Framework

Complementing Critical Social Work, this study also draws on the Person-in-Environment framework, which holds that individuals cannot be understood or effectively supported in isolation from the environments shaping their lives (Healy, 2022; Germain & Gitterman, 1980). At-risk youth in Nigeria do not exist outside of context. They are embedded in environments shaped by poverty, family instability, educational exclusion, displacement, conflict, and an absent state welfare system, and it is these environmental conditions that produce and sustain their vulnerability. The Person-in-Environment framework therefore demands that intervention address not only the young person but the structural context in which they live, which is precisely where many government-led programmes in Nigeria have consistently fallen short by prioritising enrolment figures and vocational outputs while leaving root causes unaddressed.

Together, Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment framework position life skills education as a vehicle for building critical consciousness, navigational capacity, and agency, enabling at-risk youth to understand and act upon the systems shaping their disadvantage rather than simply adjust to them (Freire, 1970; Dominelli, 2017; Adams, 2017; Healy, 2022). Critical Social Work further challenges what Theron (2024) describes as the dominant hustle narrative, the cultural expectation that young people should simply work harder and be more resilient, arguing that resilience without structural transformation produces only survival, not genuine empowerment.

2.6 Empirical Review of Interventions: What Works?

Empirical evidence in Nigeria suggests that the efficacy of life skills interventions is heavily dependent on the delivery model and the specific vulnerability of the youth population concerned. The following review examines evidence across state-led and NGO-driven sectors.

2.6.1 State-Led and National Frameworks

Nigeria has implemented several government-led interventions targeting out-of-school children, street-involved youth, and those affected by conflict, often in partnership with NGOs and international agencies (UNICEF, 2024). However, most have struggled to produce lasting impact due to weak implementation, corruption, and structural constraints that remain unaddressed.

The Better Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA), a World Bank-funded programme launched across 17 states in 2017, exemplifies this pattern. Despite over $611 million in combined investment, Nigeria's out-of-school population grew from 10.5 million in 2020 to over 20 million by 2022, with 74% of children aged 7–14 still lacking basic literacy and numeracy (Nwoke et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Its results-based financing model incentivised states to report enrolment figures without addressing the conditions needed for sustained attendance, including infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, and insecurity, with only 14% of schools meeting basic safety standards (Oyekan et al., 2023; Ogunode & Adanna, 2022; UNICEF, 2024). The most marginalised groups, including Almajiri children,

rural girls, and conflict-displaced children in the northeast, were captured in data but not meaningfully reached (Oyeyipo, 2024; Abubakar, 2025; Unimke et al., 2025). This reflects a broader results trap in which donor metrics drive compliance rather than genuine transformation (Ogunode & Adanna, 2022).

The At-Risk Children Programme (ARC-P), designed to support street-involved and conflict-affected youth through education re-entry and psychosocial support, has faced similar structural collapse. Implementation has been marked by poor continuity across administrations, weak inter-agency coordination, and a near-total absence of qualified social workers, with delivery relying on community facilitators rather than trained professionals (FGN, 2021; Isangha et al., 2024). This directly mirrors the social work gap identified in this study, where the absence of professional psychosocial expertise reduces complex child protection work to surface-level facilitation. Despite all states ratifying the Child Rights Act by December 2023, Nigeria has not submitted a report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child since 2010, underscoring a persistent accountability gap between legislative commitment and implementation reality (UNICEF, 2024; Osaiyuwu, 2023).

The Almajiri Integrated Education Programme similarly collapsed despite 15 billion naira invested in dedicated model schools. Its top-down design failed to engage community religious leaders, Mallams, and parents, leaving most structures abandoned or repurposed while Almajiri children returned to street-based patterns of learning and begging (Umar & Maaji, 2025; Teke et al., 2022). The National Commission for Almajiri and Out-of-School Children Act (2024) has since provided a legislative basis for reform but has produced little tangible progress, with the system continuing to deteriorate under weak governance and absent professional support (Umar & Maaji, 2025).

The National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP), which used daily meals as an incentive for school attendance among vulnerable children, reached 9.9 million children at its peak before being suspended in 2024 following ministerial fraud, with prior investigations uncovering 349 ghost schools and 2.67 billion naira diverted into private accounts (Dorlach et al., 2025; Nairametrics, 2025). For children in conflict-affected communities where food insecurity is acute, this withdrawal directly removed a critical protective factor that had been sustaining school engagement. Drug prevention initiatives by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) have similarly remained enforcement-focused, offering little in the way of rehabilitation, trauma-informed care, or mental health support (UNODC, 2023).

Collectively, these interventions reveal two cross-cutting failures directly relevant to this study. First, a quantitative trap in which programme success is measured by enrolment figures and beneficiary counts rather than sustained psychosocial outcomes (Ogunode & Adanna, 2022; World Bank, 2017). Second, and more critically, a social work gap, that is, the systematic exclusion of professional social workers from programme design and delivery, that leaves at-risk children without the individualised, trauma-informed, and structurally aware support their circumstances demand (Isangha et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2023). These

are not isolated programme failures; they reflect a structural inability to move beyond short-term intervention toward the kind of sustained, rights-based, and professionally grounded youth protection that this study argues social work-related initiatives are uniquely positioned to provide.

2.6.2 Targeted Community-Based Interventions (NGO Models)

Due to weak implementation of state-led youth policies and persistent bureaucratic inefficiencies, NGOs have emerged as the primary providers of life skills education and psychosocial support for at-risk youth in Nigeria, filling critical gaps left by an under-resourced and fragmented state welfare system (Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026; Amadasun, 2020). Unlike government programmes that are often constrained by political cycles, rigid bureaucratic structures, and accountability failures, NGOs demonstrate greater operational flexibility, community embeddedness, and responsiveness to local needs, enabling them to reach populations that formal state services consistently fail to engage, particularly those in informal settlements, conflict-affected areas, and low-income communities (Garba et al., 2021).

A strong example is Slum2School Africa, which operates in Makoko, Lagos, an informal waterfront settlement characterised by poverty, unsafe housing, poor sanitation, and systemic educational exclusion rooted in decades of state neglect. Rather than waiting for government infrastructure, Slum2School Africa deploys mobile classrooms, digital learning platforms, scholarships, and psychosocial support directly into the community (Slum2School Africa, 2024). Crucially, its model integrates life skills including problem-solving, emotional resilience, teamwork, and critical thinking through experiential and community-based learning, treating children not as passive beneficiaries but as active participants in their own development (Slum2School Africa, 2024). This participatory approach reflects a social work-informed understanding of agency and navigational capital that is largely absent from state-led programmes.

Similarly, LEAP Africa implements structured youth development programmes focused on leadership, employability, and civic engagement, strengthening young people's transition into adulthood through school-based and community interventions that combine life skills with mentorship and critical consciousness development (LEAP Africa, 2024). In conflict-affected northern Nigeria and displacement contexts, the Aid for Rural Education Access Initiative (AREAi) works with out-of-school and conflict-affected children in internally displaced persons camps through its FastTrack programme, which combines accelerated basic education with socio-emotional learning, trauma-informed safe spaces, and life skills such as adaptive decision-making, teamwork, and emotional regulation using a learner-centred Teaching at the Right Level approach (UNESCO, 2024; AREAi, 2025). This model directly addresses the psychosocial dimensions of displacement that state programmes have consistently overlooked.

Her Voice Foundation similarly targets adolescent girls in rural Cross River State through second-chance education, rights-based life skills, and psychosocial support aimed at addressing early marriage and educational exclusion, with evidence suggesting that storytelling and advocacy-based approaches foster

genuine agency and enable girls to negotiate access to education despite cultural resistance (Her Voice Foundation, 2025; Odije et al., 2025).

Other organisations contribute complementary dimensions of youth development. SOS Children's Villages Nigeria provides residential care and structured life skills development for children without parental care, promoting independent living and psychosocial wellbeing (SOS Children's Villages International, 2024). Teach For Nigeria addresses educational inequality by training and placing fellows in underserved schools to strengthen students' soft skills and academic engagement (Teach For Nigeria, 2024), while Aflatoun International, working through Nigerian partner organisations, promotes social and financial literacy for children and adolescents, equipping them with practical skills in money management, rights awareness, and responsible citizenship (Aflatoun International, 2024). The Tony Elumelu Foundation supports older at-risk youth through entrepreneurship training, mentorship, and seed funding aimed at building economic independence and sustainable livelihoods (Tony Elumelu Foundation, 2024).

What distinguishes these NGO-led interventions from state-led programmes is not simply their community reach, but the quality and orientation of their delivery. Their models are characterised by participatory design, community embeddedness, and sensitivity to the structural and psychosocial realities of at-risk youth, qualities that align closely with the principles of Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment framework central to this study. Yet despite this comparative effectiveness, the absence of consistent government backing and national policy integration means that even the most responsive NGO interventions remain vulnerable to funding discontinuity, limited geographic reach, and programme fragmentation, constraining their ability to scale or sustain impact beyond project cycles (Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026; Amadasun, 2020).

2.7 Conceptual Framework

While the theoretical framework presented in Section 2.4 sets out the established bodies of theory that underpin this study, namely Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment perspective, the conceptual framework presented here serves a distinct purpose and is therefore not a repetition of it. The theoretical framework explains the general principles and assumptions through which the study interprets social reality, whereas the conceptual framework translates those principles into a study-specific model showing how the particular concepts of this research, the structural drivers of vulnerability, life skills education, social work-related initiatives, and transformative outcomes, are understood to relate to one another. In short, the theoretical framework provides the analytical lens, while the conceptual framework provides the map: it operationalises the chosen theories into the specific logical structure that guides the analysis of how social work-related life skills initiatives support at-risk youth in Nigeria.

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that integrates Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment perspective to explain how social work-related life skills initiatives can support at-risk youth in Nigeria to move from structural marginalisation toward agency, participation, and empowerment. Youth vulnerability is understood as structurally produced through poverty, weak education systems, unemployment, displacement, and limited social protection, conditions that create what Albert & Oyowavotu (2026), describes as a structural trap in which limited opportunity is driven by systemic inequality rather than individual failure. In Nigeria, the withdrawal of the state from its welfare responsibilities has deepened these vulnerabilities, leaving NGOs and community-based organisations as the primary providers of psychosocial support, mentorship, and life skills education for young people in underserved communities (Amadasun, 2020; Garba et al., 2021; Nwokedi et al., 2023).

Life skills education, understood here as the development of psychosocial competencies including critical thinking, emotional regulation, communication, decision-making, and problem-solving (WHO, 1997; Oyeyemi et al., 2024; Unimke et al., 2025), is positioned within this framework not as a neutral training activity but as a rights-based and structurally aware intervention. Evidence from Nigeria demonstrates that such interventions improve psychological wellbeing, strengthen coping capacity, and reduce engagement in risky behaviour (Oyeyemi et al., 2024). Grounded in Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment framework, and delivered through community-based approaches that prioritise trust, cultural resonance, and co-design, life skills education becomes a transformative pathway through which young people can move from passive survival toward critical consciousness, navigational competence, and meaningful social participation (Dominelli, 2017; Fook, 2016; Healy, 2022; Akpan & Udoh, 2022).

Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework guiding this study, showing how structural drivers of vulnerability are mediated by Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment framework, operationalised through life skills education delivered by social work-related initiatives, and translated into transformative outcomes for at-risk youth.

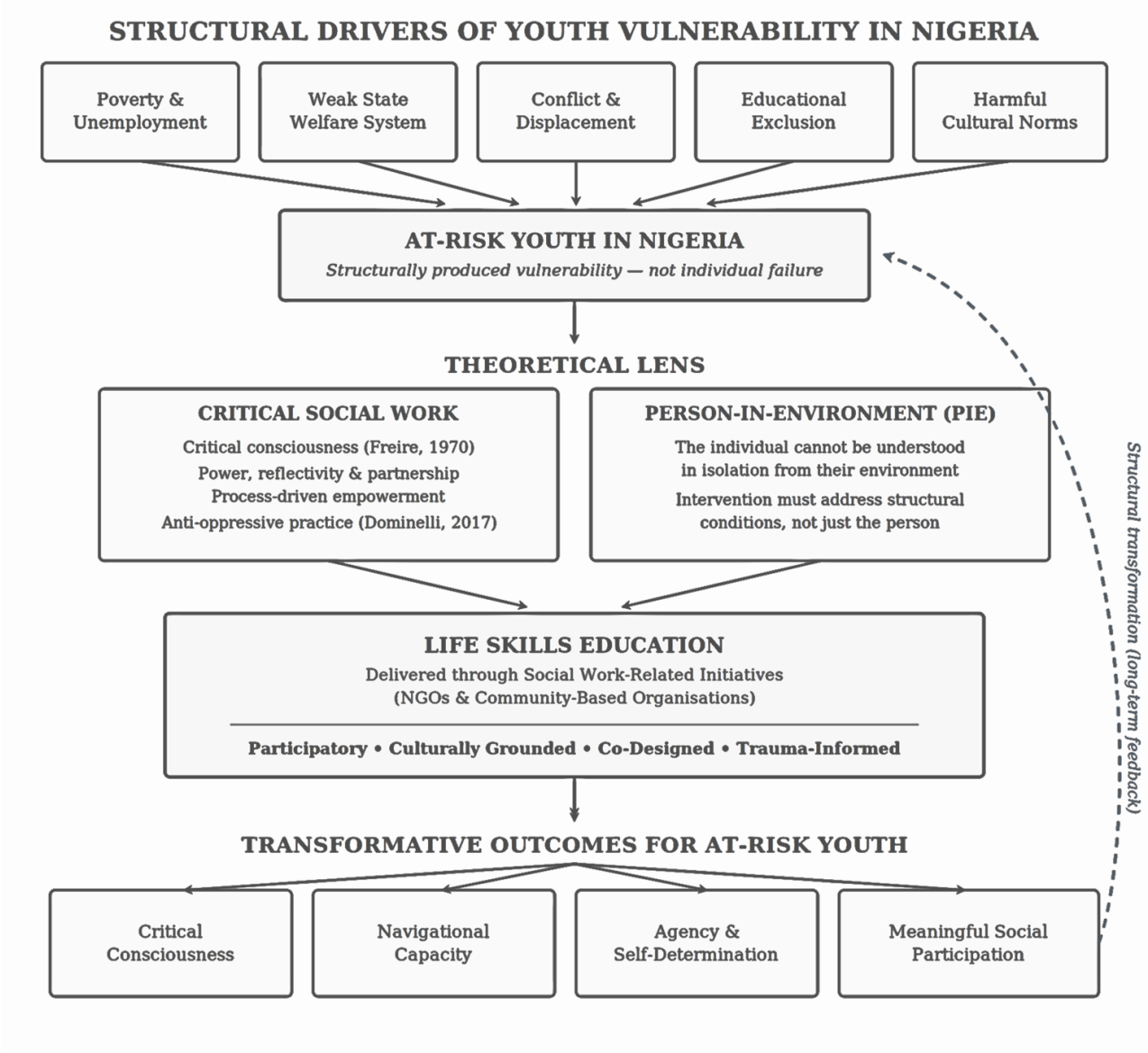


Figure 1. Conceptual framework integrating Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment framework for life skills education with at-risk youth in Nigeria. Source: Author (2026).

Summary and Study Gaps

In summary, the literature analysis reveals that life skills education is a globally recognised tool for youth development, yet its implementation in Nigeria is severely constrained by weak state welfare systems, leaving NGOs and community-based organisations to fill a gap the state has largely failed to address. Two key gaps in the existing literature justify this study.

First, peer-reviewed documentation of how social work-related initiatives are operationalised to reach Nigeria's most vulnerable youth is largely absent. These practices are most often recorded in donor reports and internal evaluations rather than academic literature, meaning there is limited empirical evidence on their methods, effectiveness, and sustainability. This study addresses this gap directly by bringing NGO-led and community-based practice into a peer-reviewed academic framework and centring the voices of both practitioners and beneficiaries.

Second, a structured professional social work perspective is largely missing from existing life skills programming in Nigeria. Key frameworks including trauma-informed care, person-in-environment analysis, and structural advocacy are rarely integrated into programme design, and there is limited understanding of how their inclusion or absence affects outcomes for young people. This study addresses this gap by examining how social work principles can be meaningfully integrated into grassroots interventions to support transformative empowerment rather than surface-level skills delivery.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology adopted to investigate the role of social work-related third-sector initiatives in providing life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria. It outlines the research approach and design, literature search technique, study setting, study population, sampling strategy, participant recruitment, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and the measures used to ensure trustworthiness and rigour. The chapter also explains the practical procedures used to access both service providers and programme beneficiaries within the Nigerian context.

3.1 Research Approach and Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory research design. A qualitative approach was most appropriate because the study sought to understand how social work-related initiatives contribute to life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria, which required engaging with lived experiences, perceptions, and multiple perspectives rather than measuring outcomes through numbers alone. Qualitative research enables attention to feelings, motivations, and interpretations that are essential in understanding how interventions are delivered and valued (Shank, 2002), making it well suited to the nature of this inquiry.

An exploratory design was adopted because limited research has examined how third-sector organisations contribute to life skills development for at-risk youth in Nigeria (Bryman, 2012). As Creswell (2014) notes, exploratory qualitative studies seek to understand and discover through questions of how and why, and this study was guided precisely by those questions, exploring how programmes are implemented, how beneficiaries experience them, and how practitioners understand their effectiveness within the Nigerian context.

3.2 Study Setting

Nigeria was purposively selected as the study setting given its status as Africa's most populous country, with over 230 million people, a substantial proportion of whom are under the age of 30 (United Nations, 2024; National Population Commission, 2024). It represents a context where structural conditions including poverty, conflict, educational exclusion, and weak state welfare provision place many young people at heightened risk, making it a highly relevant setting for examining life skills education and social work-related interventions.

Nigeria was also selected because it is the researcher's native country, which provided contextual familiarity with the social, cultural, and institutional environment, eased access to organisations and gatekeepers, and supported culturally informed engagement with participants. In addition, it was selected because third-sector organisations have become the primary providers of youth welfare and life skills programming in the absence of adequate state provision, which is directly relevant to the focus of this study.

Participants were recruited from diverse locations across the country without restriction to urban, rural, or semi-urban classifications, in order to capture a broad range of operational contexts and practitioner experiences.

3.3 Study Population and Participant Selection

The study population consisted of two categories of participants. The first comprised service providers and programme actors, including social workers, NGO staff, project managers, founders, coordinators, and facilitators with direct experience in designing or implementing youth-focused interventions. To be included, participants had to be currently or recently active in a social work-related initiative targeting at-risk youth in Nigeria. Those excluded were individuals with no direct involvement in programme planning or delivery, or those working in sectors unrelated to youth development and social welfare.

The second category comprised programme beneficiaries, specifically young people aged 15 to 30 who had participated in or completed a programme organised or implemented by the practitioner participants in this study at least three years prior to the interview. This time threshold was deliberately applied because beneficiaries who had completed programmes at least three years earlier were better positioned to speak to the lasting impact of those interventions on their lives, rather than offering only immediate impressions. Young people with no connection to the programmes represented in the practitioner sample, or whose participation was more recent than three years, were excluded.

3.4 Sampling Strategy and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with direct and relevant experience of social work-related life skills initiatives for at-risk youth in Nigeria. This approach is well suited to qualitative research where the goal is to generate rich, contextually grounded insight rather than statistical representation, and where participant selection is guided by relevance to the research questions rather than random chance (Patton, 2014; Bryman, 2012). It enabled the intentional recruitment of both practitioners, including social workers, NGO staff, project coordinators, and founders, and beneficiaries with firsthand experience of third-sector life skills programming in Nigeria.

Initial recruitment drew on the researcher's existing professional contacts within the third sector, supplemented by formal outreach through organisational email addresses and LinkedIn. Initial outreach produced a limited response due to low reply rates and the busy schedules of practitioners. Snowball sampling was therefore adopted as a supplementary strategy, with existing participants asked to recommend other eligible individuals. This proved particularly useful in accessing practitioners and founders who were difficult to reach through formal channels.

Beneficiary recruitment was carried out through project managers and programme staff who had already participated in the study, as direct access to former beneficiaries was limited by confidentiality concerns and the fact that some organisations had exited their project communities. Before interviews, a brief preparatory session was held with beneficiary participants to explain the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and voluntary participation in accessible language. This helped build rapport and improve the quality and relevance of responses.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Three separate interview guides were developed, each tailored to a specific participant group. The first was designed for practitioners who identified as qualified social workers. The second was for programme facilitators and practitioners from other professional backgrounds working in social work-related initiatives. The third was for programme beneficiaries. All three guides were drawn directly from the research questions to ensure alignment with the study objectives.

A pilot study was conducted in October 2025 to test and validate the interview guides. Following the pilot, adjustments were made and questions that failed to elicit meaningful or relevant responses were removed or revised before data collection began.

Prior to each practitioner interview, participants were provided with the purpose of the research and all relevant ethical approval documentation. An agreed interview time was then scheduled, and written consent was obtained digitally through an online consent form before the interview proceeded. Practitioner interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom between January and March 2026, as the researcher was not physically present in Nigeria during the data collection period. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent using an iPhone 14 Pro, before being transcribed verbatim. Brief field notes were also taken immediately after each interview to support reflection and aid early sense-making ahead of formal analysis.

For beneficiary participants, ethical approval documentation, the purpose of the research, and all relevant consent information were sent to the collaborating organisations prior to any contact with beneficiaries. This initiated the organisational approval process, after which research assistants facilitated access to and contact with eligible participants. Beneficiary interviews were conducted face-to-face through trained research assistants working in collaboration with these approved organisations, which helped overcome the logistical and confidentiality barriers associated with the researcher's remote position. Each session began with a preparatory session of approximately 20 minutes in which the purpose of the research, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were explained to beneficiaries in accessible language, after which the interview proceeded and lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. Research assistants were proficient

in participants' local languages, which supported clearer communication and richer responses. All beneficiary interviews were audio-recorded, uploaded to a shared drive accessible to the researcher, and transcribed verbatim. Research assistants also provided accompanying notes alongside each recording to capture contextual details and ensure that no meaning was lost in transcription.

3.6 Researcher Reflexivity

A reflexive approach was maintained throughout the research process to support the credibility and internal consistency of the findings. After each interview, the researcher documented analytical memos within 12 to 24 hours, capturing initial impressions, contextual observations, and emerging methodological concerns. This was particularly important given the remote nature of practitioner data collection and the use of research assistants for beneficiary interviews, both of which required ongoing critical reflection on how the researcher's positionality and professional identity as a social work researcher may have shaped participant responses and interview dynamics.

Reflexivity also helped the researcher remain alert to potential power dynamics, particularly in beneficiary interviews where some participants associated the research with organisational evaluation or the prospect of benefits. Steps were taken to address this through clear consent processes and introductory explanations emphasising the academic independence of the study. Awareness was also maintained regarding how recruitment through NGO gatekeepers may have influenced participant selection and the way experiences were narrated, and these considerations informed how the data were interpreted and reported throughout.

3.7 Participant Demographics

3.7.1 Programme Facilitator Demographics

Table 1

Programme Facilitator Demographics

ID	Gender	Age range	Professional role	Background (course of study)	Years of experience	Target population	Intervention setting
P1	Female	25–30	Educator	Education	~7 years	IDPs, street children	Urban, rural slums
P2	Female	35–45	Social worker / programme manager	Social work	~2 years	Sickle cell youth, IDPs, marginalised youth	Urban, semi-rural and displacement camps
P3	Female	25–30	Programme manager	French	8 years	Vulnerable children, street youth, orphans	Predominantly rural

ID	Gender	Age range	Professional role	Background (course of study)	Years of experience	Target population	Intervention setting
P4	Male	35–40	Child Protection Coordinator	Public health	10+ years	Gender, disability and localisation focus	Rural, Northwest (conflict settings)
P5	Female	25–30	Programmes Manager	English and literary studies	7+ years	In-school and out-of-school youth	Rural areas and urban slums
P6	Female	55–60	President / Founder / social worker	Social work	10+ years	Girls, trafficking survivors, substance abuse cases	Urban (shelter) and rural / semi-urban
P7	Male	30–35	Child Protection Officer	Business management	11 years	Youth in conflict-affected communities	Urban and rural settings
P8	Female	35–40	Programme Manager	Education	3–4 years	In-school youth, street children	Mixed
P9	Male	35–40	Child Protection Specialist	Sociology and anthropology	5+years	Unaccompanied children, escapees, detainees	Mainly rural intervention areas
P10	Female	25–35	Assistant Programme Manager	History and international relations	6+ years	General youth population (mostly girls)	Rural and semi-urban areas
P11	Male	25–35	Public Health Practitioner	Public health	~10 years	Key populations (LGBTQ+), SRHR focus	Underserved semi-rural / rural
P12	Female	25–35	Communications Associate	Mass communication	~5 years	In-school, out-of-school youth, adolescents	Urban, semi-urban & rural
P13	Female	35–45	Programme Manager / social worker	Social work	4–6 years	Young girls and adolescents	Urban, semi-urban & rural
P14	Female	25–35	Programme Manager	Biochemistry	5–6 years	Adolescents (10–24 years), SRHR focus	Semi-urban settings
P15	Female	20–29	Lawyer / Project Manager	Law	10 years	Street children	Urban (Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Delta)
P16	Female	25–35	Programme Manager / social worker	Social work	4 years	Children on the move, returnees, victims of	Rural and semi-urban
P17	Male	28–36	Programme Manager	Business management	7 years	irregular migration, Out-of-school youth,	Urban slums and rural

ID	Gender	Age range	Professional role	Background (course of study)	Years of experience	Target population	Intervention setting
						unemployed youth	

Note. N = 17. IDPs = internally displaced persons; LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning; SRHR = sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The facilitator sample comprised 17 participants (P1–P17), 13 female and 4 male, reflecting the general gender pattern across Nigeria's NGO and social welfare sector. Participants ranged in age from their mid-twenties to early sixties, with most between 25 and 45 years old, and experience ranging from two to over eleven years. Their roles included programme managers, child protection coordinators, social workers, protection officers, public health practitioners, educators, a lawyer, and a communications associate. Notably, while all worked in social work-related roles, only a few held formal social work qualifications, with the majority having studied fields such as biochemistry, business management, law, history, and mass communication, directly reflecting the professionalisation gap this study seeks to address. The populations they served included out-of-school youth, street children, internally displaced persons, trafficking survivors, adolescent girls, and conflict-affected youth, across urban slums, rural communities, displacement camps, and conflict-affected settings in both northern and southern Nigeria.

3.7.2 Programme Beneficiary Demographics

Table 2

Programme Beneficiary Demographics

ID	Age range	Gender	Educational status	Employment / training status	Living arrangement	Setting
B1	20–25 years	Female	Completed secondary education	Self-employed	Living with parents	Rural
B2	20–25 years	Female	Primary (dropout)	Informal employment (works in a salon)	Living with relatives	Semi-urban
B3	15–20 years	Female	Secondary education	Not working (student)	Living with parents	Rural
B4	15–20 years	Male	Secondary education	Learning trade	Living alone	Semi-urban
B5	15–20 years	Female	Secondary education	Student	Living with parents	Urban
B6	15–20 years	Female	Secondary education	Student	Living with parents	Semi-urban

ID	Age range	Gender	Educational status	Employment / training status	Living arrangement	Setting
B7	25–30 years	Female	Completed secondary education	Baking	Living alone	Rural
B8	21–26 years	Female	Completed secondary education	Self-employed (small trading)	Living independently	Rural
B9	25–30 years	Female	Secondary education	Self-employed (dressmaking)	Living in shared accommodation	Rural
B10	20–25 years	Female	Completed secondary education	Self-employed (hairdressing)	Living with parents	Semi-urban

Note. N = 10. All beneficiaries had completed a relevant programme at least three years prior to the interview.

The beneficiary sample comprised 10 young people (B1–B10), nine female and one male, aged between 15 and 30 years. Most had completed secondary education, with one early dropout, and the majority were engaged in self-employment, informal trades, or continuing studies. The sample included beneficiaries from rural, semi-urban, and urban settings across Nigeria, allowing for diverse perspectives on how life skills programming had translated into everyday life across different living and working contexts.

3.8 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and managed using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software, which supported systematic coding, organisation, and retrieval of large volumes of interview data. The process began with full familiarisation with the dataset, including repeated reading of all transcripts and the corresponding field notes and analytical memos. Each transcript was checked against its audio recording to ensure accuracy before formal coding began.

The analytical approach was both deductive and inductive. Initial codes informed by the literature and theoretical framework were brought into the analysis deductively, and these were refined and expanded as meaningful segments were coded line by line using both descriptive and interpretive approaches. Brief descriptions and analytical memos were written for each code throughout the process, capturing emerging interpretations and connections between codes and supporting the development of a structured codebook. Practitioner and beneficiary responses were coded separately to preserve the distinctiveness of each group's perspective, before being compared and analysed together to identify convergences and divergences across the dataset.

Related codes were then grouped into broader categories and reviewed for internal consistency. For example, initial codes such as life skills definition, the difference between life skills and vocational or educational skills, and self-esteem and self-regulation were merged into a single broader category reflecting

how participants understood life skills as holistic and psychosocial, which later became Theme One. Similarly, codes such as causes of risk for young people, structural barriers affecting at-risk youth, and groups at greater risk than others were grouped together to form Theme Two on the structural production of youth vulnerability. Notably, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth and young people living with disabilities both emerged inductively during this stage, not anticipated in the initial coding framework but recurring strongly enough across practitioner accounts to warrant inclusion as significant sub-themes within Theme Two. This process of grouping, reviewing, and refining was applied across all codes until five final themes were established, each with sub-themes where necessary to capture nuance. MAXQDA provided a transparent audit trail of all coding decisions and theme development throughout. The final themes were interpreted through the lens of Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment framework and presented as an analytical narrative supported by direct participant quotations.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. For practitioner participants, the purpose of the study, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty were clearly explained before consent was obtained digitally through a consent form sent ahead of each interview. For beneficiary participants, ethical approval documentation and the purpose of the research were sent to collaborating organisations before any contact with beneficiaries was made, initiating the organisational approval process. Consent was then explained and confirmed at the start of each session through the research assistants in participants' local languages.

To protect participant identities, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, with programme facilitators labelled P1 to P17 and beneficiaries B1 to B10. All audio recordings, transcripts, and related data were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher, and beneficiary recordings uploaded by research assistants were transferred to a secure shared drive accessible only to the researcher before being deleted from the assistants' devices after confirmation of successful upload. Particular care was taken when engaging beneficiary participants, given that several were young and potentially vulnerable, and steps were taken throughout to ensure that participation felt safe, voluntary, and free from any association with organisational evaluation or personal consequence.

Google Gemini Pro (Google, 2025) was used as a support tool during the drafting, analysis, and data-processing phases of this work. Specifically, it was used for linguistic review and restructuring of the text, analytical support, and exploratory suggestions of codes and themes. All AI-assisted output was critically reviewed, interpreted, and validated by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the content. The tool did not have access to full interview transcripts, field notes, or sensitive empirical material, and no personal or identifiable data was input into it. Potential limitations and biases of AI-assisted analysis were taken into account, and all final interpretative decisions were made by the author. Any codes or themes suggested by

the tool were treated as exploratory only and were reviewed and confirmed by the author in line with the terms of informed consent.

3.10 Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure the quality and rigour of the study, the four criteria of trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied throughout the research process. Credibility was achieved through the triangulation of perspectives from both practitioners and beneficiaries, ensuring that findings were grounded in multiple and complementary accounts rather than a single source. Transferability was supported by providing rich contextual descriptions of the Nigerian third-sector environment, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was strengthened through transparent documentation of all methodological decisions, from sampling and recruitment through to data collection and thematic analysis in MAXQDA, creating a clear and traceable research process. Confirmability was enhanced through the reflexive approach described in Section 3.7, in which interpretations were consistently grounded in participants' own narratives, and an audit trail of coding decisions and theme development was maintained throughout to minimise researcher bias and ensure findings remained firmly rooted in the data.

3.11 Limitations of the Study

This study faced several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, participant recruitment was challenging. Many organisations and potential participants did not respond to initial contact attempts, while others were unable to participate within the study period. To address this, the researcher used snowball sampling, where existing participants recommended other relevant individuals. Although this improved access, it may have narrowed the range of perspectives represented in the sample.

Second, access to beneficiaries was restricted by organisational confidentiality policies, anonymity requirements, and internal approval procedures. Some organisations did not permit direct contact with beneficiaries, while others were unable to complete arrangements for participation. As a result, the number of beneficiary participants was smaller than the number of professional stakeholders, meaning beneficiary voices were less represented in the final dataset.

Third, geographical and logistical barriers affected data collection. Many interventions were located in rural or semi-urban communities, while organisational offices were often based in urban areas. In some cases, organisations had already shifted operations to new intervention sites, making it difficult to trace or contact former beneficiaries. These factors limited broader access to participants across programme locations.

Finally, the study employed a small, purposive sample. The findings are therefore not intended to be statistically generalisable to all at-risk youth or all social work-related initiatives in Nigeria. Rather, the

study offers context-specific insights into participant experiences and intervention practices that have proven effective in the absence of comprehensive national support.

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach underpinning the study, covering the qualitative exploratory design, study setting, participant selection and recruitment, data collection procedures, thematic analysis process, ethical considerations, reflexivity, and the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigour. The following chapter presents the findings emerging from this process.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

This chapter presents, analyses, and interprets the findings from in-depth interviews conducted with seventeen programme facilitators and social work-related practitioners working with at-risk youth across Nigeria, coded as P1 to P17, and ten programme beneficiaries, coded as B1 to B10. Five major themes emerged from the data. Theme One examines how participants understood and defined life skills and how they distinguished them from academic and vocational training. Theme Two explores the structural and environmental conditions that create youth vulnerability in Nigeria, including which groups are most at risk and why. Theme Three addresses how participants understood professional social work, how they distinguished it from general community service, and what this means for the quality of interventions. Theme Four examines how life skills interventions were designed and delivered. Theme Five captures the outcomes of these interventions in the lives of at-risk youth.

4.1 Understanding Life Skills: More Than Classroom Learning

The first and most consistently strong theme across all interviews from both practitioners and beneficiaries was how participants understood the concept of life skills education. Without exception, practitioners rejected any narrow definition of life skills as classroom knowledge or vocational training. Instead, they described life skills as a broad and interconnected set of psychosocial, emotional, relational, and practical competencies that help young people understand themselves, manage their emotions, make sound decisions, communicate effectively, and navigate the demands of daily life. Beneficiary accounts echoed this understanding, with young people speaking about life skills not as abstract training content but as capacities they felt in their own lives, in the ways they made decisions, managed time, communicated with others, and carried themselves with greater confidence.

4.1.1 Life Skills as Holistic and Psychosocial Development

Across the practitioner interviews, participants described life skills as touching every dimension of a young person's life. Rather than treating skills as discrete items to be taught and ticked off a checklist, practitioners spoke about them as interconnected capacities that build on and reinforce each other. Self-awareness, confidence, resilience, emotional regulation, communication, conflict resolution, decision-making, teamwork, leadership, and goal setting were among the most frequently mentioned examples.

One of the participants, a child protection officer, gave a more detailed description put it thus:

> *So, for me, I see life skills education as adaptive skills. Children, or rather adolescent children, come together and learn so that they can be empowered. I like using adolescent children, but since you are talking about youth, I feel it all depends on how you define it. I start from age 15, so it's fine. For me, it is about bringing them together and putting them through life skills education. It is*

all about equipping young people with practical abilities and how to manage life, relationships, and work. It also involves ways they can address their challenges in a more healthy way. There are a lot of skills one can put in place to ensure that as they grow, they grow into their full potential. Some of these skills are centred around self-awareness. It is like someone once defined it, after all the explanations, he described it as a crisis period. ***So*** *there are many things one needs to put in place. (P7)*

Another practitioner said life skills empower young people to handle life challenges, feel a sense of belonging, and make better decisions. In their words:

Life skills education is a way of empowering individuals to handle life challenges. It builds inner strength, resilience, stress management, decision-making, communication, problem-solving, and positive relationships. It helps people feel a sense of belonging and make informed decisions. (P4)

Beneficiary accounts confirmed and personalised this understanding. B1 who identifies as self employed said it is "the ability that makes a person to deal effectively at the opportunities of everyday life." This phrasing of life skills in the relationship between a person and the demands they encounter closely mirrors the navigational logic that practitioners articulated. B3, a university student, emphasised the practical everyday dimension, describing life skills as "things that are supposed to help you out with your day-to-day life," including financial management and time management.

To make the understanding broader and distinct from narrower technical skills, B8, a rural beneficiary who had received child rights education, said in very simple terms when asked what life skills meant to her, that it was not only about learning a trade like hairdressing but about learning "how to make decisions," positioning self-agency itself as the essential outcome of life skills education.

This psychosocial orientation was particularly clear in work with highly vulnerable populations. P6, who works with women and girls who have survived human trafficking, explained that her organisation's core purpose is building confidence and self-esteem:

Girls need a lot of confidence. Without confidence, they can be pushed around, confused, and convinced into wrong things. In life skills education, we try to build enough confidence for them to have balance, understand themselves, believe in themselves, and not be messed up along the way. (P6)

P16, a qualified social worker and project manager who specialises in migration social work and works with children on the move, returnees, and victims of irregular migration, extended this point further. She argued that life skills education must be understood as contextual and rehabilitative rather than fixed, with the specific content varying according to each person's circumstances and immediate needs:

> *Life skills education for me is very contextual. It is very contextual to the experiences of the people. What you are giving an out-of-school youth may be different from what you give to a returnee or a victim of irregular migration as life skills education. It is not the same as what you give an in-school youth in a semi-urban area. It has to do with their experiences, and it meets the immediate need of that person for their rehabilitation process. (P16)*

B2, a trafficking survivor and a primary school dropout, who participated in a life skills programme after being identified through outreach, gave deeply personal confirmation of this from the beneficiary side. She described life skills as helping her to develop "confidence, boldness, and strength," qualities she had lacked before the programme. She explained that before participating, she had not been able to resist pressure or make independent choices, but that the programme had changed how she related to her own decision-making capacity. She summed this up simply: it "helped me a lot" and "make me safe." She understood life skills not as a learning achievement only but as a protective force in her life.

4.1.2 How Life Skills Differ from Academic and Vocational Skills

Most participants drew a clear and deliberate distinction between life skills, academic education, and vocational training. P1 was direct: "You could be very smart and literate, but then you cannot bring food to the table." He described academic skills as focused on literacy and subject knowledge, vocational skills as focused on earning a livelihood through a trade, and life skills as the connecting human layer, the personal qualities and social competencies that determine whether someone can actually translate their knowledge into a functioning life. P5 described life skills as "leadership and soft skills such as communication, ethics, and etiquette," positioning them as distinct from both formal academic programmes and trade-based vocational training.

P3 described life skills as "basic things you need to survive every day," offering self-discipline, financial management, contentment, and learning from mistakes as examples. These speak to everyday functioning and personal resilience rather than formal achievement. P14 offered a more integrative view, arguing that vocational and educational skills are "in a way, part of life skills" when they help a young person make an informed decision about their life. Their position is that the category of the skill matters less than whether it builds agency.

P16, drawing on her experience as a trained social worker and migration specialist, offered the most precise demarcation of the three categories across the entire dataset, framing each in relation to the specific function it serves in a young person's life:

> *Vocational education is basically related to economic survival, how well they are empowered enough to make money, handle their own finances, and provide for their needs. But life skills education has to do mainly with their coping mechanisms: anything that has to do with their social*

relationships, handling their emotional issues, learning how to live with people, and learning how to integrate their academic and vocational skills into their everyday life. They are intertwined in that they all work together, but they are definitely different. (P16)

This theme establishes that practitioners and beneficiaries share a deep and convergent understanding of life skills as holistic, psychosocial, and transformative, fundamentally different from, though not opposed to, academic or vocational learning, with some participants suggesting the two are in fact integrated. Life skills are understood as the foundation upon which other forms of learning become possible. This aligns directly with the Critical Social Work framework's emphasis on empowerment, critical consciousness, and building navigational capacity. The fact that beneficiaries articulated this understanding in their own terms, without prompting, strengthens the validity of the theme.

4.2 Who is at Risk and Why: Structural Drivers of Youth Vulnerability

The second major theme addresses how participants understood youth vulnerability, what it means to be described as an at-risk youth, who is most affected, and what structural conditions produce that risk. All seventeen practitioners consistently refused to locate vulnerability inside young people themselves. Instead, they described it as the product of structural conditions, including poverty, family breakdown, weak state institutions, geographic neglect, conflict, and harmful cultural practices, that leave young people with fewer choices and greater exposure to harm.

4.2.1 General Structural Drivers of Youth Vulnerability: Poverty, Family Neglect, and Conflict

Poverty was the most frequently mentioned risk factor across the practitioner interviews. It was understood not merely as material deprivation, but as a gateway condition that opens young people to virtually every other form of risk. Participants described it not as a passive background condition but as an active force shaping educational access, daily decision-making, and exposure to exploitation. P5 identified it as "a major root cause," while P8 described how even in communities where public schooling is technically free, poverty prevents children from attending because their families cannot afford uniforms, registration fees, or basic learning materials. In their words:

Poverty in the rural area, most of the schools there come free. They sometimes it's almost as if it is free. What you have to bring, maybe brooms, to in exchange for money that you pay to the school, but still, these students are not in school, and I tell you maybe they don't have money for uniform, they don't have money for basic registration. So we see poverty in these places. And I said, I always realise this poverty now expose these children and youth to some other vices in the society. (P8)

Another added:

> *Poverty, because I think if they had the resources, they wouldn't be in the situation that they are in right now. (P1)*

P5 argued that poverty is the root cause and foundation of all risks: "Poverty is a major root cause. Family size may mean resources are not enough. Environment also matters because some areas are prone to crime, abuse, and negative influences."

Another participant corroborated this by adding:

> *As a result of family members not being able to fend for their children, the children had to take up responsibilities as breadwinners in that family, and that led to massive teenage pregnancy rates in that community. (P13)*

Multiple participants located risk not simply in household poverty, but in the failure of the state to protect and provide for young people, a structural vacuum that civil society is left to fill. According to P2:

> *The problem is more like structural. Everything has been programmed as if the other things have been beautiful failures. There is really no structure from the top… there is really no finance in terms of putting structures in place that would address the needs of the youth. Is the welfare system functioning in Nigeria? If that system is functioning, then some of these cases could be addressed. (P2)*

Another participant added:

> *The political landscape, or the government per se, having very little contribution, affects young people socially. (P12)*

This structural vacuum is particularly pronounced in underserved geographic areas. P2 highlighted that communities receiving the least government attention bear the heaviest burden of youth risk, noting that zones such as the Makoko waterfront community in Lagos exemplify areas where state services do not reach. In their words: "The areas where they could be more affected are the areas that are like less looked into by the government or by social services, if we have that in Nigeria."

Family was also cited, with participants describing how dysfunctional family environments can become the most risk-generating factor in a young person's life. Parental absence, death, neglect, and misplaced priorities were all identified as mechanisms through which family failure creates vulnerability. As P11 noted: "Family. That is the biggest fact that affects young people in Nigeria. Family. Community. Society. Peer groups." Corroborating this, another participant added:

> *Poverty, absentee parents, negligence, misplaced priorities, and sometimes distorted beliefs and perceptions, cultural or even religious factors. These are the children we work with. (P15)*

Adding to this is the recurring conflict in Nigeria that exposes young people to violence, whether through armed conflict, community insecurity, or domestic violence, directly harming young people and stripping away the protective structures around them. Participants who had worked in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps or conflict-affected zones were especially emphatic on this point. One participant described it thus:

> *When a child is displaced or internally displaced, the child is prone to different situations and risks such as rape, contracting diseases, and not being able to be in school. Those kids are at risk. (P1)*

Another added:

> *In the northeast, more of the conflict-affected areas, youth are prone to being recruited into armed groups. For the female gender, they can be exposed to selling their bodies. "I've lost my* ***mother,*** *I've lost my father. There is nothing to do, even the support coming from the government is not tangible enough to support the family." (P7)*

P13 noted that in communities like Makoko (a slum waterfront in the semi-urban area of Lagos, Nigeria, popular for its distinctive lifestyle), basic safety was so compromised that girls could not safely remain outdoors after dark, with rape being a palpable daily risk:

> *In Makoko, girls told us you cannot leave this area by 6 o'clock. Once it is dark, the risk of you possibly getting raped is going to happen. (P13)*

Furthermore, being out of school was described as a risk factor in itself, stripping young people of structure, opportunity, and protection. Harmful cultural norms, particularly around early marriage and the devaluation of girls, compound this exclusion. Being out of school was described by practitioners not simply as an outcome of risk, but as a risk factor in its own right, one that strips young people of a protective environment, structured routine, and future opportunity. This is how some participants put it:

> *Out-of-school children are highly at risk because neglect opens the door to all other protection risks. (P4)*

> *Those deprived of basic means of survival, vulnerable populations, and those lacking facilities and services required to thrive including access to education. (P5)*

> *Some of them don't have money for uniforms, they don't have money for basic registration. Poverty exposes these children to other vices in society. (P8)*

Participants consistently noted that cultural norms, particularly around gender roles, early marriage, and the devaluation of girls' education, function as structural risk factors. These norms are not incidental but are

actively transmitted and enforced within families and communities. The most succinct descriptions of this structural barrier are captured by these practitioners:

> *Cultural expectations are a recurring factor. These families force their girls to get married. When I was growing up, and even now, they tell girls: when you reach 25, you are finished. Nobody will want to marry a woman who challenges him. This is one of the major things that now exposes these girls to domestic violence and all manner of abuse, physical, emotional, financial, because they go into marriage with men that are sometimes twice or three times their age. (P8)*

> *Girls were deprioritised because of harmful cultural beliefs and early marriage. Some community leaders openly said girls should marry at 12 rather than attend programmes. We found that girls on their period were sometimes denied food by caregivers because menstruation was seen as dirty. (P4)*

Beyond structural forces, peer influence was highlighted as a proximate mechanism through which risk is transmitted, particularly during adolescence. P11 shared compelling data from a baseline survey that underscored how peer pressure mediates the structural risks discussed above:

> *There was a particular question that I was very interested in: "Your first sexual activity, how did you come about it?" Seventy per cent of girls who answered that question said it was a coerced sexual activity by peer pressure. And there is a particular ring leader in that peer group. (P11)*

Other participants added:

> *There are a lot of peer pressures. They are pressured, there is a lack of parental care. There are environmental, social, and cultural factors which are also part of the influences. (P9)*

> *You can even find a youth from a well-educated home, but the peer pressure, the peer group this young person is working with, known for nothing productive, can turn them. You see them turning into something else because of the peer group. (P11)*

4.2.2 Who is More at Risk and Why

While structural factors create a broadly risky environment, participants identified specific groups as facing compounded vulnerability. These categories reflect the intersection of structural disadvantage with gender, age, geography, disability, and identity. Unsurprisingly, girls emerged as the most consistently identified high-risk group. Their vulnerability is rooted in gender-based cultural norms, forced marriage, sexual violence, educational deprivation, and economic exploitation. These are what participants said about that:

> *Girls are more exposed to risk. Cultural expectations become recurring factors. This is one of the major things that exposes these girls to domestic violence and all manner of abuse. (P8)*

Girls facing GBV and early marriage are a high-risk group. Out-of-school girls are highly at risk because neglect opens the door to all other protection risks. Without confidence, they may be re-trafficked. (P6)

I look at the age of 15 to 20, they are more at risk, especially for the female gender. A girl of 15 can look like a woman of 28 or 30, and we tend to be carried away by appearance. That is a threat. (P7)

The period between 13 and 17 was repeatedly identified as a particularly precarious developmental window, where puberty, peer influence, and structural neglect converge. As P11 described it:

Between the ages of 13 to 15 or 16, they want to explore. Puberty is kicking in and a lot of things are coming in. Whatever information is available to them at that particular time puts them into risk. (P11)

Other participants added that orphans and children living on the streets without parental support are also at greater risk, as they are an exposed group facing numerous risks. Some participants who identified this put it this way:

Those who are orphaned, from very poor families, living in high-risk communities, not in school, or victims of abuse such as domestic or sexual abuse are more vulnerable. (P5)

For us, it is mostly if you are on the street, or out of school. And also if you are marginalised, maybe they are just living in an underserved community and do not have parental help or guidance. (P15)

P16, who works with children on the move and out-of-school youth in rural and semi-urban settings, provided a particularly structured account of why out-of-school children face disproportionate risk. She framed the gap not only in terms of what out-of-school children lack, but in terms of what in-school children have that the wider social system no longer provides:

In-school children are definitely less exposed to risk than out-of-school children, because there are a lot more institutions watching over them. Out-of-school children have no family, no school, no teacher on their matter. And our social system is shifting away from the African idea of the village helping to raise a child. Everybody is becoming more individualistic. So that community layer of protection that used to exist is also weakening, especially in semi-urban areas. (P16)

An emerging demographic that is at greater risk is young people living with disabilities, whose vulnerability is often rendered invisible by systemic neglect and stigma. P4 and P14 both spoke at length about the specific ways that disability, whether physical, sensory, or cognitive, amplifies exposure to exploitation and denies access to protection. They put it this way:

Children with disabilities are at greater risk because they face discrimination and exploitation. Also children denied resources; children whose fathers die and families are pushed out; girls facing harmful traditional practices; and children with trauma or distress. (P4)

People who are deaf or dumb try to access healthcare but cannot express themselves. The provider at the facility doesn't understand them, so they cannot access care. They also face the risk of rape and sexual violence, people see them as unable to defend themselves. Some people feel that if you marry a disabled person, you are doing them a favour, so you can beat them or do anything you like. (P14)

Another emerging demographic was boys, especially those in conflict-prone regions. While girls were most consistently highlighted, several participants cautioned against overlooking boys, whose vulnerability is configured differently. Boys face pressures around masculinity, are susceptible to recruitment into crime and armed groups, and are at risk of child labour, particularly in northern and southwestern states. The participants described these situations thus:

Boys are at significant risk because, due to peer pressure, they indulge in different vices. It is believed that if you don't have resources, you cannot stand or speak in the community. ***So*** *they indulge in different activities. (P9)*

In the northwest, the level of poverty means young people indulge in pocket picking, stealing. These youths are the ones being used in such activities because, initially still a child, they do not yet understand their rights. (P7)

We are speaking to young boys so that we can in turn help young girls. If we keep on advocating for the young girls and are not carrying the young boys along, there is a big gap that needs to be filled. (P12)

Finally, an emerging demographic raised by P11 is LGBTQ+ youth, identified as a distinctly at-risk group in the Nigerian context, one that remains almost entirely absent from mainstream discourse in social work and NGO programming. Their vulnerability is rooted in the criminalisation of their identity and the resulting denial of healthcare, protection, and basic rights. They described it thus:

LGBTQ they are very, very at risk. In Nigeria, it is not a thing. People who identify with their sexuality… could not access service provision that allows them to live a healthy life. That is why I said LGBTQ are also at risk. (P11)

In summary, this theme and the two sub-themes reveal that predisposing factors are never singular. Structural conditions, including poverty, state failure, family breakdown, conflict, and cultural norms,

create the terrain on which risk is experienced. But who is most exposed, and to what, is shaped by gender, age, geography, disability, and identity.

4.3 Social Work Practice in Nigeria: Professional Identity and the Professionalisation Gap

Participants who did not have a social work background were asked to share how they understood social work as a profession and how they saw it as different from, or similar to, general community service. Their responses revealed a wide range of views, from those who saw social work as an open, accessible helping activity to those who recognised it as a distinct and demanding profession. Together, these responses point to a significant gap in how social work is understood, practised, and recognised in Nigeria.

4.3.1 How Participants Understood Social Work

When asked how they understood social work, participants gave very different answers. Some described it in broad, open terms. Others emphasised that it is a specialised field that should be respected as such. The range of responses reflects how inconsistently the profession is understood by those working alongside or within it but not formally trained in it.

A number of participants defined social work in ways that made it accessible to virtually anyone with a desire to help. P1, an educator working with at-risk youth, described it as a role that any caring person could step into:

> *I think social work is either a professional or someone who's trying to meet the needs of the vulnerable in the community in different aspects. As long as you are meeting the needs of the disadvantaged and vulnerable, I think that is social work. You are doing it for the impact of the community and the impact of the people around you. (P1)*

Similarly, P9, who studied sociology and anthropology and works as a Child Protection Specialist, also began with a broad framing, describing social work as anyone with the knowledge to support people in need:

> *Social work, I look at it as someone that has precise skills or knowledge to provide support and assistance to those in need. For instance, you can identify a vulnerable people or a vulnerable community and provide them with the necessary support that they need. It could be men, it could be women, it could be children. (P9)*

Adding to that, P11, a Public Health Practitioner who works with marginalised communities including LGBTQ+ youth, framed social work not as a clinical practice but as a bridging function between sectors:

> *Social work is a profession that bridges the gap between the public and private sector. For me, it is more of identification, more of bridging the gaps, more of designing and implementation. (P11)*

Unsurprisingly, some participants went further and described social work in terms that were closer to volunteering or charity than a professional field. P12, who works in communications, explicitly described social work as something done without pay and motivated purely by goodwill:

> *For social work, I believe it's a voluntary activity that you do that helps society generally. It's not a work that is done mainly for wages. It's a work that is done to help, to show up for different aspects of society and to solve problems that may not necessarily be solved politically or by the government. Not really expecting anything, we just pursue it. (P12)*

One of the most telling responses came from P4, a Child Protection Coordinator with a public health background and over ten years of field experience, including case management, family tracing and reunification, and supervision of over 200 caseworkers. Despite all of this, P4 openly acknowledged that he does not hold a social work qualification and is not professionally registered:

> *I am not a professionally certified social worker, but I would say I am a social worker in practice. Social work focuses on protecting children, supporting families and communities, and ensuring children's safety. Professionally, I am not registered, but the work I do aligns with social work. (P4)*

Not all participants held loose or informal understandings of social work. Several described it as a distinct and serious profession that should be treated with the same respect as any other. P3, a programme manager with eight years of experience in rural communities, emphasised the depth of personal engagement that social work requires compared to other forms of helping:

> *In my opinion, I would say it is the kind of work that gives full attention to the life of service. In the sense that they are able to tend to, to understand people who are being neglected. You are intentional about the people who have been abandoned and making sure they are catered for. (P3)*

P8, a programme manager with an education background, put it this way:

> *For me, social work is intentional. It provides a structural intervention to problems. It aims at protecting vulnerable children, empowering them, providing psychological support, and connecting families to resources. I kind of see social work as a rights-based work that focuses on providing systematic change to problems in society. (P8)*

P1, who earlier defined social work broadly, also offered a deeper reflection at the end of her interview, showing that even without formal training, years of practice can produce a strong understanding of what social work is really about:

I would say not everyone can be a social worker because social work comes with its own risks. Social workers understand the risks and sustainability. A community volunteer might see a child hungry and give them food today and tomorrow, but that doesn't stop the child from being perpetually hungry. A social worker sits down, strategises, and asks, "What can I do to ensure this kid is not perpetually hungry?" Social workers ensure the root cause of the problem is solved, not just the symptoms. (P1)

4.3.2 Social Work Versus Community Service: How Participants Saw the Difference

Participants were also asked directly what makes social work different from general community service. Their responses revealed a consistent set of contrasts, though many also admitted that in practice, the two are regularly confused or treated as interchangeable. The most common answer across participants was that social work requires formal training, while community service does not. P4, who has a public health background and works as a Child Protection Coordinator, and P9, who has a background in sociology and anthropology and works as a Child Protection Specialist, made this point clearly, linking professional training to specific technical skills that community volunteers simply do not have:

Community service may involve volunteers helping the community without technical training. Social work is a profession. It requires training, principles, standard operating procedures, and technical skills. For example, you cannot manage GBV cases or use case management tools properly without training. (P4)

Community service is more or less, you must not have the required skills. But as a social worker, one must be trained. So it's a skilled work. It is being administered by the professional to people. This is specialised. It is a kind of skill that you must be trained to acquire. (P9)

P10, who has a background in history and international relations and works in programme management, echoed this while also noting how easily the two get confused in public perception:

For social work, you are professionalised and trained in that field. They understand human issues and how to support people that are facing problems and challenges, counselling, child protection, trying to improve wellbeing. Community service does not require any professional training at all. Whether you are volunteering, doing outreach, whatever, anybody can do it. The difference is just in the roles. One is more professional and requires training. The other, anybody can just say, oh, this is what I want to do. I think that they are often generalised as being the same. (P10)

Beyond training, participants drew a contrast between social work's structured, long-term approach and community service's tendency to respond to what is immediately visible. P8, a programme manager with an education background, described how social work connects people to lasting solutions rather than one-time help:

> *If you talk about community service, they just come and go. But social workers, they don't just tell you, they connect you to these resources where you can actually solve your problem, even when they are not there. Social work focuses on providing systematic change to abnormalities in society. (P8)*

P3, a programme manager with a French background, made the same point from her field experience, contrasting the depth of engagement between the two:

> *I feel like social workers are more personal than community service. For community service, I just want to give it to you and leave it there. Social workers ensure that the children are actually making progress because they are more intentional about stopping the problem and creating that same impact. (P3)*

Several participants described the most important difference as the social worker's commitment to finding and fixing the real cause of a problem, not just responding to what is visible on the surface. P1, an educator, captured this with a straightforward example that stood out across the entire dataset:

> *The difference between a community volunteer and a social worker is that social workers understand the risks and sustainability. A community volunteer might see a child hungry and give them food today and tomorrow, but that doesn't stop the child from being perpetually hungry. A social worker sits down, strategises, and asks, "What can I do to ensure this kid is not perpetually hungry?" A community volunteer might take a child to school once, but a social worker asks, "How do I ensure this child stays in school?" Social workers ensure the root cause of the problem is solved, not just the symptoms. (P1)*

Despite identifying real differences, many participants admitted that in day-to-day work, social work and community service are hard to tell apart, particularly in Nigeria's NGO sector where there are no formal entry requirements and job titles do not always reflect qualifications. P12, a Communications Associate who had described social work as a voluntary activity, acknowledged that the two overlap significantly:

> *I think that they are kind of intertwined. Social work is a lot more professional and requires a certain level of education and skills. Community service is majorly more inclusive and easier to just get into as your own contribution to the community. It is more goodwill. (P12)*

P1 also reflected on this, noting early in her interview that social work is specialised but still positioning community service and social work as existing on the same continuum:

> *Social work is a specialisation. I feel like social work is someone who decides that this is my career, an area of uplifting vulnerable people and tending to their lives. Community service, anyone can do it. You don't necessarily have to have experience. Social workers have experience. Community*

service people, they don't have experience. It could be passion, you just see something ***wrong*** *and you decide to volunteer. For social work, it is more specialised, more experienced, and more streamlined. (P1)*

These data from non-social work participants show a wide range of understandings of what social work is. Some participants described it in ways that made it indistinguishable from volunteering or charity. Others recognised it as a serious profession requiring training, structure, and a commitment to long-term change. One participant openly acknowledged practising social work for over a decade without formal credentials, pointing to a real gap in how the profession is regulated and protected in Nigeria. Crucially, P16's account as a formally trained social worker provides the professional anchor that the other voices point toward but cannot fully supply: the systemic analytical framework, the theoretical grounding, and the ability to distinguish felt needs from real ones are precisely the capacities that informal practitioners lack. Across the interviews, the most consistently identified differences between social work and community service were the need for training, a more intentional and structured approach, and a focus on addressing the root causes of problems rather than just their visible symptoms. At the same time, most participants admitted that in practice, the boundary between the two is often blurred, and that this confusion is not just individual but reflects a broader gap in how social work is understood and valued as a profession in the Nigerian context.

4.4 Designing and Delivering Interventions: Participatory, Culturally Grounded, and Adaptive Practice

The fourth theme captures how participants designed and delivered their life skills interventions in practice. A strong pattern emerged across the interviews: the most effective programmes were those that began with listening rather than assuming, that involved communities in their design, that were sensitive to local language, culture, and age group, and that remained flexible enough to change when circumstances required it. Beneficiary accounts from this theme are particularly rich, providing direct evidence of what participatory design and responsive delivery looked and felt like from the receiving end, confirming that young people noticed, valued, and were changed by the difference between programmes that listened and those that did not.

4.5.1 Needs Assessment, Co-Design, and Community Embeddedness

Nearly every practitioner described some form of needs assessment or situational analysis as the starting point of their programme design. Rather than arriving in communities with predetermined solutions, effective practitioners first tried to understand what people actually needed, what resources already existed, what cultural norms shaped daily life, and what specific risks young people faced. This listening-first orientation was described not simply as good practice but as a precondition for any programme having relevance or earning community trust.

P5 described systematically engaging community gatekeepers before delivering any programme content, emphasising that without this step, even well-designed material fails to land:

> *You must understand the environment. In missionary schools, language and content must be carefully presented. In communities, you engage gatekeepers such as religious leaders, market women, and local influencers. Dressing, language, and approach matter. (P5)*

P7, who had worked across conflict-affected and rural communities in Nigeria's north and southwest, described treating programme design not as a fixed product but as a living document that must evolve as implementation reveals new realities. He described discovering mid-implementation that farming families leave their communities in November and December for the harvest season, a detail invisible at the design stage:

> *Around December, around November, most of these farmers sell their produce and go back to their maternal or paternal homes for the festive period. This is something we never saw in the face of the design. We never saw it until we started implementation.* ***So*** *it had to take us back. For us, design is a live document. It is not something that has been approved and is finished. It is something that requires changes. Because anything can happen. (P7)*

P11 offered the most striking illustration of what happens when community co-design is bypassed. Their team built a borehole to provide clean water near a community whose residents previously walked six kilometres to a communal stream. When they returned for evaluation, the borehole sat abandoned. The reason: that daily walk to the stream was the only time women in the community could leave their homes and socialise. The intervention had removed, rather than improved, a resource that mattered. P11 drew a clear principle from this experience:

> *You don't give people what they don't need. What we do when we want to do an intervention is create it with the community, not for them. We bring resources, we bring expertise, how can we make your idea better? That is what we are going to come and do. We are not going to come and dictate. (P11)*

Beneficiary accounts provide compelling confirmation of this co-design principle from the programme participant side. When young people's voices and suggestions were genuinely heard, they reported a qualitatively different experience of participation, one in which they felt ownership over the programme rather than obligation toward it. B1 described how her group raised concerns about inadequate food provision during sessions and saw that feedback acted on by the organisation:

> *We made the suggestion of food. Because at that point, we started having lack of food.* ***So*** *we told them, and they met it. (B1)*

B2, a trafficking survivor, recalled suggesting that the programme create a dedicated peer support group for survivors and the moment the facilitator acknowledged and acted on her idea:

> *She said, let us create a group for you guys, because you requested for it. (B2)*

B3 proposed a structural communication improvement, a more active Telegram channel to keep programme members connected beyond formal sessions:

> *I brought up the idea of increasing the telegram channel, and since then, we are working on creating one. (B3)*

B4 described a facilitator who consistently kept the door open for participant suggestions throughout the programme, making it structurally normal to contribute ideas, not just receive instruction:

> *X (name withheld) always opens suggestions to those that think they have better ideas than what we planned. If it is something that can be done, it will be considered, but if it is something that cannot be done, another option will be given. Yes, our ideas are always heard. (B4)*

Across these accounts, what stands out is not just that beneficiaries were heard, but that they knew they had been heard and that this knowledge changed how they engaged with and valued the programme.

4.4.2 Delivery Methods: Diverse, Flexible, and Culturally Responsive

Practitioners described a wide range of delivery methods, united by a shared emphasis on participation, expression, and active engagement rather than passive learning. These included peer-to-peer education, storytelling, drama, role play, body mapping, art and craft, mentorship circles, one-on-one counselling, group discussion, workshops, bootcamps, and community-based outreach. The choice of method was always shaped by context, what was available, what the community was comfortable with, and what the specific learning goal required.

P7 described a therapeutic technique called body mapping, used to help young people process and locate difficult emotions without having to articulate them verbally. Participants draw an outline of their own body and use colour to mark where they feel different emotions, sadness, joy, fear, pain. P7 described a specific moment in which a child began to cry while mapping his grief over losing his mother, and how he responded:

> *We will now say, okay, where is the sadness? And then you could see the reaction. A child started crying because he lost his mom, and I held him, saying: it is okay to cry, because it is normal to cry. (P7)*

Peer-to-peer education was one of the most consistently valued approaches across the dataset. P7, P9, P11, and P13 all described models in which selected young people were trained as champions or advocates who then facilitated sessions with their peers. P7 explained the rationale:

> *It is just bringing youth together to support, educate, and influence other youth using their experiences. Youth listen more to other youth. It builds leadership and confidence. And it strengthens community ownership. (P7)*

P11 described her peer champion model continuing after project funding ended, an organic sustainability driven by the young people themselves:

> *I have not done any intervention that was objected. Because it is not me designing it for them. Now you design it yourself. (P11)*

Cultural and linguistic sensitivity was emphasised by nearly every practitioner as a non-negotiable precondition for genuine engagement. P8 described the immediate shift in a room the moment she switched from formal English into local dialect during a school outreach session:

> *When you communicate with these children, it is just like you are saying, hello class, how are you doing? The response is kind of dull. And then I bring my local dialect (imeeee agaaa, this means how are you in Igbo, a dialect spoken in the south-eastern part of Nigeria). You see the excitement. Some of them, they are very happy. This person is from here. So they understand. (P8)*

P4 made a deliberate structural choice to remove classroom settings from delivery entirely, using circle formations on mats in community safe spaces to reduce the power distance between facilitators and young people:

> *Facilitators worked with children informally in circles, often seated on mats in safe community spaces. It was participatory, not like a classroom. Children shared stories, discussed topics, and learned in local language. (P4)*

P9 emphasised that even globally developed frameworks must be adapted to local Nigerian contexts before they can be effective, noting that what works in one region cannot simply be transferred to another:

> *Your programming is based on context. Where I am operating here (meaning current location of intervention, south of Nigeria), the way we design and operate our programming, you cannot compare it with the way we do programming in the northern part of Nigeria. You will need to look at the culture, the religion, the people, the level of education. Our global approaches also need to be contextualised according to the cultural traditions and religions that are applicable in those locations. (P9)*

Beneficiary accounts of delivery methods provide vivid and revealing detail from the receiving end. B1 described being divided into small groups of five, each given a topic to discuss and arrive at a consensus position, creating the experience of structured dialogue rather than passive instruction:

> *They divided us into small friendship groups. Maybe in that group we are five. You just bring up a topic and we discuss about it, and in the end, the group must agree on a conclusion. (B1)*

B5 described a school-based session in which a facilitator invited young people to write about what they wanted to become in life, a simple but significant exercise that opened a space for young people to articulate futures they may never previously have been invited to imagine:

> *She came to our school, she asked us to describe what we want to be in life. So we wrote it, and after that we shared. She taught us many things. (B5)*

Another beneficiary, B7, recalled a particularly powerful delivery moment, one in which a facilitator used personal disclosure to normalise struggle and build hope. The facilitator shared his own experience of being rejected and insulted by family:

> *It felt like a teacher teaching us. He explained all his own life story about parents insulting and rejecting him. And he said we should have hope that everything is important. (B7)*

In summary, this theme demonstrates that effective life skills delivery is relational, contextual, and adaptive. Practitioners who genuinely understood their communities before designing their programmes, and who remained open to revising their approaches as they learned more, achieved higher levels of engagement and more meaningful outcomes. The beneficiary accounts confirm this from inside the experience: young people noticed when their voices were taken seriously, when the content was delivered in ways that felt familiar and respectful, and when the programme was flexible enough to meet them where they were.

4.5 Outcomes of These Interventions for At-Risk Youth

The fifth and final theme captures what participants observed and experienced as the outcomes of life skills interventions: the meaningful and observable transformation witnessed in young people's lives. This theme is where beneficiary voices are perhaps most powerful, because they speak not to what programmes intended but to what actually changed in individual lives. Practitioners offered contextual and systems-level analysis of outcomes, while beneficiaries offered personal testimony. Together, these perspectives provide a more complete picture than either could offer alone.

Despite the challenging environments in which they worked, practitioners across the interviews described meaningful and observable changes in young people who had participated in life skills programmes. These changes included improvements in emotional regulation, communication, confidence, decision-making,

leadership, and in some cases, economic independence, visible not only to practitioners but to families, teachers, and the wider community.

P4 described teachers reporting that children who had gone through life skills sessions were noticeably changed, not academically, but in ways that formal schooling typically misses:

> *Caregivers thanked us because they saw changes in children's behaviour. Children shared what they learned at home. Community leaders recognised participants. Teachers said children in the programme were smarter because life skills addressed gaps schools often miss. (P4)*

P6, reflecting on years of running a shelter for trafficking survivors, described the moment that keeps her going, meeting a former resident years after she had left the programme:

> *Most of the girls that passed through us are doing well now. I met one in December unexpectedly. She had gone through our shelter years ago. We empowered her in fashion and cake making. She is now independent. Stories like that encourage me to continue this work. (P6)*

P13 shared a particularly vivid account of individual transformation, the story of a girl who disclosed ongoing sexual harassment in a safe space session and who, by the end of the programme, had been connected to specialist child protection support and was measurably different:

> *Before the end of the program, you could see that she became more confident. She was talking more effectively. She was sound because she got that support and resources that she needed to really advance. (P13)*

Beneficiary accounts provided direct, first-person evidence of transformation across multiple domains, providing them with navigational capital for everyday life. Some of the testimonials of the beneficiaries are presented below. B1 described a concrete example of how time management skills she had learned helped her meet an urgent client deadline:

> *It worked for me the day I made clothes for someone urgently. She brought clothes today and wanted to collect them soon because she was travelling the next day.* ***So*** *I had to do everything possible to meet up with the clothes. (B1)*

Others added:

> *It helped me a lot. It said me safe. It helped me to save, how I do things, how I think before doing things I want to do. (B2)*

> *I changed. Because that time, I cannot make decisions on myself. But now I see that children* ***can*** *and we have the right to make. I have always told my friends because they don't know what to say about them. They don't know what the solution is. I shared, and it helped. (B8)*

This ripple effect, in which a programme beneficiary becomes an informal advocate for peers in her community, reflects precisely the peer-multiplication model that practitioners described as one of the most powerful and sustainable outcomes of well-designed life skills programmes. P15 described how outcomes extended to whole households and communities, not only to the young people directly served:

> *We recorded a good amount of successes from the different communities that we work with. The children are doing well. The parents also have sustained living. We also train the mothers to train the children, and while they are training the children, we are providing work for them and paying them salaries. So it is having a wider effect. (P15)*

Summary of Key Findings

The findings from seventeen practitioner and ten beneficiary interviews confirm that life skills education plays a meaningful and at times transformative role in the lives of at-risk youth in Nigeria, with NGOs demonstrating clear capacity to design and deliver participatory, culturally grounded, and outcomes-focused interventions, from trafficking survivors gaining agency and confidence, to rural girls learning their rights and sharing that knowledge with peers. Practitioners, especially social workers and those from related disciplines, demonstrated understanding of social work principles including systems thinking, root-cause orientation, and co-design, and beneficiaries independently confirmed the value of this approach by describing concrete changes in how they make decisions, manage time, navigate risk, and advocate for themselves and others. A significant professionalisation gap runs through the sector: much of the work being done is social work in practice, yet carried out by a largely uncredentialled workforce without regulatory protection or formal recognition, pointing to the need for greater investment in professional training and qualified social worker deployment. The overarching message of the findings is that the third sector is delivering real results under difficult conditions, and that embedding this work within a stronger professional social work framework, with sustained government and institutional support, would allow it to move from resilience-building to genuine and lasting transformation in the lives of Nigeria's most vulnerable young people.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to the existing literature reviewed in Chapter Two and the theoretical framework grounding this research. The discussion is organised around five themes: the conceptualisation of life skills as holistic and psychosocial development, the structural production of youth vulnerability, the state of social work practice and the professionalisation gap in Nigeria, the design and delivery of participatory interventions, and finally the outcomes of these interventions for at-risk youth. Each theme is discussed by connecting participant insights to established scholarship and to the Critical Social Work (CSW) and Person-in-Environment (PIE) frameworks that guide this study, demonstrating how the findings both confirm and extend current knowledge about life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria.

5.1 Life Skills as Holistic Psychosocial Development

A defining finding of this study is the depth and consistency with which both practitioners and beneficiaries understood life skills as psychosocial, relational, and transformative rather than as a body of discrete teachable content. Practitioners described life skills as interconnected capacities comprising self-awareness, emotional regulation, decision-making, communication, and resilience, and beneficiaries independently articulated this understanding through their own everyday experiences. This convergence is theoretically significant. It confirms the WHO (1997) definition of life skills as abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with life's demands, but it also exceeds this definition by demonstrating that participants in this study understood life skills as a means of building navigational capacity, the ability to move through and act upon structurally constrained environments.

This understanding aligns closely with what DeJaeghere and Murphy-Graham (2022) and Singh and Agarwal (2024) identify as the shift in life skills discourse from behavioural adaptation toward active agency and social participation. In the Nigerian context examined here, this is especially relevant. As the literature review established, structural conditions including poverty, family breakdown, and absent state welfare systems mean that life skills must do more than prepare young people for stable environments; they must also equip them to navigate and, where possible, challenge deeply unequal ones (Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026; Amadasun, 2020). Practitioners who worked with highly vulnerable populations including trafficking survivors and girls navigating gender-based violence (GBV) were particularly explicit about this, describing how programmes aimed first to rebuild confidence and self-efficacy before any other competency could be meaningfully developed. This psychosocial priority reflects what Freire (1970) understood as the necessary precondition for any liberatory education: that the individual must first develop a sense of their own capacity to act before they can engage critically with the world around them.

The fact that beneficiaries articulated this understanding without prompting, and in ways that mirrored the logic practitioners used, is itself meaningful evidence. It suggests that when life skills education is delivered with genuine psychosocial intentionality, it produces a shared understanding of development that crosses the provider–recipient divide. This stands in contrast to the implementation patterns documented in the literature review, where government-led programmes have tended to reduce life skills to vocational outputs and enrolment metrics (Ogunode & Adanna, 2022; UNICEF, 2024). From a Critical Social Work perspective, this reductive approach risks reinforcing the very conditions it claims to address, treating marginalised youth as deficient individuals in need of standardised instruction rather than as social beings whose challenges are structurally produced (Dominelli, 2017; Fook, 2016). The findings of this study offer a compelling counter-model grounded in the principle that effective life skills education must begin with the lived reality of the young person, not with programme convenience.

5.2 Structural Drivers of Youth Vulnerability: Risk as a Product of Systems, Not Individuals

The second theme concerns how participants understood youth vulnerability. Practitioners consistently refused to locate risk within young people themselves, describing vulnerability instead as the product of poverty, family instability, state failure, conflict, educational exclusion, and harmful cultural norms. This structural framing is directly consistent with the Critical Social Work framework applied in this study, which positions risk as a socially constructed condition rooted in unequal power relations and structural inequality rather than in individual pathology (Amadasun, 2020; Umar & Maaji, 2025). The Person-in-Environment framework reinforces this orientation by insisting that effective intervention must address the environment shaping vulnerability, not merely the individual experiencing it (Healy, 2022; Fook, 2016).

Poverty emerged as the most pervasive structural driver in participants' accounts, understood not merely as material lack but as a gateway condition that opens young people to educational exclusion, exploitation, early labour, and exposure to harmful social norms. This is consistent with the literature review's characterisation of Nigeria's structural trap, a condition in which high rates of unemployment, inadequate social protection, and institutional weakness combine to render struggle a product of systemic inequality rather than individual failing (Albert & Oyowavotu, 2026; Chidi, 2025). Practitioners working in communities such as the Makoko waterfront described scenarios where even nominally free schooling remained inaccessible because poverty precluded uniforms, registration, and basic materials, confirming National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS0. (2024) documentation of persistent delivery gaps within the formal education system. State failure was identified not only as a background condition but as an active force shaping youth risk, producing the structural vacuum that civil society organisations are left to fill, a situation extensively documented in scholarship on Nigeria's social development landscape (Amadasun, 2020; Eshiotse et al., 2023; Nnadi et al., 2025).

The intersection of structural disadvantage with gender was particularly prominent. Practitioners documented how cultural norms, including early marriage, the devaluation of girls' education, and the restriction of female movement, function to enforce structural barriers. The literature review established that approximately 30% of girls in northern Nigeria are married before eighteen (UNICEF, 2024), and practitioners' accounts gave texture to this statistic, describing how cultural expectations actively constrain girls' access to life skills education. Dominelli's (2017) concept of anti-oppressive practice is directly applicable here: effective practitioners did not treat gender norms as fixed cultural facts to be accommodated but as oppressive structures to be named and challenged through rights-based programming and community engagement. Participants also drew attention to groups rendered invisible in mainstream discourse, a major emerging sub-theme, including young people living with disabilities and LGBTQ+ youth, whose structural exclusion the PIE framework makes visible. The criminalisation of LGBTQ+ identities in Nigeria and the systematic inaccessibility of services for disabled youth represent forms of structural disadvantage that no community-based programme alone can resolve, pointing to the need for the structural advocacy that Critical Social Work places at the centre of professional practice.

5.3 Professional Identity and the Professionalisation Gap

The third theme reveals what may be the most consequential structural gap identified in this study as it concerns social work practice in Nigeria: the absence of professional social work recognition and the corresponding blurring of boundaries between social work, community service, and voluntary helping. Participants who lacked formal social work qualifications, the majority of the practitioner sample, held a wide spectrum of understandings of what social work is, ranging from views that positioned it as accessible to any well-meaning helper, to those that recognised it as a distinct and demanding profession requiring specialised training and ethical accountability.

This finding confirms and extends what Gray and Amadasun (2024) and Amadasun (2020) have documented about the state of the profession in Nigeria, namely that without formal legal recognition, regulatory protection, and meaningful state integration, social work remains vulnerable to being conflated with charity work or volunteerism. The literature review established that many youth-focused interventions in Nigeria are implemented by individuals from unrelated professional backgrounds, whose training does not include the trauma-informed care, psychosocial assessment, or structural advocacy skills that professional social work education provides (Amadasun, 2020; Isangha et al., 2024). The practitioner sample in this study reflects this pattern directly: while all participants were engaged in work that aligned with social work principles, only a small number held formal qualifications or professional registration.

What this study makes clear is that the problem goes beyond unqualified people filling social work roles. The deeper issue is that social work itself is still not recognised as a serious, prestigious profession in Nigeria, one that deserves to stand alongside medicine, law, and education as an equal. As Fook (2016)

argues, without proper professional frameworks that demand ethical accountability, the power relationship between practitioners and the people they serve can go unchallenged and cause harm. For social work to be taken seriously, it must be established as a regulated, valued profession across health, justice, and education sectors, not something that any well-meaning volunteer can step into.

That said, this is not to dismiss the real knowledge and skill that comes from years of hands-on experience. The most experienced practitioners in this study were often the ones who best understood the difference between treating symptoms and tackling the root causes of a problem, which is exactly what Critical Social Work calls for (Dominelli, 2017; Adams, 2017). But experience alone is not the same as professional standing. For practitioners who have built that expertise without formal qualifications, the answer is not to treat informal practice as good enough. Instead, they should be encouraged and supported to pursue higher qualifications in social work, to seek out proper training, and to engage with whatever regulatory structures exist. This is how the profession strengthens itself from within while also earning greater respect from outside. Closing this gap is not a secondary concern; it is a necessary foundation for the kind of serious, rights-based work that young people at risk in Nigeria genuinely need.

5.4 Participatory, Culturally Grounded, and Adaptive Delivery

The fourth theme demonstrates how the most effective life skills interventions were characterised by a listening-first orientation. Practitioners began with needs assessment and community engagement, adapted continuously to emerging realities, and employed delivery methods that prioritised active participation and cultural resonance over standardised content. Beneficiary accounts confirmed the transformative difference this approach made not only in the quality of what young people learned, but in how they experienced themselves as co-producers rather than recipients.

This participatory orientation is directly theorised within the Critical Social Work framework through the principle of power, reflectivity, and partnership articulated by Fook (2016) and Healy (2022), which requires the practitioner to resist the expert-knows-best posture and instead facilitate conditions in which service users become co-creators of their own development. Practitioners who bypassed this principle encountered predictable failures, including abandoned infrastructure and disengaged participants, as revealed in the example of the failed borehole water project described by P11. The community embeddedness demonstrated by effective practitioners aligns with what the literature review identified as the comparative advantage of NGO-led interventions: organisations such as Slum2School Africa, AREAi, and Her Voice Foundation have distinguished themselves by designing programmes with communities rather than for them (Slum2School Africa, 2024; AREAi, 2025; Her Voice Foundation, 2025), and this is also consistent with what Garba et al. (2021) and Akpan and Udoh (2022) document about community embeddedness as a condition for reaching populations formal systems consistently fail to engage.

The delivery methods employed, ranging from peer-to-peer education, body mapping, storytelling, drama, and role play to group dialogue, reflect what Adams (2017) identifies as process-driven empowerment: the goal is not to transmit a fixed body of skills but to create conditions in which young people develop navigational capacities through reflection, dialogue, and practice. This is Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy in applied form. The peer education models described by several practitioners, in which young people trained as champions continue facilitating sessions within their communities after project funding ends, represent sustainability understood not as institutional continuity but as transferred ownership. Cultural and linguistic responsiveness, described through switching to local dialect, sitting in circles and on mats rather than in classroom rows, and adapting globally developed frameworks to specific regional contexts, was identified as a non-negotiable precondition for meaningful engagement, consistent with Dominelli's (2017) insistence that anti-oppressive practice must be grounded in the actual lived experience of those being served.

5.5 Outcomes and Evidence of Transformation

The fifth theme captures what participants observed and experienced as the outcomes of life skills interventions. This discussion focuses on the positive transformation documented across practitioner and beneficiary accounts, which together demonstrate that social work-related life skills initiatives produce meaningful change in the lives of at-risk youth when delivered with genuine psychosocial intentionality and community grounding.

Practitioners described meaningful and observable changes in young people, including improved emotional regulation, greater confidence, more deliberate decision-making, and in some cases measurable movement toward economic independence. These changes were visible not only to practitioners but to families, teachers, and wider communities. The practitioner accounts in this study corroborate the empirical evidence reviewed in Chapter Two: Oyeyemi et al. (2024) documented reductions in depressive symptoms and anxiety among Lagos adolescents who participated in targeted psychosocial life skills training, while Unimke et al. (2025) found that problem-solving and communication competencies correlated with reduced violent tendencies in high-risk communities. The findings of this study give qualitative texture to these outcomes, suggesting that the mechanisms of change are not simply skill acquisition but a shift in how young people relate to their own capacity to act, foregrounding what Freire (1970) identifies as the development of critical consciousness, and what the PIE framework locates as enhanced navigational competence within a constraining environment.

Beneficiary accounts provided confirmation of this across multiple domains. Young people described applying specific skills in concrete, everyday situations: managing time under pressure, making independent decisions, resisting peer pressure, and sharing knowledge with friends and family. Particularly significant was the ripple effect this created, in which beneficiaries who had completed programmes were

subsequently passing on what they had learned to peers and younger siblings, acting as informal advocates for the approaches that had helped them. This peer multiplication dynamic reflects precisely what Adams (2017) describes as process-driven empowerment: transformation that does not end with the programme but continues through the participant's own action in their social environment, extending the reach and impact of the intervention beyond its formal boundaries.

The most compelling accounts of transformation came from work with the most vulnerable populations, including trafficking survivors and girls navigating gender-based violence, where practitioners described not only behavioural change but a fundamental shift in how young women understood their own rights and capacity for self-determination. These outcomes are directly consistent with DeJaeghere and Murphy-Graham's (2022) argument that life skills education, when framed around agency rather than adaptation, enables marginalised youth to move from passive navigation of their circumstances toward active social participation. They also affirm what Nwokedi et al. (2023) and Akpan and Udoh (2022) document regarding the essential role of empowerment-oriented intervention in strengthening the coping and adaptive capacities of vulnerable youth. Taken together, the outcomes documented in this study make a strong empirical case that social work-related life skills initiatives, grounded in Critical Social Work principles and the Person-in-Environment (PIE) framework, and delivered through participatory and culturally responsive approaches, represent a meaningful and replicable pathway toward youth empowerment in Nigeria.

While the discussion above demonstrates what social work-related life skills initiatives can achieve, it also exposes the limits of the present evidence and points toward questions that this study could not resolve. The transformations described by practitioners and beneficiaries were observed within or shortly after programme participation, so it remains unclear whether gains in confidence, decision-making, and agency are sustained over the longer term. The discussion has also shown that the contribution of professionally qualified social workers is inferred largely from the consequences of their absence rather than measured directly, and that disabled youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and boys in conflict-prone regions appear only at the margins of both the interventions studied and the wider literature. These unresolved issues follow directly from the discussion and frame the directions for future research set out in Section 6.4.

This chapter has discussed the five themes emerging from the study's findings in relation to the theoretical framework and existing scholarship. Together, the discussions demonstrate that life skills education, when grounded in Critical Social Work and the Person-in-Environment framework and delivered through participatory, culturally responsive, and co-designed approaches, produces genuine and observable transformation in the lives of at-risk youth in Nigeria. The findings confirm that practitioners and beneficiaries share a sophisticated understanding of what life skills education can and should do, that vulnerability is structurally rather than individually produced, that the professionalisation gap remains a critical constraint on the quality and sustainability of practice, and that participatory delivery produces outcomes that extend well beyond the boundaries of any individual programme. The study positions the

third sector as demonstrably capable of meaningful transformation, and points to the integration of professional social work expertise and institutional support as the key condition for sustaining and deepening that impact.

Chapter Six: Conclusions, Implications, Recommendations, and Directions for Future Research

6.1 Conclusions

This study set out to examine the role that social work-related initiatives play in providing life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria. Overall, the findings show that this role is bigger than it is usually given credit for, but also shaped by serious limits on what these initiatives can actually do. This section presents the study's conclusions as three numbered statements that respond directly to each of the sub-questions set out in Chapter One.

1. In response to the first research question, which asked how social work initiatives and life skills education are understood within the context of Nigerian at-risk youth, the study concludes that these ideas only really make sense when looked at in their actual context. Life skills education, when it works, is not about ticking boxes or going through a training manual. It is about helping young people understand themselves, deal with pressure, know their rights, and make better decisions in difficult situations. At-risk youth are not problem young people, they are young people whose risk comes from the environment around them. And social work-related initiatives, mostly run by NGOs and community-based organisations, are not just helping out with youth development in Nigeria, they are basically carrying it, because neither the government nor the school system is really filling this gap.
2. In response to the second research question, which asked about the critical structural factors affecting the lives of at-risk youth in Nigeria, the study concludes that the risks young people face are not their own fault. Poverty, family breakdown, conflict, and exclusion based on gender, disability, or identity are structural problems built up over decades of poor governance and inequality. Looking at this through a Critical Social Work lens, the initiatives that seemed to work best were the ones that understood this. They started by listening, designed programmes with the community rather than for it, kept adjusting as they went, and stayed around long enough to actually make a difference, rather than treating young people as individuals who just needed to be fixed.
3. In response to the third research question, which asked about the experiences of practitioners and beneficiaries of social work-related initiatives, the study concludes that the biggest problem in the sector is the professionalisation gap. Social work has only recently been legally recognised in Nigeria, but that recognition on paper has not really translated into anything on the ground. There are still very few qualified social workers, they are mostly left out of policy and decision-making, and they are not prioritised in the agencies and organisations where their skills are most needed. Part of the reason is that social work is still seen as charity work rather than as a real profession.

Without proper training, professional structures, and a real seat at the table, programmes end up inconsistent, ethical risks get missed, and the more complicated needs do not get the response they need.

Taken together, these three conclusions answer the study's main research question, which asked what role social work-related initiatives play in providing life skills education for at-risk youth in Nigeria. The study shows that these initiatives play a central role in providing life skills education to at-risk youth, but they are doing it under conditions that hold them back. So real improvement is less about creating new programmes and more about properly resourcing, professionalising, and supporting the work that is already happening. This means career pathways for qualified social workers, long-term funding for NGOs as proper implementation partners, government backing for the organisations doing this work, building community co-design into how programmes are run, and making sure services actually reach the groups that are currently being left out. These strategies are discussed in more detail as the implications and recommendations of the study in the sections that follow.

6.2 Implications of the Study

6.2.1 Implications for Policy

The evidence points to a serious mismatch between the scale of youth vulnerability in Nigeria and the professional infrastructure available to address it. NGO-led initiatives are not charity, they are essential welfare infrastructure, and policy needs to treat them as such. That means sustainable funding frameworks, monitoring systems that measure psychosocial outcomes rather than just enrolment numbers, and genuine government partnerships with organisations that have earned community trust. It also means moving beyond the legal recognition of social work, which already exists, to the harder work of ensuring social workers are actually present and employed in the places they are needed most, including schools, hospitals, and government agencies, where they are currently largely absent.

6.2.2 Implications for Practice

This study is clear that effective life skills education cannot be delivered through standardised, top-down programming. Community co-design, culturally responsive delivery, peer-based learning, and the flexibility to adapt to what young people are actually facing are essential conditions under which meaningful and impactful engagement occurs. Equally important is the recognition that youth development is not a single-discipline responsibility. Educators, health practitioners, community leaders, and social workers each bring distinct but complementary expertise, and the most effective programmes are those that bring these contributions together deliberately. Practitioners from any discipline working with at-risk youth would also benefit from structured exposure to core social work principles, including trauma-informed care,

anti-oppressive practice, and the understanding that a young person cannot be understood or supported in isolation from the environment shaping their life.

6.2.3 Implications for Knowledge

For knowledge, this study fills a gap that the literature review identified as largely absent, namely an empirically grounded, peer-reviewed account of how social work-related initiatives actually operate in reaching Nigeria's most vulnerable young people. By centring the voices of both practitioners and beneficiaries and taking their accounts seriously, the study brings into academic view a body of practice that has mostly lived in donor reports and internal evaluations. It also demonstrates that broader theoretical frameworks are not only applicable in the Nigerian context but genuinely useful for making sense of what is happening on the ground, and for building a social work knowledge base that speaks to the realities of the Global South.

6.3 Recommendations

6.3.1 To the Federal and State Governments and the social work regulatory bodies (Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASOW) and the Chartered Institute of Social Work Practitioners of Nigeria (C-ISOWN))

Establishing the Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASOW) and the Chartered Institute of Social Work Practitioners of Nigeria (C-ISOWN), the two regulatory bodies responsible for social work education and practice in Nigeria, was an important step, and you should be commended for that. But the work cannot stop at recognition. The most urgent task now is to build the career pathways that make this recognition real. The Federal and State Governments should mandate the employment of qualified social workers in schools, hospitals, federal agencies, and NGOs, because legal recognition means very little if social workers have nowhere to be deployed. School social work in particular is almost entirely absent in Nigeria, and this gap has direct consequences for how early vulnerability is identified and addressed in young people. NASOW and C-ISOWN should intensify your advocacy to push for these positions to be created, insist on proper supervision frameworks to come with them, and hold government accountable for placing qualified social workers in the sectors where they are most needed. Without this push from both sides, the profession will remain recognised on paper but absent in practice.

6.3.2 To the Federal and State Governments and donor agencies

The evidence from this study is clear: NGO-led initiatives are consistently outperforming government-run programmes in reaching the most marginalised young people. Rather than competing with this or duplicating it poorly, government and donors should lean into it. You should direct funding toward NGOs serving underserved groups, shift to multi-year grants that allow for genuine relationship-building and long-term outcomes, and formalise these organisations as implementation partners rather than treating

them as peripheral actors. Where government programmes have repeatedly failed to reach certain populations, the more honest and effective approach is to resource those who are already doing the work well.

6.3.3 To NGOs and community-based organisations

Non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations should embed co-design into your programming as an ongoing commitment rather than a one-off consultation, resource peer education models beyond individual project cycles, and create structured professional development pathways for practitioners currently working without formal social work qualifications. This includes giving them access to supervision, trauma-informed training, and connection to professional networks, so the people doing this work are properly supported and the quality of practice continues to improve.

6.3.4 To policymakers, programme designers, and NGOs

Finally, policymakers in the Federal and State Houses of Assembly, programme designers working as project managers, and non-governmental organisations must design programmes that intentionally reach the groups current interventions largely miss, including young people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ youth, and boys in conflict-prone regions. Their exclusion or limited inclusion in services is not accidental but structural, and closing that gap requires deliberate design, legal advocacy, and in some cases even decriminalisation before any programme intervention can be meaningful.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

Three areas stand out as most urgent. First, longitudinal studies following beneficiaries over several years would establish whether the changes in confidence, decision-making, and agency this study documents actually hold over time and connect to longer-term outcomes. This evidence is currently absent and is what policymakers and donors most need to see.

Second, research that specifically examines what difference professionally trained social workers make when integrated into NGO-led programmes, and when available in important sectors such as schools, hospitals, and government agencies, would directly address the professionalisation gap this study has identified and provide the evidence base needed to advocate for their systematic deployment.

Finally, dedicated research on groups that remain largely invisible in current programming, particularly LGBTQ+ youth, young people with disabilities, and boys in conflict-affected regions, is urgently needed. Their exclusion from the literature mirrors their exclusion from services, and that gap needs to be addressed in both places.

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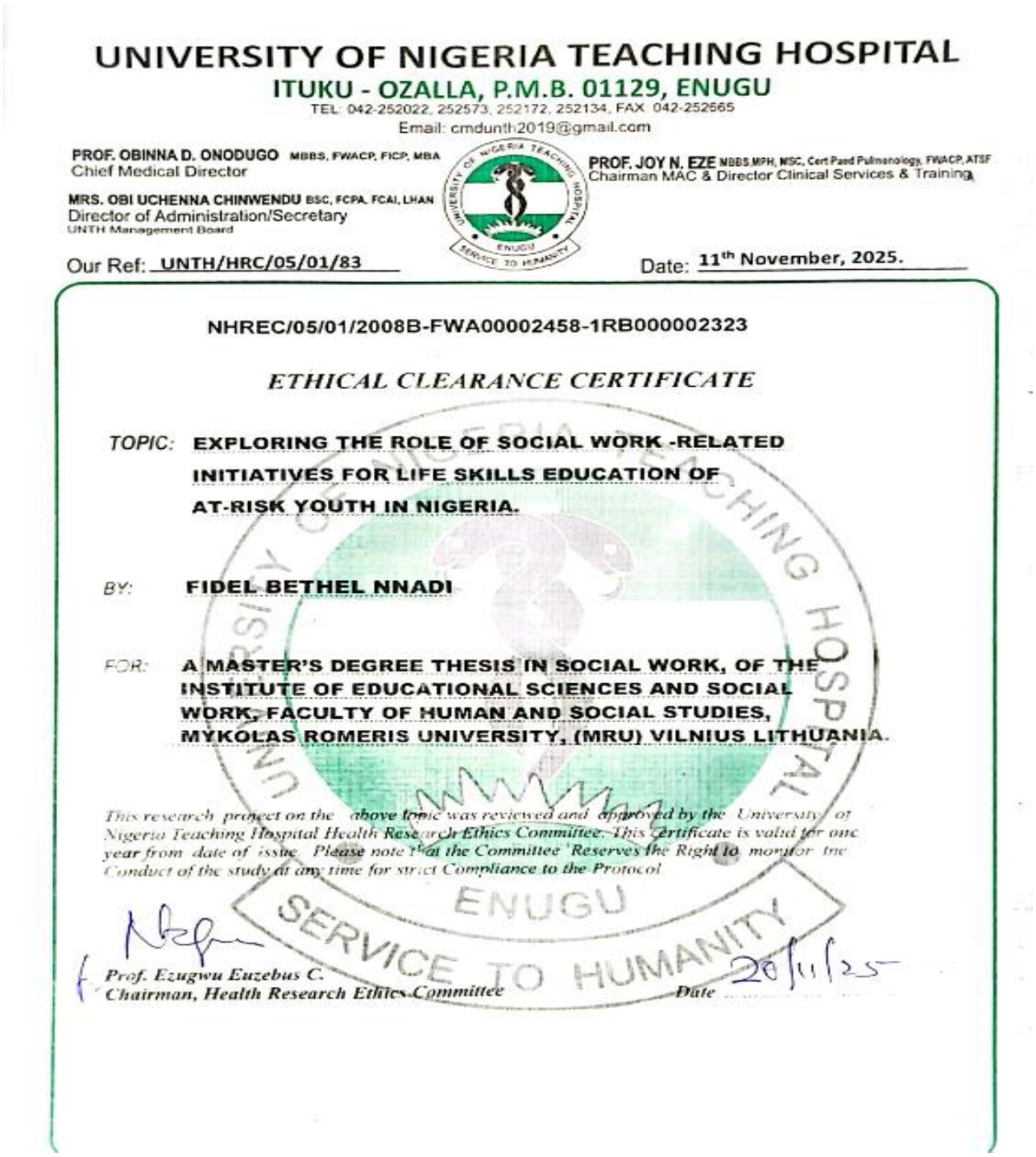
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Ethical Approval



UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA TEACHING HOSPITAL
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Chief Medical Director

MRS. OBI UCHENNA CHINWENDU BSC, FCPA, FCAI, LHAN
Director of Administration/Secretary
UNTH Management Board

PROF. JOY N. EZE MBBS,MPH, MSC, Cert Paed Pulmonology, FWACP, ATSF
Chairman MAC & Director Clinical Services & Training

Our Ref: UNTH/HRC/05/01/83

Date: 11th November, 2025.

NHREC/05/01/2008B-FWA00002458-1RB000002323

ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

TOPIC: **EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK -RELATED INITIATIVES FOR LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION OF AT-RISK YOUTH IN NIGERIA.**

BY: **FIDEL BETHEL NNADI**

FOR: **A MASTER'S DEGREE THESIS IN SOCIAL WORK, OF THE INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES AND SOCIAL WORK, FACULTY OF HUMAN AND SOCIAL STUDIES, MYKOLAS ROMERIS UNIVERSITY, (MRU) VILNIUS LITHUANIA.**

This research project on the above topic was reviewed and approved by the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital Health Research Ethics Committee. This certificate is valid for one year from date of issue. Please note that the Committee Reserves the Right to monitor the Conduct of the study at any time for strict Compliance to the Protocol

Prof. Ezugwu Euzebus C.
Chairman, Health Research Ethics Committee

Date 20/11/25

UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA TEACHING HOSPITAL ENUGU SERVICE TO HUMANITY

CamScanner

Appendix 2

Informed Consent Form for Semi-Structured and Key Informant Interviews

Institute of Educational Sciences and Social Work
Mykolas Romeris University
October 2025

Exploring the role of social work-related initiatives for life skills education of at-risk youth in Nigeria. **Informed consent forms for semi-structured and key informant interviews (KII)**

My name is Fidel Bethel Nnadi. I am a master's student at the Institute of Educational Sciences and Social Work, Mykolas Romeris University. I am interested in conducting this study to explore the contribution of social work-related initiatives for life skills education of at-risk youth in Nigeria.

What is this research about?

In this research, I want to explore the contribution of social work-related initiatives to the life skills education of at-risk youth in Nigeria. Specifically, I aim to understand the targeted group experiences of life skills education in Nigeria and the role of social work in this context. This is a personal discussion involving only you (and your focus group), the interviewer, and the note taker, unless you would like someone else to be present. If you do not want to answer any of the questions, you may say so, and the interviewer will move on to the next question. If you agree, the discussion will be tape-recorded to assist in fully writing up the information later. No one will be identified by name on the tape or in the transcriptions.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to help with this research and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time. The interview should take approximately 35 minutes to one hour. Refusing to participate will have no negative consequences and will not affect your daily life, activities, or future endeavours.

Potential Risks and Benefits of the Study

Given that this study is non-experimental, it is unlikely to cause any physical or psychological harm to participants. While there are no direct personal benefits to taking part in the study, the findings may provide a valuable basis for improving social work initiatives and life skills education programs for at-risk youth in Nigeria. Participation is entirely voluntary, and no form of remuneration will be provided for taking part in the study.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

We would like to clarify that we are not here to judge or criticise your opinion. The information obtained by interviews will be used for research purposes only. Apart from members of the research team, no one else will have access to the data collected from these interviews. Your identity and the name of your organisation or the organisation you represent will not be disclosed in any reports of this work. Direct quotes will be used. Data collected will remain anonymous by ensuring that your name and that of the organisation are not recorded; instead, codes will be used. Interviews will always be conducted by an interviewer and an assistant who are both part of the research team. All data provided will be kept confidential. The knowledge gained from this research will be shared in a summary form, without revealing the identities of individuals.

In case you have any questions, please contact the researcher using the contacts below:

Fidel Bethel Nnadi, Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania
Tel: +234 8143158700 (WhatsApp) (Nigeria)

+37067707838 (Call) (Lithuania)
Email: finnadi@stud.mruni.eu

I have had the study explained to me. I have understood all that has been read/explained and had my questions answered satisfactorily

□ **Yes,** *please tick* **I agree to be interviewed**

□ **Yes,** *please tick* **I agree for the interview to be recorded**

□ **Yes,** *please tick* **I agree for direct quotations to be used**

I understand that I can change my mind at any stage, and it will not affect me in any way.

Signature/Thumbprint:		**Date:**	
Participant Name:		**Time:**	

Appendix 3

Instrument for Data Collection (Key Informant Interview Questions)

Instructions to the interviewer
Please introduce yourself to the interviewee, explain the project to them and ask them to sign the consent form. If they agree to the interview being recorded, please start the recorder. Remind the interviewee that their participation is entirely voluntary and they can withdraw from the interview at any time or request to skip a question if they do not feel comfortable answering it. Encourage the participants to talk freely, capturing the experiences in their homes and how that experience affects their sexual behaviour in the university.

Research Topic: Exploring the Role of Social Work-Related Initiatives for Life Skills Education of At-Risk Youth in Nigeria.

Research questions
The main research question: What are target group experiences of social work-related initiatives for life skills education of at-risk youth in Nigeria.
Other specific questions that will guide the research includes
1. What meaning do target groups assign to the concepts of "social work-related initiatives" and "life skills education"?
2. What critical factors affect the lives of at-risk youth in Nigeria, and how are these reflected in target groups' professional practice?
3. How do target groups understand and experience their roles in working with at-risk youth?
4. What specific activities or actions do target groups engage in when working with at-risk youth?

1. Key Informant Interview (KII) Questions
Target Respondents: NGO facilitators, youth program coordinators, educators, community stakeholders

PART A
Demographic information questions
1. Age: _____ years
2. Sex / Gender:
☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Other / Prefer not to say
3. Professional Role: _____
4. Years of Experience working with youth / life skills development:
☐ Less than 1 year
☐ 1–3 years
☐ 4–6 years
☐ 7+ years
5. Target group(s) you work with:
☐ In-school youth
☐ Out-of-school youth
☐ Street children
☐ Adolescents in rural areas
☐ Other (please specify): _____
6. What type of programs do you facilitate or coordinate?
☐ Life skills education
☐ Psycho-social support
☐ Vocational training
☐ Advocacy/awareness

☐ Mentoring / Counselling
☐ Other: _____
7. Location / Community of Service:
☐ Urban
☐ Semi-urban
☐ Rural

PART B
Section A: Understanding of Key Concepts:*What meaning do target group assign for the concepts of " social work-related initiatives" and " life skills education"?*
1.How do you define or understand *life skills education* in the context of the communities you work with?
Probes
Can you give specific examples of what you consider life skills?
How do these differ from academic or vocational skills?
2. How do you define or understand social work?
Probes
What makes social work different from general community service?
3. In your opinion, who qualifies as an *at-risk youth* in the Nigerian context?
Probes
Please, name some features.
Why exactly those? Please, explain.
Section B: Program Experience and Observations: *What critical factors effecting youth at risk lives disclose in target group's professional practice and what do target groups do and how they do it?*
4. What critical factors effecting youth at risk lives disclose in your professional practice?
Probes
Are there specific risk factors you've observed in your work (e.g., poverty, family issues)?
Are some groups more at-risk than others? Why?
5.How does it look, your work with youth at risk? What do you do?
6. Please, describe any social work-related initiative you have been involved in that targeted at-risk youth?
Probes
What was your role in the program?
Who designed and implemented the intervention?
7. What life skills were included in these programs (e.g., communication, conflict resolution, emotional regulation)?
Probes
Were the skills selected based on any assessment or needs analysis?
Were the skills tailored to local culture or age groups?
8. What approaches or methods were used to deliver life skills to the youth (e.g., workshops, mentorship, drama, digital tools)?
Probes
Were the sessions formal (classroom-based) or informal (community or peer-based)?
How did the youth respond to the delivery methods?

2. Key Informant Interview (KII)
Target Respondents: Social workers

PART A
Demographic information questions
1. Age: _____ years
2. Sex / Gender:
☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Other / Prefer not to say
3. Professional Role: _____

4. Years of Experience working with youth / life skills development:
☐ Less than 1 year
☐ 1–3 years
☐ 4–6 years
☐ 7+ years
5. Target group(s) you work with:
☐ In-school youth
☐ Out-of-school youth
☐ Street children
☐ Adolescents in rural areas
☐ Other (please specify): _____
6. What type of programs do you facilitate or coordinate?
☐ Life skills education
☐ Psycho-social support
☐ Vocational training
☐ Advocacy/awareness
☐ Mentoring / Counselling
☐ Other: _____
7. Location / Community of Service:
☐ Urban
☐ Semi-urban
☐ Rural

PART B
KII interview Questions
Section A: Understanding of Key Concepts: *What meaning do target group assign for the concepts of " social work-related initiatives" and " life skills education"?*
1. How do you define or understand *life skills education* in the context of the communities you work with?
Probes
Can you give specific examples of what you consider life skills?
How do these differ from academic or vocational skills?
2. In your opinion, who qualifies as an *at-risk youth* in the Nigerian context?
Probes
Please, name some features.
Why exactly those? Please, explain.
Section B: Program Experience and Observations: *What critical factors effecting youth at risk lives disclose in target group's professional practice and what do target groups do and how they do it?*
3. What critical factors effecting youth at risk lives disclose in your professional practice?
Probes
Are there specific risk factors you've observed in your work (e.g., poverty, family issues)?
Are some groups more at-risk than others? Why?
4. How does it look, your work with youth at risk? What do you do?
6. Please, describe any social work-related initiative you have been involved in that targeted at-risk youth?
Probes
What was your role in the program?
Who designed and implemented the intervention?
5. What life skills were included in these programs (e.g., communication, conflict resolution, emotional regulation)?
Probes
Were the skills selected based on any assessment or needs analysis?
Were the skills tailored to local culture or age groups?
6. What approaches or methods were used to deliver life skills to the youth (e.g., workshops, mentorship, drama, digital tools)?
Probes

Were the sessions formal (classroom-based) or informal (community or peer-based)?
How did the youth respond to the delivery methods?

3. KII interview Questions 3 for Program Beneficiaries
Target Participants: At-risk youth aged 15–35 who have participated in or been impacted by life skills programs or social work-led initiatives.

PART A
Demographic information questions
1. Age: _____ years
2. Sex / Gender Identity:
☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Prefer not to say
☐ Other: _____
3. Current Educational Status:
☐ In school (Primary / Secondary / Tertiary)
☐ Out of school
☐ Dropped out (specify level: _____)
☐ Vocational/skills training
☐ Other: _____
4. Living Arrangement:
☐ With parents
☐ With relatives
☐ Alone
☐ In a care facility or shelter
☐ On the street
☐ Other: _____
5. Employment Status:
☐ Not working
☐ Working part-time
☐ Working full-time
☐ Informal work (e.g., street hawking, artisan, etc.)
☐ Apprenticeship / Vocational trainee
☐ Other: _____
6. Have you ever participated in any program related to life skills or youth development?
☐ Yes (specify): _____
☐ No
☐ Not sure
7. What type of community do you live in?
☐ Urban
☐ Semi-urban
☐ Rural

PART B
FGD questions.
Section A: Understanding of Key Concepts: *What meaning do target group assign for the concepts of " social work-related initiatives" and " life skills education"?*
1.In your own words, what does 'life skills' mean to you?
Probes:
Did you think you needed the skills, why
2. Can you describe what kind of young person will think needs this kind of program
Section B: Program Experience and Observations
3. Can you share your experience of being part of a life skills program?

Probes:
How did you join?
What did you learn
What was the best part of the experience?
Were there chances for group work, sharing, or discussion?

4. Can you share how those skills helped you in real life (at home, school, or work)?
   Probes
   Did it change how you handle conflict, pressure, or decisions?
5. Did you feel your voice and ideas were heard during the activities?
   Probes
   How were your contributions considered?
6. What could be done to make life skills programs better for young people like you?
   Probes:
   What new skills or topics should be included?
   How could they be made more relevant or interesting?

Appendix 4

Non-Plagiarism Declaration

I, Fidel Bethel Nnadi, hereby declare that my Master thesis titled “Exploring the Role of Social Work-Related Initiatives for Life Skills Education of At-Risk Youth in Nigeria.” is the result of my own work and carried out for the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master ‘s degree in Social Work with Children and Youth under the guidance and supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Daiva Penkauskienė of the Mykolas Romeris University, Lithunia. I confirm that the work contained herein is my own, except where explicitly stated otherwise; this text:

• Has not been submitted to any other Institute/University/College

• Contains proper references and citations for other scholarly work

• Has listed all citations in a list of references.

I am aware that violation of this code of conduct is regarded as an attempt to plagiarizeand will result in a failing grade in the programme

Date : 25/05/2026

Signature: 

Name : FIDEL BETHEL NNADI

Appendix 5

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools in Academic Work

1. Declaration and Transparency

☐ No AI tools were used in the manuscript.
☐ AI tools were used in the manuscript, and:
☐ I have explicitly declared the use of AI tools in the manuscript.
☐ I have indicated the name of the tool and, wherever possible, the version.
☐ I have clearly described the purpose for which AI was used (e.g.: linguistic review, analytical support, preliminary organisation, data simulation).

2. Authorship and Responsibility

☐ I assume full responsibility for the text, data, analyses, interpretations and references.

3. Use of AI in Writing and Scientific Content

☐ AI was not used to fabricate data, empirical results or conclusions.
☐ Any text generated or reformulated with AI support has been critically reviewed by me.
☐ All bibliographic references and citations were verified manually (there are no fictitious or inaccurate references).

4. AI as Part of the Method (Tick only if applicable)

☐ The use of AI as part of the method has been justified from the standpoint of knowledge production.
☐ The procedures have been described clearly and transparently.
☐ Limitations, potential biases, and human interpretative decisions have been made explicit.

5. Qualitative Research, Interviews and Ethnography (Tick only if applicable)

☐ AI did not have access to full transcripts of interviews, field notes, ethnographic diaries, or participant observations.
☐ AI was not used to generate discourse, empirical narratives, or simulated ethnographic descriptions.
Any AI support for qualitative analysis (e.g.: exploratory suggestions of codes or themes) was:
☐ Described in the Methodology section;
☐ Interpreted and validated by the researcher(s);
☐ Used in accordance with the terms of informed consent.

6. Data Protection and Ethics

☐ No personal, sensitive, or identifiable data has been input into AI tools.
☐ The use of AI is compatible with the ethical standards of scientific research and with the applicable data protection legislation.

Date: 28th May, 2026
Name(s): Fidel Bethel Nnadi

Signature: 

Appendix 6

MAXQDA Code System

Code System	Memo	Frequency
Code System		191
Theme 3: social work Practice in Nigeria	This theme examines how program facilitators who are not social workers understood and defined social work, how they differentiated it from general helping activities or community service. interesting how some persons after saying social work can be done by anyone at the beginning of the interview will change their mind and say maybe it requires some training.	3
How partciicpants understand and define social work (+)	This sub-theme explores program facilitators who are originally not social workers different understandings of social work practice in Nigeria.	5
Difference between social work and community service (+) (+) (+)	This sub-theme focuses on how program facilitators distinguished social work from general community service and how professionalised they think social work is as a discipline	6
Theme 4: Design and delivery of interventions	This theme explains how program facilitators designed and implemented life skills program and also beneficiary accounts of that, that is how they experienced and liked or disliked the delivery methods including if their voices were sought for and heard. all that was done, their roles and every aspect that was paid special attention during the programming and intervention, lessons learnt and sustainability plans if mentioned.	15
Delivery methods (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+)	This sub-theme focuses on the different methods used by program facilitators to deliver life skills interventions, including peer education, storytelling, group discussions, counselling, and culturally sensitive approaches and also accounts how beneficiaries experienced the methods of the delivery themselves	28
Needs assessments and co (+) (+)	All responses that paid special attention to some social work technique and tools for field intervention	14
Theme 5:outcomes of the intervention	This theme captures the positive behavioral, emotional, social, and practical changes program facilitators observed in young people after participating in life skills interventions and also captures the personal changes as accounted by beneficiaries after and during the intervention.	17
beneficiries assessment (+) (+) (+)	focused on beneficiaries account of the intervention and their experiences or life before and after the intervention. recorded changes and all.	5

Theme 2: Who is at risk, structural drivers of youth vulnerbaility (+)	This theme explores how program facilitators understood youth vulnerability and its causes and how it reveals in the life of the young people they serve and how beneficiaries themselves described the difficult social and economic realities that exposed young people to different forms of risk and vulnerability.	19
General structural drivers of youth vulnerability (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+)	This sub-theme highlights the major structural conditions such as poverty, family problems, violence, conflict, weak institutions, and harmful cultural practices that expose young people to risk. All that was mentioned and identifies and described by both program facilitators and beneficiaries	26
who is at more risk and why	This sub-theme identifies the groups of young people considered by both program facilitators and beneficiaries as most vulnerable, and in need of interventions most because of their condition or environment. it is interesting that both LGBTQ and Disabled people were not explored in my theoretical parts and is an emerging population to explore	14
Theme 1 Understanding of Life skills	This theme explains how program facilitators and beneficiaries understood life skills as practical, emotional, social, and personal abilities that help young people navigate everyday life beyond formal classroom education.	17
Life skills as holistic	This sub-theme focuses on how program facilitators and beneficiaries described life skills as involving emotional wellbeing, confidence, communication, self-awareness, resilience, and decision-making and not just classroom learning. all responses that argued that life skill is really beyond classroom learning	11
Life skills mentioned (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) (+)	All life skill mentioned and described by both program facilitators and beneficiaries	28
Difference between life skills and vocational or educational skills	This sub-theme explains how program facilitators distinguished life skills from academic learning and vocational training. does it have nay difference and why. It is interesting to see a conflict of both saying it is a combination of them all and some saying it is not related.	11