Implementing an early childhood curriculum in a different cultural context: an ethnographic study of Arabic early literacy practices in a Saudi Arabian preschool

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This thesis is submitted for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

2017

Declaration

I hereby declare that this work is my own.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my beloved parents, Fahad and Aljohrah, for their endless love, sacrifice, and support.

Acknowledgments

Abstract

Drawing on socio-cultural perspectives of literacy learning, this study investigates the contribution of early literacy practices in a Western-oriented curriculum, that were designed for a different linguistic and cultural context, to Arabic early literacy development for preschoolers in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, this study investigates the implementation of the Creative Curriculum at an institutional level and explores how the Saudi practitioners perform and interpret its literacy practices. Early literacy development for Saudi preschoolers and its link to their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity is also explored. This is an ethnographic study that takes place in a Saudi Arabian preschool. Data are collected through participant observation, interviews, documents, and children's mind maps. Study participants are six Saudi preschoolers and their mothers, two teachers, and the preschool director. Data analysis employs the thematic approach and the multi-layering method informed by a number of socio-cultural concepts as an analytical framework. This research provides evidences that children's early literacy development is a multimodal meaning-making activity and a social practice that is embedded in their socio-cultural context. It also shows the strong link between Saudi preschoolers' Arabic early literacy development and their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity. Furthermore, the findings reveal that although a number of the adopted literacy practices appear to make a significant contribution in promoting Arabic early literacy, other literacy practices influenced by linguistic, cultural and contextual factors are adapted or transformed. The findings suggest that instead of transplanting educational curricula and early literacy pedagogies, they need to be planted and developed in the relevant context in order to assimilate the linguistic features of the Arabic language and the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Personal background

There is no doubt that our personalities and attitudes have been formed under the influences of the surrounding environment. As is the case with any member of a society, there are several factors that have constructed and driven my scientific and professional attitudes. In my case, my family has been the key influential factor. I grew up in a small family with two sisters and two brothers. My family can be considered as a middle-class family led by a father who forged his social, educational and economic lives independently. Like many other girls in that era, my mother got married at an early age following which she dropped out of school and devoted her life to raising her children. Although my mother did not complete her basic education, she has a strong passion for education. Indeed, her positive perspective on education has had a significant impact on my life and those of my siblings.

I received my basic education in a middle-class private school. My first experience of studying in public educational institutions was when I undertook my Bachelor's programme at King Saud University. I gained my Master's degree from the same university, which I admire greatly, following which I began my academic career as a Teacher's Assistant in 2003. The decision to specialise in Early Childhood Education has been taken for several reasons, one of which is my deep conviction in the essential role of the early childhood stage in shaping the adult's personality. In other words, from my own experience I found that the main features of my personality were formed as a

result of the experiences that I had in my childhood. Moreover, the lack of attention that was given at that time to this developmental stage encouraged me to learn more about the early childhood education field.

1.2 Career life and the beginnings of my research interest

In a Montessori private school, I started my first job as a preschool teacher. I attended a six-month training course prior to starting to work with children. This experience was valuable for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was an opportunity to see how the Montessori approach had been applied practically in the field. Secondly, working with colleagues from Western countries has enriched my knowledge about teachers' practices from other cultures. In particular, some of these differences are interaction with children, classroom management, and preparation of activities. This experience increased my curiosity concerning the role that culture plays in children's learning and teaching practices.

As part of the training course, I was required to work on a project that was related to one of the classroom interest areas. Although the classroom was a bilingual class (Arabic and English), it was surprising how children developed their literacy skills in English faster than acquiring these skills in their native language (Arabic). For this reason, I chose the Arabic language area as the topic of my project. Throughout my teaching in this class, I realised that children encounter some difficulties in learning Arabic early literacy due to the visual complexity of the Arabic letters and the diglossic feature of the Arabic language which comprises two forms of the same language; the spoken form (vernaculars) and the written form (Standard Arabic) (Taibah and Haynes, 2011) (see Chapter 2 for more details). Since then, not only has a personal

interest in early literacy development emerged, but also several questions have come to mind about early literacy development in Arabic.

In 2003, I began a new phase in my career. I was nominated to work as a Teacher's Assistant at King Saud University in the same department that I graduated from. This proved a major turning point in my professional life; in other words, to be a member of a university faculty is not an ordinary job. It required a constant quest towards knowledge, research and professional development. As part of my duties as a Teacher Assistant, I participated in teaching some undergraduate courses while I was studying my Master's degree. After obtaining the Master's degree, I was promoted to the post of Lecturer where I had to teach several undergraduate courses and participate in a number of research projects and committees.

One of the courses that I taught is *Development of Early Language Skills and Concepts* which consisted of both theory and practice. Theoretically, I was eager to identify and discuss different theories, approaches and pedagogies in developing language and literacy in early childhood. In this course - as with other courses in the department programme - the taught educational theories were developed in other cultures (mostly Western). Throughout my teaching years, I constantly questioned how these Western theories could support student-teachers in their literacy teaching practices in Saudi preschools, a context that has different language and culture to the context where these theories were developed. Indeed, teaching this course not only motivated me to broaden my knowledge in the area of early literacy learning, but also increased my desire to gain more insights into Arabic early literacy.

On the other hand, the practical part of this course required the completion of several projects, language and literacy activities, that need to be prepared, presented and discussed by students in lectures throughout the term. In addition, since the students would do their internship year at preschools that implement the Saudi preschool official curriculum, The Self-Learning Curriculum (SLC), this curriculum was taken into account while teaching this course. Through the students' early field experience, which was one of the course requirements, they expressed a sense of discrepancy between what they studied theoretically and what was applied in the field; indeed, this expressed discrepancy increased my passion about early literacy practices in Saudi preschools.

Throughout my teaching, I have been reviewing a variety of literacy approaches in the area of early literacy learning with a particular focus on Arabic early literacy. Unfortunately, I found these approaches applied to other languages such as English. Although there are some Arabic literacy programmes, they are outdated and not compatible with recent trends in teaching literacy in early years. For instance, some of these programmes are not only teaching literacy as a separate component from other daily activities, but also applying teaching strategies that do not appear suitable to the children's needs in this stage of growth.

Hence, I found myself driven to search for international standards in early literacy practices. I was inspired by the developmentally appropriate practices that are stated in a joint position paper published by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of the Young Children (NAEYC), the leading professional association in the field of

early childhood in the United States (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). This latter paper aroused my curiosity about early literacy pedagogy that is appropriate developmentally, socially, culturally and linguistically for Saudi Arabian preschoolers.

Based on my knowledge and experience in early childhood education, I believe that early literacy has a key role to play in children's future academic learning, and has an essential impact on their social and emotional development. In other words, I believe children's cognitive skills, as well as their self confidence and self esteem, cannot be developed unless children become competent in language and literacy that enables them to participate effectively in their society. In addition, I am deeply convinced that children can develop early literacy at an early age. Guided by these convictions, I began to question what early literacy means in today's social context which is increasingly characterised by multimodal communication tools.

Throughout my academic career, I participated in a number of research projects in the field of early childhood education. In 2009, I participated as a research assistant in a study that was funded by The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNCEF) (Al-Ameel et al., 2009). This research project investigated the Saudi Arabian preschool programmes. One of the findings of this research showed that little attention has been given to the Arabic early literacy in the Self-Learning Curriculum, the official curriculum in Saudi preschool education. Indeed, participating in such research projects has broadened my knowledge, strengthened my skills as an academic researcher, and motivated me towards the doctoral degree.

1.3   The Doctoral journey

Taking the decision to continue my postgraduate studies by undertaking a PhD was not a hasty process; it took a long period of time during which I questioned why I should undertake research. What would I investigate during this long journey? Ultimately, a number of factors led to the decision to continue my studies some were personal, such as achieving my professional ambitions and pursuing professional development in my career life. Other aspects were driven by the concerns that were generated and developed throughout my teaching experience. In other words, a strong desire emerged within me to go back to the field as a researcher in order to find answers to the concerns I developed throughout my teaching experience. Indeed, the doctoral journey started in the hope that it may enrich my experience and deepen my knowledge about a particular area in early childhood education.

As early literacy development has become a personal point of interest, I have chosen this area as the general background to my research. Narrowing the scope of the desired research topic to a single research question requires not only reading extensively through relevant literature, but also exploring the current practices in the field.

As part of the Saudi government's vision to reform the educational system, King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Public Education Development Project was launched in 2007. The Project aims to enhance Saudi Arabia's competitiveness in building a knowledge-based economy which relies on knowledge in all society's activities. The implementation of the project was assigned to Tatweer Education Holding Company which is a strategic investment company owned by the Public Investment Fund (see Chapter 2 for details).

One of Tatweer's projects in the field of early childhood education is the Comprehensive Project to Develop Preschool Education. In January 2013, a pilot implementation of three suggested preschool curricula was applied in some preschools in different regions of the country. These curricula were Bawakeer, Montessori, and the Creative Curriculum. Since I have built up a special concern about early literacy practices, I started gathering some information about early literacy practices in these curricula. I collected some information through informal conversations held with some leaders in the Ministry of Education and some preschool directors, and through informal observations in the field. I found myself driven to focus my attention on the Arabic version of the Creative Curriculum. Indeed, there are a number of justifications underlying choosing this Curriculum. The first reason is that the Creative Curriculum that was developed in the United States has been applied for the first time in the Middle East in a number of public preschools in Saudi Arabia as part of Tatweer's project (see Chapter 2 for details). The second reason is that the Creative Curriculum, according to the Saudi educational company that has published the Arabic version, will also be applied in a number of private preschools in Saudi Arabia.

In order to broaden and deepen my knowledge about the Creative Curriculum, and to have a sense of the reality of the current situation, it was important initially to contact the relevant authorities. I started my communication with the Saudi Arabian educational company, and also arranged a meeting with a director of one of the public preschools that hosted the pilot implementation of the Creative Curriculum in Riyadh. As I believe that teachers play a crucial role in the educational process, it was necessary to explore their perspectives

on the implemented Curriculum. Thus, an informal conversation was held with two teachers who applied the new Curriculum.

Indeed, it was deduced from the conducted meetings that there were several issues of concern. On one hand, some of these concerns were related to the Arabic version in terms of the accuracy and validity of translation, while other concerns were related to the adaptation of the Curriculum to the Saudi culture. On the other hand, some of the concerns raised were related to teachers, their professional development, motivations, beliefs and perspectives concerning the new Curriculum. Surprisingly, all the people that I met drew attention to the Arabic language and literacy component in the Curriculum.

In the light of what has been mentioned above my curiosity was aroused not only about the future of preschool curricula in Saudi Arabia, but also recalling my earlier questions about the Western theories and Arabic early literacy that I mentioned earlier in this chapter. This generated the main research question for this study:

How can literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum that were designed for a different linguistic and cultural context contribute to Arabic early literacy development for preschoolers in Saudi Arabia?

Guided by this question, I started to review the relevant literature in the area of Arabic early literacy with a particular interest on literacy pedagogies that are Western-oriented. The above question also directed my fieldwork where a number of research sub-questions were generated throughout the research journey. These sub-questions are:

- How was the Creative Curriculum implemented at an institutional level?

- How do the Saudi practitioners perform and interpret early literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum?

- How do children in a Saudi Arabian preschool that uses the Creative Curriculum develop Arabic early literacy?

- In what ways are the preschoolers' Arabic early literacy development linked to their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity?

1.4   Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of eight chapters. This chapter, Chapter one, highlights the beginnings of this research and states how the main research question emerged. Chapter two presents a contextual background that might help the readers from different cultures to understand the context of the current work. Chapter three discusses the relevant literature and determines the theoretical perspectives that inform this work. The methodological framework and the design of the current study are outlined in Chapter four. Chapter five presents the outer ethnographic layer of the findings, the socio-cultural context, using data from the institutional (the preschool) and the home contexts. The middle ethnographic layer of the findings is presented in Chapter six, which discusses teachers' literacy practices, drawing on the data from the classroom context. Chapter seven provides the inner ethnographic layer of the findings that discusses children's early literacy development. The last chapter, Chapter eight, is the final section in this thesis. It offers a concluding discussion that brings together the key findings, and highlights their relevance to the literature and their theoretical and methodological contributions. This chapter also outlines a number of educational implications, limitations of the current work, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2   The Context of the Study

2.1   Introduction

An educational system in any country is influenced by the social, cultural and economic aspects of the society. Since the current study seeks to investigate early literacy practices in a Saudi Arabian preschool, it is crucial to provide the reader with a contextual framework for the study.

First, this chapter provides an overview of Saudi Arabian society and culture, which collectively form the broad socio-cultural context of this study. Second, a broad background of the educational system in Saudi Arabia is set out, with a particular focus on literacy learning in general education. Third, Saudi Arabian preschool education is discussed in great detail as it represents the specific area of this study. In this latter section, the chapter highlights the official curriculum in Saudi Arabian preschools. After that, the discussion moves to shed light on the recent reforms in the Saudi educational system through providing an overview of King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz's Public Education Development Project with a particular focus on recent reforms in the provision of preschool education. Finally, since this study aims to investigate Arabic literacy practices, the chapter concludes with an overview of the main characteristics of the Arabic language.

2.2   Saudi Arabia: society and culture

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the official name of the country, is the largest country of the Middle East. Geographically, it comprises the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula and it is part of the Arabian Gulf Countries (Hamdan, 2005).

The latest census in 2010 showed that the population of Saudi Arabia surpassed 31 million, of which 67% are Saudi citizens and 33% are non-Saudi citizens (General Authoroty for Statistics, 2015). Islam is the official religion of the country and it underpins the values and attitudes and social organisations throughout society. Specifically, Saudi Arabia is the hub of the Islamic world as the two holiest Islamic sites, Makkah and Madina, are located in the Western region of the country. In addition, the majority of Saudi citizens are Muslims and ethnic Arabs (Al-Khateeb, 2012).

In Saudi Arabia, like other Arabian Gulf Countries, the discovery and production of oil in 1938 has moved the country from poverty to become one of the most crucial economic countries in the world. Indeed, discovering oil led to large-scale changes in the infrastructure of the Saudi society in terms of healthcare, education and social services. In spite of the noticeable progression, there are some challenges that Saudi society continues to encounter, some of which are unemployment, divorce, people with special needs, social care services and religious extremism (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010).

Saudi society and culture have been shaped by two key factors, tribalism and Islam. Social organisation in the Saudi society is in the form of tribe that consists of a number of families. The ideology of Saudi society is driven by Islamic principles. Consequently, the Saudi political, social, educational and economic systems are underpinned by Islamic ideals (Al-Khateeb, 2012). In other words, Saudi society has an Islamic-based culture and its cultural beliefs are compatible with Islamic values (Aljabreen and Lash, 2016). In this respect, Alebaikan (2010, p. 119) argued that "Religion and culture in Saudi Arabia not

only shape people's attitudes, practices, and behaviours, but also form the construction of the reality of their lives".

Saudi Arabia has never been subject to colonisation. Its peoples have a homogenous culture and Saudi society has been described as a mono-cultural society where Saudi citizens share a common ethnicity, religion and heritage (Elyas, 2008; Al-Khateeb, 2012). However, Nouraldeen and Elyas (2014) argued that Saudis are increasingly becoming exposed to other cultures through pilgrimage, foreign workers, media and travelling.

Nouraldeen and Elyas (2014) asserted that most Muslims Arabs in the Middle East, including Saudis, have a collective identity that has three elements; Islamic, Arab, and national. Although the Saudi cultural identity is grounded in Islam and the country's cultural norms, it has been developed and transformed as a result of globalisation and its interactions with the international community. In other words, the economic, social, educational and cultural aspects of modernisation have reshaped the Saudis' lifestyle and cultural identity; subsequently they have become more open to the acceptance of modern and Western ideas that do not conflict with the Islamic values (Ayub et al., 2013). In this respect, in his study of foreign language student identity Elyas (2014) found that Saudi learners seem to have individual identities instead of a collective and fixed Islamic identity, and they view themselves as technology natives and global citizens. On the other hand, Al-Mogbel (2014) contended that Saudis are in fact cautious about accepting any changes in their society as they strongly adhere to their culture and heritage; therefore, any reforms in early childhood curricula should be aligned with the Saudi culture. Hence, this cultural context underscores the significance of this thesis in its

investigation of the implementation of the Creative Curriculum, a Western-oriented curriculum that has been applied in a Saudi Arabian preschool, a different linguistic and cultural context to that which it was originally designed for.

Arabic is the official language in Saudi Arabia with a variety of local dialects that vary from one region to another (this point is discussed further at the end of this chapter). Although Arabic language is highly respected by Saudi society, the use of English has been increased and expanded as a result of globalisation and economic evolution (Mahboob and Elyas, 2014).

A common belief in the Saudi society is that education is the key to success in life (Aljabreen and Lash, 2016). Saudis view schools as fundamental institutions that prepare children for future life through an educational environment that gives high consideration to self-discipline among other traits (Rabaah et al., 2016).

2.3   The Saudi educational system: a background

Saudi national development plans have considered the education sector as a priority; relying on the belief that real investment is to invest in human resources (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010). Therefore, the general budget of the education sector is increasing annually. The Saudi educational system was set up in the light of the Education Policy Document which was issued in 1969 by the Saudi Council of Ministers. Indeed, the education evolution in Saudi Arabia is a result of government support with significant contribution from the private sector, and the educational system is divided into general education and higher education. The Saudi educational system follows single-gender education where boys and girls attend separate schools; however,

despite the separation between the two genders, the Saudi educational system provides equal educational opportunities for both. Another unique feature of Saudi educational policy is that education is free for all levels (Al-Shaer, 2007).

In 2002, the Ministry of Education (MOE) became the main educational authority of general education for boys and girls in Saudi Arabia. Before that, boys' education was supervised by the Ministry of Knowledge, and girls' education was supervised by The General Presidency for Girls' Education. Moreover, there are some other authorities which participate in providing educational services; these include the Ministry of Defence and Aviation, the Ministry of the National Guard, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation. Besides this, and due to the wide geographical area of Saudi Arabia, several district educational authorities have been established under the supervision of the MOE to facilitate the supervision of the educational process (UNESCO, 2011). Educational management in Saudi Arabia is a centralised system where plans and decisions are taken by the higher authorities in the educational pyramid (Alyami, 2014).

The general education system consists of three levels: primary (ages 6 to12), intermediate (ages 12 to 15) and secondary (ages 15 to 18), while the preschool stage (ages 3 to 6) is still outside the formal educational ladder. The school year is divided into two terms: the duration of each term is between three to four months, and the average hours for a school day are about six (Al-Shaer, 2007).

Arabic is the formal language of instruction in the general educational system in Saudi Arabia. Although teaching English begins at grade four (ages 9 to10)

of the primary stage in public schools, private schools are allowed to teach English and other foreign languages from preschool. Saudi Arabia's new general education development strategy emphasises the importance of developing Arabic literacy and communication skills for students. Besides this, the development strategy also states the necessity of learning English as a foreign language (Tatweer, no date).

In response to social and economic development at a local level, and continuous development scientifically and technically at the international level, the national curriculum at all levels is undergoing a constant evolution. In particular, development is encapsulated in textbooks, teaching strategies, classroom environment, teaching facilities and technologies. Although both public and private schools are obligated to implement the national curriculum, private schools are allowed to incorporate additional subjects.

'Primary' is a compulsory stage that consists of six grades (years). Students start at the age of six, and children who are three months under six years can be enrolled if they have completed at least one year at preschool (UNESCO, 2011). The following subjects are taught at this stage: Islamic studies (religious subjects such as reading and interpretation of the Qur'an), Arabic language studies, Social and Citizenship education (History and Geography), Science, Math, Art Education, Physical Education (for boys), Feminine studies (for girls) and English starting from grade four. Throughout the primary phase, students are assessed through regular evaluation instead of examinations. Indeed, primary education has realised significant achievements; for instance, the enrolment rates increased from 76.8% in 1990 to 84.9% in 2008.

After completing the primary stage, students move to the intermediate phase which lasts for three years. At this stage, passing final exams is an essential requirement to move up from one grade to the next. At this stage, the students study the following subjects; the Arabic language, English language, Math, Science, Social studies, Computer, Islamic studies, Art, and Physical Education.

The secondary stage runs for three years. In the first year all the students study a general curriculum, while during the remaining two years students have to specialise in one of the following majors: the arts track or the science track. Recently, and due to the labour market's need for graduates who are specialising in different scientific disciplines, the secondary students are encouraged to enrol in the science track (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010). The secondary curriculum has been criticised for not preparing students adequately for either university or labour market requirements, and has been subject to many changes as a result. One of the recent changes is the implementation of the McGraw-Hill Math and Science curriculum. It is undeniable that the secondary school stage has led to significant achievements in terms of Saudi general education; for instance, the number of graduates rose dramatically from 239,000 in 2004 to 350,000 in 2010 (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2012).

Qur'anic schools are an integral part of the Saudi general education. These public schools are special religious schools where students have regular academic education with a particular focus on memorisation of the Qur'an. Qur'anic schools are available for boys and girls at the three levels of the general education (Rugh, 2002).

A further issue that has been given considerable attention by policymakers in the Saudi educational system is adult education. The General Secretariat for Adult Education was established which is supervised by the MOE in order to achieve the targeted goals in adult education. In particular, adult education consists of two strands; the first strand (combating illiteracy) aims to combat illiteracy throughout the country and is targeted at adults who did not enrol in primary school at the appropriate age and who cannot read and write. The second strand (continuing education) aims to enable those who cannot continue their education during the day to pursue their education during evening classes. In addition to the government's efforts in disseminating adult education, the private sector plays a considerable role in providing adult education classes. All adult education programmes implement a curriculum that has been developed by the MOE (Al-Shaer, 2007).

In addition to the efforts of the MOE in eradicating illiteracy and providing continuing education, the Ministry of Social Affairs plays a vital role in increasing social and cultural awareness through several programmes. One of these programmes is the Mother Child Education Programme (MOCEP) which was published by ACEV, a Turkish organisation. This programme was translated and adapted to Saudi culture by the Child Care Association in Riyadh. In particular, it aims to raise mothers' awareness in childcare, and to educate them in how to prepare their children for school life (Faour, 2010). MOCEP is a compensatory programme that is primarily addressed to mothers whose children have not been enrolled in preschools, and provides mothers with a series of booklets that contain different activities to help them teach literacy and arithmetic skills.

In respect of the above, it is important to shed some light on non-statutory literacy programmes (informal education) which differ from the formal education in schools. To illustrate, mosques, charitable societies and Qur'an memorisation groups play a considerable role in supporting government policy in reducing illiteracy (UNESCO, 2011). Although such Islamic institutions are confined to limited literacy practices in a religious context - for example, reading the Qur'an - they are highly appreciated and valued by Saudi society where Islam is one of the fundamental pillars that underpin it.

It is clear that the Saudi government has achieved remarkable improvements in eradicating illiteracy; for instance, illiteracy among females decreased from 40% in 1993 to 21% in 2005 (Al-Shaer, 2007). In addition, the ninth Saudi development plan (2012) indicated that, in 2007, the percentage of illiterate men aged 15 and above was 8.6% compared to 23.6% for women. In spite of the remarkable decrease in illiteracy rates, however, its effects are not only concentrated in the age group of 60 and above, but also appear among women more than among men. Therefore, eradicating illiteracy through the concerted efforts of public and private institutions is an essential tool in developing Saudi society.

From the above discussion, it can be deduced that the Saudi general education system has made several achievements. Despite remarkable progress, some aspects of the Saudi educational system have been criticised. This criticism relates to the marginalising of essential skills such as critical thinking, social interaction and the ability to debate (Prokop, 2003). In addition, Rugh (2002) reported that Saudi teaching pedagogy focuses on rote memorisation and relies on the text books as the sole source of knowledge. In this respect, Rabaah et al.

(2016) argued that one of the key challenges facing the Saudi Arabian educational system is improving the efficiency and quality of teachers.

2.3.1   Arabic literacy learning in Saudi general education

For a long period of time, the Arabic language was taught through several separate subjects that rely on the linguistic sciences approach. Based on this approach, the focus was more on syntax, morphology, literature and rhetoric than on realising and understanding the language itself unless in reading and comprehension lessons.

A content analysis of the reading curriculum for the primary grades was done by Al-Jarf (2007) to describe the acquisition of reading and literacy skills for Saudi primary students. The study showed that these students acquired literacy skills through five stages: readiness (pre-reading), initial reading and decoding, consolidation, fluency, and reading to learn in the final year of the primary school. The study also revealed that reading instruction is a whole-class strategy, and the literacy approach is a combination of analytic, synthetic, whole word phonics, whole language and language experiences. In addition, the study demonstrated that there is an apparent lack of out-of-class independent reading, which is an essential element for independent and enjoyable reading.

As part of the MOE's Comprehensive Project to Develop Curricula, the policymakers claimed that the current literacy curriculum for the primary and intermediate stages did not meet current trends and the Ministry's goals. Hence, the curriculum for Arabic literacy was developed with a great focus on language outcomes. This new literacy curriculum underpins the following principles (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 10) (translated by the author):

- Adopts 'constructivist theory' that emphasises knowledge, thinking skills and the student's needs.

- Follows the integrated approach in teaching language skills and components.

- Focuses more on language fluency than on language accuracy.

- Involves students with a variety of Standard Arabic texts.

- Increases the diversity of opportunities whereby students are exposed to using Arabic in more natural contexts.

- Encourages students to use the language functionally in different situations in their daily routine.

- Enables the teaching of language using the following strategies: self-learning, active learning, interactive learning, cooperative learning, modelling and simulation.

- Organises the content into a number of thematic units that consist of several educational tasks and workshops; each unit includes the four components of literacy: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

- Uses alphabetic principles based on the letter's sound not the letter's name.

- Emphasises the importance of short and long vowels.

The above section has discussed the principles that underpin the Arabic language curriculum in the primary and intermediate stages. Although it is assumed that literacy practices are supposed to be applied in the light of the

above principles, a review of empirical studies will show to what extent the literacy practices carried out reflect the above principles.

2.3.2   Preschool education

Preschool education in Saudi Arabia includes day care, nurseries and preschool centres. It was mentioned above that attending preschool education is still not compulsory in Saudi Arabia. Preschools serve children aged three to six from both genders where they attend three levels (KG1, KG2, and KG3) based on their age. It is worth noting that public preschools in Saudi Arabia prioritise admission to the children of working mothers (Gahwaji, 2013).

In the Saudi educational system, the private sector has the lead in establishing preschool centres. The first private preschool was established in Jeddah in 1965. In 1975, the MOE (Ministry of Knowledge previously) established the first public preschool centre. After that, the provision of preschool education has been developed and expanded all over the country (Al-Hariri, 2002). In the academic year 2014-2015, the number of preschools in all sectors reached 2559, of which 1632 are public and 927 are private. In Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia and where the current study took place, there are 579 preschools; 132 are affiliated to the public sector and 319 are affiliated to the private sector (Ministry of Education, 2016).

As the number of working women grew dramatically from 5.4% in 1992 to 14.6% in 2011, the need for preschool services increased in Saudi society (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2012). In response to the social and economic needs of the society, and the international call for early childhood care and education, a royal decree 7/ B/ 5388 was issued in 2002 that states the desire to

> develop a plan and a time schedule to be adopted by the development plan of the state for gradual expansion in establishing kindergarten throughout the kingdom benefiting from efforts of the private sector to achieve this goal, and develop an effective educational curriculum for kindergartens (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010, p. 386).

Since 1980 the MOE has been responsible for supervising all preschool centres in Saudi Arabia. In 2003, an independent administration called the General Administration for Preschool was established by the MOE to manage the preschool stage separately from other general education stages. In particular, preschool education in Saudi Arabia is under girls' education. Furthermore, the MOE has established the Saudi National Commission for Childhood that aims to coordinate the efforts of several institutions regarding children's affairs. The Education Policy Document states the general goals for preschool education as follows (General Presidency for Girls' Education, 1999; cited in Al-Jadidi, 2012, pp. 39-40):

1. Protecting the innocence of children, looking after their moral, mental and physical growth in a natural environment similar to their family environment, and responsive to the requirements of Islam.

2. Composition of the child's religious direction based on belief in the oneness of God; this conforms to the child's instincts.

3. Teaching children good behaviour and helping them to acquire the virtues and expected behaviours of Islam by providing a good example for them at school.

4. Familiarising children with the school atmosphere, preparing them for school life, and transferring them gently from self-centredness to a social life shared with peers.

5. Providing children with a wealth of correct expressions and appropriate information that is suited to their growth and environment.

6. Training children in terms of physical skills and senses, and how to use them appropriately.

7. Developing children's creative skills; giving them the opportunity to enjoy their vitality under guidance.

8. Fulfilling children's needs, pleasing them, and educating them without spoiling or overstraining.

9. Protecting children from risks, treating early signs of negative behaviour, and addressing childhood problems in an adequate way.

In Saudi Arabian private preschools, a number of early childhood curricula have been implemented such as the Self-Learning Curriculum, the Montessori approach and the High Scope. The following section sheds light on the Self-Learning Curriculum, the official curriculum in preschool education in Saudi Arabia.

2.3.2.1 The Self-Learning Curriculum (SLC)

In 1991 the first official early childhood education curriculum was implemented in preschool education in Saudi Arabia. The first edition of this curriculum was called " The Developed Kindergarten Curriculum" with a sub-title " the self-learning". This curriculum was developed through a cooperative project between The General Presidency for Girls' Education, The Arab Gulf Programme for the United Nations Development Organization (AGFUND), and The United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO). This project had two aims; develop a preschool curriculum and

establish four in-service training centres in different regions in Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Education, 2005).

The second edition of this curriculum was developed in 2005 and the name was changed to "The Self-Learning Curriculum" (SLC) (in this study I will use this name to refer to the official preschool curriculum in Saudi Arabia). Although all preschools - both public and private - are obliged to apply the Self-Learning Curriculum, private preschools are afforded more flexibility in implementing this curriculum. For instance, some private preschools offer additional reading and writing activities to satisfy children's parents (Bahatheg, 2010).

The Self-Learning Curriculum was developed in the light of several Western educational theories, Islamic values and research findings in the area of early childhood education (Gahwaji, 2006). The concept of "self learning" refers to children's own self-initiated activities that are driven by their needs. Although this concept is similar to the Western concept of "child-initiated activities", Al-Jadidi (2012) argued that in the context of self learning there is more focus on the role of adults in guiding children's learning and development. As described by its authors, the Self-Learning Curriculum adopts the play-based pedagogy, developmentally appropriate practices, and the child-centred approach (Al-Ameel, 2002). In addition, the curriculum emphasises the following principles; flexibility, play, freedom, interaction, respect, child identity and culture, knowledge, skills, and relationships with parents (Ministry of Education, 2005).

The Self-Learning Curriculum consists of seven books; a teacher guidebook, five detailed learning (thematic) books in the form of units, and one book with brief learning units. These learning units are water, sand, nutrition, life in

dwellings, hands, friends, and health and safety. Each unit takes from two to four weeks to complete, and is divided into several concepts (Ministry of Education, 2005). According to the teaching guides of this curriculum, teaching activities need to be planned in the light of the available teaching materials, and children's needs and interests. In this sense, teachers are not obliged to adhere to the activities that are mentioned in the teaching manuals (Al-Jadidi, 2012).

Based on the Self-Learning Curriculum, the classroom is divided into a variety of interest areas which are equipped with a range of activities intended to develop children's skills and to support the learning units. These areas are: Library area, Construction area, Dramatic play area, Table-toy area, Discovery area, Art area, and Reading and Writing area. In addition to these basic areas, there is an additional area that varies depending on the learning unit (Ministry of Education, 2005).

The programme in public preschools takes between three and four hours; whereas in some private preschools the programme might extend to seven hours. The daily routine consists of circle time, free playtime, recess, meal and last meeting. Private preschools are allowed to add additional periods such as English language, physical education, computers and Qur'an memorising circles.

The Self-Learning Curriculum views the role of the teacher as a guide for children's learning and development. The curriculum also emphasises the important role that teachers play in preparing the classroom environment. In Saudi Arabia, a number of universities have established colleges of education and departments of preschool education to provide qualified teachers. In

addition, the MOE has provided professional development programmes for preschool practitioners through a number of training centres that were established in different regions in the country (Gahwaji, 2013).

A considerable number of studies have investigated different aspects of the Self-Learning Curriculum. With regard to the theoretical principles of the curriculum, Khomais (2007) reported that the concept of child-centred activities, which emerged from the seminal works of Piaget (1972), has focused solely on children's development and has overlooked the impact of the socio-cultural context on children's development and learning. Thus, Saudi practitioners in preschool education still view children's learning from this developmental perspective. In this respect, Gahwaji (2006) also claimed that some tensions exist in applying the Self-Learning Curriculum such as the conflict between teacher-directed activities and free play.

Zamzamy's (2000) study demonstrated a lack of educational activities in reading and writing areas. In addition, Al-Ameel (2002) examined the effects of different approaches to the Self-Learning Curriculum according to some aspects of child growth. Al-Ameel's study yielded that preschools that have applied the Self-Learning Curriculum lack educational activities in mathematics, language and science. The study also pointed out that there is no clear assessment system in the Self-Learning Curriculum.

Another study that was done by Abdulkarim (2003) has shown that the Self-Learning Curriculum has contributed significantly to emotional, social development and thinking competencies. In contrast, the study found that numeracy and literacy skills have not been emphasised in the curriculum. In particular, the study found that there is no specific period for reading aloud, a

lack of developmentally appropriate Arabic literature, and a lack of emergent writing activities. The study called for the application of the emergent literacy approach instead of the reading readiness approach.

In 2009, Al-Ameel and colleagues explored the reality of Saudi Arabian preschool programmes. Their study revealed several interesting results emerging from the Self-Learning Curriculum, one of which is the suitability of the learning units to children's environment, needs and their previous experiences, albeit not keeping pace with the recent global and national needs. The study also indicated that considerable attention has been given to the spoken language and using language as a communication tool. In addition, the study showed that the curriculum provides activities that help children to develop positive self-esteem. The results also revealed that listening and speaking skills have been given more attention than reading and writing skills. Furthermore, in spite of the availability of reading, writing, the library area and reading story's activities, these skills have not yet attained a satisfactory level (Al-Ameel et al., 2009).

2.3.2.2   Early literacy in the Self-Learning Curriculum

The above section has shown that a number of studies concurred over the fact that little attention has been given to literacy learning in the Self-Learning Curriculum. Thus, in the second edition of the curriculum, more focus has been given to literacy activities by adding a particular interest area for reading and writing in the classroom environment, and providing more literacy activities and worksheets within the content of learning units (Khomais, 2007). According to the conceptual framework of the Self-Learning Curriculum, early literacy learning principles are as follows (Abdulkarim, 2003, pp. 275-276):

- children in this developmental stage need to verbally express their feelings and thoughts,

- children need to perform a variety of individual and group activities that develop their social and communication skills,

- children need to hear their own voices, so their language awareness can be raised,

- children need to see their words written, not only to be exposed regularly to the printed word, but also to recognise the relationship between spoken and written language,

- children need to strengthen their relationship with language, by exposing them to a variety of activities; both spoken and written,

- children should be provided with different writing materials to encourage them to trace, copy and write.

Abdulkarim (2003) indicated that the literacy component in the Self-Learning Curriculum can be classified under two categories, one is the development of verbal skills, and the second is the development of fine motor skills. The verbal skills are (a) memorisation and recitation (verses from Qur'an, songs, stories); (b) verbal communications (learn new words, use appropriate sentences, use correct grammar); (c) knowledge of sounds (pronouncing words clearly, identifying initial/last sound of words, discriminating words based on the initial/last sound); (d) reading and dictation (dictating word/sentence/story, reading some selected words); and (e) comprehension (recalling characters/ideas/plot of a story). On the other hand, the development of fine motor skills focuses on the acquisition of two skills. The first one is tracing (lines, shapes, letters, words, using sand/clay/unlined paper and lined paper). The other skill is writing (child's name, some letters, numbers).

2.3.2.3 King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz's Public Education Development Project

In 2007, King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz's Public Education Development Project "Tatweer" was established to reform and develop the general education in Saudi Arabia. "*Tatweer*" is an Arabic word that means development. The project was assigned to a government-owned holding education development company (Tatweer) to achieve the vision of the project in cooperation with the MOE (Tatweer, 2012; Alyami, 2014). The following quotation shows Tatweer's vision in relation to curricula development and the Arabic language (Tatweer, 2010, p.1, cited in Elyas, 2014, p. 36):

> Tatweer's curriculum program starts from basic principles that are based on Islam and its moral, ethical and cultural system is an essential point for development, prompts for positions and an entrance to a conscious interaction with diverse cultures in openness era and global village. It is a shared responsibility to preserve the learner's identity, emphasize active citizenship, national belongings, and positive values of society and to ensure its connection, development, and maintenance. The curriculum is the most important affect to achieve. Arabic is the language of Qu'ran, it is conveyed to our society's cultural heritage, to maintain our culture and identity we have to maintain it.

It can be deduced from the above quotation that, in its vision of educational reform, Tatweer has emphasised the importance of Islamic principles, social values, cultural identity, and citizenship. Besides this, the above vision also reflects a consideration of interaction with other cultures in the contemporary global era, and it also emphasises the crucial role of maintaining the Arabic language as a vital cultural tool.

One of the achievements of the Tatweer project in the area of early childhood education is developing national standards for the early childhood education. A document, "Saudi Early Learning Standards" was developed in collaboration between Tatweer in Saudi Arabia and The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in the United States. The document

consists of seven dimensions; approaches to learning, social-emotional development, language and literacy development, cognition and general knowledge, patriotism and social studies, Islamic education, and health and physical development (Ministry of Education et al., 2015).

In 2012, the Comprehensive Project to Develop Preschool Education was launched. This project aims to adopt early childhood curricula in accordance with global educational standards. The project also seeks to raise the professional development of the practitioners and leaders in the field of preschool education through in-service training programmes. In order to achieve the objectives of this project, a partnership was built between Tatweer and a number of Saudi educational companies in the area of early childhood education (Tatweer, 2012).

In 2013, three proposed preschool curricula were applied in a number of public preschools in different provinces of the country. The following section presents two of the implemented curricula, Montessori and Bawakeer, while the third one, the Creative Curriculum, which was investigated in this study is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Bawakeer Curriculum

In 2010, the International Childhood Company was established in Riyadh to provide integrated care to children aged 3-14 years in three areas: teaching, training and entertainment. The company generated its own curriculum, *Bawakeer* (an Arabic word that means early stages), from the endeavours of a team of expert educators from Saudi Arabia, Arab and Western countries (Altofola, 2016).

In order to achieve the company's goals, a series of private schools has been established in Riyadh under the supervision of the MOE. The schools offer education for children aged 3 to 9 years. The Bawakeer curriculum has been implemented in the preschool stage; whereas in the first three primary stages the national primary curriculum continues to be applied with additional learning units from the Bawakeer curriculum. According to the curriculum authors, a number of educational theories such as the Gardner theory of multiple intelligences and brain research have been considered. In addition, the curriculum adopts the following philosophy: developmentally appropriate practices, comprehensive balanced development, and pleasure as a necessity and not a luxury (Altofola, 2016).

The Bawakeer curriculum for preschoolers consists of a number of learning units designed to comply with the Saudi culture. In each unit, children work on a project that incorporating a variety of educational activities. The curriculum aims are to develop the growth of the child in social, emotional, spiritual, cognitive, motor and language development aspects. In January 2013, the International Childhood Company participated in the pilot implementation of three preschool curricula as a part of the Comprehensive Project to Develop Preschool Education. The Bawakeer curriculum was introduced to 10 public preschools in Riyadh (Tatweer, 2012).

The Montessori Curriculum

The Montessori approach was applied in a number of private preschools before the launch of Tatweer's project. As part of the Comprehensive Project to Develop Preschool Education, the Montessori curriculum has been applied in 10 public preschools in two cities; Qassim and Jeddah. The Montessori

Curriculum has been implemented by a partnership between the Academic Company for Educational Services and Tatweer (Tatweer, 2012).

The Montessori approach is widely known as an educational approach that focuses highly on the importance of a well-organised environment. Maria Montessori emphasised that children learn through play using their senses. Thus, the Montessori classroom is divided into a number of interest areas; each area is enriched with several tools, and each tool is designed to promote a certain skill (Soundy, 2003).

In the Montessori classroom, language is a fundamental component. From a Montessori perspective, language is considered as a process and reading and writing are viewed as tools of communication. The language arts area and the library area are enriched with a variety of activities that promote language and literacy skills. In order to develop children's skills in language and literacy, teachers apply different teaching strategies; for example, language games, reading stories, singing songs and individual reading and writing lessons. It can be said that the Montessori approach underscores the relationship between language, literacy and motor development (Soundy, 2003).

The above section discussed the Saudi educational system with a particular focus on preschool education. It has been shown that the Saudi government has made several attempts to improve the educational services. It can be deduced from the above sections that there is a tendency among the policymakers in the Saudi educational system towards importing educational curricula as part of educational reforms; for instance, employing Western-oriented curricula such as McGraw-Hill Math and Science curricula in the secondary stage, and the Montessori approach, the High Scope, and the Creative Curriculum in

preschool education. In addition, although the Self-Learning Curriculum was designed for preschool education in Saudi Arabia, it was built on a number of Western educational theories. Hence, this educational context stresses the need to investigate early literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum, which was generated and developed in a different cultural context (United States) and was implemented in a very different context in terms of language (Arabic) and culture (Saudi Arabian Islamic).

2.4   Arabic language and literacy: an overview

The current work focuses on the area of Arabic early literacy; thus this section discusses key features of the Arabic language and literacy learning. Arabic is the mother tongue for about 300 million people. Arabic also is the official language of 27 countries and is the religious language for all Muslims as it represents the language of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam (Saiegh-Haddad and Henkin-Roitfarb, 2014).

Arabic is part of what is called the Semitic group of languages, where there are some similarities in a number of languages -such as Hebrew and Amharic - in terms of their phonology and morphology. In addition, some languages such as Kurdish, Persian, Sindhi and Urdu use the Arabic letters but in different ways (Mahfoudhi et al., 2011).

Arabic language has 29 letters and 38 phonemes. In Arabic orthography, texts are written from right to left. In addition, consonants are represented by letters, and short vowels are represented by diacritic markings (variations of dots and lines placed below or above letters) (Taibah and Haynes, 2011). Mahfoudi (2011) indicated that one of the main features of Arabic orthography is its consistency between phonemes and graphemes.

A significant feature of Arabic orthography is the visual complexity of the letters. One aspect of this complexity is that the Arabic letter has multiple shapes that vary according to its placement in the word. In other words, Arabic letters are connected to each other to form a word. Another aspect is that some Arabic letters not only have similar sound, but also have similar or identical shape and vary only in the number and location of dots; for example, /r/ (ﺭ) and /z/ (ﺯ) (Eviatar and Ibrahim, 2014). Another feature of Arabic orthography is that it has two scripts; one is attributed as shallow, while the other is attributed as deep. In other words, the shallow aspect is when letters and words are written with diacritic marks, whereas the deep aspect is when the script appears without the diacritic marks, and the reader relies only on the context. Indeed, diacritic texts are the only ones used in the early years of education and in some special texts that require standardised pronunciation such as Qur'an texts. In particular, diacritic marks are usually removed from text when children become competent in basic visualisation skills (Taibah and Haynes, 2011). It is worth noting here that this feature of the Arabic script, diacritic marks, is not currently taught in preschools in Saudi Arabia.

Given this complex feature of the Arabic orthography, Mahfoudhi et al. (2011) argued that Arabic-speaking children face some difficulties in their literacy learning. In this respect, a number of researchers emphasised the importance of visual discrimination and memory processes in promoting Arabic literacy (Ahmad et al., 2014; Hansen, 2014).

As noted, a key linguistic feature of the Arabic language is diglossia. The term "diglossia" was first used by Ferguson (1959); it means " two related varieties of the same language were used for distinct purposes" (Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky, 2014, p. 226). In other words, Arabic has two forms; the spoken form

(vernacular) that is used in informal daily communication with different dialects and has no formal written form, and the literary form (Modern Standard Arabic) that is used in education, books, media, formal speech, and religious practices (Eviatar and Ibrahim, 2014). In this respect, Saiegh-Haddad and Henkin-Roitfarb (2014, p. 20) reported another form of Standard Arabic, known as Educated Spoken Arabic, that has been used widely in educational and formal institutions: "Academic school-related speech is conducted in a semi standard variety". I should mention here that in the current thesis I used the terms "vernacular" and "Standard Arabic" (including the Educated Spoken Arabic) to refer to the two forms of Arabic.

Standard Arabic varies from the vernacular in several linguistic dimensions such as vocabulary, phonology, syntax and grammar (Tibi and McLeod, 2014). Indeed, Arabic speakers use and are exposed to the two forms in their daily life. In schools, although children are exposed to Standard Arabic through reading and writing and as a language of instruction, outside the school they use vernacular Arabic in their oral communication. More discussion about Arabic language and literacy is undertaken in the next chapter.

In Saudi Arabia, the context of the current study, children are raised within this diglossic linguistic context. Young children grow up speaking the vernacular form of Arabic (Saudi dialect of a particular region), which differs slightly from one region to another. The different forms of vernacular Arabic also vary according to education and social class. Within the Saudi home context, although children and adults use different forms of vernacular Arabic as the prominent form in oral communication, they have some exposure to Standard Arabic through reading, media, and religious practices.

The above discussion has described some special characteristics of the Arabic language such as diglossia and the complex orthography system. Given this, literacy learning in Arabic has long been a main topic of concern among educators in the Arab world.

2.5   Summary

The above discussion has presented a contextual overview for this study. In this chapter, a general background of Saudi society and culture was discussed to help the reader understand the main social and cultural factors that have affected the educational system in Saudi Arabia. The chapter discussed how Saudi society has developed as a result of the social and economic evolution, and has shown that the ideology of the Saudi society is driven by Islamic principles. Moreover, this chapter provided an overview about the educational system in Saudi Arabia in terms of its general structure, goals, curricula, and literacy learning. This section also discussed the present criticisms of the Saudi educational system and the latest reforms that have been implemented by the Saudi educational authorities.

In addition, a detailed discussion on Saudi Arabian preschool education was provided to show how the provision of preschool education developed and expanded to meet the social and economic demands of contemporary Saudi society. In particular, this section focused on the official curriculum of preschool education in Saudi Arabia, the Self-Learning Curriculum, in terms of its principles, objectives, content, and early literacy approach. The discussion also shed light on the recent reform that has been made to preschool curricula in Saudi Arabia, and the chapter concluded with a brief discussion on the special characteristics of the Arabic language. The last section has shown the

uniqueness of the Arabic language that is apparent in its complex orthography system and diglossic nature.

The next chapter sets the theoretical framework for the current study. In the following chapter I situate my work within the relevant literature in the area of early literacy learning, which helps in identifying the existing gaps in the literature. The next chapter also discusses the theoretical perspectives underpinning this study which inform the analysis and interpretation of the collected data.

Chapter 3   Early Literacy Development: Theoretical Perspectives

3.1   Introduction

This chapter highlights the theoretical framework that informs the present study. This framework draws from international research and studies that took place in the Arab world in three areas; (1) literacy learning from socio-cultural perspectives; (2) emergent literacy from early childhood studies; and (3) research in the area of importing educational curricula.

First, the theoretical perspective that informs this study is set out. In this section, my theoretical stance, a socio-cultural perspective drawn from the New Literacy Studies, is outlined which I employ to investigate early literacy learning. This section also discusses key socio-cultural concepts that are used as analytical concepts in this study.

Next, the evolution of the concept of literacy is discussed, with a particular focus on the concept of early literacy in early childhood education. In addition, this chapter presents the relevant literature on emergent literacy in early years curricula and settings with a particular focus on Arabic early literacy and bi-literacy learning in early years. Moreover, the available literature in the area of importing educational curricula is addressed, and the chapter concludes with a review of the literature in the area of culture, identity and early literacy development.

3.2 A socio-cultural approach to early literacy learning: theoretical perspectives

Studies in the area of early literacy have been underpinned by several theoretical perspectives that were developed over a long period of time. This section discusses socio-cultural perspectives on literacy that inform the current study. These perspectives on literacy were generated from studies in the fields of psychology, anthropology, and sociolinguistic (Gregory et al., 2004; Perry, 2012).

The theory of the psychologist Vygotsky (1978) is the cornerstone of the evolution of socio-cultural research. Many Vygotskian notions have subsequently been developed by a number of socio-cultural theorists in the area of cultural psychology such as Bruner (1976), Rogoff (1990), Moll (1992), and Cole (1996) (Kelly, 2010). One of these notions is the significance of culture, signs and play in children's learning and development (Kim, 2011; Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013; Gillen and Hall, 2013). A central principle in socio-cultural perspectives is that learning and development are viewed as being constructed both socially and culturally; therefore, the context of learning is crucial from the point of view of the socio-culturalists (Kelly, 2010). From Vygotsky's view, children develop their cognitive skills through interaction with different cultural tools within their communities such as language(s), numbers, music, art and writing (Smidt, 2013b).

Socio-cultural perspectives of literacy have linked individual cognition with the social-cultural context of literacy practices (Gregory et al., 2004). Findings from this strand of research have emphasised the crucial role of the informal educational settings such as home and community schools in children's

language and literacy development (Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013). A review of the literature in the area of literacy research from a socio-cultural approach shows an overlap between the different socio-cultural perspectives. Therefore, it is crucial to determine the particular theoretical framework that underpins the current study. Although I adopt socio-cultural perspectives as a foundation for the theoretical framework for this study, I draw particularly on the New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003). In addition, it is worth noting that key concepts within socio-cultural perspectives and its impact on early literacy development are discussed later in this chapter (Section 3.2.1).

Literacy as a social practice is a major perspective within socio-cultural theories on literacy. This perspective was influenced by the early research of Street (1984) in Iran that investigated literacy practices for different purposes. In particular, Street focused on *maktab* literacy in Qur'anic schools, commercial literacy in markets, and school literacy (Street, 1984). Drawing on the perspective of literacy as a social practice, researchers provide valuable insights into how literacy practices vary across different communities and contexts; however, they were criticised for the limited attention that has been given to the instructional implications for these practices (Perry, 2012). In this sense, the perspective of literacy as a social practice informs my work as it aligns with its purpose in investigating early literacy practices that were imported from a context that has different language (English) and culture (US) and which were applied in a Saudi Arabian preschool.

Derived from the perspective of literacy as a social practice, a new path of literacy research has been launched called the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Perry, 2012). This theoretical perspective is further developed by Scribner and

Cole (1981), Heath (1983), Street (1984), Gee (1990) and Barton and Hamilton (1998); it incorporates notions from the fields of anthropology and sociolinguistics (Kelder, 1996). Researchers from this group emphasise the links between literacy and orality and describe literacy as a social practice that relies on a complex set of communication tools, which vary across socio-cultural contexts. The New Literacy Studies introduced the ideological model of literacy which extends literacy beyond a set of autonomous skills to include socio-cultural contexts that construct literacy learning (Street, 2003). The ideological model of literacy "offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another " (Street, 2003, p. 77).

In addition, the New Literacy Studies highlight the notions of "literacy events" and "literacy practices". In particular, the term literacy events has stemmed from Heath's work (1983) referring to the situations in which literacy learning occurs (Heath, 1983). Street (1984) adopted this latter term to develop the notion that literacy practices refer to the participants' social practices that occur within the literacy event by linking these practices to the wider social, cultural and ideological contexts (Street, 2003). In this respect, Perry (2012) argued for the interpretation of literacy practices as they reflect unobservable aspects such as beliefs and attitudes. Socio-cultural perspectives create a strong link between literacy events and literacy practices (Kelly, 2010). Concurring with this perspective, the term "literacy events" in this study means the periods where early literacy occurred in the preschool classroom such as circle time, interest areas, reading aloud, small groups, snack time and final meeting. Moreover, I used the term "literacy practices" to mean the participants'

practices that occurred throughout the different literacy events and that are embedded in the Saudi Arabian socio-cultural context.

Although the earlier work under the perspective of the New Literacy Studies took place with older children and adults, Heath's research (1983) paved the way for a number of researchers to investigate literacy practices for young children (Gregory, 1993; Volk and de Acosta, 2001; Drury, 2004a; Kenner, 2004). The current study sits within this latter line of the New Literacy Studies that investigated early literacy practices in young children.

Researchers from the New Literacy Studies perspective refer to literacy as "literacies". In other words, "literacies" - or "multiple literacies" - means the multiple ways that literacy is used in different cultures and contexts such as communities, homes, and schools (Street, 2003). In this sense, although this study focuses primarily on a preschool classroom as a site for early literacy learning, it also addresses children's early literacy learning in the home context. Moreover, researchers from this theoretical perspective have also viewed literacy as a meaning-making process where children use multimodal literacies, including digital technologies, that are embedded in their socio-cultural contexts (Wohlwend, 2009; Razfar and Yang, 2010). Hence, in this study, I view early literacy both as a social practice and as a meaning-making activity where children develop early literacy through the use of a variety of communication tools in their socio-cultural contexts.

In the light of the above discussion, I postulate that adopting socio-cultural perspectives can produce richly situated insights into early literacy practices. In particular, the perspective of the New Literacy Studies is crucial as it helps in tying the investigated early literacy practices to its socio-cultural context. The

following sections highlight a number of key concepts within socio-cultural perspectives and their implications for early literacy learning.

3.2.1 Key socio-cultural concepts in literacy learning

This section discusses a number of socio-cultural concepts that inform the current work and that have also been used as analytical framework for the present study. In particular, these concepts served as tools for the analysis of early literacy as a social and cultural practice within the classroom and the home contexts.

3.2.1.1 Mediation

A first and major theoretical concept that informs the current work is the concept of "mediation". From a socio-cultural perspective, the term mediation was defined as "the process whereby individuals' understanding is refracted through the experience of others" (Fernyhough, 2008, p. 230). This notion was developed by Vygotsky (1978), Wertsch (1985), Rogoff (1995), and Cole (1996) (Lee and Smagorinsky, 2000). Specifically, Vygotsky stressed the importance of verbal and semiotic mediation in children's learning (Vygotsky, 1981). This Vygotskian view has been expanded by a number of scholars such as Wertsch (1985) and Cole (1996) who introduced the term "cultural tools", drawing on the belief that mediating tools such as languages are historically and culturally constructed (Thompson, 2013). Rogoff (1990) determined three elements of mediation:

- Apprenticeship:

  a model in the plane of community activity, involving active individuals participating with others in culturally organised activity that has as part of its purpose the development of mature participation in the activity by the less experienced people (Rogoff, 2008, p. 60).

- Guided participation: "The notion of guided participation emphasises the active role of children in both observing and participating in the organised societal activity of their caregivers and companions " (Rogoff et al., 1998, p. 229) (discussed later in this chapter).

- Appropriation: "how individuals change through their involvement in one or another activity in the process becoming prepared for subsequent involvement in related activities " (Rogoff, 2008, p. 60).

Proponents of the socio-cultural perspective view learning as a social practice that is mediated by multiple signs such as languages, numbers, drawings and technology tools (Rowe, 2013). The term "mediators of literacy" was first developed by Baynham in (1995) and subsequently used by many researchers working from the perspective of the New Literacy Studies. Baynham (1995, p. 39) defines a mediator as "a person who makes his or her skill available to others, on a formal or informal basis, for them to accomplish specific literacy purposes". In light of this, the term "mediator" in this study refers particularly to the means that facilitate children's early literacy learning through several mediators such teachers, peers, mothers, siblings, language, numbers, drawings, culture, play and digital tools, among others. The following section discusses key social and cultural mediators in children's early literacy learning.

One of the mediators emphasised by a large body of research is the teacher. Some scholars argued that although the curriculum can help the teacher in planning literacy activities, the teacher is still a vital mediator for early literacy development (Neuman and Wright, 2010; Wasik, 2010; Scull et al., 2013). Research on effective literacy teaching revealed that an effective literacy teacher is the one who implements several literacy activities that motivate and scaffold children's learning (Hall, 2013).

Existing literature suggests that peers are another crucial social mediator in children's early literacy growth. A number of studies have investigated the relationship between peer interaction play and literacy development (Long et al., 2004; Kenner, 2004; Chen and Gregory, 2004; Gregory, 2008; Wohlwend, 2013). In this area of study, researchers have also investigated the link between gender and literacy peer learning (Kelly, 2010). Despite the importance of peers in literacy development, a review of early literacy research conducted by Lee (2012) indicated that only a limited number of studies have focused on the role of peers in early literacy growth. Given this gap in the literature, and since the current study takes place in a preschool classroom, I seek to explore the role that peers play in mediating children's early literacy learning.

There have been several studies in the literature that underscore the significant role of grandparents, parents and siblings as social mediators in children's literacy growth (Brooker, 2002; Drury, 2004a; Kelly, 2004; Kenner et al., 2007; Zeece and Wallace, 2009; Gregory et al., 2010; Stockall and Dennis, 2013). A review of the literature in this area of research indicated that home literacy practices are diverse and complex, and rely on a variety of literacy tools and resources (Nichols and Nixon, 2013). However, the review also revealed that there has been little discussion about how grandparents, parents and siblings mediate Arabic-speaking children's early literacy (Aram et al., 2013a; 2013b; Korat et al., 2014; Tibi and McLeod, 2014). Driven by this gap in the literature, my aim is to shed light on literacy practices within the home context of the Saudi preschoolers from the perspectives of the participant children and their mothers.

The reviewed literature also indicated that parents from different cultures hold different beliefs and expectations of children's learning (Korat, 2001; Khoja, 2015). For instance, Chinese parents tend to focus on children's academic performance as they consider preschool a preparatory stage for schooling (Rao et al., 2010; Li et al., 2012). In Kuwait, a similar socio-cultural context to the current study, parents expect more focus on school readiness during the preschool stage (Al-Shatti, 2011). Rowe (2013), however, pointed out that parents from similar socio-cultural backgrounds may hold different beliefs about learning.

In this respect, Kelly (2010) argued that the disparity between school and home relating to literacy beliefs and practices might be a barrier in children's literacy development. Kelly also highlighted a number of factors that influence children's literacy learning at home such as parents' educational and economic background, language(s), religion, and siblings' education. Furthermore, a recent study conducted by Kim (2014) called on early childhood teachers and researchers to involve parents more effectively in children's learning and literacy activities.

Since this study investigates early literacy practices in a preschool classroom from a socio-cultural perspective, it is crucial to highlight the relevant literature that addressed the construct of 'play' as a significant mediator in children's early literacy learning. A considerable amount of literature has indicated that play is a significant social and cultural mediator in children's learning (Ghafouri and Wien, 2005; Roskos et al., 2010; Kim, 2011; Roskos and Christie, 2011). In particular, through play, children are not only users of

several cultural tools but also are producers of culture in their attempts to interweave multicultural resources (Rowe, 2013; Wohlwend, 2013).

Gillen and Hall (2013) reported that dramatic play is a crucial opportunity for children to express different aspects of their culture. In this line of research, three ethnographic studies were conducted to investigate children's learning in three multicultural settings. The studies showed that children not only used different cultural resources in their play, but also wove multilingual texts into their play and literacy performance (Long et al., 2007).

Literature on literacy development in early childhood settings that draws on socio-cultural perspectives has shown that play, including digital tools, has long been considered a vital factor in children's identity and literacy growth. Hence, play is viewed as a pivotal mediator that provides children with multiple opportunities to interact with adults and peers in their socio-cultural contexts (Razfar and Yang, 2010; Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013).

In this respect, Dinehart (2015) argued that digital tools mediate children's literacy learning. Specifically, the reviewed literature indicated that the computer keyboard is a semiotic mediation that children use besides other semiotic tools in an increasingly multimodal world (Razfar and Yang, 2010). Researchers in this area stressed the importance of employing technology in literacy practices in early childhood settings (Wohlwend, 2009; Burnett, 2010; Razfar and Yang, 2010).

In the field of Arabic early literacy, the reviewed literature revealed that a few studies, grounded in the emergent literacy perspective, have investigated the role of digital tools in developing Arabic early literacy skills. Gahwaji (2011) found a positive influence of using interactive teaching programs in the

computer area on children's emergent literacy in a Saudi Arabian preschool. In Jordan, Ihmeideh (2014b) investigated the influence of electronic books on promoting preschoolers' emergent literacy. The latter study found a significant contribution of electronic books on children's print awareness and vocabulary. Hence, the current study seeks to provide different insights into this area by addressing digital tools from a socio-cultural perspective as mediators for Saudi preschoolers' early literacy learning.

In the light of the above section, the concept of mediation is used as an analytical concept in this study to investigate how Saudi Arabian preschoolers develop their early literacy through several mediators that are embedded in their socio-cultural contexts.

3.2.1.2 Scaffolding

A second and important theoretical concept underpinning this study is that of "scaffolding". One of the Vygotskian notions is *the zone of proximal development* (ZPD). In Vygotsky's words the ZPD is

> the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85)

In the light of the above quote, children's development and learning are socially mediated (Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013). 'Scaffolding' therefore means the assistance that is given to the child from someone more experienced to achieve the ZPD, the potential level of learning and development. The term 'scaffolding' has been used by socio-cultural theorists such as Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) (Smidt, 2013a).

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Researchers who are working from socio-cultural perspectives consider 'scaffolding' an essential notion in early literacy development as they view social interaction a crucial element of learning and development (Gillen and Hall, 2013; Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013). Indeed, although the notion of scaffolding is widely recognised in research and practice, it has been criticised for emphasising the role of the adults as experts and the passive view of the children as learners (Gregory, 2001). Despite this criticism, I argue that the application of 'scaffolding' as an analytical concept in this study is appropriate to the Saudi Arabian preschool educational context which puts more emphasis on the teacher's role in guiding children's learning (Al-Jadidi, 2012).

Williams and Gregory (2001) argued that the notion of scaffolding is different across cultures as each culture has its own view of teaching and learning. Furthermore, studies have found that the nature of scaffolding is influenced by a number of factors such as the teacher's skills and the value of the activity in a particular culture (Jessel et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2011). In this respect, Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) suggested six steps which describe several roles that the adult might play in the process of scaffolding:

1. Stimulating the child's interest during the activity.

2. Simplifying the activity.

3. Managing the activity in order to achieve its objectives.

4. Interpreting discrepancies and marking key features.

5. Managing children's feelings of frustration.

6. Presenting an ideal model of the task "modelling".

In this study, the above steps have been adopted in applying "scaffolding" as an analytical concept for early literacy learning and teaching practices in the observed classroom.

3.2.1.3 Modelling

A third theoretical concept that frames the current work is the concept of "modelling". Thompson (2013, p. 272) defined this term as "modelling of a behaviour or task by an expert that the learner initially imitates and ultimately internalises and appropriates". Notions such as 'scaffolding' and 'modelling' have been widely discussed in the studies investigating the interaction between learners and teachers. For a long period of time, modelling was considered a cornerstone of learning and teaching. In her review of effective literacy teaching, Hall (2013) indicated that effective teachers use the modelling approach in their literacy practices. Research in the area of early literacy has also emphasised the crucial role of teachers' modelling of language and literacy (Norling et al., 2015).

Research to date, however, has tended to focus more on 'scaffolding' rather than 'modelling'. According to the framework suggested by Wood and colleagues (1976), mentioned above, scaffolding is a much broader notion, while modelling is only one step towards successful scaffolding. In this respect, Gregory and colleagues (2010) suggested that modelling is part of the process of developing learning and literacy skills that is used in formal educational settings. Concurring with this latter view, in my study, "modelling" means a teaching technique that is used in early literacy teaching and learning and as a step towards scaffolding children's learning.

3.2.1.4   Guided participation

A fourth theoretical concept that informs this study is the notion of 'guided participation'. Drawing on the Vygotskian notion of ZPD and the developed concept of scaffolding Rogoff (1990), a neo-Vygotskian theorist, introduced the term 'guided participation'. Although some researchers have used 'scaffolding' and 'guided participation' interchangeably, the notion of guided participation emphasises the active role that children play in supporting and facilitating their own development and learning (Rogoff, 2008). Referring to guided participation, Rogoff states,

> The apprenticeship system often involves a group of novices (peers) who serve as resources for one another in exploring the new domain and aiding and challenging one another. Among themselves, the novices are likely to differ usefully in expertise as well (Rogoff, 1990, p. 39).

In the light of the above quote, it can be said that the notion of guided participation views children as competent in their learning and stresses the social interaction that takes place in the learning setting. In other words, children are viewed as active learners in the meaning-making process towards their literacy development (Whitmore et al., 2004; Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013). Although the notion of guided participation allows the child a much more active role than scaffolding does, it has been criticised for the lack of equality between the interacted children as usually the support for the younger or less skilled child comes from the older or more skilled child (Gregory, 2001). In relevant literature, terms such as 'exchange teaching' (Chen and Gregory, 2004) and 'peer tutoring' (Smidt, 2013b) have been also used to describe the interactions between peers in the classroom context that support their learning.

Believing in Rogoff's view of children as competent in their learning, and since this study takes place in a preschool classroom, the term "guided

participation" has been adopted as an analytical concept in analysing data related to children's early literacy learning and to better understand peer interactions.

3.2.1.5 Synergy

A fifth theoretical concept underpinning the analysis in this study is the concept of "synergy". The notion of 'synergy' has been developed in the light of key socio-cultural concepts such as scaffolding and guided participation. Although 'guided participation' has been used to describe the interaction that takes place between peers where one of them is more expert than the other, Gregory (2001) introduced the term 'synergy' to refer to a more equal level of learning between older/expert children and younger/novice ones. In other words, a synergy occurs when an older or more expert child teaches a younger or a less skilled child and learns from this interaction as well (Gregory, 2008).

In the area of literacy research, Drury (2007) argued that through synergy young language learners not only acquire new knowledge but also learn cultural and linguistic notions. Relevant literature has also referred to the notion of synergy as 'collaborative learning' when learning occurs in more formal setting such as schools (Chen and Gregory, 2004; Gregory et al., 2010). In addition, Kenner and colleagues (2007) have used the notion of synergy to describe the learning that takes place between grandparents and grandchildren in their research on intergenerational learning in East London. In the current study, the term 'synergy' is used as an analytical concept in analysing the interaction that takes place between peers in the preschool context and siblings in the home context.

3.2.1.6 Funds of knowledge

A final and significant theoretical concept informing this study is that of "funds of knowledge". Under the umbrella of socio-cultural perspectives, this term was developed by Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) in their ethnographic studies that investigated households and classroom practices for disadvantaged children in Mexican communities in Arizona. Moll et al. (1992, p. 133) defined the funds of knowledge as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being". In other words, the concept of funds of knowledge refers to how children's learning at school is impacted by the knowledge they gained from the wider socio-cultural contexts (Burnett, 2010; Kelly, 2010). In addition, the concept refers to the cultural knowledge that mediates children's literacy learning (Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013).

In their research, Moll and colleagues argued that culture is a crucial mediator for educational practices; however, teachers give little attention to the funds of knowledge that children bring from out-of-school communities (Lee and Smagorinsky, 2000). This concept has been used by a number of researchers who investigated children's literacy learning that took place in informal settings in different communities (Kenner et al., 2007; Gregory et al., 2015).

In the light of this theoretical concept, this study takes the term 'funds of knowledge' to mean the cultural knowledge that children bring from their homes to the classroom context which in turn influences their early literacy learning. Hence, I postulate that, by applying this term as an analytical concept in this study, rich insights into how Saudi preschoolers develop their early literacy within their socio-cultural contexts, preschool and home will emerge. It

is worth mentioning that although the concept of funds of knowledge was firstly used with disadvantaged children, this work employs this concept in investigating early literacy learning for children from socio-economic middle-class Saudi families.

The above section has presented definitions of key theoretical concepts in socio-cultural perspectives – namely, mediation, scaffolding, modelling, guided participation, synergy, and the funds of knowledge. Specifically, these concepts were discussed by situating them in their broad theoretical perspectives and their relevance to the current study. The data analysis chapters show how the insights derived from these theoretical concepts help in understanding early literacy practices in a Saudi Arabian preschool classroom.

3.3   Reconceptualising literacy in early years

Educators' view of literacy has influenced their literacy practices (Scull et al., 2012). As explicated above, the evolution of theoretical perspectives in the area of literacy has formulated the concept of literacy. Therefore, it is significant to highlight the evolution of this concept and the most prominent shifts in research and practice.

In the late nineteenth century, the term "literacy" emerged. This term has evolved over time and has replaced the term "reading and writing" which was originally used on a large scale (Gillen and Hall, 2013). Indeed, in other languages such as Arabic the term "reading and writing" is still widely used as there is no equivalent term (literacy). For many decades, literacy has meant the ability to read and write; however, this traditional view has been challenged by socio-cultural perspectives of literacy that introduced the ideological model of literacy (literacy is connected to its social and cultural context), which opposes

the autonomous model of literacy (a set of skills). In addition, the expansion of digital technology further challenged the view of literacy (Burnett, 2010). It is worth noting that with this transformation in the concept of literacy, a number of notions have been emphasised such as children's agency, motivation, engagement, self-efficiency and identity (Kleeck and Schuele, 2010; Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013).

Indeed, the concept of literacy has moved from a narrow view to a much broader definition. Specifically, the print-based literacy has been expanded to include several aspects of the complex communication system such as language(s), drawings, pictures, and electronic texts (Flewitt, 2013; Hall, 2013; Kennedy, 2013; Lancaster, 2013; Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013). This broad view of literacy has shifted to looking at language as part of a broader set of communicational resources. In this respect, action research conducted by Haggerty and Mitchell (2010) called early years teachers to adopt a broader view of literacy as a tool for communication with a particular focus on the tools preferred by children at this early age.

 In early years education, the concept of early literacy has not only become the subject of debate, but has also transformed and evolved (Gillen and Hall, 2013; Hall, 2013; Tolentino and Lawson, 2015). In particular, socio-cultural theories of learning have influenced early literacy practices in early childhood settings. In other words, the concept of early literacy is no longer limited to a set of cognitive skills; instead it has expanded to view early literacy as a meaning-making practice (Kim, 2011; Kennedy, 2013; Kim, 2014). For instance, the work of Kim (2011) showed that children's early literacy practices are situated in their social and cultural contexts and that they generate meaning through the

use of different semiotic tools such as language(s) and drawings by sharing literacy events with adults and their peers.

3.4   Emergent literacy in early years curricula and settings

The previous discussion outlined the evolution of the concept of early literacy. This section discusses the relevant literature on literacy learning in early childhood curricula and settings. Since the 1970s a large volume of research in this area has drawn from the emergent literacy perspective (Clay, 1966). This perspective views literacy as a social process that is developed earlier than previously thought. In this sense, the emergent literacy view counters the reading-readiness approach which holds that literacy development starts with formal schooling and that there are several prerequisite skills that children need to acquire before they can learn reading and writing (Teale and Sulzby, 1989; Green et al., 2006; Liu, 2008; Roskos and Christie, 2011; Lee, 2012).

The emergent literacy approach has afforded valuable insights into a number of fundamental dimensions in early literacy growth, such as formal and informal contexts, culture, and social factors (Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013). In addition, researchers who adopted the emergent literacy approach have not only given more attention to the importance of socio-cultural contexts in early literacy research, but have also viewed children as active learners (Gregory, 2008). Thus, a considerable and growing body of research took place in naturalistic settings such as homes, kindergartens and schools using qualitative, quantitative or mixed method research (Saracho and Spodek, 2013). Researchers in this area suggest that the emergent literacy in early childhood curricula consist of the following components; (a) oral language; (b) print awareness; (c) emergent reading; (d) emergent writing; (e) phonological

awareness; and (f) letter knowledge (Foorman et al., 2002). Since this study investigates early literacy practices within an early childhood curriculum, the Creative Curriculum, the above components of emergent literacy are taken into account in analysing children's early literacy learning.

There is remarkable growth all over the world in early childhood care, and the enrolment rates of children who attend early childhood care centres are increasing dramatically. The reviewed literature revealed a consensus among researchers that early childhood settings have a crucial impact on early literacy development (Dyson, 2001; Foorman et al., 2002; Green et al., 2006; Kleeck and Schuele, 2010). Socio-cultural theories have directed attention towards the significant role of social and cultural aspects of early years pedagogies (Whitmore et al., 2004; Wong, 2008; Rao et al., 2010).

A large volume of published studies emphasised that early literacy experiences have a significant influence on a child's confidence, independence and other major skills that are fundamental throughout life (Lonigan et al., 2011; Roskos and Christie, 2011). Moreover, Teale and colleagues (2010) concluded that literacy practices in early years education are influenced by social context, educational policy and teachers' beliefs.

There has been ongoing debate in the field on when the child should acquire early literacy and how literacy skills should be developed (Fisher, 2000). Earlier studies also found that there has been little discussion about the actual literacy practices in early years education and how the social context influences these practices (Green et al., 2006; Girard et al., 2013). Furthermore, the reviewed literature indicated that very few studies have investigated the impact of particular preschool curricula, such as the *High Scope* and the *Creative*

Curriculum, on early literacy development (Lonigan et al., 2011). Responding to this gap in the literature, this study explores the actual early literacy practices in a Saudi Arabian preschool that implements the Creative Curriculum.

Recent literature indicates some agreement between scholars on a number of essential principles in early literacy development, some of which relates to literacy across the curriculum. As Kennedy (2012) reported, incorporating of literacy across different subjects of the curriculum has a significant influence on literacy development. Besides this, a literacy-rich environment has also been considered a powerful factor in early literacy learning (Neuman, 2004; Wolfersberger et al., 2004; Owodally, 2013).

Moreover, relevant literature has highlighted other significant literacy practices in early childhood settings, one of which is the reading-aloud activity that has been considered by some as a rich opportunity in early literacy development (Zeece and Wallace, 2009; Chiong and DeLoache, 2013; Ankrum et al., 2013). In this review of some recent studies on interactive read-aloud activities, Lennox (2013) identified a number of factors that influence the effectiveness of storybook reading such as pedagogical knowledge, selection of books and the kind of interaction taking place between adults and children. In this respect, Ankrum et al. (2013) asserted that verbal scaffolding has a significant influence in promoting early reading. Furthermore, a growing volume of literature has attested to the fundamental role of the child's name in early literacy development (Bloodgood, 1999; Haney, 2002; Welsch et al., 2003; Diamond and Baroody, 2013).

Many studies in early literacy development have emphasised the crucial role of phonological awareness in children's literacy growth (Foorman et al., 2002; Connor et al., 2006; Callaghan and Madelaine, 2012). Studies in this area also concur that 'environmental print' has a significant influence in developing children's early literacy (Foorman et al., 2002). In particular, the reviewed literature indicated that identifying environmental print is one of the forms of early reading during preschool years and that it helps children develop the knowledge that print conveys meaning (Anderson et al., 2012). From a socio-cultural perspective, Neumann et al. (2011) argued that environmental print is embedded within children's socio-cultural contexts and plays a role in scaffolding children's early literacy.

A large body of published research emphasises the vital role of play in early literacy development (Trawick-Smith et al., 2003; Ghafouri and Wien, 2005; Roskos et al., 2010). The play-literacy approach draws on the theories of Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) and sits within the emergent literacy perspective (Roskos and Christie, 2011). In a recent review of research on young children's writing, Rowe (2013) reported that many studies on literacy-related play conducted in the 1990s focused on incorporating literacy materials in dramatic play centres. This active line of research revealed that literacy-enriched play centres could promote early literacy skills through effective scaffolding from adults (Morrow, 2001; Roskos et al., 2010). Researchers who are working from socio-cultural perspectives have carried out a number of studies that view play as a multimodal literacy tool (Wohlwend, 2009; Razfar and Yang, 2010; Rowe, 2013).

Studies published to date demonstrate an ongoing debate on play-based pedagogy in early literacy development. In other words, as a result of the increased calls for the explicit teaching of literacy at preschool age, educators and researchers have split into proponents and opponents. In a meta-analysis of research on literacy play in early childhood settings conducted by Roskos and colleagues (2010), the review showed that these studies took different stands towards incorporating play in learning. In particular, advocates of the play approach claim that play is the children's voice and that it provides a natural context for different literacy practices (Trawick-Smith et al., 2003; Ghafouri and Wien, 2005; Kim, 2011; Kennedy, 2013; Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013). In contrast, there is another group which calls for the implementation of more direct literacy instructions besides the play-based experiences (balanced literacy). That is, they argue that some literacy skills need to be taught through direct instruction (Hurry et al., 1999; Abdulkarim, 2003; Connor et al., 2006; Callaghan and Madelaine, 2012; Ashton et al., 2013).

Based on the above argument, it is worth noting that the play-based pedagogy is also a matter of debate in preschool education in Saudi Arabia, the context of the current research, where there are different perspectives among the decision makers, teachers and parents. To illustrate this, the *Saudi Early Learning Standards* (Ministry of Education et al., 2015) reports that Saudi policymakers support the play-based pedagogy. However, a number of studies reported a resistance towards applying new educational pedagogies (such as learning through play) among parents and teachers in Saudi Arabia, and ascribed this to a lack of knowledge about the significant role of play in children's development and learning and the dominance of the belief that preschool stage is a preparation for primary schooling (Al-Ameel, 2002; Alfayez, 2013).

Since the focal point of this study is Arabic early literacy, and since this study took place in a preschool classroom where English was taught as a foreign language besides Arabic, the following sections discuss the literature in the area of Arabic early literacy and bi-literacy learning.

3.4.1 Arabic language and early literacy development

The reviewed literature indicated that early literacy development in Arabic is a significant area of study for a number of reasons, some of which relate to the special characteristics of the Arabic language in terms of diglossia and complex orthography. Another reason is that Arabic is the religious language for Muslims as it is the language of the Qur'an (Mahfoudhi et al., 2011) (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, only limited research has been conducted on Arabic early literacy compared to the large body of research available on literacy learning in different languages such as English (Abu-Rabia, 2000; Mannai and Everatt, 2005; Palmer et al., 2007; Levin et al., 2008; Ibrahim, 2011; Mahfoudhi et al., 2011; Aram et al., 2013a; Russak and Fragman, 2013; Ibrahim, 2013b).

Research on Arabic early literacy has revealed reading obstacles that are faced by Arabic-speaking children and this may be referred to as the diglossia of Arabic (Abu-Rabia, 2000; Ibrahim, 2013b). In this respect, Aram and colleagues (2013a) stated that the difficulty in developing literacy in Arabic is a result of the gap between the two forms of Arabic; the first form is Standard Arabic which is used in education, books, stories and media and the other form is the vernacular which is used in everyday communication with different dialects. Farran et al. (2012) argued that vocabulary (lexicon) is one of the elements where Standard Arabic differs than vernacular Arabic.

Researchers in the area of Arabic literacy emphasised the importance of exposing kindergarten children to the Standard Arabic as it has a significant effect on their literacy development (Leikin et al., 2014). Al-Dannan's (1999) longitudinal study on using Standard Arabic in conversation with his children at an early age found that children can naturally acquire the Standard form of Arabic if they are exposed orally to it during their early years (Al-Dannan, 2014). A more recent study that investigated Arabic emergent literacy for kindergarteners in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) found that children use Standard Arabic when they interacted with a teacher who used this form of Arabic (Tibi and McLeod, 2014). Relevant literature also indicated that reading stories is a vital source in developing vocabulary for diglossic languages such as Arabic (Foorman et al., 2002; Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky, 2014). In early childhood education, Fedda and Oweini (2012) argued that Arabic-speaking children are supposed to be exposed to Standard Arabic through literacy activities, religious literacy and teachers' oral language.

Arabic linguistic researchers have stressed the overlapping features of the different varieties of Arabic and its positive impact on language learning and development (Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky, 2014; Myhill, 2014). In this respect, Khamis-Dakwar and Makhoul (2014) argued that Arabic-speaking children have a "metadiglossic awareness"; that is, an awareness about the variations in forms of Arabic, which plays a crucial role in promoting Arabic early literacy. The authors also reported that the notion of "code-switching", the use of two or more languages in the spoken language (Smith, 2014), also applies in transferring between both forms of Arabic – Standard and vernacular – in the spoken language. In addition, Palmer et al. (2007) argued that Arabic-speaking children who are exposed to different forms of the same language

tend to have what is termed a "metalinguistic advantage" that has been noticed in bilingual children.

In this respect, Al-Azraqi (2014) carried out a study in the East region of Saudi Arabia to investigate the appropriateness of preschools' language learning programmes to overcome the gap between the Standard and the vernacular forms of Arabic. Data that were collected through quantitative and qualitative methods found that the existing language programmes in Saudi Arabian preschools were not designed to help children to bridge the gap between the two forms of Arabic as little attention has been given to exposing preschoolers to Standard Arabic. The researcher ascribed that to the lack of awareness of the diglossic nature of Arabic. In line with this study, Tibi and McLeod (2014) called for further research on the impact of diglossia on children's Arabic literacy, and suggested that issues for diglossia need to be considered when planning for Arabic early literacy. They also raised the importance of promoting Standard Arabic in preschool classrooms through meaningful and culturally appropriate practices.

Numerous Arabic studies examined the role of the Qur'an in developing Arabic language for students who speak Arabic as a first language. This line of research has shown the crucial influence of the Qur'an on the development of the Arabic language and literacy (Allan, 2013; Ibrahim, 2013a). For instance, Allan (2013) investigated the role of the Qur'an in maintaining the meanings of Arabic words. Also, several studies published in English (Gregory et al., 2012a; Gregory et al., 2012b; Gregory et al., 2014) have laid some groundwork in investigating Arabic language, as a second language, within religious practices. Studies carried out by Gregory and colleagues in London revealed

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that children develop different skills related to language and literacy, logical reasoning, cultural and social skills through faith activities.

With regard to early writing in Arabic, the reviewed literature indicated that early literacy development in Arabic in terms of the written form is slower than in other languages due to the visual complexity of the Arabic script (Ibrahim, 2011; Russak and Fragman, 2013). Ihmeideh (2009) carried out a qualitative study to investigate the influence of daily writing activities on promoting early writing for kindergarteners in Jordan. His study found that children who were exposed daily to writing activities such as drawings, scribbling, making lists, writing cards and stories showed good progress in their Arabic early writing. Ihmeideh (2014a) also conducted a further study in Jordanian kindergartens which showed that the dramatic play area has a significant role in developing early writing for Arabic-speaking children. In particular, Ihmeideh found that, through dramatic play, children produced different forms of emergent writing such as letter-like forms and writing through drawing.

Tibi, Joshi and McLeod (2013) investigated kindergarten children's emergent writing in the UAE. The study found that limited writing opportunities were available to Emirati children at home and the researchers referred that to parents' lack of awareness about the significant role of early home literacy practices. They also found that writing activities in kindergartens, which were very few, focused on worksheets and writing letters. The researchers ascribed that to the teachers' perceptions about children's early writing development. Reviewing the literature in the area of Arabic early literacy also indicated that developing phonological awareness skills during preschool years is considered a vital predictor for Arabic-speaking children's future reading skills (Mannai

and Everatt, 2005; Mahfoudhi et al., 2011; Taibah and Haynes, 2011; Callaghan and Madelaine, 2012).

A number of studies have addressed kindergarten teachers' practices and perceptions on Arabic early literacy. In Qatar, a quantitative study explored teachers' perspectives on early writing in the preschool setting. The study found that the participant teachers showed positive attitudes towards teaching early writing in preschool settings in Qatar (Ihmeideh and Al-Maadadi, 2015). Al-Qaryouti et al. (2016) undertook a recent survey in the Arabian Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, to explore kindergarten's teachers strategies in promoting children's emergent literacy. They found that kindergarten teachers in the Arabian Gulf countries gave high consideration to the knowledge of letters in their literacy teaching practices. The study also called for the need for further research on kindergarten teachers' literacy practices in the Arabian Gulf countries, an area that has not been given full attention by the Arab researchers. In the context of the Arabian Gulf, another study conducted in the UAE found that kindergarten teachers gave more attention to oral language and memorisation skills (Tibi and McLeod, 2014).

Research from socio-cultural perspectives of early literacy development in Arabic, which is very limited, has highlighted the important role of parental mediation in early literacy development for Arabic-speaking children (Aram et al., 2013a; 2013b; Tibi and McLeod, 2014; Korat et al., 2014). Aram and colleagues (2013a) carried out a study in Israel to explore Arabic-speaking kindergarteners' early literacy within their home context with a particular focus on mother-child joint writing. The researchers used both quantitative and qualitative methods in collecting their data. The study stressed the importance

of the family context and maternal mediation in Arabic-speaking children's literacy development.

Korat and colleagues (2014) also investigated Arabic language and literacy development for Israeli Arabic-speaking kindergarteners at home. Their focus was on two literacy practices, storybook reading and joint writing. The study found that children's early literacy development at home was influenced by parental mediation, home literacy environment and the family's socio-economic status. In addition, Tibi and McLeod (2014) carried out qualitative research that drew on socio-cultural perspectives to investigate children's Arabic emergent literacy in the kindergarten and at home in the UAE. Their focus was on issues of bilingualism, diglossia and writing, and findings showed that literacy practices within the context of children's families were limited.

The above section discussed a number of studies in the area of Arabic early literacy that took place in the Middle East. Most of these adopted a quantitative method, and a few studies were qualitative. It can be deduced from the reviewed literature that only one study investigated different aspects of Arabic early literacy (Tibi and McLeod, 2014); however, most attention has been paid to particular components of early literacy such as phonological awareness (Mannai and Everatt, 2005; Taibah and Haynes, 2011) and early writing (Ihmeideh, 2009; 2014a; Tibi et al., 2013). Furthermore, the above discussion showed that limited existing studies in the field of Arabic early literacy were informed by socio-cultural perspectives (Aram et al., 2013a; 2013b; Korat et al., 2014; Tibi and McLeod, 2014). The review also confirmed that, in Saudi Arabia, there are very limited studies not only on the Arabic language and early literacy but also on how literacy is promoted and practiced in preschool

education (Taibah and Haynes, 2011; Al-Azraqi, 2014; Al-Qaryouti et al., 2016).

Hence, and driven by the existing gaps in the above literature, this study set out to investigate early literacy practices in a Saudi Arabian preschool classroom from a socio-cultural perspective. Specifically, I investigate early literacy as a social practice that is embedded in the Saudi Arabian socio-cultural contexts. I also seek to add methodological contributions to the area of Arabic early literacy research by using the ethnographic approach as – to the best of my knowledge – no ethnographic studies have been undertaken in the area of Arabic early literacy in the Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia.

3.4.2 Bilingual and bi-literacy learning in early years

Cultural and linguistic multiplicity has been spread widely driven by massive expansion of technology tools (Rowe, 2013). Given this, bilingualism has been considered a significant factor in improving communication in the global era (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000). Most recent studies have reported that, globally, the number of bilingual children exceeds the number of monolingual ones (Kenner and Gregory, 2013).

Vygotsky (1978) viewed the notion of bilingualism as a power tool in children's learning (Kenner and Gregory, 2013). This view has been also supported by research that attests to the advantages of learning a second language such as positive self-esteem, cognitive flexibility, positive identity and metalinguistic awareness (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000). This term "metalinguistic awareness" was defined as "the ability to think about language and its purposes" (Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013, p. 62). The reviewed literature in this area raised the significance of the home context and the literacy-rich

environment in learning a second language, and also indicated that learning a second language is influenced by psychological, cognitive and social factors (Chan and Sylva, 2015). In this respect, Alhussein (2004) argued that parental attitudes towards learning a foreign language influence their children's learning even if the parents do not speak the foreign language. Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000) added that children vary in how well they learn a second language due to the disparity in their abilities and motivations towards learning a new language.

Literature shows that there have been few studies on bilingualism and Arabic language. In particular, a number of studies investigated children's bilingual learning of Arabic and English (Kenner et al., 2004; Palmer et al., 2007; Farran et al., 2012). Other studies addressed children's bilingual learning of Arabic and Hebrew (Russak and Fragman, 2013; Schwartz and Asli, 2014). In the area of bilingual learning, Mahmoud (2000) found that Arabic as a first language plays a vital role in learning a foreign language such as English as it is considered a key source of linguistic knowledge. His study also identified that Arabic-speaking students transfer between both forms of Arabic, Standard and vernacular, when learning English as a foreign language.

Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000) suggested that early childhood setting is a favourable environment to learn a second language where children can develop the new language through play-based activities. However, there has been little discussion on how young Arabic-speaking children learn English as a foreign language (Chan and Sylva, 2015). Palmer and colleagues (2007) underscored the significant role of scaffolding in teaching English as a foreign language for Arabic-speaking children. Another study by Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000)

argued that young second-language learners tend to use non-verbal means such as face expressions and body language, and thus teachers are encouraged to respond positively to this behaviour by explaining verbally the children's silent message.

In this respect, a number of studies stressed the need for bilingual programmes that are developmentally and culturally appropriate (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000; Palmer et al., 2007). These suggestions are also supported by Kenner and Gregory (2013) who underlined the importance of culturally relevant books and drawings in bilingual education; they also posited that unfamiliarity with the cultural content of the stories is one of the difficulties that children face in their bi-literacy learning.

From a socio-cultural perspective of literacy development, Kenner and colleagues (2004) conducted six case studies to explore how children understand the variations in the script of each language. The study involved six children who speak Chinese, Arabic and Spanish as their first language and learn English as a second language. The findings showed that bilingual children were able to distinguish the differences of the script of each language such as directionality of the text and the letters' forms. The authors termed this transition between two languages systems in children's bi-literate learning the "moments of transitions". Along similar lines, Mor-Summerfeld (2005) investigated young children's writing in a bilingual context, Hebrew and English. In her study she used the term "language mosaic" to describe the combination of two or more languages in a script. This bilingual practice was also called "linguistic creativity" (Kenner and Gregory, 2013).

In addition, researchers in the area of bi-literacy learning suggested that the term "translanguaging" describes the practices of the bilinguals in using different linguistic semiotic tools in a bi-literate context in both the spoken and the written forms of languages (Hornberger and Link, 2012). This term was first used in the 1980s by Cen Williams in schools in Wales in opposition to the segregation of two monolinguilisms (Welsh and English) (Williams, 1994). The notion of translanguaging emerged to emphasise that both Welsh and English are valid and beneficial (Lewis et al., 2012). With this particular focus on the practices of the bilingual learners, clearly this term may provide insights into socio-cultural perspectives on literacy learning.

Another ethnographic study from this line of research conducted by Gregory and colleagues (2007) investigated the interlingual and intercultural literacy practices, which is reading a story, between children and their grandparents in a family context in East London. The study demonstrated that children's literacy experiences are intermingled with their grandparents' heritage, and also found that children are able to syncretic cultural meanings from different versions of a traditional story. In a later study, Gregory (2008) indicated that siblings are significant mediators of language and literacy development for children's bilingual learning.

In the Middle East, English has been taught as a foreign language besides Arabic (Palmer et al., 2007). Tibi et al. (2013) argued that bi-literacy learning in the UAE has become a key feature of the Emirati educational system. In Saudi Arabia, English is the foreign language that has been used most in many sectors. Nevertheless, learning English as a foreign language has become a matter of debate among educators in Saudi Arabia. A qualitative case study

explored bilingual programmes in Saudi Arabia in terms of advantages and obstacles; it found that incorrect beliefs about bilingual education among parents and teachers is one of the challenges in teaching children bilingually. The findings also showed that bilingual education enhances both first and second languages, divergent thinking and self-confidence. The study stressed the importance of implementing bilingual education from an early age in the Saudi educational system (Alzahrani, 2012).

In this respect, Elyas (2008) argued that in Saudi Arabia, the resistance towards learning English can be linked to the mono-culturalism of the Saudi society. Al-Mansour (2009) reported that although the opponents of teaching English at an early age in Saudi Arabia think that learning English might impede Arabic language, culture and identity, he argued that teaching Saudi children English as a foreign language at an early age has a crucial influence on developing their linguistic and cognitive skills, and enhancing cultural flexibility in the Saudi society.

Learning English in early years education was also a debated issue among parents and educators in the Saudi society. A number of studies investigated parental attitudes towards teaching English at an early age in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2005; Al-Harthi, 2014; Alsowayegh, 2015) and found that mothers showed positive attitudes towards learning English at early years education. In her 2014 study, Al-Harthi argued that Saudi mothers' viewed learning English in preschool years through the lens of their cultural and social contexts. For instance, the participant mothers in her study validated their desire to teach their children English by linking it to Prophet Mohammed's encouragement to learn foreign languages.

The above section discussed the literature in the area of bi-literacy learning with a particular focus on learning Arabic and English in early childhood settings. The reviewed literature showed agreement among researchers in this area on a number of advantages of learning bilingually through developmentally and culturally appropriate programmes. In addition, the above section showed the debate in the literature on learning English at an early age in Saudi Arabia. Concurring with what the above literature indicated about the advantages of learning bilingually in early years education, I postulate that in the current digital age, learning English alongside Arabic for Saudi Arabian preschoolers is crucial. Hence, and although the focal point of the current work is Arabic early literacy, children's bilingual learning is taken into account to better understand how Arabic-speaking preschoolers develop their Arabic early literacy with its diglossic nature in a bilingual learning context.

3.5   Importing curricula and pedagogies in early years education

Globalisation has played a crucial role in linking educationalists all over the world. A number of educational notions such as play-based pedagogy and the child-centred curriculum have become widely known among early childhood educators (Rao et al., 2010). In the area of early literacy, the joint statement published in the United States by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education for Young Children (NAEYC) (1998; 2009) has widely impacted early literacy practices. Specifically, this statement has emphasised that early literacy pedagogies need to be appropriate to children's development, language and culture. In this respect, Li et al. (2011) argued that although standards such as the developmentally appropriate practices and quality criteria that are stated by the NAEYC are widely known,

it is crucial to consider that these notions cannot be applied directly to other contexts that have different social and cultural features. In addition, Gregory et al. (2004) argued that although early childhood curricula were influenced by Piaget's notion of "child-centred" which emphasises a child's individuality, it is important to consider that the child also belongs to a social and cultural group.

Despite the significance of 'cultural borrowing', the concept must be treated with caution, as teaching and learning are mediated by social and cultural contexts (David et al., 2001; Gregory et al., 2010). Relevant literature indicated that with the spread of this construct of importing educational ideas, maintaining a national's identity has attracted debate from educators (Wong, 2008). In recent years, there is a notable tendency towards applying quality criteria which were developed in the Western societies to early years settings (Li et al., 2012; Korkeamaki and Dreher, 2012). For instance, early years education in China has been described as a combination of Western and Chinese pedagogies (Rao et al., 2010). Socio-cultural theories of learning have highly emphasised the importance of the social context in the case of importing educational pedagogies (Wong, 2008).

The review shows that only a few studies have focused on the notion of importing educational ideas. In Europe, Arnold and Brennan's (2013) ethnography study drew on socio-cultural perspectives to investigate the notion of sharing pedagogical practices in two early childhood centres in England and Ireland. Their study found that cultural values have a crucial influence in shaping the educational practices in each context. In Asia, most of the studies in this area were carried out in China (Li, 2004; Vong, 2005; Cheng, 2006;

Grdeshaber, 2006; Yuejuan and Yan, 2008; Li et al., 2011; Li et al., 2012). Results generated through this line of research argued that borrowed pedagogies need to be adapted contextually, and educators need to consider a number of factors that are related to culture, language, parental expectations and educational system.

The work of Cheng (2006) showed that importing educational theories is a challenging issue due to the complex correlation between theory and practice. Vong (2005) found that the concept of creativity, which was adopted from Western cultures and implemented in the Chinese kindergartens, was reconstructed when applied by Chinese practitioners influenced by the Chinese culture. She also found that the Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's learning were influenced by their historical, social and cultural backgrounds. Another study from this line of research (Yuejuan and Yan, 2008) revealed that although educational reform in Chinese kindergartens has achieved its objectives in terms of physical learning environment, little change has been made in teachers' beliefs and practices.

In the area of early literacy, Li and colleagues (2012) explored the adaptation of Western pedagogies for Chinese literacy instruction in preschool education using a qualitative approach with case studies from Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Singapore preschools. Their data were collected through classroom observations, teachers' interviews and surveys. The study findings showed that although Western pedagogies were applied in these classrooms, the Chinese traditional pedagogy was still the predominant method of teaching. The study also found that the linguistic features of the Chinese language influenced literacy pedagogies in the observed classrooms, and findings suggested that

linguistic, social, and cultural appropriateness need to be taken into account to a great extent when planning for educational reform. Indeed, Li et al.'s study provides more insights into socio-cultural perspectives in early childhood pedagogy, and is also strongly linked to the present work as both address early literacy pedagogies, which are Western-oriented, in preschool education. However, my study investigates this issue in a different context in terms of language (Arabic) and culture (Saudi), an area which remains unexplored in this field.

In the Middle East, the notion of cultural borrowing has become a notable phenomenon. For instance, Godwin (2006) reported that the educational system in the UAE is built on Western educational principles. In Saudi Arabia, Al-Jadidi (2012) argued that the Saudi educational system has been influenced by Western educational models. Al-Jadidi also indicated that kindergarten teachers' education programmes in Saudi Arabia include theories that were developed in Western cultures; thus, it is crucial to consider how these Western theories will be implemented in a different socio-cultural context. In this respect, Aljabreen and Lash (2016, p. 312) argued that in the Gulf countries there is a common view of Western early childhood educational practices as a "best practice".

In Saudi Arabian preschool education, a number of early childhood curricula such as the *High Scope* and the *Creative Curriculum,* developed in the United States, were applied in response to the tendency of the policymakers towards providing global educational standards (Tatweer, 2012). Those who support this stance assert that through the importing of Western ideas, different experiences can be shared with the international community (Nyland and

Alfayez, 2012). On the other hand, Riman and Darwish (2008) argued that the weakness in students' achievements in Arabic literacy in many Middle Eastern countries is a result of imported educational pedagogies that are not compatible with the features of the Arabic language. Rao et al. (2010) argued that despite the agreement over the importance of sharing successful experiences, it is crucial that successful early childhood pedagogies are socially, culturally and linguistically appropriate.

The above section discussed past research in the area of importing educational curricula. It can be deduced from the above discussion that the large portion of these studies took place in China. In contrast, the reviewed literature showed that although there is awareness of the notion of importing educational curricula in the Middle East, this area has not received sufficient attention from researchers.

The above discussion raises a number of questions and concerns in relation to the process of importing educational curricula. From a socio-cultural perspective, teaching and learning are constructed socially and culturally; thus, the context of learning is crucial. In particular, the view of literacy as an ideological, social and cultural practice, which this study adopts, emphasises that literacy practices vary across different communities and contexts, and views literacy as connected with cultural and social practices.

Since preschools are cultural institutions situated in local and global contexts, importing educational pedagogies across different cultures poses a number of challenges at policy and practice levels. At the *practice* level, one of the broad questions of concern is how imported educational curricula, such as the Creative Curriculum, will be implemented by Saudi practitioners whose

practices were shaped by the cultural context of education in Saudi Arabia. In other words, it is important to consider in what ways the Saudi educational context will influence – directly or indirectly – these imported pedagogies. In particular, I question how the imported curriculum will be adapted and transformed as a result of a range of socio-cultural factors of the new context such as the Saudi educational system, practitioners' beliefs and cultural assumptions about teaching and learning, parents' expectations about preschool education, and children's own perspectives regarding learning. The theoretical principles underpinning these pedagogies also represent a challenge when borrowing educational pedagogies. Since theories frame educators' beliefs and practices about learning and teaching (Perry, 2012), it is crucial in the case of borrowing educational curricula to ensure that the practitioners in the new context have a good grasp of the theoretical aspect of the imported pedagogies to bridge any potential gaps between theory and practice.

The imported pedagogies in early literacy learning are of particular relevance to this study. The linguistic dimension of these imported literacy pedagogies calls for significant consideration. Since early literacy pedagogies in the Creative Curriculum were designed for the English language, it is important to interrogate to what extent these literacy pedagogies are compatible with the Arabic language that has unique features such as the diglossic aspect and a complex orthography. Another concern is related to the conceptualisation of early literacy in the Creative Curriculum and how the Saudi preschool practitioners and parents view early literacy learning.

At the policy level, the implementation of the Creative Curriculum poses other questions of concern. Since the policymakers endeavour to apply global

educational standards in the provision of the Saudi preschool curricula, this begs the question of whether importing educational curricula is effective when seeking curricular development. Therefore, if this is the case, what criteria did the Saudi policymakers build on in importing a particular curriculum among other international curricula? In addition, the implementation of the Creative Curriculum raised other specific questions regarding early literacy. For instance, how do the policymakers and the curriculum developers in the provision of preschool education in Saudi Arabia view Arabic early literacy? Do they adopt an autonomous view of early literacy or do they adopt a broader view of early literacy as a social and cultural practice? Does this view fit with the conceptualisation of early literacy in the Creative Curriculum?

By raising the above questions, I do not reject the idea of applying global educational standards in preschool curricula in Saudi Arabia; rather I contend that transplanting educational curricula from one linguistic, cultural and social context to another is complex and not a straight-forward process. To illustrate this, importing the curriculum's teaching materials and providing training programmes do not necessarily assure that the curriculum has achieved its original intentions. My argument here is that the Saudi social, cultural and educational contexts have a profound impact on the Saudi practitioners' and parents' understandings of learning and teaching which might not be congruent with the imported curriculum that has originated from and been developed in a totally different culture. I also contend that, in the Saudi social and cultural contexts, there are distinct cultural values, social beliefs, and valued educational practices which raise other concerns regarding cultural preservation when borrowing educational pedagogies. Taking into account these considerations may help the policymakers and the practitioners to better

accommodate the progressive educational pedagogies that are developed in other socio-cultural contexts within the cultural uniqueness of the Saudi educational context.

The above concerns urged me to investigate this educational phenomenon not in an evaluative way but to better understand the process of importing educational curricula. In particular, my aim is to learn what happens when early literacy pedagogies are imported across different languages and cultures, to identify how the Saudi society and culture shape the pedagogic views and practices of the practitioners in preschools, and to examine whether the implementation of the imported curriculum in the Saudi preschool context achieved its intended objectives. If these objectives have been achieved, what considerations should be taken into account at policy and practice levels when importing educational curricula?

3.6   Culture, identity and early literacy

It was outlined above that culture is a core principle in socio-cultural theories of learning. According to Rogoff (1990, p. 43), "development can be understand only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities". The New Literacy Studies (NLS) have also drawn connections between the socio-cultural context of knowledge, language and identity within and outside the school environment (Kim, 2014). Through this theoretical lens, language is considered a symbolic mediation that has a crucial influence in constructing the social identity (Rowe, 2013). Pahl and Rowsell (2005) argued that identity is an integral component in teaching and learning literacy as language is a key representational resource to express social and cultural identities.

Vygotsky viewed culture as "the product of social life and human social activity" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 164), while Moll et al. (1992) described it as a set of cultural practices. In addition, Rogoff (1990) viewed culture as a dynamic concept, as she believed that cultural practices vary across time and context. Concurring with this view of culture, I take the term "culture" to mean the accumulated knowledge, behaviour, beliefs and attitudes that are shared by society's members.

There is a growing body of literature that views identity as a complex construct. Gee (2000, p. 99) defined identity as "a certain kind of person in a given context". Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 588) postulated that, "Identity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore as fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon", and Schwartz et al. (2010) view cultural identity as a combination between identifications, cultural practices and values.

Reviewing the literature in the area of social and cultural identity shows that there are two key approaches in conceptualising identity. The first approach – *essentialist* – views identity as a fixed concept and an *a priori* social fact, regardless of the impact of different contexts and cultures. In this sense, the language reflects a particular social identity. The second approach – *constructionist* – views identity as a social construct that is developed socially, culturally, historically and contextually (Ochs, 1993; Lytra, 2016). Within this latter approach, language is indirectly associated with identity (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). From a social constructivist approach to identity, Ochs states,

> Speakers attempt to establish the social identities of themselves and others through verbally performing certain social acts and verbally displaying certain stances. In one community, a stance or act may be widely used to construct

some social identity, whereas in another that stance or act is rarely drawn on to construct that identity (Ochs, 1993, pp. 289-299).

The above quote infers that social identity manifests through a range of behaviours, actions and languages, which vary from context to context. This is supported by Campbell (2000) who suggested that cultural identity evolves through the influences of family, peer group, school, religion, and media. Within the social constructivist view of identity, recent literature conceptualises cultural identity as multiple and flexible (Joseph, 2004; Lytra, 2016).

Since this study adopts a socio-cultural perspective to literacy learning, I view cultural identity as a social construct. Specifically, I contend that a number of socio-cultural factors, which vary from one context to another, play a role in how children develop their cultural identities. In other words, children's cultural identities develop and transform through interaction with different mediators and adults. In light of this, I seek to understand how Saudi preschoolers construct, develop and produce their cultural identity through their early literacy practices within the home and preschool contexts.

A considerable number of published studies emphasised the relationship between children's culture, identity and literacy growth (Tobin et al., 1989; Korat, 2001; Li, 2004; Grdeshaber, 2006; Cheng, 2006; Compton-Lilly, 2006; Wong, 2008; Rao et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011; Kuby and Vaughn, 2015). Some studies have reported that early childhood settings and cultural resources are valuable factors in children's learning (Compton-Lilly, 2006). An early ethnographic study by Tobin and colleagues (1989) presented a comprehensive comparison of preschool education in Japan, China and the United States. This cross-cultural study showed that preschool education in the three different

countries is bound by each country's cultural, social and economic contexts. Although the current work is not a cross-cultural study, it considers culture as a crucial context when investigating early literacy practices in a Saudi Arabian preschool's classroom.

A cross-cultural comparison conducted by Wong (2008) explored how socio-cultural beliefs impact early literacy practices in two preschool classrooms in Canada and Hong Kong. The study findings showed that although there were some similarities between the two preschools' classrooms, differences existed due to the cultural variations in each context. It can be asserted that cultural and social background shape not only children's learning, but also influence educators' perspectives and interpretations of children's learning and development (Korat, 2001). In this respect, Fleer (2006) suggested that learning theories need to be bounded by the context where the learning occur as social and cultural contexts shape learning and teaching practices.

Smidt (2013b) suggested that creating an appropriate culture within the classroom is essential in enhancing learning and teaching. Existing literature has documented that an effective teacher is the one who views literacy as a process of interaction between school and home in order to take into account children's social and cultural backgrounds (Hall, 2013). Kim (2014) stressed the importance of early literacy activities that are culturally appropriate. In this respect, Wohlwend (2013) reported that a kindergarten teacher has become a social and cultural mediator, particularly in the case of cultural convergence. Durden et al. (2015) argued that teachers' cultural awareness is a crucial requirement in providing culturally relevant pedagogies. In Saudi Arabia, Al-Jadidi (2012) reported that there is no reliable evidence of how Saudi

kindergarten teachers consider culturally appropriate pedagogies in their teaching.

Literature drawing on socio-cultural perspectives has found that children from different cultural contexts would have different views of literacy (Gillen and Hall, 2013). In addition, research has shown that cultural interest is a significant motive for reading, and children tend to read stories that reflect their culture and language (Palmer et al., 2007; Rowe, 2013). In this respect, Gregory (2008) found that children's learning to read in formal educational settings is impacted by out-of-school reading experiences and cultural expectations. More recently, Tolentino and Lawson (2015) argued that children become literacy learners through engaging in literacy activities that are valued by their own culture and society. In Canada, Kendrick (2005) carried out a study drawing on socio-cultural perspectives and found that play can provide rich insights into children's literacy learning and their identities.

The reviewed literature indicated that literacy practices are a means to represent a particular identity. To illustrate that, Bloodgood (1999) argued that the child's name is fundamental in promoting the child's socio-psychological identity. Moreover, Rowe (2013) reported that acquiring writing skills helps children construct their cultural identities.

In the Middle Eastern countries, a few studies have investigated children's learning and their cultural identities. In the UAE, Tibi and McLeod (2014) called for the importance of maintaining the vernacular Arabic for Emirati children as it reflects their cultural identity. Another study in the UAE explored how children's drawings reflect their identity and culture; it found that children's drawings strongly reflect the Emirati children's identity and culture,

and that children constructed their identity through language, media and religion (Shaban and Al-Awidi, 2013).

In summary, the above discussion has highlighted an area that is significantly related to the present work. The literature review has revealed that a large body of research has underscored the links between culture, identity and literacy development. However, this area has not been thoroughly investigated in the Middle East. Hence, this gap has motivated the current work to understand the ways the preschoolers' Arabic early literacy development linked to their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity.

3.7 Summary

This chapter traced key features of the existing literature that are related to the main objectives of the current thesis. In this chapter, I presented the theoretical perspectives that inform the current work. Specifically, drawing on the perspective of literacy as a social practice, I situated my research within the perspectives of the New Literacy Studies. This chapter also discussed key socio-cultural concepts that inform the analytical framework of the current study. In addition, this chapter illuminated my view of early literacy as a social practice and as a meaning-making activity where children develop early literacy through the use of a variety of communication tools in their socio-cultural contexts.

The above reviewed literature has determined a number of existing gaps that inform the rationale of the current study. For instance, emergent literacy studies showed that very few studies have investigated Arabic early literacy from a socio-cultural perspective. Literature also indicated that limited studies have focused on the influence of specific preschool curricula on early literacy

development. In addition, reviewed studies in the area of importing educational curricula agreed that teaching and learning vary across socio-cultural contexts, and extant related research also showed that this area has not been sufficiently investigated in the Middle East. This chapter also showed that little discussion has been undertaken in the area of Arabic early literacy and cultural identity; in addition, although a considerable body of international studies on early literacy adopted the quantitative, qualitative and the ethnographic approaches, researchers in the Arab world are still confined to the quantitative approach. The next chapter discusses the methodological perspective of the current work.

Chapter 4   Methodology

4.1   Introduction

"The methodology chapter is the turning point where the work suddenly becomes your own; it is about unique ways of dealing with unique data" (Conteh et al., 2005, p. 91).

This chapter outlines the methodological framework of the current study. The first part discusses the research paradigm that underpins this work. The methodological approach that was applied herein, ethnography, is also discussed and justified. In particular, this chapter highlights ethnography in educational contexts and early childhood education. The advantages and difficulties of ethnographic studies and the role of the ethnographic researchers are also discussed. In addition, since the current study involved young children, related issues and perspectives are addressed below.

The second part highlights the design of this study. This part sheds light on key elements of the fieldwork such as accessing the research setting, data collection methods and selecting the research participants. In addition, the data analysis approach applied in this study is outlined, along with ethical considerations, and the validity of the research findings.

4.2   Part One: Methodological approach: theoretical framework

4.2.1   Research paradigm and methodology

Scholars have argued that choosing a research paradigm is the first decision that a researcher needs to take as it helps in determining the research

methodology, methods and the overall design of the study (Maxwell, 1998). The research paradigm refers to philosophical assumptions about viewing reality (ontology) and gaining knowledge (epistemology) (Troudi, 2010). There are many philosophies that underlie educational research (Mack, 2010), one of which is the interpretivist paradigm which relies on the ontological assumption that the reality is multiple and socially constructed, and also relies on the epistemological assumption that knowledge is acquired in an inductive way to generate a theory (Joniak, 2005). In other words, researchers adopting the interpretivist paradigm are conducting their research to explore and understand rather than to evaluate or measure. Furthermore, within this paradigm researchers tend to consider the participants' view (emic perspective) of the studied phenomenon throughout an interaction between the researcher and the participants using different qualitative data collection methods (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Hence, the current work has selected its methodology in the light of the interpretivist paradigm, as this paradigm is more relevant for the purposes of this study that explores early literacy practices in their socio-cultural contexts.

A number of scholars have argued that the research questions help the researcher determine the research methodology. For instance, research questions in qualitative inquiry tend to provide answers about meanings, behaviours, and the impact of a context (Cohen et al., 2011). In this sense, and since this study seeks to answer the main research question, *How can literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum that were designed for a different linguistic and cultural context contribute to Arabic early literacy development for preschoolers in Saudi Arabia?*, an ethnographic approach was chosen, as this helps to offer insights into early literacy practices that are implemented in

a different context in terms of culture and language, and also in terms of how preschoolers develop Arabic early literacy.

4.2.2   Choosing a methodological path

The previous section argued that choosing a research paradigm helps researchers in determining the most appropriate methodological path. Ellis and Levy (2009) also argued that choosing a particular methodological approach is driven by research questions, type of data required and the conceptualisation of the research topic.

A large number of studies in the area of early childhood literacy research have been conducted using a variety of methodological approaches. A review of early childhood literacy research from 2000 to 2010 conducted by Orellana and Peer (2013) showed that the majority of studies used a qualitative approach, while a considerable amount of research used a quantitative approach, and a few studies used a mixed-method design. In particular, the qualitative approach has been used in studying early literacy practices in classrooms and homes, where the researchers view literacy as a social and cultural practice. In these studies, different aspects of early literacy have been examined through observations, interviews and document analysis.

On the other hand, the quantitative studies focused on the area of children's literacy development by using different measures and assessment tools since researchers using quantitative approaches tend to view literacy as a set of cognitive skills. In addition, a number of early childhood literacy studies utilised intervention methods. Moreover, Orellana and Peer (2013) reported that literacy research in early childhood seems to overlook children's views about their learning, which raises the need for the use of methodological

approaches such as ethnographic methods and participatory research techniques that consider children's perspectives.

In this study, the methodological path was guided by the main research question, as mentioned above. It is important to note that the purpose of this study was not to evaluate or assist the implemented literacy practices, but to gain an in-depth understanding of how literacy practices, that were imported from a different linguistic and cultural context, contribute to Arabic early literacy development in a Saudi Arabian preschool. In addition, the intent was not to examine the impact of particular variables or teaching pedagogies; rather, the main aim was to acquire a holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon from the insiders' perspectives.

Ethnography is considered a naturalistic form of inquiry as it studies social phenomena in their real contexts (Buchbinder et al., 2006; Hammersley, 2006). Although some quantitative methods can be used in ethnographic studies, ethnography is considered a form of qualitative research. Crucially, ethnography starts with a main research question that is developed and formulated throughout the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Another major characteristic of ethnographic studies is the nature of their data, the *emic data* that are generated by the participants and the *etic data* that are represented by the ethnographer's interpretation of the research outcomes (Creswell, 2012).

Ethnography can be used for several purposes; these include exploring a particular cultural context, understanding a social phenomenon, and describing people who are sharing the same culture (Buchbinder et al., 2006; Mukherji and Albon, 2012). Pole and Morrison (2003) reported several expected

outcomes of ethnographic studies; rich data, cultural interpretation, constructing a conceptual framework about the studied phenomenon, and providing findings that can influence policies and practices in a particular setting. Therefore, the main focus of ethnographic studies is to generate descriptions and interpretations rather than to test existing theories or hypotheses (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Hence, I believe that an ethnographic approach is convenient for this study due to its key features which are (1) a comprehensive exploration of the studied topic in its real socio-cultural context; (2) the acquisition of an in-depth understanding of the topic under study from the participants' perspectives; and (3) the cultural interpretation of the studied phenomenon. In this sense, the current ethnography study aims to achieve the following:

- Investigate literacy practices that are implemented in a different context linguistically and culturally, in a Saudi Arabian preschool (a culture-sharing group), and the contribution of these practices to early literacy development in Arabic.

- Investigate the studied phenomenon through the lens of the insiders by giving voice to children, teachers, administration and mothers.

- Gain a better understanding of how children in a Saudi Arabian preschool develop Arabic early literacy within their socio-cultural contexts.

- Interpret how the preschoolers' Arabic early literacy development links to their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity.

- Understand how literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum have been implemented, performed and interpreted by the Saudi practitioners, and explore the sociocultural factors that impact on their practices, which may help in improving educational practices in Saudi Arabian preschool education.

The following table illustrates the main features of ethnographic approaches and how these features fit in the current work.

Table 4.1 Ethnographic features in the study

Main features of ethnographic approaches	Ethnographic features in the current research
Study people in their naturalistic setting rather than in an environment that has already been prepared by the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).	The study took place in a naturalistic setting (preschool).
The researcher is immersed in a particular setting for an extended period of time (Bryman, 2012).	I spent a considerable amount of time (38 weeks) in the research setting.
Employ multiple methods of data collection in order to understand the studied phenomenon (Mukherji and Albon, 2012).	Data were collected through several methods; participant observation, interviews, mind maps, documents and artefacts.
Focus on a small number of cases, which allows for in-depth investigation (Bryman, 2012).	The study focused on a small number of participants (six children, six mothers, two teachers, and the preschool's director).
Data analysis is inductive rather than deductive, and moves from rich descriptions to identify patterns and concepts (Cohen et al., 2011).	Data analysis was carried out simultaneously with data collection to identify emerging regularities, patterns and themes.

4.2.2.1 Ethnography in educational contexts: principles and procedures

Ethnography was originally used by scholars focusing on unfamiliar cultural practices in anthropology and sociology. Currently, ethnography is widely used by a large number of researchers across different disciplines such as psychology, economics, education and social research (Buchbinder et al., 2006). Indeed, although researchers from different disciplines share the main features of the ethnographic approach, some features were developed and refined to better suit the nature of each discipline (Zaharlick, 1992; Creswell, 2012).

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argued that using ethnography in different disciplines led to difficulties in defining it as a construct. Despite this, a considerable number of definitions have agreed on essential elements for any ethnographic work. One of these definitions is,

> Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating overtly or covertly, in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and or asking questions through formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

Another definition views ethnographic research in terms of its

> aims at immersion or becoming a member of a setting in some way and stresses the keeping of a detailed fieldwork dairy and participant observation, it is this level of fieldwork that distinguishes ethnography from case study research (Mukherji and Albon, 2012, p. 69).

This latter definition highlights a significant feature of ethnographic research; that is its overlapping features and similarities with other research approaches such as case studies (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). On the other hand, ethnography has not only been considered a method of research, but also has been described as a way of writing (Bryman, 2012).

Ethnography is one of the research approaches widely used in the educational field. Indeed, researchers in the fields of Sociology of Education and Educational Anthropology have led the movement towards employing ethnography in educational research (Al-Sultan, 2008). Educational ethnographers view education as a cultural transmission adhering to the belief that a full understanding of an educational phenomenon requires consideration of the socio-cultural contexts within which learning occurs (Wolcott, 2014). Ethnographic studies allow educational researchers to take an inclusive exploration of educational matters. Spindler (2014) asserted that an ethnographic approach has added to the educational field a kind of knowledge not provided by correlational or experimental research. In other words, ethnography helps us to gain better understanding of the school culture and the broader socio-cultural context within which the learning process takes place (Wolcott, 2014).

In this respect, it is crucial to illustrate that employing ethnography in educational research has its own features which differ from the original anthropological form of ethnography. In other words, anthropologists and educationalists are working to achieve different goals. For instance, to develop a theory, ethnographic anthropologists intend to describe humans by explaining the individuals' behaviours, while educational ethnographers intend to describe an educational phenomenon to better improve educational practices (Zaharlick, 1992). In addition, educational ethnographers tend to do their fieldwork over short time periods of months rather than years, and their participant observation takes place during partial periods rather than the researchers living (immersing themselves) in the setting under study (Hammersley, 2006).

In educational research, the use of ethnographic studies is currently a well-established approach in literacy research. Early ethnographic studies appeared in the work of Heath's (1983) comparative research in the role of culture in children's language learning, Street's (1984) practice-based literacy studies, and Scribner and Cole's (1981) research that generated a remarkable shift from cognitive-based literacy research to more practice-based studies (Baker and Baynham, 2002; Baynham, 2004).

4.2.2.2 Ethnography: advantages and difficulties

As discussed above, there are several advantages of using an ethnographic approach in an educational context; in-depth investigation, rich description, providing insights on an existing theory, or developing a new one (O'Leary, 2004). Ethnography is a flexible approach in that it allows for the formulation of research questions throughout the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Indeed, this flexibility emerged in this study that began with a main research question from which other sub-questions were formulated throughout the process of conducting the research.

There are many advantages to being an educational ethnographer. For instance, ethnography provides the opportunity to collect live data as the researcher spends a considerable period with the participants in the researched setting. In addition, the ethnographic approach allows the researcher to fully capture the studied phenomenon within its socio-cultural contexts, which affords cultural interpretation of educational practices (Spindler, 2014).

On the other hand, some aspects of ethnographic studies have been criticised. For instance, ethnography has been characterised as only a descriptive approach (O'Leary, 2004). However, Pole and Morrison (2003) argued that

ethnographic studies go beyond generating rich description to ultimately allow for a holistic exploration of the studied phenomenon which could not be explored by using other research approaches. Another challenge for ethnographic researchers is that the holistic picture of the studied phenomenon would only become clear on completion of the fieldwork (Skånfors, 2009).

In addition, ethnographic research has been criticised for its time-consuming nature, difficulties in gaining access to the setting, and difficulties in building trust with the participants involved (O'Leary, 2004; Cohen et al., 2011). In respect to the length of time required to conduct ethnographic studies, Skanfors (2009) argued that the short time-span over which many contemporary ethnographic studies are undertaken raises some concerns about the validity of this line of research. Another challenge that ethnographers face is their impact on the participants' behaviour 'reactivity' – or 'The Observers' Paradox' – and how they can minimise this effect (Cohen et al., 2011). With regard to subjectivity in ethnographic research, Hammersley (2012, p. 13) argued that "there is acceptance of the fact that data, and inferences from them, are always shaped by the social and personal characteristics of the researcher". In this sense, I have acknowledged my personal and social background in Chapter one and throughout this thesis.

In addition, literature indicates that although ethnographic studies have become well recognised in academia, particularly in the UK and the US, there is still some resistance from policymakers towards this line of research (Pole and Morrison, 2003). On the other hand, the ethnographic approach is still not accepted or recognised globally. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the context of the current research, and other Middle Eastern countries, educational

researchers are still confined to quantitative approaches and ethnographic studies continue to be devalued. This devaluing of the ethnographic approach is driven by a number of perceptions; that these studies lack a rigorous research design, researchers' conservatism and resistance to different approaches, and the prevailing beliefs in using quantitative research among researchers in academic institutions (Al-Sultan, 2008; Al-Abdulkareem, 2012).

4.2.2.3 Ethnographic researcher: role, identity and reflexivity

The above section discussed a number of advantages and challenges for ethnographic studies; one such challenge is the role of researchers as they are considered the human instrument for data collection (Fetterman, 2010). Barley and Bath (2014) suggested that the initial period of entering the setting, the familiarisation period, helps the ethnographers to establish their position.

In addition, ethnographers tend to be reactive rather than proactive and aim to understand the studied phenomenon from the participants' perspective (emic) rather than their (the researchers') point of view (etic). In other words, the emic perspective means the insiders' view, the cultural knowledge, of the studied phenomenon. Therefore, the researcher's ability to observe and make the *familiar strange* is a crucial element of ethnographic studies (Pole and Morrison, 2003; Bryman, 2012). In addition, although participants' perspective (emic data) is one of the key features of the ethnographic approach, it is important to point out the crucial role of the researcher's interpretations (etic data) of the meaning of the information generated by the research participants (Creswell, 2012).

Based on the above, a key issue I considered early on in this research was determining my role in the research setting. Since the current study was carried

out at a preschool in Saudi Arabia, my home country and where I live, I entered the setting as an *Insider* and as an *Outsider* at the same time. In other words, since I share the same social, cultural and religious background with my research participants, I consider myself as an Insider. On the other hand, since I am not a member of the researched setting, as I am an academic researcher, I consider myself as an Outsider as well. Indeed, being an outsider in a setting which is familiar to me was not an easy task; however, I gradually built the ability to make the *familiar strange* by looking at the situation through an outsider's lens instead of through an insider's lens. In this sense, Gregory and Ruby (2011) argued that it is a real dilemma to be an insider and an outsider at the same time since entering the setting as a researcher, despite any cultural similarities, makes the researcher different from the insiders.

The notion of researcher reflexivity is a key feature of any ethnographic work. Reflexivity in ethnography means "the researcher being aware of and openly discussing his or her role in the study in a way that honors and respects the site and the participants" (Creswell, 2012, p. 474). Cohen et al. (2011, p. 171) also reported "reflexivity suggests that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research, seeking to understand their part in, or influence on, the research". In this sense, some scholars argued that ethnographers can eliminate their reactivity by considering reflexivity during fieldwork and writing up of the research report. Hammersley (2012) argued that reflexivity helps in recognising the researcher's effect on the data analysis and the research findings.

In light of the above discussion, throughout my research, instead of trying to avoid my reactivity, I have tried to be aware of my impact on my participants,

research setting and the process of data collection and analysis. To ensure reflexivity, throughout this research journey I recorded self-reflections in my field notes about my thoughts, feelings, questions and challenges. With regard to data analysis, I have also tried to be tentative in my interpretations of the research findings.

4.2.2.4 Ethnographic research in early childhood settings

Participant observation, as a key method for collecting data in ethnographic studies, allows early childhood researchers to hear children's voices and explore their own perspectives about their learning (Buchbinder et al., 2006). From this view, some scholars argued that ethnography allows early childhood researchers to study children as they live their lives in different socio-cultural contexts. In this respect, Cheney (2011) reported that ethnography is an appropriate methodology for empowering children's participation in research.

Childcare centres, including nurseries and kindergartens, are considered crucial social/cultural institutions for carrying out research on children and their caregivers. In particular, early childhood centres are viewed as sites for social and cultural practices, educational theories and government policies. Thus, ethnography as an approach is well suited to the investigation of a range of matters in early childhood settings (Buchbinder et al., 2006). For instance, the early work of Cochran-Smith (1984) is an example of using the ethnographic approach in a nursery school to examine the story-reading process as an aspect of literacy socialisation.

Ethnographic methods can help early childhood researchers in several aspects, one of which is the lengthy period that the researcher will spend in the setting, which can provide a clear overview of the stages of children's growth.

Moreover, ethnographic studies are carried out in naturalistic settings, which afford the opportunity to see how children and caregivers interact in their everyday life rather than observing them under experimental conditions. In addition, the researcher can explore the emotional, social and cultural aspects of children's lives through participant observation (Mukherji and Albon, 2012). Another advantage of conducting ethnographic research in the early childhood setting is that ethnography can help the researcher to understand childcare practices by linking these practices to their socio-cultural contexts (Buchbinder et al., 2006).

A growing body of research has used ethnography to investigate different phenomena in early childhood settings. Arnold and Brennan (2013) used ethnography to study two early childhood centres in England and in Ireland. The study aimed to understand cultural differences in the two centres through in-depth investigation of the thoughts and values underpinning the teaching pedagogies in each centre. Another study was conducted in the UK to explore how the ethnographic approach can generate in-depth descriptions and insights of early literacy development in the digital era (Flewitt, 2011). In addition, Gregory and colleagues (2007) carried out an ethnographic study to explore the forms of reading that appear in the family context from different cultural backgrounds in East London. Another ethnographic study conducted in the UK, the US and Iceland investigated children's socio-dramatic play across different linguistic and cultural contexts (Long et al., 2007). Indeed, these studies provided evidence for the appropriateness of the ethnographic approach in researching early literacy practices from a socio-cultural perspective.

In Asia, an ethnographic study conducted by Vong (2005) explored the development of a new kindergarten pedagogy (children's creativity), which had been imported from Western countries. Data were collected through observations, interviews and documentation. Using the ethnographic approach in this study allowed the researcher to give voice to the Chinese teachers' views and explore their own perspectives on implementing creativity in Chinese kindergartens. Furthermore, this ethnographic study provided cultural interpretation of the phenomenon of importing educational ideas, which evidenced that children's learning is socially and culturally constructed. Indeed, this latter study has not only mirrored the present work in investigating early childhood pedagogies that are Western-oriented, but has also provided evidence of the appropriateness of the ethnographic approach in studying such educational matters, and how ethnography afforded cultural explanation for the topic being studied.

In Australia, Simmons (2014) conducted an ethnographic study in a primary school to investigate how socio-dramatic play using several tools from their culture empowers children. The study used participant observations and focus groups as key methods for data collection. This Australian study suggested that the ethnographic approach facilitated a better understanding of children's cultural knowledge throughout their dramatic play.

In Saudi Arabia, where the current study took place, only a few studies have been conducted by using the ethnographic approach/methods in the field of early childhood. One such study applied a combination design of quasi-experimental research and elements of ethnographic-case study design to investigate the effect of using the Montessori method on children's creative

problem-solving in a Saudi Arabian preschool (Bahatheg, 2010). In the area of Arabic early literacy, Myhill (2014) argued that there have been very few attempts to investigate Arabic early literacy using an ethnographic approach.

4.2.3 Doing research with young children: issues and perspectives

For a long period of time, research with children, particularly in psychology, has been conducted based on the notion that children are unskilled compared to adults (Mayall, 2008). Thus, a large body of early childhood research has been conducted *on* children instead of *with* them. In other words, this traditional perspective views the child as an object rather than as a social actor (Mukherji and Albon, 2012). With the emergence of the children's rights movement, calls increased to consider children as participants in the research as they are viewed as competent constructors of their own lives (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). Indeed, the rights-based perspective, which views children as active participants in research, has emerged from the crucial notions of child agency and autonomy. This view of involving children as social actors in research emphasises the concept of "knowledge is power" (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). In this respect, O'Reilly et al. (2013, p. 77) argued that "no one can tell us better than children themselves about what childhood at any given point feels like". Kyronlampi-Kylmanen and Maatta (2011) also argued that involving children as participants in research not only provides the opportunities of listening to children's voices but also helps researchers to construct a comprehensive picture of the studied topic, which increases the validity of the research.

When involving children as participants, researchers need to consider a number of issues. Although ethics are crucial elements when undertaking research with participants of various ages, it is vital to bear in mind ethical issues when

carrying out research with young children due to their early age and their vulnerability (Mukherji and Albon, 2012). Researchers need to respect children's desires to participate in research (Moore et al., 2016) and to obtain their acceptance through appropriate consent forms (Mayne et al., 2016). In this respect, Dockett and Perry (2007) suggest that it is crucial for researchers who have children participating in their research to build good relationships with them, while Fielding and Bragg (2003) stress the significance of determining the role of the children in the research. Another issue that researchers need to take into consideration is all the different perspectives of the children besides adults' perspectives on the investigated topic (Roberts, 2008; Palaiologou, 2014). In addition, when involving children in research it is critical to choose research methods that are appropriate not only to children's abilities (Gunson et al., 2016) but also to their culture (Punch, 2002).

Researchers who want children to be active participants in their research face a number of challenges. Hadley et al. (2008) claim that parents might reject the participation of their children in research despite the children's agreement. Researchers also might encounter resistance from traditional early childhood practitioners and researchers (MacNaughton et al., 2007). Dealing with the participant children (Christensen and James, 2008) and trusting their responses (Dockett and Perry, 2007) is another dilemma that the researchers may face. In this respect, Palaiologou (2014) states that, in research with children, researchers might come up against methodological challenges in striking a balance between the methods that are most appropriate for children and the ones that are aligned with the research design. In Saudi Arabia, Bashatah (2016) found that one of the challenges that Saudi researchers face is the lack of confidence and skills to deal with children as participants in their research.

A growing body of international research has involved children as active participants (Clark and Moss, 2001; Kendrick and McKay, 2004; Stamatoglou, 2004; Robbins, 2007; Cheney, 2011; Harris, 2015; Lipponen et al., 2015). The key message from this line of research is that children are able to express their own perceptions of learning when researchers employ appropriate research methods such as photographs, videos, and drawings (this point is further discussed in Section 4.3.2.2).

The Mosaic Approach is an example of this active line of research in listening to young children (Clark and Moss, 2001). This framework has been informed by a number of theoretical perspectives such as children's competency, children's voice and the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards et al., 1998). In this approach to listening, children are viewed as active learners, meaning-makers, and agents (Clark, 2001). The Mosaic Approach incorporates the traditional research methods directed by adults – observation and interviews with parents, practitioners, and children – with participatory methods for children, such as book-making, tours, and map-making (Clark, 2007).

The Mosaic Approach has been developed through two studies. The first one, an exploratory study, aimed to develop verbal and non-verbal methodological tools for listening to the voices of young children. The study took place in an early childhood setting and involved two groups of young children – kindergarteners aged three to four years and nursery children aged less than two years (Clark and Moss, 2001). The second study, titled Spaces and Play, applied the Mosaic Approach to listen to children describing their outdoor play experiences (Clark and Moss, 2005).

The Mosaic Approach emphasises three elements of listening to young children (Clark, 2005, pp. 17-23):

- Internal listening: listening as a reflective process through the use of multi-method tools where children can express their own views and understandings.

- Multiple listening: listening to multiple perspectives including those of children, parents and the practitioners.

- Visible listening: the documentation of children's voices through visible tools such as photography, book-making, and map-making.

In light of the above elements of listening to young children, the Mosaic Approach was applied through two phases; in the first one, the researchers used multiple methods of hearing children's voices such as observation, interviews, book-making, map-making, photography and tours. The second phase aimed to interpret and reflect on the mosaic of documentations that were gathered in the first phase from multiple perspectives; those of children, researchers, practitioners, and parents (Clark, 2005).

In this research, I situate my work within the rights-based perspective that views children as socially competent in their learning and in their lives. In this sense, it can be seen how the rights-based perspective seems to be consistent with socio-cultural perspectives that view learning as socially and culturally constructed. Particularly, I was influenced by the work of Clark and Moss (2001), which introduced the Mosaic Approach in listening to young children. The founders of this approach argued that this framework for listening is adaptable and can be applied in different early childhood settings (Clark et al.,

2003); thus, the Mosaic Approach was adapted and applied in the Saudi preschool context. This framework has influenced the current study which has applied the three elements of listening; the internal listening, the multiple listening, and the visible listening. For instance, the first element, the *internal* listening, was considered through using multiple methods in hearing children's voices such as participant observation, conversations with children and the use of mind maps as participatory research techniques. The second element, the *multiple* listening, was taken into account through listening to multiple perspectives; children and their mothers, teachers and the preschool director. The *visible* listening, the third element, was applied through using mind maps with children where they could express their views through drawing and some writing. Hence, this study intends to add to the growing line of international research that involves children actively, and contributes to the existing research in the Middle East where no studies have considered children's own perspectives in investigating Arabic early literacy.

4.3   Part Two: Design of the study

The research design is a crucial element as it highlights the main features of the study (Wahyuni, 2012). The design of any research is determined by the research aims. Qualitative studies are characterised by having a research design that is formative, emergent, and related to a particular context (Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore, the research design of qualitative studies is unstructured and is developed throughout the research process unlike the research design of the quantitative studies, which is more structured and predetermined before starting the fieldwork. It is worth noting that this term, the research design, has different meanings. Some studies identify it as the whole research process including the research problem, literature review and the research methodology. However, other studies linked the research design only to the research methods (Cohen et al., 2011). In this work, the design of the study refers to the methodological procedures employed for conducting the research.

4.3.1   Stages of the inquiry

The previous section showed that ethnographic research design is known for its flexibility as the data collection methods are generated and developed throughout the fieldwork. Nevertheless, ethnography, as is the case with any other research approach, follows a number of steps to achieve its objectives. The following table presents the key stages in this study.

Table 4.2 Stages of conducting the current study

	Stage of the inquiry
1	Identified the contextual framework for the study in order to highlight the emergence of the research problem.
2	Formulated the main research question.
3	Reviewed relevant literature in order to locate the present study within the context of existing studies.
4	• Gained access to the research setting and piloted the study. • Started main data collection through participant observation, interviews, gathering documents and mind-map sessions with children. • Sub-questions were generated throughout the fieldwork.
5	Initial data analysis coinciding with the data collection process (organising the data, transcribing, coding).
6	Generated meaning of the data through data analysis by looking for patterns, categories and themes.
7	Interpreted the research findings to gain a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon.
8	Discussed the key findings and suggested a set of implications for policymakers, curricula developers, preschools administration and teachers.

4.3.2 Fieldwork and data collection

In ethnography, fieldwork is the cornerstone of the research (Fetterman, 2010). The research field was defined as "where the phenomenon exists" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 227). Ethnographers usually choose the setting in the light of the research question and purpose (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

4.3.2.1 Choosing and accessing the setting

In the present study, the setting was chosen based on the main research question, and the purpose of the research. As mentioned earlier in this chapter the question guiding this study is:

How can literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum that were designed for a different linguistic and cultural context contribute to Arabic early literacy development for preschoolers in Saudi Arabia?

Thus, the research setting was chosen because it represents the implementation of early literacy practices that are derived from a Western pedagogy, the Creative Curriculum, and have been applied for the first time in Saudi Arabian preschools. Indeed, the Creative Curriculum has been put into practice in a number of public preschools in some of the country's provinces. However, there are only four preschools in Riyadh, the city where I live; three of them applied the Curriculum through a pilot implementation from the MOE, while just one public preschool, which is affiliated with a university, has purchased the Curriculum through a training contract with the owner company. Therefore, the latter location was chosen as it has implemented the Curriculum on a permanent basis. Indeed, the director of the preschool was the facilitator who paved the way for my entry to the setting. Further details regarding accessing the setting are discussed later in this chapter (Section 4.3.3).

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argued that some personal characteristics of the researcher play a vital role in gaining access to the research setting. In the case of this study, my gender as a female researcher facilitated my entry to the setting since the Saudi Arabian educational system is single-gender-based and the preschool education is only supervised by females. Besides this, there were other factors that facilitated my entry to the research setting; these included my long and extensive experience in the field of preschool education in Saudi Arabia, and the professional network that I have built up with the practitioners and the leaders in this field.

During the first days in the research setting, I needed to familiarise myself with this new location. Barley and Bath (2014) argued that although the "familiarisation period" is a critical stage in ethnographic research, it has not been widely considered. The familiarisation period is particularly significant when the ethnographer is working with young children as it helps build trust between researchers and children, which will enhance the research process (Barley and Bath, 2014). In view of this, I spent two weeks visiting the preschool, observing different classrooms, hanging around in the preschool building, and talking to administration staff and teachers. After I had built a general idea about the preschool, and after I felt that my presence had become familiar to the preschool community, I started my fieldwork in one of the preschool classrooms.

At the beginning, the classroom teachers introduced me to the children as a visitor teacher who will visit the classroom some days a week. After a couple of days, the teachers explained to the children that I am a teacher at King Saud University and I am carrying out research to investigate learning and literacy

practices in their classroom. Indeed, I initially thought that it may take a long time to become familiar to the children and the teachers; however, as time went on, I found that some children began to see me as a member of their classroom. One explanation for this, as the classroom teachers mentioned, is that the children were used to visitors such as university students and faculty since the preschool is located within a university campus. The following table illustrates the phases of the fieldwork.

Table 4.3 Phases of the fieldwork

Research phase	School Year	Terms	Duration (weeks)	Number of visits	Observational hours
Pilot Study	School year 2013-2014 (KG2)	*Term 1* 31/8/2013 to 15/1/2014	7 weeks	7	22 hours
Main data collection		*Term 2* 25/1/2014 to 24/5/2014	12 weeks	19	54 hours
	School year 2014-2015 (KG3)	*Term 1* 7/9/2014 to 31/12/2014	5 weeks	35	140 hours (4 hours per day)
		Term 2 25/1/2015 to 21/5/2015	14 weeks		
Total			**38 (weeks)**	**61 (visits)**	**216 (hours)**

The above table outlines the time period that I spent in the research site. The entire fieldwork lasted 38 weeks (non-sequential) resulting in a total of 61 visits and 216 hours of participant observation. As the table shows, at the

beginning the research was conducted as a pilot study for seven weeks which took place in a KG2-level classroom where children were aged between four and five years. After that, I started the second phase of the research to collect the main data; this lasted for 31 weeks. As Table 4.3 shows, the main data collection started in the school year 2013-2014 and took place in a KG2-level classroom, and continued to the end of the school year 2014-2015 where the same group of children were moved to a KG3-level classroom. Indeed, the prolonged immersion in the research setting not only helped in establishing a rapport and trust with the research participants, but also allowed me to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied over a period of two years.

4.3.2.2   Methods of data collection

Data collection is not merely a technical phase; it needs to be organised well enough to provide answers to the research questions (Silverman, 2010). The ethnographic study has been characterised by its multiple methods of data collection; however, what makes a study ethnographic is not only the multiple data collection methods but the socio-cultural interpretation of the collected data (Fetterman, 2010).

Participant observation is the key data collection method in any ethnographic work (Fetterman, 2010). Ethnographic research relies mainly on qualitative methods as they are compatible with the naturalistic inquiry (Mukherji and Albon, 2012). The following section discusses the data collection methods that were applied in the current study, focusing on the theoretical principles for each method and how these methods were employed practically in my research.

Participant observation

Observation is a fundamental data collection method in early childhood research (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). Mukherji and Albon (2012) argued that observation is a well-suited method in carrying out research involving young children since they might not be able to provide answers through interviews or surveys due to their developmental stage. In addition, observation provides live data for the studied phenomenon which cannot be obtained from other methods (Cohen et al., 2011).

Research questions help the researcher decide what form of observation needs to be employed (Bryman, 2012). In ethnographic studies, naturalistic observation is used which allows researchers to observe their participants in their actual setting. Thus, this form of observation differs from laboratory observation where the setting is pre-prepared by the researcher such as in experimental studies (Cohen et al., 2011). In addition, participant observation is the best way to not only observe participants in their real lives but also to interact directly with them (Wolcott, 2014). In this respect, Clark (2003) argued that although observation is a crucial method of listening to young children, it draws largely on adults' perspectives; thus, besides the traditional methods of observation, it is important to apply participatory research tools to hear children's voices such as taking photographs by children on tours led by them and involving the researchers, book making and map making using photographs and drawings.

In the present work, participant observation was the most appropriate method for data collection. In other words, being a participant observer helped me to get insights into the actual early literacy practices that were implemented in

this classroom. In addition, as my research involves young children, observation becomes a crucial method in data collection and to listen to children's voices. Indeed, the main bulk of data for the current study was collected through observation, and all other data that were collected through interviews, documents and mind maps were driven by the observational data.

Participant observation is considered a process that moves from *descriptive* observation to *focused* observation to more *selective* observation. This progressive feature requires ongoing analysis of the data that have been collected by observation as the preliminary analysis helps the researcher to reflect on the collected data and generate initial themes (Cohen et al., 2011). Mukherji and Albon (2012) reported that culture, social class, religion, education and previous experience influence researchers during the observational process. Indeed, keeping in mind the progressive nature of the observation helped me to reduce my worries and concerns over how to keep my observations focused and selective.

Several considerations should be taken into account during participant observation; these include accessing the setting, establishing trust, and determining which role the observer will adopt in situ. Cohen and colleagues (2011, p. 404) suggested four roles that the observer can adopt in the setting:

- Complete participant: the observer is a fully participating member of the setting and the research is undertaken covertly.

- Participant as observer: the observer remains in the setting for a long period of time, and the research aims are explained to the participants.

- Observer as participant: the observer is not a member of the studied group, but participates in some activities. The research is undertaken overtly.

- Complete observer: the researcher just observes and does not participate with the group being studied. The research is carried out covertly and the identity of the observer remains anonymous.

In this study, my role was *observer as participant*. Despite not being a member of the preschool where the study was conducted, I participated in some activities during the daily routine. In addition, my identity as a researcher was disclosed to all members of the preschool and the research aims were explained to all participants.

On the other hand, practically, the researcher has to think about specific matters such as how to take notes, move, stand or sit while observing, and what exactly needs to be recorded (Mukherji and Albon, 2012). Another consideration is related to stopping observation and leaving the field. It has been suggested that ethnographers can stop observation when the observational data become repeated as this means that theoretical saturation has been reached (Cohen et al., 2011). In the present work, I approached theoretical saturation gradually when the collected data became repeated and no new data were observed.

In participant observation, the researcher records in narrative form exactly what happens in the situation under observation. This type of observation produces unstructured data. Although this type of observation does not need prior preparation in the setting, the produced data, which are unstructured, take much longer to organise and analyse. Furthermore, data that have been

obtained through observation are sensitive to contexts; this requires researchers to be fully aware about the context of the research.

It was mentioned above that observation has been criticised for its time-consuming, subjective nature, and the observer effect. Some have argued that the participant observer needs to spend a considerable period in the researched setting to reduce the reactivity effect (discussed earlier in Section 4.2.2.2) (Cohen et al., 2011). In this respect, McKechnie (2000) suggested that considering certain strategies can reduce observer reactivity; for instance, spending a familiarisation period with the participants before collecting the main data, avoiding eye contact with participants being observed, and ongoing analysis of the collected data to identify any observer effect that might be present. With regard to subjectivity, participant observers need to balance between their role as researchers and their role as participants so they be aware of and trying to minimise their biases (Fetterman, 2010). Moreover, participant observers need to avoid any judgments, evaluations or expectations when documenting their observations (Cohen et al., 2011; Mukherji and Albon, 2012). The following excerpt comes from the reflective part of my field notes, as an example of my feelings as a participant observer.

Excerpt 1

Today I have felt a set of mixed feelings regarding my role as a participant observer. Although I feel happy that the classroom's children began to trust me and asked me to participate with them in their play, I found myself questioning: to what extent should I strengthen this relationship? How can I distinguish between my role as a researcher and my role as a participant? At the time I focused my observation on the children who are participating in my study, what about the other children, who are not participating in my study, and are asking me to play with them?

(Field notes, 16 March 2014, translated from Arabic)

Observational tools

Field notes

In ethnographic studies field notes is a key method for recording observational data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Thus, considerable attention needs to be given to how field notes will be recorded, organised and analysed. Taking notes in the setting is not an easy task even if the research is carried out overtly. In other words, it is not only hard to record everything that happens in the observed situation, but it is also difficult to decide how and when to write down the notes. It was mentioned earlier in this chapter that observation is guided by the research questions so, in this sense, field notes need to be selective (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). At the beginning of the current research, I had the same worries about not only what to write, but also about how and when to write. Indeed, bearing in mind that my observation needs to be driven by the research questions, I found that my notes became more selective as the research progressed.

In terms of field notes content, usually field notes consist of two parts; the first part is descriptive and the second part is reflective. The descriptive part includes accurate description (factual data) about date, time, place, setting, people, activities, and actual words. On the other hand, the reflective part includes the researcher's reflections on the descriptive data, concerns, questions, feelings, obstacles and ethical issues (Cohen et al., 2011). Heath and Street (2008) made a practical suggestion that some ethnographers write their field notes in a separate document from that of their reflection notes, while others keep both in the same document in separate columns. In this respect, Wolcott (2014) suggested a framework for writing field notes, which consists of three sections; description, analysis and interpretation.

In order to ensure the validity of the field notes, Cohen et al. (2011) suggested that observers need to have the following sets of observational data; short notes taken in situ (jottings), expanded notes that are written up as soon as possible after observation, journals to record the researcher's reflections, and ongoing organisation and analysis.

In the current work, observational data and reflection notes were written down in a small notebook that could be carried around in the classroom; these notes were in the form of jottings. After each visit, on the same day, these jottings were typed out in Word, with more expansion and detail (54 sets of field notes). The expanded form of the field notes were entered in a particular form (Appendix 1) that was designed to help me with organising and analysing the collected data.

Visual data

Educational researchers can collect data by using a variety of visual methods such as photographs, videos and artefacts. In ethnographic studies, some scholars have suggested that visual data may make a considerable contribution to the findings (Fetterman, 2010). In addition, Kendrick (in press) suggested that visual data allow the researcher to explore the participants' perspective in literacy studies. The decision to use visual data depends on whether it is appropriate for the research purposes and whether it is applicable in the research setting (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In addition, the use of such data is surrounded by ethical issues that need to be considered by researchers (Fetterman, 2010).

Although visual data reflect particular situations, they are not neutral as they have meaning and they cannot be seen as isolated from their social and cultural

contexts. Therefore, visual data need to be analysed and interpreted as any other kind of data are. In addition, visual data need to be selective based on the research questions, as is the case with observational data (Cohen et al., 2011). It has also been argued that visual data usually present an incomplete story, which raises the need for other sources of data (Fetterman, 2010).

With the evolution of digital technology, cheap and high-quality cameras are available to researchers. Indeed, visual data are valuable for many reasons: they capture the reality; they are repeatable; they are time-efficient compared with written notes, and they provide rich details (Mukherji and Albon, 2012). On the other hand, using visual tools such as cameras and video recording may affect the normal behaviour of the participants.

With the evolution of the online network and the emergence of social media tools, Pink (2013) suggested that researchers could undertake visual ethnography by exploring the visual culture of a particular research setting through websites, blogs, video and photograph-sharing programs. In the current work, some visual data were viewed in the preschool's Instagram account, a social media tool for sharing videos and photographs, which was created by the preschool administration as a communication tool with the children's families.

In this study, visual data such as photographs and video clips were employed. Indeed, these kinds of data were used in order to construct a comprehensive picture of the studied phenomenon and provide triangulated data. In other words, visual data would enhance and enrich the observational data that were recorded in the field notes. In this study, a moving camera was used instead of a fixed camera. Despite the advantages of using a fixed camera, in the setting under study, the presence of a fixed camera was rejected for administrative,

cultural and social reasons. Therefore, I used the camera from my iPhone to take photographs and video clips since it has a convenient size, clear sound and image quality, and the facility to transfer the photographs automatically to the laptop (MacBook Pro), which assists in organising and analysing the collected data. In particular, photographs (507) and short-clip videos (94) were taken selectively according to their relevance to the purposes of the research.

Some have argued that the use of a moving camera is intrusive and artificial (Cohen et al., 2011). In the case of the current research, I found that children were not distracted when I was taking shots, since the classroom teachers frequently take photographs by using the cameras on their smartphones to document children's work. In addition, when I was introduced to the class as a researcher, it was clearly explained to the children that I would be using my smartphone to take photographs of them, and this was again explained to each of them, individually, when seeking assent from the children. With regard to the teachers, due to cultural and social reasons, their faces did not appear in any of the pictures. Moreover, since photographs can be taken by the researcher or the participants (Cohen et al., 2011), I found that children were delighted when I asked them if they would like to take a photograph of their work by themselves.

Interviews

The interview is one of the essential data collection methods that are used by ethnographers. This technique can be used in quantitative and qualitative research (Fetterman, 2010). It has been defined as "a method of data collection that involves researchers asking respondents basically open-ended questions" (O'Leary, 2004, p. 162). This method is also seen as a social and emotional

process rather than just a method for collecting data (Cohen et al., 2011). Some scholars argued that interviews are the most suitable data-collecting method when in-depth information is needed from participants. Moreover, interviews are crucial when the researcher aims to investigate the studied subject from the participants' perspectives (Fetterman, 2010; Mukherji and Albon, 2012).

In the light of the above discussion, interviews were employed in the current study as a second data collection method. Interviews are consistent with the ethnographic nature of the current study. Since this study investigated early literacy practices that were implemented in a different context linguistically and culturally in a Saudi Arabian preschool, the interview proved significant in generating in-depth data from the research participants' perspectives. In addition, interviews' data helped in linking teachers' beliefs and perceptions with their actual literacy practices that were documented through observation.

Interviews differ in their flexibility and formality. In terms of flexibility, there are structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Indeed, the decision on which kind of interview needs to be used depends on the research questions (Cohen et al., 2011). In this study, semi-structured interviews were used with the participants (teachers, the preschool's director and children's mothers) to gain more insights into their early literacy perceptions. This kind of interview is well suited to the purposes of conducting interviews as the general discussion topic is predetermined but the questions are more flexible (O'Leary, 2004). On the other hand, since informal interviews are considered valuable in ethnographic research, this approach was used in the current work. The informal interview was defined as "a mixture of conversation and embedded questions" (Fetterman, 2010, p. 41). Indeed, informal interviews are consistent

with the naturalistic character of this ethnographic study as they provide data in a natural context and they helped me to establish a good rapport with the research participants.

Since interviewing is a social and emotional process, the most important skill that researchers require is active listening. Thus, it is highly significant that interviews are digitally recorded (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). In my research, semi-structured interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed. Since the recording of interviews raises a number of ethical issues, informed consent to record interviews was obtained from the interviewed participants (this point is discussed in more detail later in this chapter). Since the questions in ethnographic interviews stem from the observational data (Cohen et al., 2011), the interview questions for this study were derived from observations. The following table illustrates the interviews conducted in this study.

Table 4.4 Summary of the conducted interviews

Participants	Date and number of interviews		Duration of each interview	Location
The Arabic-speaking teacher	27/5/2014	3	01: 34: 01	Preschool
	10/5/2015		00: 46: 14	
	21/5/2015		00: 38: 56	
The English-speaking teacher	27/5/2014	2	00: 51: 07	
	25/5/2015		00: 56: 40	
The preschool's director	12/5/2015	1	00: 42: 20	
Children's mothers	16 /2/ 2015	1	00: 28: 25	Mother's work place
	22 /2/ 2015	1	00: 46: 50	Mother's work place
	1 /3/ 2015	1	00: 39: 36	Preschool
	3 /3/ 2015	1	00: 37: 16	Mother's work place
	16 /3/ 2015	1	00: 24: 07	Mother's work place
	16 /3/ 2015	1	00: 33: 52	Preschool

The above table presents the interviews that were conducted in the current study. Specifically, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study. An interview schedule which was constructed in the light of the observational data was prepared for each interview including a number of open-ended questions, (Appendix 2). Despite conducting the interview with a set of predetermined questions, the interviews took a more conversational style rather than a fixed sequential style. Since it is crucial to conduct the interview in the participants' preferred language (Rubin and Rubin, 2012), all interviews were conducted using the Arabic language, a mix of Standard Arabic and the

vernacular, except for the English teacher's interviews which were conducted in English based on the participant's preferences.

Moreover, all interviews were planned in advance, and time and the location were chosen at the participants' convenience. After setting a date for the interview, the interview schedule, information about the study and the informed consent were sent to each participant by email. Although all interviews were audio-taped, brief notes were taken during the interview to record any important non-verbal behaviour that was observed during the interview. It is worth noting here that it was difficult to find a convenient time to interview the teachers as the only time they could be away from their classroom was their break time; thus, their interviews took place at the end of the term where the children were not attending the school.

After each interview, to ensure the data credibility, a member check procedure was applied by sending the interview transcript to the interviewee asking for any corrections. All transcriptions, except one which was not sent back to me, were checked and approved by the interviewees.

Documents and artefacts

Documents and artefacts are considered important sources for ethnographers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). These sources can provide information that may support or contrast with the data that have been gathered by other tools such as observation or interview. As is the case with other kinds of data, documents and artefacts should be collected in the light of the research questions. There is a range of both formal and informal documents that can be used in research.

In the current work, I used documents as a source of data that may support and enrich the data that were obtained through observations and interviews. In particular, I focused on the documents that were most relevant to the purposes of my research. These documents were:

- children's work such as drawings and writing/mark-making,

- the Creative Curriculum volumes that teachers used as daily planning resources (teaching guides),

- teachers' weekly plans, and

- children's literature.

Artefacts are considered a significant medium for ethnographic studies (Fetterman, 2010). Artefacts include setting furniture, displayed materials, clothing, notice boards and children's toys (Cohen et al., 2011). In this study, artefacts were represented by the classroom equipment, displayed pictures and materials, learning tools, and toys. These artefacts were considered during the observation process and have been documented by taking photographs.

Participatory research techniques involving children

Participatory research techniques are child-friendly methods where children can express their ideas visually through developmentally appropriate tools such as drawing, mapping, diagrams and drama (O'Kane, 2008). This notion is rooted in the belief that children are a key source of knowledge and they have the ability and the right to express their own views through visual tools. In this respect, it has been suggested that participatory research techniques need to be employed within a methodological approach and to be considered when planning the research design (Alderson, 2008).

In the area of early childhood research, a number of creative research methods have been employed to hear children's voices. Hyder (2002) and Davis (2007) employed storytelling as a data collection method to inspire children to express their feelings. Veale (2005) used drawings produced by the children and by others as a research tool in investigating children's perspectives about war in Croatia and Rwanda. In another study carried out by Angelides and Michaelidou (2009), children's drawings, and how they talked about these drawings, were also used to hearing children's voices about marginalisation in Cyprus.

In England, Clark and Moss carried out a series of studies in the area of listening to children's voices through participatory research methods (Clark and Moss, 2001; 2005; Clark, 2010). A recent study in this series is an ethnographic and participatory research that used map-making with children and adults to investigate their perspectives of the learning environment (Clark, 2011). Alderson (2008) also suggested that using mind maps that include drawings and photographs provides the opportunity to explore children's own views about their learning experience, which helps in improving the educational system. Very recent research in this field undertaken by Palaiologou (2017) used the 'vignette' as a participatory research method to listen to children's voices concerning their views about the partnerships between their schools, parents, wider community and themselves. Palaiologou's findings suggested that the vignette is a useful research tool when working with children as it allows them to use their own voices to express their feelings.

In view of this, and since the current study involves young children, a participatory research technique (mind map) was employed to explore

children's views about their early literacy learning. In particular, the mind map was created with each child individually in the preschool's library. Since drawing is considered an effective research tool with young children (Mukherji and Albon, 2012), a variety of crayons and colouring pencils were provided in the mind-map sessions to encourage children to express their feelings and ideas through drawing. In each session, I asked the child some questions, wrote down the question on the mind map, listened to the child's answers, and encouraged the child to participate by drawing or writing anything that is related to the discussed subject (Figure 4.1). All six sessions were audio-taped and transcribed. Indeed, using such a participatory research technique has provided a valuable opportunity to look through the lens of the child and know how children view their early literacy learning. The following excerpt is from my reflections regard the mind-map sessions.

Excerpt 2

Today I have done the mind-map sessions. Indeed, before conducting the mind maps with children, I doubted the feasibility of using such methods in scientific research. After the first mind-map session, these doubts began to fade. On the part of children, they seemed not only excited but also were proud to show their mind maps to the other children. Indeed, the mind-map session allowed me to identify children's thinking and perceptions regarding their literacy learning which I could not identify through observations.

(Field notes, 15 February 2015, translated from Arabic)
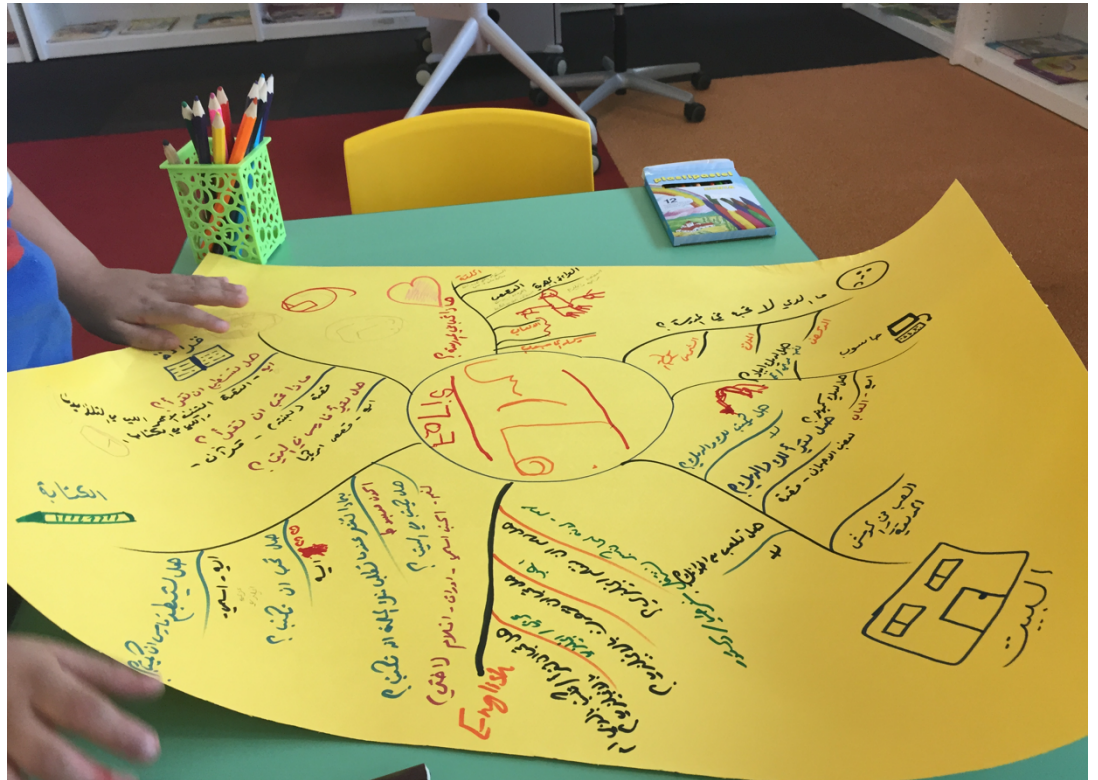
Figure 4.1 A mind map was created with one of the participant children.

4.3.2.3 Participants

Research questions not only play a vital role in determining the choice of research setting, but also in selecting the research participants (Fetterman, 2010). In qualitative research it is more appropriate to use the term "participants" than the term "sample", which is widely used in quantitative studies. In ethnographic studies, choosing participants is a circular process rather than a linear process. In other words, selecting the research participants cannot be decided in advance as such selection evolves and changes as the research progresses. In qualitative research, there is no clear rule in determining the number of the participants and the most important principle is "fitting to purpose" (Cohen et al., 2011).

In ethnographic research, the reviewed literature shows that most ethnographers choose their participants by using the "big-net approach". In this approach, before the data collection commences, the researcher mingles with all people in the setting. Then, as the research progresses, and guided by the research questions, the researcher selects the most appropriate individuals. Indeed, this approach provides the researcher with a holistic view of the people under study before narrowing the focus down to particular members (Fetterman, 2010).

Cohen et al. (2011) suggested that a good participant is the one who has the knowledge of the matter being studied, has time to participate in the study, and shows a desire to be involved in the study. In addition, Fetterman (2010) suggested that there are two approaches in selecting the research participant; the first one is determining who should not be involved in the research, and the second approach is selecting who should be involved.

In the light of the above theoretical principles, the process of choosing the participants of this study was recursive, and it developed over time. Following the big-net approach, I started my research by observing a number of classrooms in the chosen preschool. After that, I focused on one classroom only for the pilot study. The classroom was a KG2-level, where children were aged between four and five years. In this classroom, there were 18 children and two teachers. The number of participants in qualitative studies tends to be smaller than in quantitative research as qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with in-depth investigation rather than generalisation to a larger population (Creswell, 2012). After the pilot stage, I focused on a small number of participants, which allowed me to carry out an in-depth investigation of the

subject being researched. The following section highlights the participant groups of this research.

Children

Since one of this study's objectives is exploring how Saudi Arabian preschoolers develop Arabic early literacy and how that links to their identity and Saudi Arabian Islamic culture, children were key participants in this research. As mentioned earlier, I started my fieldwork by observing the whole classroom. After that, I limited my focus to a specific number of children of both genders, as focusing on a limited number of children is consistent with the ethnographic character of this study. At the beginning, I started with eight children - four girls and four boys. During the study, one child was withdrawn from the school and another one was absent constantly. Therefore, the total of the children involved in this study was six preschoolers - three girls and three boys. The child participants in this study were selected based on the following criteria:

- Children who were enrolled in KG2-level during the pilot study (school year 2013-2014) and were registered for KG3-level in the school year (2014-2015) where the main data collection was conducted.

- Children who are Saudi Arabian.

- Children whose parents agreed for them to participate by indicating informed consent.

- Children who showed their willingness to work with the researcher.

- Children who were committed to attend the preschool and who were rarely absent.

Children who participated in this study were aged between five and six as all were born in 2009. Since the preschool was located at a university campus, admission was limited to the university's faculty and the children of the preschool's teachers. Thus, it can be said that there was a sort of homogeneity between the children as they all came from middle-class and well-educated families. Although involving young children in the research was a hard challenge, I found that working with the children for such a prolonged period (two years), and collecting data through multiple data collection methods (observation, gathering documents, mind maps) helped me to gain a holistic understanding of early literacy development of a number of Saudi Arabian preschoolers.

Mothers

I sought the participation of the children's mothers, adhering to the belief that gaining multiple perspectives may enrich the study and help me to fully capture the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, the mothers of the six children participating in this study took part through individual semi-structured interviews. It is worth noting that involving only mothers rather than fathers in this study is due to the Saudi culture where genders are segregated; it would have posed a strong challenge if a female researcher was to interview the fathers. Indeed, interviewing the children's mothers allowed an opportunity to explore home literacy practices and the mothers' perspectives on their children's early literacy development. The mothers were recruited through a mobile call explaining to them the main purpose of the study. After obtaining their approval to participate in the study, information about the study and the informed consent were sent to them by email. The following section sketches the background of each of the six participant children and their mothers.

1. Leen

Leen enrolled in this preschool when she was three years old. Her family comes from the central region of Saudi Arabia (Riyadh). Leen's mother is an English teacher in the same preschool where her daughter enrolled and in which this research took place. She has a Bachelor's degree in English language and translation, and she has been working in this preschool for two years. She is in her mid twenties and has two daughters; Leen is the eldest. Leen's mother is a special case in this study as her position as a teacher allowed her to provide her opinion not only as a mother but also as a teacher.

2. Tala

Tala's family comes from the western region of Saudi Arabia. Tala enrolled in this preschool when she was three years old. Tala's mother is in her forties. She has a doctorate and has been working at the university for about 15 years. She has four children; Tala is the third.

3. Ruaa

Ruaa's family is from the central region of Saudi Arabia. Ruaa is the fourth among five children in her family. She enrolled in this preschool when she was four years old. Ruaa's mother is in her late forties. She has a doctorate and has been working as a faculty member for about 20 years.

4. Nawaf

Nawaf is the fifth among six children in his family that originally came from the southern region of Saudi Arabia. He enrolled in this preschool when he was three years old. His mother has a doctorate and is an assistant professor at the university.

5. Saad

Saad's family comes from the southern region of Saudi Arabia. He is the youngest child among four children in his family. He enrolled in this preschool when he was four years old. His mother is in her mid forties, has a doctorate and has been working for about 18 years as an assistant professor at the university.

6. Faris

Faris's family comes from the southern region of Saudi Arabia. He is the third among four children in his family. He enrolled in this preschool when he was three years old. Faris's mother is in her late forties. She has a doctorate and has been working at the university for many years.

Teachers

Since one of the current work objectives was to understand how teachers in a Saudi Arabian preschool perform and interpret early literacy practices that were derived from a Western Curriculum, it was essential to involve the teachers as participants in this study. Data related to the teachers were obtained through observation, interviews, informal conversations and gathering related documents. In the classroom where the study took place there were two teachers, one for Arabic and the other for English, working together for the whole school day. Both teachers were with the same group of children in the KG2 and KG3 classrooms. The following section introduces the two participant teachers.

1. The Arabic-speaking teacher

The Arabic-speaking teacher is Saudi and she is in her mid twenties. She has a Bachelor's degree in Preschool Education. She has been working in this preschool for three years. She attended a number of training workshops that

were held in this preschool. Throughout this thesis, I refer to her as "the Arabic teacher".

2. *The English-speaking teacher*

The English-speaking teacher is from Saudi Arabia. She is in her mid twenties. She has a Bachelor's degree in English Literature. She has been working in this preschool for three years, and also attended several training workshops. Hereafter, I refer to her as " the English teacher".

The preschool director

In order to provide more insights on early literacy practices that were implemented in the research site, it was crucial to hear the voice of the preschool's administration. Thus, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the director of the preschool. In addition, ongoing informal conversations with her took place throughout the study. Indeed, involving a member of the preschool administration allowed an opportunity to understand the administration perspectives and experiences in applying the Creative Curriculum in a context that has different language and culture from the original context of the Curriculum.

The director of this preschool is from Saudi Arabia. She is in her late thirties. She has a Bachelor's degree in Preschool Education. She has been working for 13 years in the field of preschool education; ten years as a teacher and three years as a director in this preschool.

4.3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethics are substantial matters in all kinds of research. Ethical considerations in research have emerged as a result of the development of relevant literature and

the spread of ethical regulations that are stated by different professional institutions (Cohen et al., 2011). Ethical issues not only relate to the research topic, but also link to the methods intended for collecting the required data (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012).

In this study, ethical considerations have been taken into account in the light of the code of ethical principles that is stated in the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2011). In addition, since the current work is a PhD thesis, ethical approval was obtained before conducting the research from the Ethics Committee, Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Hammersley and Traianou (2012) suggest that there are key ethical principles in educational research, some of which are harm, autonomy, privacy and reciprocity. The following sections discuss ethical concerns that were considered in this study.

Access and permission

Accessing the research setting required formal permission from the setting's gatekeepers (Cohen et al., 2011). Since this study took place at a preschool, permission was obtained from the relevant parties. At the initial point of seeking access, a formal letter was sent to the higher authority (The Supervision Committee for the University's Schools) as the preschool is affiliated to a university. Then, informed consent was obtained from the preschool director. After focusing on one classroom, informed consent was gained from each of the classroom teachers. Since the current study involved young children, consent letters were sent to all children's parents, as it has been strongly emphasised that obtaining the parents' informed consent needs to be

the first step in undertaking research with children (Skånfors, 2009). Since Arabic was the main language in the research site, all informed consent letters were written in Arabic (Appendix 3).

After piloting the study, I limited my focus to a number of the classroom's children; thus, I sought the children's agreement to take part in my study. In this respect, a growing body of literature has shown that consent can be obtained from young children. Existing literature shows that there is a debate not only in obtaining consent from young children but also in the research information that is given to the children. Mukherji and Albon (2012) suggested that researchers need to be cautious in the kind of research information that is explained to children; however, children can give their consent to participate in research if the information was given to them in a way that they could clearly understand. On the other hand, it is crucial to bear in mind that, although children can take the decision to participate in a research study, it is important to consider that this approval is not definitive. In other words, researchers need to be constantly aware of any nonverbal rejection of, or withdrawal from, the process (Skånfors, 2009).

In this study, a child-friendly consent letter was prepared for the children, which explains in a simple way the main purpose of the study and the data collection methods (Appendix 4). During the interest areas time, I read the letter with more verbal explanation to the children and I asked them to write their names on the letter if they agreed to take part in the research. In addition, as discussed above, I do believe that gaining consent from young children is an ongoing process; therefore, I was respecting the children's right if they showed

any indications of rejection, such as turning away or refusing to be observed, throughout the research journey.

Privacy

Protecting privacy of the research setting, the participants and the data is a cornerstone in ethical regulations (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). This ethical principle is adhered to by ensuring the research site, participants and data remain confidential and anonymous. In this study, I protected the privacy of the research site by anonymising the name of the preschool, teachers and mothers. In respect to children, it was impossible to hide the first name of the children as the first name of the most of the children appears in their early writing samples; thus, only children's faces and family names were hidden to protect children's privacy. Information of privacy was discussed in the informed consent.

Harm

Although harm is usually minimised in ethnographic research as compared to experimental studies, potential harm may be caused during the research process, or following publication of the study findings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In my study, I avoided any harm that would affect the research participants or the research site, and details related to this principle were explained to the participants in the informed consent.

4.3.4   Data analysis

In qualitative studies, data analysis coincides with data collection (Maxwell, 1998). Analysing qualitative data has been defined as "making sense of data in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 537). Fetterman (2010, p.

93) described data analysis in ethnographic research thus: "It begins at the moment a fieldworker selects a problem to study and ends with the last word in the report or ethnography". The main aim of analysing ethnographic data is to gain a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon using descriptive, interpretive or explanatory words (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010).

Existing literature (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2012) suggests that there are three main stages for analysing qualitative data; these are data reduction, data display, and data interpretation. The following section discusses these three stages.

1. ***Data reduction***: In this stage, researchers aim to limit their focus on particular questions and events by coding through preliminary analysis. Researchers argue that this stage begins before starting data collection, as the theoretical framework helps the researcher narrow the scope of the research. This stage is also an ongoing process as the researcher refines the focus of the study throughout the research process. The following section discusses two main steps for data reduction.

   ▪ *Managing data*: decisions on managing and organising the collected data need to be taken before starting the data collection. Transferring data from different sources (field notes, interviews, visual data) to electronic copy makes the data more flexible for subsequent organisation. Heath and Street (2008) argued that qualitative data software is an effective tool in organising, retrieving and comparing the data. In this study, all data including handwritten field notes, visual data, and audio-taped interviews were transcribed periodically into electronic files and were categorised in folders based on the data source.

▪ *Coding data*: in this step, researchers break data down into a number of categories to identify themes that may be generated by the data. Indeed, the research questions and theoretical framework guide the coding and categorising of the data, and codes emerge inductively during the study. In this study, descriptive coding (topic coding) was applied, where data were coded according to the topic reflected by each unit of data. Wolcott (2014) argued that descriptive coding leads to thematic analysis and it is appropriate for all qualitative research including the ethnographic approach. In the current work, coding emerged from the collected data (inductive approach) rather than from linking the data to a predetermined coding system (deductive approach).

As long as the research progress data were accumulated from multiple sources, there was a need to use one of the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) packages. I selected ATLAS.ti Student License (Mac OS X). After transferring all the collected data into electronic form, all data were imported into ATLAS.ti in order to start their analysis. Indeed, although this software did not actually analyse the data compared to the ones being used in quantitative studies, it helped me in

- organising the data from different sources,

- searching and retrieval of texts,

- coding the data,

- categorising the codes into themes, and

- displaying data in different ways.

The following figures show examples of coding data from different sources using ATLAS.ti software. Figure 4.2 shows how data from field notes were coded. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 show examples of linking codes directly to the visual data (photos and videos).

Figure 4.2 Coding the field notes using ATLAS.ti

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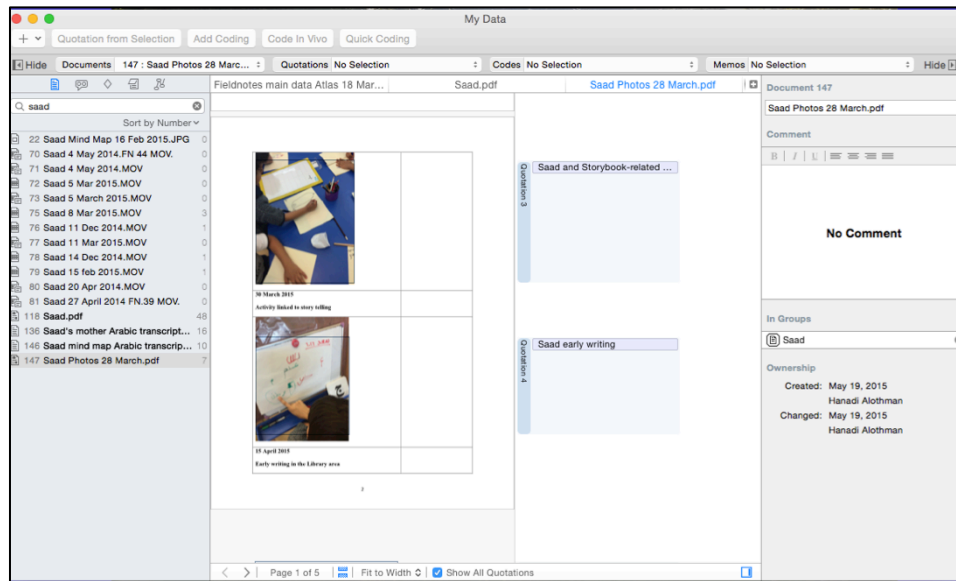
Figure 4.3 Coding visual data (photos) using ATLAST.ti
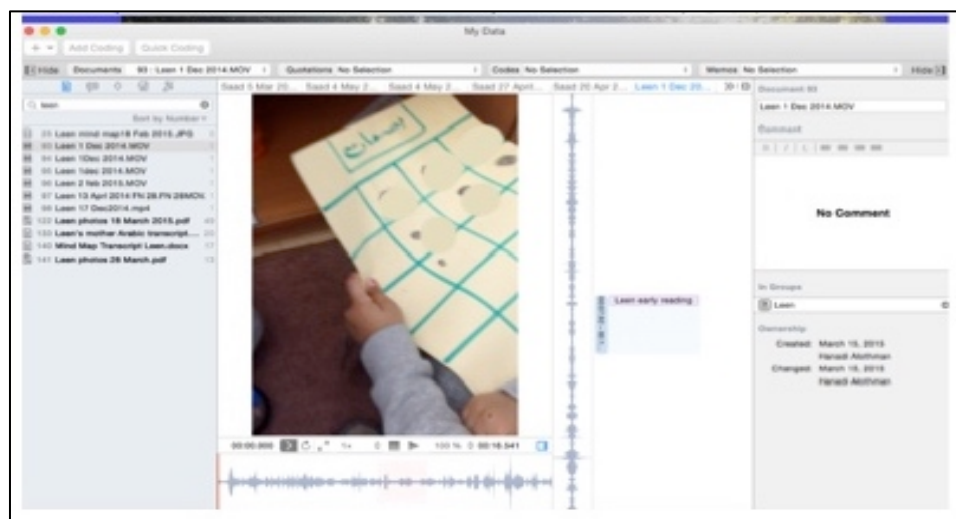
Figure 4.4 Coding visual data (video) using ATLAS.ti

2. ***Data display***: qualitative data can be displayed in several effective ways, such as direct excerpts from field notes, vignettes, tables and matrices. In this study, data were displayed through employing direct excerpts from field notes and the transcripts of interviews and mind maps. In addition, visual data such as photographs from the observational data and collected documents were used to display data.

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3. ***Interpretation and conclusion***: interpreting the research findings means ascribing explanations to these findings from the researcher's perspective. At this stage, researchers also review the relevant literature to link their findings with those of previous studies. Some scholars suggested that in this stage researchers need to balance between describing the findings and their own interpretation of these findings (Creswell, 2012).

In this study, data analysis was done in a non-linear style; that is the data analysis was undertaken through reflective cycles that were guided by the research questions. These cycles were familiarising and immersing myself in the data, generating initial codes, looking for patterns/themes, refining themes through defining and comparing themes, interpreting the findings by relating them to research questions and the relevant literature, and then immersing myself again in the data.

Since ethnographic data are unstructured, and in order to understand the meanings underlying the collected data, analysis was carried out using thematic analysis and the multi-layering method. Bloome and Theodorou (1988) used the multi-layering method to understand the lessons and the interactions that occur in the classroom which are viewed as social events that consist of multiple layers. The multi-layering method was employed by a number of researchers in the area of literacy learning (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Gregory, 1993; Volk and de Acosta, 2001; Robertson, 2005).

Since this study sits within the socio-cultural perspectives of early literacy, analysing the data through multiple layers helped me construct a comprehensive picture of the topic under study. In other words, the multi-

layering approach facilitated the investigation of early literacy as a social practice that itself is embedded within layers of socio-cultural contexts.

Determining the unit of analysis is a crucial step towards analysing qualitative data. Since the focal point of this study is Arabic early literacy development, the concept of "early literacy practices" was used as a unit of analysis. In this study, the concept "literacy practices" means the literacy activities that occur in the classroom and the home context and which are embedded within the socio-cultural contexts. These literacy practices were analysed in order to uncover

(a) curriculum-based literacy practices that took place in the preschool context,

(b) teachers' literacy practices in the classroom context,

(c) children's early literacy development within the preschool context, and

(d) early literacy practices within the context of children's homes.

In the current study, the unit of analysis – early literacy practices – was analysed in three key layers:

1. The outer layer that highlights the broad socio-cultural context including the institutional context and the home context.

2. The middle layer that includes early literacy practices in the classroom context.

3. The inner layer that addresses children's early literacy development.

These layers have been put in this order for a number of reasons. Firstly, I have placed the institutional and the home contexts in the outer layer to represent the broad socio-cultural context that has shaped and affected literacy practices that

occur in the other layers. Although the home context has a direct and essential impact on children's development, I have placed the home context within the outer layer as this work is a classroom-based research and the home context was only investigated through mothers' interviews and children's mind maps.

Secondly, the middle layer discusses early literacy practices in the classroom context. Indeed, this layer represents the main bulk of the collected data since this study took place in a preschool setting where I immersed myself with the research participants for an extended period of time. Moreover, the middle layer is a core layer in this analysis since it reflects the implementation of early literacy practices that were derived from the Creative Curriculum.

Thirdly, I have placed children's early literacy development in the inner layer as it represents the main focus of the current research, showing how this layer is influenced by the broader contexts. In view of this, employing the multi-layering approach in the data analysis helps to provide in-depth ethnographic analysis and cultural interpretation of the studied phenomenon.

4.3.4.1 Issues of transcription and translation

Transcribing data has long been considered the initial phase of data analysis (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Wahyuni, 2012). In other words, in order to make the data ready for analysis, some sort of raw data, such as interviews, need to be prepared by transcribing their content into written form (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Transcriptions are viewed as the researcher's data and the way the transcriptions are prepared impact the interpretation of the research outcomes. Moreover, Ochs (1979) cautioned that researchers need to be selective when transcribing and adhere to the research objectives.

In this study, transcriptions were prepared for all interviews, mind-map sessions and some video recordings. The transcribing stage took a long time and intensive effort. It should be pointed out that the work of Ochs (1979) helped me during the transcribing process. Before starting the process of transcribing, I went through the data in order to decide what were to be included in and excluded from the transcription and its layout. After that, all transcripts followed the same style.

Translating was one of the significant issues in this study since the language of my participants and the context of the research (Arabic) is different to the language of this thesis (English). In addition, it is worth noting that these linguistic differences are linked to cultural differences as the readers of this work are likely to come from a range of cultures that differ from that of the research participants. Hence, readers are advised to bear in mind the context of this study. All these factors point to the need to discuss the issue of translating in this chapter.

In this work, the main bulk of the data was written in Arabic, my native language and that of my participants. However, data related to the English teacher's interviews and transcriptions for videotaped English literacy events were written in English. In this study, the field notes were written in Standard Arabic including parts of vernacular Arabic that reflect the actual words of the participants. On the other hand, interviews and mind-map sessions were conducted by using a mix of the two forms of Arabic. Therefore, all transcriptions were done in Arabic using the actual words used in the interview.

In order to discuss the collected data with my supervisors, part of the data such as interviews and mind-map transcriptions were translated into English. Despite believing that having the script in both languages in one document would be helpful for both Arabic and English readers, it was a difficult task due to different features of both languages, such as directionality. Nevertheless, each line of the text has the same number in both transcripts, Arabic and English (Figure 4.5). In the process of data analysis, data were analysed in the original language (Arabic). However, examples of the data were translated for use in the thesis. Here, it is noteworthy that a key concern during the translation process was maintaining the same meaning so the data would not lose their original flavour.

الموضوع	مقابلة مديرة الروضة	الوقت	١١ ص
اليوم	الثلاثاء	المدة	٤٢:٢٠ :٠٠
التاريخ	١٢/ ٥/ ٢٠١٥	فرع المقابلة	الباحث
المكان	الروضة		

الباحث (ب)
المشارك (م)

1	ب :	شاكره قبولك الدعوة لإجراء المقابلة
2	ب :	كم عدد سنوات خبرتك كمعلمة؟
3	م :	١٣ سنة
4	ب :	لديك خبرة طويلة في التعليم بمرحلة رياض الأطفال، برأيك ماهي ابرز الفروقات بين
5		منهج التعلم الذاتي والمنهج الابداعي بشكل عام وفيما يتعلق بالقراءة والكتابة المبكرة
6		بشكل خاص؟

Day	Tuesday	Duration	00:42:20
Date	12/5/2015	Transcriber	Interviewer
Place	Kindergarten		

INTERVIEWER [I]
PARTICIPANT [P]

1	I:	Thank you for participating in this study.
2	I:	How long is your experience as a teacher?
3	P:	13 years.
4	I:	You have long experience in kindergarten education. In your opinion, what are the most
5		prominent differences between the Self-learning Curriculum and the Creative
6		Curriculum in general, and with the special relation to early literacy?

Figure 4.5 Example of an interview transcript in Arabic and English.

4.3.5   Validity in ethnographic research

Criteria for evaluating the validity of ethnographic studies emerge from the criteria used in naturalistic research (Creswell, 2012). Terms such as 'authenticity', 'trustworthiness' and 'rigour' have been used to refer to the research validity (Cohen et al., 2011). Validity in social research means that "the findings accurately reflecting the real situation and being backed by evidence" (Guion, 2002, p. 1). In ethnography, validity means " scientific observations and measurements are authentic representations of some reality" (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982, p. 32). In this respect, LeCompte and Goetz (1982, p. 3) argued: "Distinctive characteristics of ethnographic research

designs result in variations in the ways problems of reliability and validity are approached in ethnographic and experimental research". Existing literature suggest that validity in ethnographic research is achieved from the multiple methods that ethnographers use in data collection and the multiple levels of analysis (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

The reviewed literature on the area of ethnographic research suggest a number of criteria to strengthen the validity of any ethnographic study (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Silverman, 2010). These criteria are

(1) employ well-established data collection methods,

(2) familiarity with the culture of the research setting,

(3) prolonged observations in the research site,

(4) reflexivity,

(5) triangulation,

(6) thick description of the studied phenomenon and the context of the research.

(7) ensure honesty in the data that have been provided by the research participants,

(8) discussion sessions with experts, and

 (9) member check.

In this study, I considered a number of the above-mentioned criteria to strengthen the validity of my research. The following table illustrates the procedures I followed to enhance the validity in the current work.

Table 4.5 Procedures to check validity in the study

Criteria for validity in ethnography	Procedures for strengthening validity in this study
Adoption of appropriate data collection methods.	Data were collected through multiple methods; participant observation, interviews, documents and artefacts, and mind maps.
Triangulated data and methods to reduce the researcher's bias.	• Triangulated data from different sources (children, teachers, director, mothers, documents). • Methodological triangulation, by using multiple data collection methods.
Familiarisation period spent in the setting before gathering the main data.	Started the fieldwork with a pilot study phase (seven weeks).
Prolonged observations in the research setting.	216 observational hours.
Reflexivity.	Constant reflecting on the descriptive notes, methods, obstacles, feelings, concerns and emerging questions (Section 4.2.2.3).
Ensure honesty in the data provided by participants.	Participants were given the right to participate or withdraw at any time; confidentiality of the data and the participants' identities was emphasised (informed consent).
Discuss the research process and data collection methods with experts.	Constant meetings were held with the supervisory team.
Member checks.	• Part of the field notes was given to the participant teachers for review and comment. • Participants were asked to review their interviews' transcripts to ensure that what is written matches what they said.
Thick description of the studied phenomenon and the context of the research.	• Detailed descriptions of the studied topic and the context of the research (Chapters 2, 4 and 5).
Relate the research findings to an existing literature.	• Relevant literature was reviewed (Chapter 3). • The research findings were linked to the relevant literature (Chapters 5- 8).
Providing full details of the research design and the data collection methods.	Methodological framework and data collection procedures were discussed in this chapter.

4.4 Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological perspective of the current study. Part one focused on the theoretical framework of the research methodology. In the first part, key methodological elements were discussed such as the justification for choosing this particular methodology path, the research paradigm, and the approach adopted. Since the current study involves young children, the chapter discussed methodological and ethical issues related to undertaking research with young children. Moreover, since the ethnographer is the research instrument, I explained my role and my identity as a researcher in this study.

Part two of this chapter provided a more detailed description of the research design and methods for collecting and analysing the data. In addition, the research participants and the selection strategies that were applied were explained. At the end of the chapter, principles and criteria for addressing the research validity were highlighted and justified. Next, the first data analysis chapter is set out; this constitutes the outer layer that presents data related to the institutional and home contexts of the research.

Chapter 5   The Outer Layer: A Socio-cultural Context

5.1   Introduction

This study sits within socio-cultural perspectives that view literacy as a social and cultural practice. They treat classrooms as part of a wider social context that influences the norms of teaching and learning. It is therefore crucial to discuss the practices of early literacy within their different social contexts. This chapter discusses the outer ethnographic layer of my data. In particular, it looks beyond the classroom where this work took place to show early literacy in the wider social context including the preschool as an institution and the homes of the children. Data presented in this chapter were obtained from observations, interviews with mothers, teachers and the director of the preschool, and mind maps with the participant children. In addition, this chapter discusses and analyses documentary data obtained from the Creative Curriculum's publications such as teaching guides and other teaching resources, and attempts to provide answers for the following research questions:

- How was the Creative Curriculum implemented at an institutional level?

- How do children in a Saudi Arabian preschool that uses the Creative Curriculum develop Arabic early literacy?

- In what ways are the preschoolers' Arabic early literacy development linked to their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity?

Data analysis in this chapter addresses the first question in the institute (the preschool) and the second and the third questions in the home context. The data obtained from the classroom are discussed in the inner layer (Chapter 7).

The chapter first broadly outlines the preschool where the current work took place – namely (a) demographic data of the research site; (b) the principles, objectives, teaching resources of the Creative Curriculum and its early literacy pedagogy; (c) training programmes; and (d) communication with parents. This chapter deals with the *theoretical principles* of the Curriculum while the next chapter deals with the *implementation* of the Curriculum by describing the Curriculum-based literacy activities as they occurred in the classroom.

Next, early literacy practices are discussed in the home context in terms of the perspectives of mothers concerning preschool education and early literacy, mothers' literacy practices and children's literacy practices at home.

5.2   The institutional context of the preschool

This preschool was established in 2012 at one of the universities in Riyadh under the supervision of the MOE and the university administration, in partnership with one of the Saudi educational companies, to supervise the implementation of the Creative Curriculum and provide in-service training for the teaching staff. This preschool was one of the few in Riyadh that have begun to use the Creative Curriculum.

The preschool was built on the university campus since it was intended for children of the faculty's staff. The building was designed according to the highest specifications in terms of space, facilities, ventilation and lighting, paying particular attention to the needs of preschool education. It had a number

of rooms for administration, eight classrooms, a library, a first-aid clinic, a workshop/repository for educational games and materials, an outdoor playground and three indoor playgrounds. The following table shows demographic information of the research site during the period of data collection.

Table 5.1 Demographic data of the research site

Dimension		Academic Year	
		2013-2014	**2014-2015**
Staff	Administrators	8	8
	Teachers	12	16
Classrooms	KG1 (3-4 years)	1	2
	KG2 (3-4 years)	2	3
	KG3 (5-6 years)	3	3
Children	Saudi	100	142
	Non-Saudi	5	16

(Documentary data, the preschool's administration, 2013-2014 / 2014-2015)

As is customary in Saudi Arabian preschool education, children are assigned to the classrooms according to age. In each classroom, there are two teachers, an Arabic-speaking one and an English-speaking one. Since this preschool is located within a university campus, there are a number of university students undergoing their training as preschool teachers.

The above table shows that in the academic year 2013-2014, when part of the main data collection took place in a KG2-level classroom, there were eight administrators, 12 Saudi teachers half Arabic-speaking and the other half English-speaking and 105 children distributed across six classrooms. In the academic year 2014-2015, when the greater part of the main data collection

took place in a KG3-level classroom, there were eight administrative officers, 16 Saudi teachers (eight Arabic-speaking and eight English-speaking) and 185 children distributed across eight classrooms. Of the children enrolled, 142 were Saudis and 16 were from other Arab countries and from Europe. The following sections describe the principles, objectives, and teaching resources of the Creative Curriculum, and its early literacy pedagogy.

5.2.1 The Creative Curriculum: principles and objectives

The Creative Curriculum is an early childhood curriculum that was created by Diane Dodge in 1978. She is the founder of *Teaching Strategies* in the United States, a company that publishes, distributes and runs teacher-training programmes. Her curriculum is based on research findings and key principles of theorists such as Maslow, Erikson, Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, Gardner, and Bronfenbrenner. The Creative Curriculum underwent several stages of development through five editions in 1978, 1988, 1992 and 2002. The most recent edition was published in 2010 (Gestwicki, 2012).

According to *Teaching Strategies* (2013a), documentary data stated that the Creative Curriculum endeavours to achieve 38 objectives (Appendix 5) in a child's growth and learning. These objectives cover social-emotional, physical, language and cognitive development. In addition, the Curriculum set a number of objectives in six areas of learning:

- literacy,

- mathematics,

- science and technology,

- social studies,

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- arts, and

- language acquisition.

In particular, according to *Research Foundation: The Creative Curriculum* (Teaching strategies, 2010b), this Curriculum was built on five basic principles. Each principle reflects at least one educational theory. These principles were as follows:

- Positive interaction between the child and adult: this principle stems from John Dewey's theory (1897) that perceives education as a social process. It also reflects Lev Vygotsky's theory (1978) of social interaction and learning.

- Children's social-emotional development: this principle relies on Erik Erikson's theory (1950) that emphasises the important role of social and cultural aspects in a child's growth and learning.

- Purposeful play: this belief emerged from both Jean Piaget's (1972) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories that underline the crucial role of play in children's social and cognitive development.

- Physical environment: both Piaget and Dewey emphasised the vital role of a stimulating environment in a child's development.

- Effective partnership with families: the theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) turned attention to the importance of learning settings such as home, community and preschool in a child's growth and learning.

In Saudi Arabia, a partnership formed between one of the Saudi Arabian educational companies and *Teaching Strategies International* in the United States (see Chapter 1). This partnership aimed to introduce the Creative Curriculum to preschool education in a number of Arab countries. The

Curriculum was translated into Arabic and some modifications were made in order to adapt the Curriculum to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture (discussed later in this chapter).

The first Arabic version of the Creative Curriculum was published in 2011. As noted, the Arabic version, which was used on the research site, was based on the 5th edition of the Creative Curriculum, published in 2010. The first pilot implementation of the Arabic version was under *Tatweer* as part of the King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Public Education Development Project (see Chapter 2), and was implemented in 10 public preschools in Ha`il city and the Eastern Province. In September 2012, another pilot implementation took place in three public preschools in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. My research took place in one of these schools.

In addition to the 38 objectives that covered six areas of learning as mentioned above, the Arabic version addressed an additional learning area related to religious and moral education (Teaching strategies and Obekan, 2011, p. 1). The additional five objectives were:

1. Express faith and spiritual feelings.

2. Acquire Islamic behaviours.

3. Perform Islamic values and morals.

4. Listing the five most basic forms of worship in Islam.

5. Affirm that prophet Mohammed is the messenger of God (Allah).

As stated above, the 38 learning objectives were extracted from the English version of the Curriculum, and the five objectives of religious and moral education were added in order to adapt the Curriculum to the Saudi Arabian

Islamic culture. Further details on religious learning are discussed in the next chapter.

The Creative Curriculum was organised in the form of studies (projects) that the Curriculum authors defined as follows: "A method of integrating content learning through children's in-depth investigation of a meaningful topic. Children raise questions about the topic and find answers to their questions" (Teaching Strategies, 2011, p. 2). According to the authors,

- in the "studies approach", selecting a topic for study should emerge from the children's interest,

- whereas in the "thematic approach", topics are determined by the curriculum or the teacher (Teaching Strategies, 2011).

 The following figures were obtained from one of the teaching guides and the classroom illustrating the implementation of the studies.

Figure 5.1 An example from the teaching guide of the Clothes Study showing one of the investigations *(How do we take care of our clothes?)*. (Written in Arabic where the arrow points in Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 A web of investigations constructed by the Arabic teacher at the beginning of the Clothes' study showing the seven questions that were explored during the study.

(Visual data, 14 December 2014)

*Hereafter, names of the non-participant children are blurred for ethical considerations.

The Creative Curriculum contains five studies, with one teaching guide for each: Balls, Clothes, Trees, Buildings and Recycle. Figure 5.1, from the teaching guide of the Clothes Study, shows one of the investigation areas, "Taking Care of Our Clothes". Each study has three main stages:

- the beginning of the study, where teachers and children identify the web of investigations which determine areas of exploration (Figure 5.2);

- this phase is the heart of the study, where the investigations take place through first-hand experiences, through site visits inside and outside the preschool, and through visits from experts;

- this phase is called "celebrating learning"; mothers are invited to visit the classrooms and see how their children have learnt and are learning and

admire the work they have produced during the study (Teaching
Strategies, 2011).

The following excerpt from the interview with the Arabic teacher shows her
perspective on the studies.

Excerpt 1

I: Interviewer   P: Participant

1	I	Were the children allowed to suggest which studies to use and which
2		questions to investigate in each study?
3		Initially the administration did not allow us to deviate in any way from
4		the instructions contained in the teaching guides. But more recently we
5	P	discussed this issue with the American trainer and the administration,
6		and they told us that we could change the questions investigated in
7		accordance with the needs of the children.
8	I	If you were given more flexibility in planning the activities, for example
9		to use a new study, would you welcome this idea?
10	P	Definitely, I can prepare for new studies and I can modify the existing
11		studies.

(Second interview with the Arabic teacher, 10 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Here, the Arabic teacher indicated that, despite what was explicitly stated in
the Curriculum, when the curriculum was first being implemented,
administration asked them to adhere to the areas of investigation that were
prescribed in the teaching guide for each study: "*Initially the administration
did not allow us to deviate in any way from the instructions contained in the
teaching guides*" (lines 3 and 4). The Arabic teacher also mentioned that, after
discussion with the American trainer and the administration, they were allowed
to make some modifications according to the children's needs (lines 4 - 7).
Excerpt 1 also shows how the Arabic teacher presented herself and her
colleagues as having agency as they discussed the issue with the American
trainer and the administration, and how the interviewed teacher showed her

willingness to apply new studies and modify the existing ones. Hence, it may thus be argued that the decision to make some modifications according to children's needs was a top-down decision that was taken by the preschool administration and teachers' agency was not considered throughout the process of adapting the Curriculum to the Saudi educational context.

The above examples show that initially the topics of the studies and the areas of investigation in each study were fixed by the teaching guides. Data obtained from the interview with the Arabic teacher show that during the implementation of the curriculum teachers were allowed to make some changes to the areas of investigation in each study, as required by the children's needs. Nevertheless, this practice was not in keeping with one of the principles of the curriculum, which states: "children raise questions about the topic and find answers to their questions".

The above data reveal a tension between this principle "the selection of the topic to study should emerge from children's interest" and the way in which the study was initially run since the topics of the studies (and their sequence) were rigidly fixed by the teaching guides and were not suggested by the children. There was therefore a tension between the *principles* of the curriculum (as stated by the authors) and their *realisation* in the teaching guides. In other words, regardless of the theoretical principles of the Curriculum, the participant teachers followed the teaching guides. This finding also leads to the question as to whether this tension was a result of the Saudi practitioners' lack of knowledge about the theoretical principles of the Curriculum or whether it was a result of the teachers' own interpretation of the Curriculum.

5.2.2 The Creative Curriculum teaching resources

This section discusses the teaching resources of the Creative Curriculum. It deals with the teaching *materials*, whereas literacy *activities* based on these resources are discussed in the next chapter. This section also outlines the modifications made to the teaching resources as part of adapting the Curriculum to the Saudi educational context. The Creative Curriculum consists of the following components:

1. foundation,

2. interest areas,

3. literacy,

4. maths, and

5. objectives for development and learning.

The Curriculum provides teachers with resources that support their daily practices (Teaching Strategies, 2013a). In the research site, each classroom had a full toolkit of the Creative Curriculum. This consisted of

- teaching guides,

- intentional-teaching cards,

- "Mighty Minutes" cards,

- children's books, and

- book discussion cards.

These materials were available in Arabic and English, and are discussed throughout this chapter. Excerpts 2, 3, and 4 reveal the teachers' and the preschool director's views of these resources.

Excerpt 2

1	I	What do you think of the teaching guides and other teaching resources available, such as the Mighty Minutes cards?
2		
3	P	The teaching guides have detailed and clear instructions. The translation needs to be improved, and we have mentioned that to the company.
4		
5	I	Do you think that the detailed instructions are useful for the teachers?
6	P	Yes.
7	I	How?
8	P	The detailed instructions do not confine teachers. They allow them to do things differently. Some teachers follow the instructions exactly while others make some changes. The teaching guides show the absolute minimum a teacher has to achieve.
9		
10		
11		

(Interview with the preschool director, 12 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 3

1	I	What did you think of the teaching guides and the other teaching resources?
2 3 4	P	I admit that they give detailed information. But in fact, the language of the guides (the Arabic) is weak; it might be because it has been translated from English? There are also some concerns about the sequence of the activities.
5	I	Do you feel that these detailed instructions restrict you as a teacher?
6	P	Yes, and at the beginning they asked us to strictly adhere to them.
7 8	I	Do you have any particular concerns regarding how Arabic early literacy has been treated in the teaching guides?
9 10	P	The teaching guides treat Arabic as a second language whereas it is our mother tongue.

(Second interview with the Arabic teacher, 10 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 4

1 2	I	Do you refer to the English version of the teaching guides or the Arabic one?
3 4	P	The English one: when I read the Arabic one I misunderstood what it means because of the translation.
5 6	I	Have you noticed any differences between the Arabic and the English versions?
7 8	P	Maybe because some of the activities were translated literally from English into Arabic.
9 10	I	In the teaching guides, English is presented as the first language and Arabic as the second language; what do you think?
11	P	Yes, I need a teaching guide that treats English as a foreign language.

(Second interview with the English teacher, 25 May 2015)

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Excerpt 2 shows what the director thinks of some of the teaching resources. The director agreed that the teaching guides have detailed and clear instructions. She believed that the detailed instructions do not constrain the teachers and that the teachers can deviate from them to some extent, and that the guides lay down only the minimum that the teachers have to achieve. In Excerpt 3, the Arabic teacher confirmed the director's view that the teaching guides had detailed instructions. However, these two interviews show different perspectives in assessing the amount of detail in the teaching guides; for the teacher they were restrictive while for the director they proved useful supports. Data reported here can be linked to the interview data presented in Excerpt 1 where the Arabic teacher presented herself as having agency in applying new studies and modifying the existing ones.

Both interviewees expressed some concerns regarding the teaching guides, namely the quality of translating literally from English into Arabic. Excerpts 3 and 4 agreed that the relationship of Arabic and English was wrongly presented in the guides (incorrectly treating Arabic as the second language of the children, whereas it is the first). Data reported here were supported by documentary evidence which found that although Arabic is the first language of the children in this preschool, it was presented in the teaching guides as a second language.

The Creative Curriculum was translated from English into Arabic. Data obtained from the collected documents showed that the books and stories were not literally translated but their contents (text and pictures) were adjusted to make them acceptable to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. It is worth noting that some original Arabic stories were added to the collection in place of the

English stories that were considered culturally inappropriate. The following

figures give examples of the modifications that were made to children's books.

Figure 5.3 An example from children's books in its English
and Arabic versions.

Figure 5.4 "The Three Little Pigs" were metamorphosed
into "The Three Little Sheep" in the Arabic story.

Figure 5.3 comes from one of the children's books about buildings in its Arabic and English versions. The figure shows not only that the text was translated into Arabic but also that the pictures were replaced with ones that reflect Saudi Arabia. For instance, the photo on the cover of the English book shows a public library in the United States while the photo on the cover of the Arabic book shows the National Library in Riyadh.

Figure 5.4 provides another example of one of the storybooks that was translated into Arabic. The main characters (pigs) were replaced with sheep. This shows that at least some attempts were made to adapt the books to Saudi culture, not only by translating the texts into Arabic, but also by adjusting the stories (turning a story about piglets into a story about sheep) and modifying the illustrations (replacing American streets and buildings with Saudi streets and buildings) (Figure 5.3).

Interestingly, I observed that the English story, where pigs were the main characters, was also read to the children in this classroom. The reader may note that not only is the consumption of pork prohibited in Islam but, quite apart from that, pigs do not exist in Saudi Arabia. This finding can be explained with Elyas's (2008) argument that the current Saudi educational policy tends to cautiously introduce aspects of western cultures into the English curriculum, aspects which were not previously accepted by policymakers in the Saudi Arabian educational system. In this respect, Nouraldeen and Elyas (2014) argued that English cannot be learned in isolation from its culture.

However, although the main characters, the pigs, in the story "The Three Little Pigs" were replaced in text and illustrations (Figure 5.4) with sheep in the Arabic version of the story to fit in with Islamic values, no changes were made to the content or other illustrations to present the values and the reality of Saudi

Arabian and Islamic culture. In other words, the story, even in Arabic, reads and looks very much like a western story; for instance, the illustrations, such as houses, furniture, clothes and the environment look European.

Data reported here agree with the findings of Gregory and colleagues (2007) in their study of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" in different guises, English and Bengali. Their study indicated that, although text, illustrations and cultural values had to some extent been adjusted to Bengal, the story still contained traces of its European heritage. For example, although Snow White looked Asian in the Bengali version, the queen still appeared western through her clothes and eye-make up. Children's books and stories are further discussed in the next chapter.
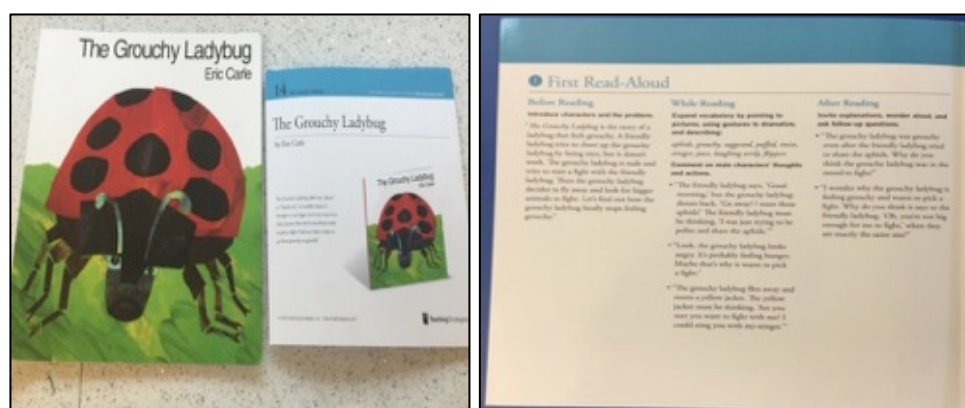
Figure 5.5 A book discussion card of the storybook *"The Grouchy Ladybug"*.

Figure 5.5 shows an example of the Book Discussion Cards. They are linked to some of the children's storybooks and are available in Arabic and in English. These cards are designed to help teachers plan their reading-aloud, stressing new vocabulary and asking helpful questions.
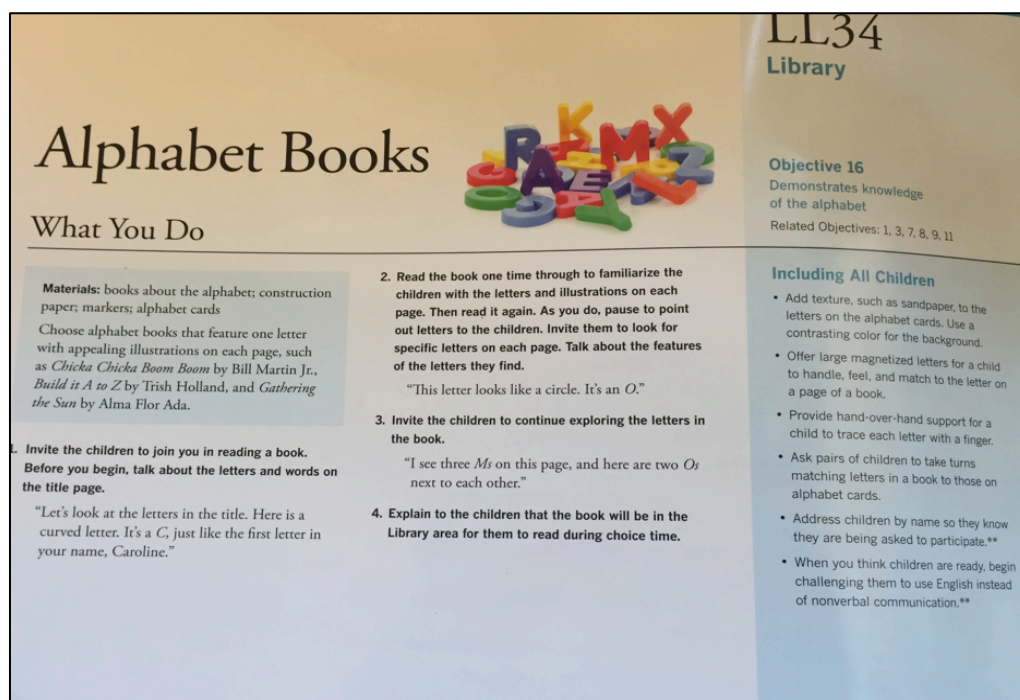
Figure 5.6 An example of the intentional-teaching cards for acquisition of literacy.

Figure 5.6 shows another teaching resource of the Creative Curriculum, the Intentional-Teaching Cards. The Curriculum has 63 cards that address objectives concerning

- language and literacy,

- mathematics, and

- physical, social and emotional development.

These cards were used for activities that took place during large and small group times. The following excerpt is taken from the interview with the Arabic teacher about the Intentional-Teaching Cards for Arabic literacy.

Excerpt 5

1	I	Which special features of Arabic script have been considered on the Arabic
2		literacy teaching cards?
3	P	Only some of the cards deal correctly with aspects of the Arabic script. For
4		example, one of the cards mentions the multiple shapes of Arabic
5		characters.

(Second interview with the Arabic teacher, 10 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

In Excerpt 5 the Arabic teacher said only some of the intentional-teaching cards addressed the varying shapes of the Arabic letters, a key feature of the Arabic script. The above excerpt indicates that some special characteristics of the Arabic language such as the multiple shapes of the letters were addressed partially in some of the intentional-teaching cards for the Arabic literacy. There is further discussion on this point in the next chapter.

Figure 5.7 The Mighty Minutes Cards.

Figure 5.7 shows another kind of teaching tool that is part of the Creative Curriculum, the Mighty Minutes Cards. These cards are available in Arabic and English. The Mighty Minutes cards are intended to encourage children's learning through activities that fit into very short periods, such as the transition times, for example through songs, rhymes and games. Below, the Arabic teacher expresses her perspective on the Arabic version of the Mighty Minutes Cards.

Excerpt 6

1	I	What about the Mighty Minutes cards, the Arabic version?
2	P	Nice and swift, but some are not clear and weak due to the mistranslation.
3	I	Are all the activities on the English cards translated into Arabic?
4	P	No, not all of them.

(Second interview with the Arabic teacher, 10 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

In Excerpt 6, the Arabic teacher described the Mighty Minutes Cards as useful and quick but considered that, since they were not originally written in Arabic, they were not as intelligible as they should be.

5.2.3   Early literacy in the Creative Curriculum

This section is based on the Creative Curriculum's publications and teaching guides (Heroman and Jones, 2010; Teaching Strategies, 2010a). Because of the generally recognised importance of early literacy development, the authors of the Creative Curriculum decided to create a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy at preschool level. They tried to provide precisely targeted language and literacy activities based on play. These were incorporated into a daily routine and covered different areas of interest (Heroman and Jones, 2010).

According to *The Research Foundation: Language and Literacy,* published by Teaching Strategies (2010a), literacy in the Creative Curriculum has five components;

- literacy as a source of enjoyment,

- vocabulary and language,

- phonological awareness,

- knowledge of print, letters and words, and

- comprehension, books and other texts.

Documentary data obtained from the above-mentioned document showed that literacy principles in the Creative Curriculum can be described as follows (Teaching Strategies, 2010a, pp. 6-14):

- Expose children regularly to their names and to alphabet books to increase their awareness of letters through sensory exploration.

- Integrate phonological awareness activities (songs, rhymes, language games and the sharing of books) into all interest areas and into all parts of the daily routine.

- Increase children's knowledge of print by exposing them to shared writing and reading aloud.

- Create a print-enriched environment by having meaningful, functional and interesting literacy activities all over the classroom's interest areas.

- Develop children's comprehension skills by providing opportunities for discussing books, asking questions and interactive reading.

- Take children's individual needs and their prior knowledge into account when planning literacy activities.

- Cultivate children's identities by maintaining their home language and culture.

- Provide literacy-enriched play centres as a natural context in which meaningful and functional writing activities can take place.

- Practise spoken language through natural everyday activities such as conversations, play, reading aloud, story retelling, and dramatic play.

- Use teachers as role models for social language functions and let them explore the children's culture and prior experiences by building partnerships with families.

In the light of the above key principles for promoting language and literacy which complement the basic principles of the Creative Curriculum mentioned earlier in (Section 5.2.1), a number of theoretical notions can be deduced:

(a) The Curriculum views the teacher as a social model of language and literacy and as a mediator for learning (Neuman and Wright, 2010; Scull et al., 2013).

(b) The children become literate by interacting with literacy materials, adults and peers (Jessel et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2011).

(c) Social and cultural aspects of learning are important; therefore the teachers have to build partnerships with the children's families and maintain their culture.

5.2.4   Teachers' in-service training and the Creative Curriculum

The Creative Curriculum assumes that professional development of early childhood educators is a key element in building a high-quality child care programme (Teaching Strategies, 2013b). Therefore, at the beginning and end of each school term, training workshops are often held on the research site. Their purpose is

1. to introduce the Creative Curriculum,

2. to help teachers apply the Curriculum, and

3. to make them more skilled in observing and assessing the children's development and learning.

As mentioned above, a Saudi Arabian education company and the US company *Teaching Strategies International* are working in a strategic partnership. One of the aims of this partnership is to provide in-service training for preschool teachers. This is done through workshops, some of which are run by Saudi trainers and others by western trainers. The following excerpts from interviews with the preschool director and the teachers show their perspectives on the in-service training.

Excerpt 7

1	I	Have you benefited from the partnership with the educational company?
2	P	Yes, we have. Especially the English teachers, as they are not specialised
3		in kindergarten.
4	I	Have the training courses met the needs of the administration and the
5		teachers? What about the training that was provided by the Saudi
6		company and by *Teaching Strategies* in the United States?
7	P	The biggest benefit was from one of the American trainers, as she was
8		basically a teacher and acquainted us with an experience that met the
9		needs of the teachers.

10	I	Do you think that the teachers still need more training?
11	P	Sure, training should be continual. For instance, they need some training
12		courses on how to assess children's learning.

(Interview with the director, 12 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 8

1	I	Have you noticed any differences between the trainers from the *Teaching*
2		*Strategies* and the trainers from the Saudi company?
3	P	Yes, the Saudi trainers rely on their personal experience. However, the
4		western trainers have a kind of flexibility in applying the curriculum and
5		in the daily practices, and they used simple activities that met the
6		objectives.

(First interview with the Arabic teacher, 27 May 2014, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 9

1	P	Frankly, at the beginning, I did not understand the progressive nature of
2		the objectives of this period (small-group time).
3	I	Do you ascribe that to lack of training before starting to use the
4		Curriculum or to other factors?
5	P	We had many workshops, but they did not meet our needs as teachers;
6		they were more promotional.

(Second interview with the Arabic teacher, 10 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 10

1	I	This is your third year working in this preschool. With regard to the
2		professional development, have you found the training workshops met
3		your needs as a teacher in general and in respect of the Creative
4		Curriculum in particular?
5	P	With regard to the Creative Curriculum, partly. I have benefited more
6		from the video clips that were presented during the training courses.
7	I	With the different cultural context?
8	P	Certainly, certainly. As trainees we have noticed many differences. For
9		instance, we were surprised that in one of the video clips some children
10		were lying down during circle time!
11	I	Have you noticed any differences between the western and the Saudi
12		trainers?
13	P	Yes. For example, the western trainers have never concentrated on
14		children's discipline (when they visit classrooms), whereas the Saudi
15		trainers comment and say, "Why do you not catch children's attention?"
16	I	Do you feel that you need still more training?
17	P	Yes.

(Third interview with the Arabic teacher, 21 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 11

1	I	Have you attended any training this year?
2 3	P	I attended one training course presented by the American trainers. The course was on how to apply the curriculum.
4	I	Was it useful?
5 6 7 8	P	Yes, it helped me better understand the curriculum. I thought before that I had to stick to what is written in the teaching guides. However, after meeting the trainers I understood that I can change to what is suitable for me as a teacher.
9	I	What are your training needs?
10 11 12	P	I need to learn more about children and how to deal with them, how to interact with them. For the curriculum, I think no, I can do what I see is suitable for my children.

(Second interview with the English teacher, 25 May 2015)

In Excerpt 7, the preschool director indicated that the partnership with the Saudi company was useful because of the workshops it provided. The above excerpts show that the director and the English teacher largely agreed that the workshops were more useful for the English teachers because they (unlike the Arabic teachers) did not specialise in early childhood education. In Excerpts 9 and 10, the Arabic teacher mentioned that the training only partly met her needs, and some needs were not covered. She also reported that some of the workshops sounded more like promotions for the curriculum materials than professional instruction.

Excerpts 7 and 8 show agreement between the director and the Arabic teacher that the most useful training was that given by western trainers. In Excerpt 8 the Arabic teacher noted a clear difference between the Saudi and the western

trainers when teaching. For instance she stated that the western trainers were more flexible in applying the Curriculum and in their teaching practices than the Saudi trainers. She also noticed some contextual differences. For example, when watching the videos, the Saudi teachers were surprised that some western children lay down on the floor during circle time, whereas in Saudi preschool classrooms children are expected to sit up properly throughout group times. The Arabic teacher also said that, during their classroom visits, the western trainers were less concerned with the children's discipline than were the Saudi trainers. In addition, all participants interviewed agreed that continued training is needed in particular areas such as interaction with children and learning assessment. These interviews are revealing in two ways:

- They stress the importance of professional development programmes particularly when introducing a new curriculum. This is in keeping with the work of Li and colleagues (2012) which argued that in-service training is a crucial element of any educational reform as teachers might lack the skills required for applying the new pedagogies.

- The disparity between the American and Saudi trainers in terms of flexibility and expectation reflects socio-cultural differences.

5.2.5 Communication with parents

A partnership between preschool and family is a core principle of the Creative Curriculum (Teaching Strategies, 2013a). In Saudi Arabian preschools, usually the direct communication is with mothers since the educational system is a single-gender education. In this preschool, the mothers were welcome to meet the administration or the teachers throughout the day.

Observational data captured several different ways of communication with parents (mothers). Here are three examples:

- Each mother had a standing invitation to participate in any activity in the classroom, such as cooking and story-telling.

- The preschool wanted to document how the children learn and progress and share these moments with children's families, it therefore created an account on *Instagram*, a social media channel for photo-video sharing.

- At the end of each study, the preschool invited the mothers to attend an event called "Celebrating Learning". On these occasions, the classrooms displayed children's work and showed their achievements during the study. Figure 5.8 shows an example of Celebrating Learning at the end of the Trees Study.

Figure 5.8 The Celebrating Learning day at the end of the Trees Study. Samples of children's work were displayed, and photos that captured some learning situations that took place during this study were shown.

(Visual data, 5 March 2015)

The above observational data show attempts to establish regular contact with the mothers and to strengthen their involvement. Data reported here support

earlier literature that called on early childhood educators to provide opportunities to involve parents in their children's learning (Brooker, 2002; Kim, 2014). The views of the preschool director and the teachers on the communication with the mothers are described below.

Excerpt 12

1		Building an effective partnership with families is one of the key
2	I	principles of the Creative Curriculum. What are the preschool's
3		endeavours to enhance this partnership?
4	P	I am not satisfied with the level of the present partnership. We are
5		facing some difficulties since most of the mothers are busy at work.

(Interview with the director, 12 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 13

1	I	Can you describe the role that families play in children's learning?
2	P	Actually, children's families do not play a major role, even though we
3		are trying to involve them as best we can.

(First interview with the Arabic teacher, 27 May 2014, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 14

1	I	Can you describe the role of parents in children's learning in your
2		classroom?
3	P	Most of the mothers do help. However, they are dealing only with
4		Arabic; they feel that Arabic is more important than English.

(First interview with the English teacher, 27 May 2014)

The above observational data show that although there were several attempts to create regular communication with the mothers, in Excerpts 12 and 13 both the director and the Arabic teacher expressed dissatisfaction with the current partnership with the mothers due to their work commitments. However,

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Excerpt 14 shows a different view expressed by the English teacher. She said that the mothers showed their cooperation with the preschool but most of them focused on Arabic rather than on English. Later in this chapter, the mothers' attitudes to children's learning are discussed further.

5.3   Early literacy practices in the home context

Since this study views early literacy as a socio-cultural practice, I investigated early literacy practices at home in order to provide insights into the "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992) that the children transferred to their educational setting and how this knowledge influenced their early literacy learning in preschool. This section introduces the voices of the six mothers whose children participated in this research. Data presented here were obtained from interviews with mothers, mind maps created with the children, and observations.

I now discuss the mothers' thoughts on preschool education and early literacy, mothers' literacy practices, and children's early literacy practices in their families.

5.3.1   Mothers' perspectives on preschool education

The interviews with the mothers revealed their perspectives about preschool education. Different mothers had different views and expectations about their children's learning. This is illustrated in the following answers to the question: "What do you expect from the preschool?"

Excerpt 15

1	P	Honestly, excellent. They really provide care. They focus on developing
2		the child's personality such as promoting self-reliance. My daughter does
3		not want to be absent even if she does not feel well, which means that she
4		likes the school.

(Interview with Tala's mother, 16 March 2015, translated from the Arabic)

Excerpt 16

1	P	The results exceeded my expectations. I am specialised in education and I
2		can say that this is an ideal preschool. This generation is smart; education
3		should be built on children's needs, where the child is an active learner in
4		a stimulating environment. There has been a remarkable change for my
5		son in terms of his speaking, communication and interaction. He returns
6		home smiling and happy.

(Interview with Faris's mother, 16 March 2015, translated from the Arabic)

Excerpt 17

1	P	I expect a comprehensive development. The curriculum is good, I can see
2		the change in my child's personality, he was shy but now he has acquired
3		many skills such as motor skills, observation and visual discrimination.
4		However, at the beginning of the year, we suggested that there should be
5		more focus on reading and writing skills. Frankly, the preschool does not
6		teach them. Starting last year we demanded more focus on systematic
7		teaching of the alphabets; however, they told us that the curriculum aims
8		to develop children's knowledge of alphabet in an indirect way.

(Interview with Saad's mother, 22 February 2015, translated from the Arabic)

Excerpt 18

1		My expectations were higher than what I have found. I expected that my
2		child learns more words and letters, knows how to read and write. I am a
3		teacher, and I know that my daughter's teacher focuses on Arabic literacy,
4	P	but the curriculum has not given sufficient attention to reading and
5		writing. As a mother, I want a direct instruction, I want my child to be
6		able to read, I did not bring her to school to play, I can play with her at
7		home. I want her to learn the Qur'an, memorise supplications; if you
8		noticed, they just learnt three suras during the term.

(Interview with Leen's mother, 1 March 2015, translated from the Arabic)

Excerpt 19

1		My other children, who attended another preschool, they read and write
2		before they start primary school. In this preschool, I thought that my child
3		will be able to read and write. The preschool is good, and learning through
4	P	play is also nice. However, I am planning to register my child in a
5		Qur'anic school for her primary education, and they interview children to
6		assess their academic performance. Thus, at home I focus on teaching her
7		the Arabic letters.

(Interview with Ruaa's mother, 3 March 2015, translated from the Arabic)

It is clear that the interviewed mothers had different expectations of preschool education. In Excerpts 15 and 16 both Tala's and Faris's mothers expressed their satisfaction with the preschool. They also admired the fact that the preschool focused on the children's personality such as developing self-reliance. Both mothers stressed their children's happiness in the preschool. It can be deduced from both excerpts that these mothers highly valued the provision of care, and emotional and social development.

Excerpts 17, 18 and 19 show different expectations of preschool education. Saad's and Ruaa's mothers (Excerpts 17 and 19) showed some satisfaction with the education provided but felt that more attention needed to be given to the alphabets and to reading and writing. Saad's mother approved of the Creative Curriculum in as much as her child's personality had developed well. However, she criticised the preschool which her child attended for not doing any "teaching" (lines 5 and 6). In her view "teaching" means explicit teaching of letters, and of reading and writing.

Excerpt 18 is quite revealing in several ways. Firstly, unlike other mothers, Leen's mother drew on her experience both as a teacher and as a mother of a child in this preschool. Secondly, although Leen's mother was a teacher at the preschool where this research took place, some of her beliefs about children's learning did not agree with the philosophy underlying the Creative Curriculum. For example, the Creative Curriculum stresses the importance of play-based pedagogy, but Leen's mother had reservations about employing play exclusively in early years' education. She also stressed the importance of direct instruction for reading and writing and demanded more effort be devoted to memorising the Qur'an and Islamic supplications. The interview with Leen's mother raised issues about teachers' beliefs and their understanding of the Creative Curriculum. This is discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

Excerpt 19 shows that Ruaa's mother's experience with her older children had influenced her expectations about preschool education. It was interesting that this mother wanted her child to attend not just any public primary school but a "Qur'anic school", which restricts admission to children who had passed its entrance interview. This was the reason why she was keen that her daughter should be taught the alphabet. Hence, it may thus be argued that the

interviewed mother's insistence on the Arabic alphabet was motivated directly by her wish that her daughter was accepted in the Qur'anic school and motivated indirectly by religious convictions. Ruaa's mother also viewed preschool as an essential preparation for primary school and was therefore concerned about Ruaa's readiness for school.

The above excerpts show that the participant mothers came from the same ethnic background, and their educational, social and cultural backgrounds were similar. They therefore shared some beliefs. Nevertheless, the excerpts show their different perspectives on preschool education. This finding supports Rowe's (2013) view that parents from similar socio-cultural backgrounds may hold different beliefs about learning. For instance, the first two mothers took a broad view of early learning that focused on child socialisation, while the others took a more narrow view by focusing on the acquisition of skills and school readiness. This finding agrees with the findings of Al-Harthi (2014), that the views of Saudi mothers on early learning were influenced by their Saudi cultural and social contexts, their early childhood experiences, and their experiences with their older children. The mothers' broad view of learning fell in line with the current official approach in Saudi Arabia that assumes that children grow and learn through socialisation and comprehensive development (Ministry of Education et al., 2015).

By contrast, the narrow view of early learning expressed by other mothers is in keeping with what Al-Shatti (2011) found in Kuwait, where, in a socio-cultural context similar to this study, parents demand that the preschool stage should concentrate more on school readiness. This is also in line with earlier studies which found that Chinese parents also consider preschool as a preparation for

school and therefore tend to focus on the academic performance of their children (Rao et al., 2010; Li et al., 2012).

In addition, concerning the role of play in early years, the mothers expressed different views (Excerpts 18 and 19). This supports existing literature which found that play in early childhood settings was greatly valued in some cultures but much less so in others (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000). Indeed, the different views of the mothers of the importance (or otherwise) of play in early years' education reflect an ongoing debate in Saudi society. The *Saudi Early Learning Standards* (Ministry of Education et al., 2015) shows that Saudi policymakers support the play-based pedagogy. However, a number of studies revealed that, among parents and teachers in Saudi Arabia, there is some resistance against implementing new pedagogies, such as learning through play. These studies showed that teachers and parents often did not know enough about the importance of play in children's development and clung to the belief that the preschool stage is a preparation for primary schooling (Al-Ameel, 2002; Alfayez, 2013).

5.3.2   Mothers' perspectives on early literacy

The previous section discussed the children's mothers' views of preschool education. In this section, I discuss how these mothers view early literacy learning. The following excerpts from interviews with the participant mothers show what counts as early literacy in their view.

Excerpt 20

1	I	From your point of view, how do children develop early literacy?
2		When learning the basics, I mean the alphabets. When my child learned
3	P	the letters, she was able to identify some words when I was reading a
4		story.

(Interview with Leen's mother, 1 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 21

1	I	How do you view early literacy?
2	P	The child reads and writes at an early age.
3	I	From your point of view, how do children develop early literacy?
4	P	Compose letters and words.

(Interview with Ruaa's mother, 3 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 22

1	I	How do you view early literacy?
2		Previously, I considered reading and writing integral parts of the
3		preschool's curriculum. When my child was in KG1 (the first level of
4		preschool education), I was not satisfied with the curriculum. However,
5	P	after meeting the American trainer, who said that the curriculum aims
6		to provide a comprehensive development, and after realising how my
7		child changed positively, I changed my mind.
8	I	From your point of view, how do children develop early literacy?
9		A four-year-old child can develop early literacy through play. For
10	P	instance, using blocks to build up a character. This way is better than
11		our previous method, tracing over dotted characters.

(Interview with Nawaf's mother, 16 February 2015, translating from Arabic)

Excerpt 23

1	I	How do you view early literacy?
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	P	I think through stories that have short sentences, the child can read some words and explain the story from the illustrations. For instance, Saad's older brother, as he was my first child, I focused on reading for him. He had a small library at home. Although Saad showed the ability to write his name, I did not feel that he progressed in the other aspects. This is his second year in this preschool; next year he will move to the primary school and he still cannot read and write. I am looking for a teacher who can come to the house and teach him to read and write Arabic.

(Interview with Saad's mother, 22 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 24

1	I	How do children develop early literacy?
2 3	P	I think that children will be able to write if they reach a certain level of maturity.
4 5	I	Do you think that early literacy can be developed before the child has reached a particular level of maturity?
6 7	P	No, I do not think so. The result might be negative. For instance, fine motor skills might not be developed enough.

(Interview with Tala's mother, 16 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 25

1	I	How do you view early literacy?
2 3	P	At this early stage, children develop their experiences with symbols; it is a preparation stage rather than focusing on reading and writing.
4	I	So learning to read and write is not a priority for you?
5 6	P	No, it isn't. I think learning reading and writing should start at primary school, and in preschool the focus should be on the child's development.

(Interview with Faris's mother, 16 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

The above excerpts reflect the mothers' views about early literacy. Excerpts 20- 24 suggest that the mothers held a narrow view of early literacy. They defined early literacy as the ability to read and write. Excerpt 22 shows that reading and writing were priorities for Nawaf's mother, but she changed her mind after meeting the American trainer and noticing progress in her child's development. The mothers of Ruaa and Nawaf felt that children develop early literacy through play (Excerpts 21 and 22). Nawaf's mother also preferred the play approach – "*using blocks to build up a character*" – to the previously common method of tracing dotted characters.

Excerpt 23 shows that Saad's mother viewed stories as a significant means for developing children's early literacy. Her opinions appear to be influenced by her experiences with her first-born (lines 3 and 4). She emphasised the importance of learning to read and write during the preschool years before starting primary school.

Excerpt 24 provides a different angle. Tala's mother expressed concern over maturation and reading-readiness: children must have developed certain prerequisite skills. When this has happened, they can readily learn to read and write. In Excerpt 25, Faris's mother expressed her belief that during preschool

years children first have to become aware of the fact that symbols have meaning. Learning to read and write as such comes only after that awareness has been created. It is therefore not the central objective of preschool activities. She viewed preschool as a preparation for primary school. Preschool should focus on the child's development rather than on systematic teaching of reading and writing (which should start only in primary school).

These mothers' views of early literacy reflect their expectations of preschool education that were discussed earlier in this chapter. For instance, Faris's mother who expressed a broad view of learning in early years, focusing on child's socialisation (Excerpt 16), also expressed in Excerpt 25 a more comprehensive approach to early literacy than the other interviewed mothers did, as she said *"rather than focusing on reading and writing* (line 3), *in preschool the focus should be on the child's development"* (line 6). On the other hand, the interviewed mothers who expressed a narrow view of learning in early years that focuses on school readiness also adopted a narrow view of early literacy. Note that, although Nawaf's mother shared the narrow view of early literacy of the other mothers, she believed in the potential of play in developing early literacy: "*A four-year-old child can develop early literacy through play*" (Excerpt 22, line 9).

Accordingly, it is clear that some mothers adopted a narrow view of early literacy. In the light of socio-cultural perspectives, focusing on learning letters, reading and writing reflects the autonomous model of literacy (skills-based approach). The autonomous model views literacy as an array of skills that can be developed in the same way in different contexts. Indeed, the autonomous model has been challenged by socio-cultural theories that introduced the ideological model of literacy, which this study adopts, that extends literacy

beyond a set of autonomous skills to include socio-cultural contexts that construct literacy learning (Street, 2003).

This finding – that some mothers had a narrow view of early literacy – can be explained with Volk and Acosta's (2001) finding that parental understanding of acquisition of literacy is shaped by the learning experiences of parents. In the case of this study, the educational experiences of the mothers differed from those of their children since the mothers, unlike their children, studied in an educational system that emphasised the skills-based approach. This finding also concurs with Tibi and McLeod's (2014) study, which reported that, in the UAE, there was a disparity between parental educational experiences and their children's educational system.

The views of the mothers described above suggest that what parents believe about their children's learning can change with the passing of time. For example, Nawaf's mother (Excerpt 22) said that she changed her beliefs about the priority of systematic learning to read and write in preschool after meeting the American trainer and when she noticed progress in her child's development. She also eventually agreed that developing literacy through play is much better than tracing dotted characters, the traditional method with which she grew up.

5.3.3   Mothers as social mediators for early literacy

This section gives examples of what mothers did at home to encourage their children's early literacy. They are drawn from interviews with the mothers and from mind maps created with the children.

Excerpt 26

1	I	Do you read to your child? In which language?
2	P	Yes, in Arabic. I was reading to her in English, but she showed
3		unwillingness, so I did not want to put more pressure on her.
4	I	At what age did you start reading to your children?
5	P	Around three years. Reading from the book. Reading a story from a
6		book and pointing to the text is more helpful than just telling a story.
7		Sometimes, I read the label on the food containers. When I was
8		young, I grew up in a reading family.
9	I	Do you sing songs with your children at home?
10	P	No. My mum sings traditional songs with them.

(Interview with Leen's mother, 1 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 27

1	I	Do you read to your child?
2	P	Sometimes I do a bedtime story in Arabic. At times, he tells me a story,
3		in his own way, bedtime is the most beautiful time I spend with him.
4	I	Do you sing songs with your children at home?
5	P	No.

(Interview with Nawaf's mother, 16 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 28

1	I	Do you read to your child?
2	P	Yes, in Arabic.
3	I	When did you start reading to your child?
4	P	Since he was three. I brought stories for him and his sister.
5	I	What about songs?
6 7	P	Actually, I do not believe in songs. I do not sing any songs with them and I deleted all the songs channels in the television.

(Interview with Saad's mother, 22 February 2015, translating from Arabic)

Excerpt 29

1	I	Do you read to your child?
2 3	P	Yes, before she attended the preschool. Bedtime story is a daily habit in our family.
4	I	Do you just tell the story, or do you read it from a storybook?
5	P	From a storybook.
6 7	I	Does this habit come from your own beliefs or because your children enjoy listening to stories?
8 9	P	They like and enjoy stories, and I believe that stories have a significant impact on children's personality.
10	I	Do you sing songs with your children at home?
11	P	Sometimes, just for fun.
12	I	Other literacy practices?
13 14	P	Yes. When she draws she asks me to write something into her drawing. I keep her writings and drawings to show her when she grows up.

(Interview with Tala's mother, 16 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 30

1	I	Do you read to your child?
2 3	P	No, bedtime stories, no. However, when the primary school (Qur'anic) told me that they will interview my child, I started to do some reading.
4	I	I mean reading for pleasure, not only for learning and school.
5	P	No, rarely.
6	I	Do you sing songs with your children at home?
7 8	P	They listen to songs on the iPad. Sometimes, I do some rhymes with them.

(Interview with Ruaa's mother, 3 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 31

1	I	Do you read to your child?
2 3	P	No. I do not read to any of my children. Although I am an educator, I could not with the work commitments.
4	I	Any other literacy practices?
5	P	No.

(Interview with Faris's mother, 16 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

These excerpts shed light on some of the mothers' literacy practices that occurred in the homes of the children. Excerpt 26 shows examples of literacy practices that took place at Leen's home. Leen's mother said that she read stories to her children from an early age. She preferred reading aloud from a storybook rather than just telling the story, as she could point at the text she was reading. Leen's mother also said she read some environmental print to Leen, such as the labels on food containers. In addition, this excerpt shows that Leen's mother was not the only literacy mediator for her daughter at home; but the grandmother also appeared to play a role by singing traditional songs with Leen (line 10). Moreover, data reported in lines 6 and 7 suggest that Leen's

mother herself grew up in a family where children were read stories; thus, her habit of reading stories to her children was influenced by her own childhood experiences.

The mothers' views expressed above also showed how literacy practices varied in the children's homes. In some, reading stories, including bedtime stories, was a common practice (namely in the homes of Leen, Nawaf, Saad and Tala, Excerpts 26, 27, 28 and 29 respectively), but in others it was much less frequent (namely in the homes of Ruaa and Faris, Excerpts 30 and 31 respectively). Most noticeably, Excerpt 30 shows a family where reading seemed rare, and, when it was done, it was for schooling purposes rather than for pleasure. In order to provide multiple perspectives, the following excerpts give triangulated data obtained from the mind map sessions with Tala and Ruaa.

Excerpt 32

1	I	At home, do your parents read to you?
2	P	Yes, Arabic stories.
3	I	Do you see your parents writing at home?
4	P	Yes. They write for me "love you".

(Tala's mind map session, 25 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 33

1	I	Do your parents read to you at home?
2	P	We do not have stories.
3	I	Do you see your parents write at home?
4	P	My mum writes with my sister, she helps my sister with her homework.
5		

(Ruaa's mind map session, 24 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

In Excerpt 32 Tala confirmed what her mother said in Excerpt 29. Her parents read Arabic stories to her at home and they did some writing for her. Ruaa's

mind map also confirmed what her mother said in Excerpt 30. In particular, Ruaa said that they had no story telling at home, but her mother helped Ruaa's sister with her homework. Hence, it can be said that literacy activities in Ruaa's home were confined to reading and writing in preparation for school; nothing for pleasure.

In some of the families, they not only read stories but also sang songs. Leen said she sometimes sang traditional songs with her grandmother (Excerpt 26). Tala's and Ruaa's mothers would also sometimes sing songs and nursery rhymes with their daughters. By contrast, songs were not sung in the homes of Nawaf, Saad and Faris. Other examples of mothers' literacy practices at home were the reading of labels on the food containers as mentioned by Leen's mother in Excerpt 26 and joint writing as mentioned by Tala's mother (in Excerpt 29).

Interviews with the mothers showed that religious literacy, learning to recite parts of the Qur'an, is a common practice in the Saudi families who took part in this study. The following are examples of religious literacy practices that took place in the families.

Table 5.2 Religious literacy practices at home

Participants	*Do you recite the Qur'an with your child at home?*
Nawaf's mother	Yes, he asks about the meaning of some words and I explain it in the vernacular until he understands the meaning. I wish that he could memorise the Qur'an, learning the Qur'an by heart strengthens Standard Arabic.
Faris's mother	Previously, there was a Qur'anic teacher who came to the house. Sometimes, I recite short suras with them. I feel that hearing and reciting the Qur'an has an impact on their language, it improves their vocabulary and articulation.
Saad's mother	Yes. Based on the preschool's study plan I revise with him. He hears me when I read the Qur'an.

(Extracts from interviews with mothers, translated from Arabic)

Table 5.2 presents mothers' responses to the interview's question: Do you recite the Qur'an with your child at home? Data reported in the above table showed that, obviously, reciting the Qur'an was a common religious practice in the participating families. The answers showed that Nawaf's and Faris's mothers thought that listening to, and reciting, the Qur'an would help their children significantly in promoting their Standard Arabic, as it developed their vocabulary and articulation. When Saad's mother studied the Qur'an with him, she followed the preschool's study plan, which was sent to the parents every week. She also said that she recited the Qur'an in Saad's presence. Data reported here support the findings of Tibi and McLeod (2014), which showed that reading the Qur'an is one of the literacy practices of Emirati families, a socio-cultural context that is similar to that of my study, and that parents served as models of reading the Qur'an.

The responses in Table 5.2 support the view of literacy as a socio-cultural practice as faith is viewed as a cultural practice (Gregory et al., 2015). This is in keeping with Street's (2003) view that children's literacy learning is embedded in their social and cultural contexts. It can be therefore said that

religious literacy that was created and practised in the homes of the children involved in this study reflects the rich Islamic culture of Saudi society. The next chapter discusses in more depth how religious literacy is developed in the classroom.

To summarise, mothers and children reported the following literacy practices taking place at home:

- reading Arabic stories from books,

- reciting the Qur'an,

- singing songs and rhymes,

- reading environmental print, and

- writing.

The above discussion revealed that not all mothers used the same practices. For instance, some mothers emphasised pleasure to motivate their children to read, whereas others were only concerned with reading for school purposes. This finding can be explained with research which found that the literacy practices of mothers were shaped by their previous experiences and by their cultural beliefs about the role of parents in children's learning (Korat et al., 2014).

The above section also showed how mothers served as role models in some literacy practices, such as reading stories and reciting the Qur'an. In other words, through *maternal mediation*, a key concept in socio-cultural theories, children developed their early literacy within the context of their families. This finding may add to a growing body of literature which indicated that parents play a crucial role as social mediators in children's literacy growth (Gregory et al., 2010; Aram et al., 2013a; Stockall and Dennis, 2013). Furthermore, the

interview with Leen's mother illustrated the role that grandparents may play in developing children's Arabic early literacy at home. Although a growing body of international research investigated the role of grandparents in children's literacy development (Jessel et al., 2004; Gregory et al., 2007; Kenner et al., 2007; Gregory et al., 2010; Jessel et al., 2011), this area remains unexplored in the Arab world including Saudi Arabia to the best of my knowledge.

5.3.4 Children's early literacy practices at home

This section deals with children's early literacy practices at home. Data reported here were obtained from mothers' interviews, children's mind maps and observations. I discuss the following aspects:

- oral communication,

- early writing,

- learning English as a foreign language, and

- digital literacies.

5.3.4.1 Oral communication

Saudi children, like other Arabic-speaking children, develop their spoken language within a dual linguistic context due to the diglossic nature of Arabic. In Saudi Arabia, as in other Arab countries, children are exposed to several vernaculars in their everyday life, and their spoken language develops within this complex context. Saudi children naturally acquire the spoken language (vernaculars) through interaction with parents and siblings in the family, and with teachers and peers at school. Besides the vernacular forms of Arabic, children are also exposed to Standard Arabic through the Qur'an, media, and

children's books (Al-Azraqi, 2014). The following excerpts from interviews with mothers illustrate how children are exposed to Standard Arabic at home.

Excerpt 34

1	I	To what extent is your child exposed to Standard Arabic at home?
2	P	We do not use Standard Arabic in our communication. My child is exposed to Standard Arabic from stories. I read the stories in Standard Arabic, also from the television.
3		
4		

(Interview with Faris's mother, 16 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 35

1	I	To what extent is your child exposed to Standard Arabic at home?
2	P	From the television. From hearing the Qur'an.
3	I	I have noticed that your child uses Standard Arabic when speaking to the Arabic teacher.
4		
5	P	Yes, I think this is the impact of home. My child listens to the Qur'an daily, and the Qur'an is a rich source for Standard Arabic.
6		

(Interview with Ruaa's mother, 3 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 36

1	I	Do you use Standard Arabic at home?
2	P	No, no. Only when I read a story, I read it in Standard Arabic. What I found useful for my child in developing Standard Arabic is watching the Arabic children's television channel.
3		
4		

(Interview with Leen's mother, 1 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 37

1	I	To what extent is your child exposed to Standard Arabic at home?
2	P	From the television, Arabic children's channel. When I read a story, I read it in the vernacular to simplify it to him, and when he retells the story he uses some words in Standard Arabic.
3		
4		

(Interview with Nawaf's mother, 16 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 38

1	I	To what extent is your child exposed to Standard Arabic at home?
2		Sometimes I use Standard Arabic when I give him some
3	P	instructions. I found that he understands Standard Arabic that is
4		being used on the children's television channel.
5	I	Do you feel that Standard Arabic is becoming familiar to your
6		child?
7	P	Yes.

(Interview with Saad's mother, 22 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

These excerpts show how children were exposed to Standard Arabic at home from the mothers' perspectives. Excerpt 38 shows that Saad's mother sometimes used Standard Arabic when giving him instructions. Interestingly, Excerpt 37 shows that Nawaf's mother recited stories in the vernacular to make them easier to understand, but then Nawaf was able to use some words in Standard Arabic when retelling the story. This may imply that Nawaf derived his knowledge about Standard Arabic from the preschool where the teacher read out stories in Standard Arabic and from watching television. This finding supports earlier studies which showed that Emirati parents tend to use vernacular Arabic for more explanation and understanding while reading stories to their children (Tibi and McLeod, 2014). This finding also appears to be in line with Korat and colleagues' (2014) study of Israeli Arabic-speaking kindergarteners within the context of their family. This showed that, when reading a story in Standard Arabic to their children, mothers help them to understand it by paraphrasing it in vernacular Arabic. In brief, it can be deduced that in some oral activities and genres, parents and children combined standard and vernacular forms of the language.

The interviews showed that the vernacular forms of Arabic in Saudi Arabia is the main form of spoken communication in the families involved in this study. This finding may highlights the link between language and identity, as the vernacular forms of Arabic can be considered as a reflection of the national identity of the families taking part in this study. Besides the vernacular forms of Arabic, children were exposed at home to Standard Arabic from different sources. In particular, there was a level of consensus among the mothers that children were exposed to Standard Arabic through story-telling, television and the Qur'an. This finding agrees with Al-Azraqi's (2014) study in the Eastern region of Saudi Arabia, which found that vernacular Arabic is the prominent form of spoken language within Saudi families. It is also in line with Tibi and McLeod's (2014) study which found that television programmes broadcast in Standard Arabic were significant sources for developing children's knowledge of Standard Arabic within Emirati families.

The data from the above interviews support socio-cultural theories that emphasised the role of culture and media in promoting children's acquisition of literacy (Kennedy et al., 2012). They also suggest that Arabic-speaking children developed their Standard Arabic through several "mediational tools" within their families, namely Arabic stories, Arabic television programmes for children, and the Qur'an.

5.3.4.2 Early writing

This section deals with children's emergent writing within their families. Table 5.3 shows extracts from the interviews with mothers.

Table 5.3 Early writing at home

Participants	Does your child write at home?
Nawaf's mother	He likes drawing more than writing. He has a whiteboard and a notebook.
Tala's mother	Yes, always. Also, when she draws she asks me to write something into her drawing. I keep her writings and drawings to show her when she grows up.
Ruaa's mother	Yes, and she enjoys that. She sits with her young brother, gives him instructions and corrects his attempts to draw. She sits also with her older sister, observing and imitating how she uses colouring pencils.
Faris's mother	He likes drawing more than writing, he always writes his name. My children do some writing together.
Saad's mother	Yes, when I ask him to bring the alphabet book, but he does not initiate. He does his drawing; he has colouring pens and a notebook. He sits with his sister when she does her homework; she is his teacher at home.
Leen's mother	Yes, she shows us how she can write her name. Sometimes, she copies some words.

(Extracts from interviews with the mothers, translated from Arabic)

The above answers show the nature of children's early writing at home. The children engaged in several mark-making activities such as drawing, writing the child's name and copying some words. The literacy materials used at home were pens, notebooks, boards and colouring pencils. Mother-child writing activities seemed to rarely occur as only Tala's mother indicated that she wrote into her child's drawing. The same mother also indicated that she encouraged her child by retaining samples of the child's mark-making. This finding is in line with the study by Tibi and colleagues (2013) which showed that in Emirati families little attention is given to parent-child writing activities. These interviews also show interaction between siblings and how they helped each other in different learning situations. I wanted to explore children's writing experiences at home further and, therefore, provide triangulated evidence from children's mind maps and observational data.

Excerpt 39

1	I	Do you write at home?
2	P	Yes.
3	I	Do you have papers and pencils at home?
4	P	I use my sister's colouring pencils.

(Nawaf's mind map session, 15 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 40

1	I	Do you write at home?
2	P	No, yes, I write my name.
3	I	Do you have pencils and papers at home?
4	P	Yes, I take from my sister.
5	I	Do your parents write for you at home?
6	P	No.

(Faris's mind map session, 25 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 39 shows data obtained from Nawaf's mind map. He tried to write at home using his sister's colouring pencils. What Faris said in Excerpt 40 about his writing activities at home concurred with what his mother indicated in Table 5.3; for example writing his own name and sharing literacy tools with his siblings. Moreover, this mind map session (lines 5 and 6) confirms the interview data in Excerpt 31 that parent-child literacy activities were very rare at Faris's home. Figure 5.9 shows an example of Tala's writing and drawing on a calendar page that she did at home and proudly brought it to her class. This example confirms what her mother said in Table 5.3.
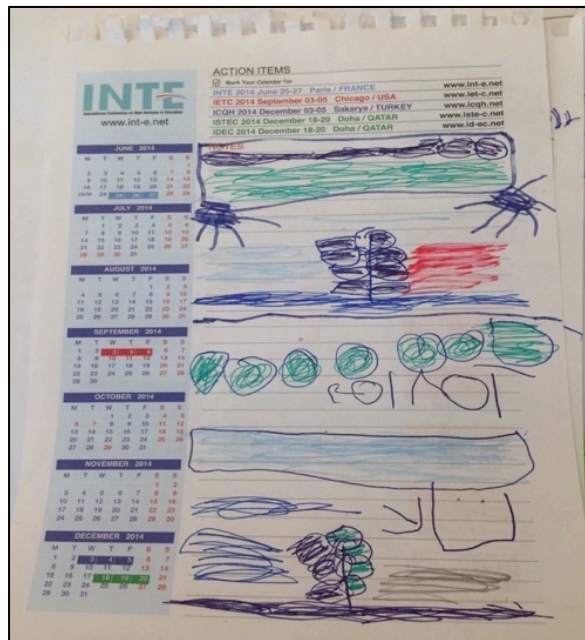
Figure 5.9 Tala's drawing and writing on a calendar's page at home brought by her to the preschool.

(Visual data, 8 December 2014)

The above data showed that children's early writing in their homes can be viewed as a social practice, which consisted of interaction less with adults and mainly with siblings. In particular, siblings served as mediators of learning. The data also showed a kind of "guided participation" (Rogoff, 1990) that took place between siblings at home. For instance, two mothers indicated that the more expert sibling played the role of the teacher (facilitator) for the younger sibling by giving instructions and correcting mistakes. Moreover, through data analysis a kind of "synergy" (Gregory, 2001) was revealed between children at home. For example, one of the mothers reported that her child not only taught her younger sibling but also sat with the older sister and learned from her how to colour through observation and imitation. This finding supports Gregory's (2001) work in East London on young children's language and acquisition of

literacy at home. Gregory found that, through play activities, "synergy" was a crucial mediator to children's literacy learning.

5.3.4.3 Learning English as a foreign language

Although the preschool where the research took place is affiliated to the public sector where English language is not provided at this stage of education, English is taught as a foreign language in this preschool as part of the implementation of the Creative Curriculum. Earlier literature showed that the home context play a significant role in learning a new language (Alsowayegh, 2015; Chan and Sylva, 2015). It was therefore important to find out what mothers thought about learning English at an early age and how often children were exposed to English at home. The following excerpts come from the interviews with the mothers illustrating their views on learning English as a foreign language.

Table 5.4 Learning English as a foreign language at home

Participants	*What is your opinion about learning English at an early age?*	*Is your child being exposed to English at home?*
Leen's mother	Very important. I highly agree.	Through television programmes.
Nawaf's mother	Important. We live in a digital era; it is crucial to learn English.	Yes, from his older sisters. On television, we do not watch English channels. Sometimes I talk with him in English.
Tala's mother	Extremely important. Although it is crucial to learn Arabic, it is important also to learn English. I did not learn English at an early age, and now I find it difficult to learn.	Not too much. Sometimes, they speak English with our housekeeper.
Faris's mother	Very, very important. I encourage him through watching English television programmes. I am also planning to register him at a private primary school.	No.
Ruaa's mother	I do not know. I think it is a good idea to learn English at preschool age; however, I think it might interfere with learning the first language. For example, I noticed that my child is confused about the directionality of Arabic and English. I think learning English in primary school is more appropriate.	Yes, but very rarely, through using some English words with her sisters. I prefer focusing on Arabic as it reflects where we belong.
Saad's mother	I do not believe that children should be exposed intensively to a foreign language at an early age.	Sometimes, through television, technology tools such as iPads, and speaking with the housekeeper.

(Extracts from interviews with mothers, translated from Arabic)

Table 5.4 shows that the mothers can be divided into two groups concerning their views on learning English at an early age. The first four mothers thought that learning English at preschool age was very important. Nawaf's mother argued that learning English is important because of the current era of technology. Tala's mother recognised the importance of learning English

besides the mother tongue, Arabic. Tala's mother also wanted her daughter to learn English early, particularly as she herself did not learn English well when she was young, and now finds it difficult to learn.

These views expressed above showed that the children had some exposure to English at home. The children were exposed to English through television programmes, technology tools, and using some English words with parents, siblings and housekeepers. This finding is in line with Al-Mansour's (2009) argument that in Saudi families where parents are Arabic monolingual, children have rather limited opportunities for exposure to English.

Table 5.4 also shows, however, that some mothers were not all that keen on their children learning English at an early age. Ruaa's mother was worried that learning English too early might confuse her daughter and make it more difficult for her to learn her mother tongue. She also believed that focusing on Arabic at home would strengthen Ruaa's sense of belonging to Saudi Arabian culture and society. Saad's mother was strongly opposed to her son learning a foreign language at preschool age. This latter finding, mothers' perspectives on not teaching their children English at an early age, concurs with Elyas's (2008) study of the attitudes of Saudi university students towards learning English and its culture. His study revealed that Saudi university students agreed on the necessity to study English and its culture but were wary of western ideology and culture that might conflict with their Arabian Islamic identity. Below are examples of the children's exposure to English at home as reported in the mind map sessions.

Excerpt 41

1	I	Do you like to speak in English?
2	P	Yes, very much. I speak in English with my mum, dad, uncle and aunt.

(Leen's mind map session, 18 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 42

1	I	At your home, who speaks English?
2	P	The housekeeper.
3	I	Do your parents speak English at home?
4	P	No, they speak Arabic.

(Saad's mind map session, 16 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 41 provides insights into Leen's willingness to speak English at home. Leen liked to speak English with her parents and relatives. Excerpt 42 and Table 5.4 show that English was not often used by Saad's family; Saad was exposed to the English language only through television, technology devices and the housekeeper.

The data in the excerpts above support the findings of earlier studies which showed that introducing English as a foreign language in early years education is controversial among parents and educators in Saudi Arabia (Al-Mansour, 2009; Alzahrani, 2012; Aljohani, 2016). Several other studies investigated the attitudes of parents in Saudi Arabia towards teaching English at an early age (Al-Jarf, 2005; Al-Harthi, 2014; Alsowayegh, 2015). They found that mothers showed positive attitudes towards learning English in early years. Al-Harthi argued that Saudi mothers viewed learning English in preschool years through the lenses of their cultural and social contexts. For instance, the mothers participating in this latter study justified their desire to teach their children English by pointing out that the Prophet Mohammed himself encouraged his

followers to learn foreign languages. In this respect, Alhussein (2004) also found that parental attitudes towards learning a foreign language influence their children's learning even if the parents do not speak the foreign language.

There was, however, some resistance to learning English. This was seen as a result of the mono-culturalism of Saudi society (Elyas, 2008). Alzahrani (2012) found that teaching English in the Saudi Arabian educational system was challenged by incorrect beliefs about bilingual education. In this respect, Al-Mansour (2009) reported that the opponents of teaching English at an early age in Saudi Arabia believed that learning English might undermine Arabic language, culture and identity. Al-Mansour countered by arguing that teaching Saudi children a foreign language at an early age would not only have a great impact on their linguistic and cognitive development, but also enhance cultural flexibility in the Saudi society.

5.3.4.4 Digital literacies

Socio-cultural perspectives view literacy as a socio-cultural practice where literacy resources are not confined to print-based texts but embrace a wide range of literacy forms. One of these forms is digital literacies. Dinehart (2015) argued that children's engagement with digital technology, such as computers and iPads, at home has a positive impact on their future academic achievements. Therefore I now discuss how children use digital devices at home. The following table reports the replies of the mothers to the following interview questions:

- *Does your child play with any technology devices at home?*

- *What are the most used applications? And in which language?*

Table 5.5 Digital literacies at home

Participants	*Does your child play with any technology devices at home?*	*What are the most used applications? And in which language?*
Tala's mother	Yes, she always plays with her iPad.	Games, songs and listening to the Qur'an. In Arabic
Leen's mother	Yes, iPad. But I do not believe in technology.	YouTube, songs and some applications about Arabic literacy.
Ruaa's mother	iPad. I am not keen on technology tools because of my child's health condition (wearing glasses).	Games and drawing.
Faris's mother	My child likes technology a lot. However, I am trying to get him away from using technology. He uses my cell phone. I do not allow him to use the computer.	Arabic and English.
Nawaf's mother	Compared to his peers, he does not use technology too much; he plays with the iPad once or twice a week.	Games. Arabic and English.
Saad's mother	He has an iPad and we allow him to play with it only on weekends. During the week he plays with his father's cell phone. I am not convinced of touch-screens; I want him to hold the pen. I am worried that technology might restrict their intellectual skills.	Games. I downloaded an application about the Arabic alphabet for him.

(Extracts from interviews with children's mothers, translated from Arabic)

These answers show that the children appear to be very attracted to digital devices such as iPads and mobile phones at home. The most popular reported applications on iPads were games, but the children also used iPads to listen to songs and to the Qur'an, for drawing and for some Arabic literacy applications. They used these devices in both Arabic and English. This finding confirms Al-Harthi's (2014) argument that the widespread availability of digital devices increased the exposure of Arabic-speaking children to the English language.

The above views also revealed that the mothers were not all happy with the eagerness with which their children used the digital devices. Ruaa's mother

was not happy with the digital devices because of her daughter's health condition. Saad's mother felt that using too much digital technology at an early age might impede children's cognitive development. She therefore only allowed her son to play with his iPad at the weekends. Faris's mother had tried to wean her son away from the digital devices with which he was fascinated. Children's digital literacies are further discussed in Chapter 7.

5.4   Summary

This chapter dealt with the outer ethnographic layer of my data analysis. I started by describing one aspect of the outer layer, the institutional context of the preschool where this research took place. I described the research site in terms of its demographic data, the Creative Curriculum, training programmes and communication with parents. With regard to the Creative Curriculum, I discussed the Curriculum in terms of its principles, objectives, teaching resources and early literacy pedagogy. Since the Creative Curriculum came from a different socio-cultural context, data reported in this section showed that it underwent an adaptation process such as the adding of religious objectives and modifications to children's books and stories.

In the second part of this chapter, I addressed another aspect of the outer layer, early literacy practices within the context of children's homes. I discussed data related to mothers' perspectives on preschool education and early literacy learning. This section also shed light on the literacy practices of the mothers, and children's early literacy practices at home. This section showed clearly that literacy is a social and cultural practice. I showed how mothers' perspectives on preschool education and early literacy were shaped by their social and cultural contexts. This chapter demonstrated how mothers served as social

mediators for their children's early literacy development. It also explained how children's early literacy practices at home occurred within a social process through interaction with adults and siblings. A number of concepts from socio-cultural perspectives were used to interpret the mothers' and the children's literacy practices, such as mediation, synergy, guided participation and funds of knowledge.

Data discussed and analysed in this chapter help in further analysing data in the next two chapters as this chapter illuminated the broad socio-cultural context of the research. Particularly, the following chapters show how the outer layer discussed above impacts on teaching and learning in the observed classroom; in other words, how the institutional context influences teaching practices that occur in classrooms, and how the teachers implemented the Creative Curriculum's objectives and early literacy pedagogy. Moreover, data related to the family context provide insights into literacy practices that the children engaged in at home. The following chapters show how the funds of knowledge that children brought with them from an informal setting (home) impacted on their learning in a more formal educational setting (preschool).

Chapter 6   The Middle Layer: Early Literacy in the Classroom Context

6.1   Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the outer layer of my data, the broad social and cultural context, the institutional and home contexts. In this chapter, the lens zooms into the middle ethnographic layer of the data, which discusses early literacy practices in the observed classroom. The current chapter in particular addresses the following research question: *How do the Saudi practitioners perform and interpret early literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum?*

Data presented in this chapter were triangulated from multiple sources in order to fully capture the studied phenomenon and highlight the different perspectives of the research participants. In particular, data were obtained from participant observation, interviews with teachers and the preschool director, mind maps with the participant children, and documents such as teaching materials.

This chapter begins with a detailed description of a preschool day in the observed classroom with a particular focus on literacy activities from a curricular perspective. Next, the research findings related to teaching practices are presented through a discussion of teachers' perspectives on early literacy and their literacy practices within the framework of the Curriculum. The chapter concludes with examples of adaptations and changes that were made to the Curriculum.

6.2 The Creative Curriculum in a Saudi Arabian preschool classroom

In order to understand early literacy practices that occurred in the preschool classroom observed in this study, and to help the reader achieve a sense of what was happening there, a detailed description of the classroom is crucial. This section describes the physical environment and the key literacy activities that took place in this classroom throughout the daily routine. Notably, literacy activities that are reported here fell under the umbrella of the Creative Curriculum (see Chapter 5).

6.2.1 A glance at the classroom environment

The observed classroom was divided into several interest areas; these were Art, Library, Writing, Computer, Science and Discovery, Dramatic Play, Cooking, Table Toys, Water/Sand, and Sound and Movement areas. The classroom was furnished with child-sized tables and chairs. In addition, there were a number of bulletin boards around the classroom to display children's work. In front of a large white board that was placed on one of the classroom's walls, there was a circular coloured rug that was used for the circle time and other large-group activities.

This classroom can be described as a print-rich environment; an examination of the linguistic landscape of the classroom showed that children were exposed to print in both languages, Arabic and English. Arabic was written in black and English was written in red. Print in this classroom appeared in the labels for interest areas and furniture, daily schedule, calendar and weather charts, classroom rules, short texts of Islamic supplications (this point is further discussed later in this chapter), and samples of children's work (mark-making/early writing with explanation written by the teacher). The different

materials and objects incorporated in the interest areas were labelled in both

Arabic and English (Figures 6.1 and 6.2).

Figure 6.1 Print in the circle time area (calendar and weather chart,
classroom rules, daily schedule, print related to the investigated study).

Figure 6.2 Labels on classroom furniture in both Arabic and English.

In addition, print related to children's names appeared on children's bags closets, children's work boxes, name cards that were used for taking attendance and for accessing the interest areas, and the job chart (Figures 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6).

Figure 6.3 Boxes labelled with children's names to store their paperwork.

Figure 6.4 Children's name cards.

Figure 6.5 Job chart.

Figure 6.6 Children's closets.

In the observed classroom, digital literacies were considered through incorporating the Computer area as one of the permanent interest areas. This area was equipped with two computers, headsets, papers and pencils. Mainly, children used the computer to play with some literacy and numeracy programmes, listen to stories and songs, and watch videos on YouTube.

Figure 6.7 Saudi riyals and Arabian coffee cups in the Dramatic Play area.
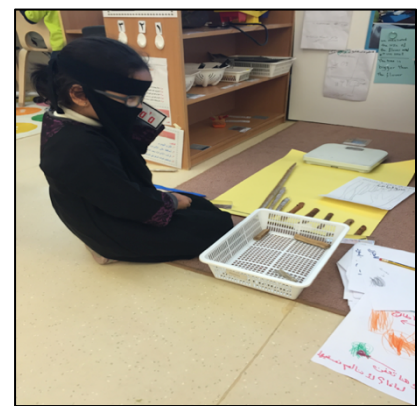
Figure 6.8 An object "a man wearing the traditional Saudi custom" within the construction accessories in the Blocks area.

Figure 6.9 A child working in the Science area while wearing "Abaya" from the Dramatic Play area.

(Visual data, 3 February 2015)

The above examples show how the learning environment was adapted to Saudi culture as part of the adaptation process discussed in Chapter 5. Through observation it was possible to capture some culturally relevant artefacts in the classroom environment. Figure 6.7 shows examples of incorporating objects that are part of the Saudi culture, such as Saudi riyals and Arabian coffee cups, within the Dramatic Play area. Another example was captured in the Blocks area; Figure 6.8 shows an object of a man wearing the traditional Saudi costume. Data reported here support Savage-Shepherd (2011) argument that children tend to play with artefacts that are related to their cultural heritage; an

example being Japanese girls' preference to play with "Hello Kitty" as it reflects their culture.

Interestingly, Figure 6.9 shows one of the participant children wearing the "Abaya" from the Dramatic Play area while working in the Science and Discovery area. This example supports Gillen and Hall's (2013) argument that dramatic play is a crucial opportunity for children to express different aspects of their culture. Hence, incorporating some culturally relevant artefacts in the classroom reflects Vygotsky's notion of cultural tools that mediate children's learning and thinking (Smidt, 2013b). In other words, these cultural tools – Saudi riyals, Arabian coffee cups, traditional Saudi costume and Abaya – were means to maintain the Saudi cultural heritage and build a Saudi Arabian Islamic culture within the classroom.

The above section described the main features of the classroom as a physical environment. Indeed, although the classroom environment was organised in the light of the Creative Curriculum, observational data showed some similarities between this classroom and other preschool classrooms in Saudi Arabia that implement the *Self-Learning Curriculum*, the official curriculum for preschool education in Saudi Arabia (see Chapter 2). The main point of similarity is the dividing of the classroom into several interest areas that collectively emphasise a number of notions in early childhood education such as play-based pedagogy and active learning. However, there were more interest areas in the classroom used for the Creative Curriculum, such as Writing, Cooking, Water/ Sand and Sound and Movement. In addition, there appeared to be much more emphasis on the notion of a print-rich environment in this classroom than in the classroom used for the Self-Learning Curriculum. The following excerpt from

the interview with the director of the preschool presents her perspective on the classroom environment.

Excerpt 1

1	I	You have long experience in kindergarten education. In your opinion, what are the most common similarities and differences between the Self-learning Curriculum and the Creative Curriculum?
2		
3		
4	P	The classroom environments are very similar. Some interest areas are different such as the Sand and Water area. The American trainer said this (the observed classroom) is really a Creative Curriculum classroom.
5		
6		

(Interview with the director, 12 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 1 shows that the interviewed director worked for many years as a preschool teacher in the public sector, gaining extensive experience in the Self-Learning Curriculum. She reported great similarities between the classroom used for the Creative Curriculum and the Self-Learning classroom. In addition, the director supported her view – that the learning environment of the observed classroom reflected the implementation of the Creative Curriculum – by bringing in the views of the American trainer. Hence, it can be said that organising the classroom's environment as part of applying a new curriculum in this preschool was done smoothly.

6.2.2   Curriculum-based literacy activities throughout the daily routine

This section provides a holistic picture of the literacy events that took place in the observed classroom. I should clarify that this section focuses on the literacy activities that were derived from the Creative Curriculum, rather than focusing on how the teachers practised and performed these activities, discussed later in this chapter.

Children attend this preschool for six hours daily from 7.00 am to 1.00 pm. The daily routine consisted of the following periods; (a) circle time; (b) interest areas; (c) snack time; (d) playground; (e) reading aloud; (f) small groups; and (g) final meeting. Table 6.1 illustrates the daily schedule and the time allocated for each period.

Since the Arabic and the English teachers worked together in this classroom, it is worth noting that the large-group times such as the circle time, reading aloud and the final meeting were led by one of the teachers on consecutive days. In particular, the lead teacher was in charge of the large-group times and the other teacher took the role of assistant teacher who observed, interacted with and managed the classroom. Moreover, throughout the daily programme the Arabic teacher constantly interacted in Arabic (switched between vernacular and Standard Arabic) with children and with the other teacher, and the English teacher used only English with her interactions with children and the Arabic teacher. In this way, although the children were exposed to each language *separately* in the large- and small-group periods, at the same time they were exposed to *both* throughout the day, in their interactions with the teachers.

Table 6.1 The daily routine

Time	Period
7.00 – 7.30	Children's arrival.
7.30 – 8.00	Children enter the classroom/free play.
8.00- 8.30	The morning circle.
8.30- 9.30	Interest areas.
9.30 – 10.00	Snack time.
10.00-11.00	Playground.
11.00-11.20	Reading aloud.
11.20-11.50	Small groups.
11.50- 12.30	Final meeting (Roundup).
12.30-1.00	Snack/departure.

Children's arrival

The above table shows that children arrived at the preschool between 7.00 am and 7.30 am. The following excerpt from the field notes provides an example of the beginning of the day in this classroom.

Excerpt 2

Today I arrived at the preschool at 7.00 am. When I entered the classroom, there was a beautiful reciting of the Qur'an coming from the Computer area and the English teacher was printing out some papers. I heard the children coming to the classroom with the Arabic teacher who greeted them in the entrance area with the Islamic greeting "*As salamu alaikum*" (Peace be upon you). When the children saw me, some ran up and hugged me. Children were surprised that I came to the classroom before they did. The children put their bags in the wooden closets then lined up to sign their names on the sign-up sheets. The Arabic teacher sat down on her knees in front of the white board showing the question of the day. The teacher wrote down the question "What is the texture of your clothes?" (Figure 6.10), discussed it with the children, wrote down their answers, then asked them to put their name cards beside their answers. After that, the children were distributed to the different interest areas before the circle time started at 8.00 am.

(Field notes, observation 37, 5 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Figure 6.10 The Arabic teacher writing the question of the day "What is the texture of your clothes?" upon children's arrival to the classroom.

As seen from the above excerpt, when children arrived at the preschool they put their bags in the closets and began the day by signing their names on the sign-up sheets where the child's name was written in both Arabic and English (Figure 6.11).
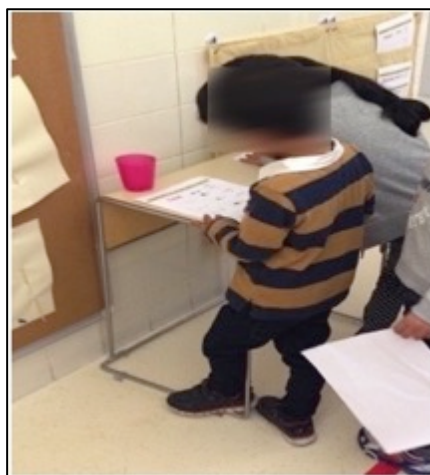
Figure 6.11 Children write their names on the sign-up
sheets in both Arabic and English.

(Visual data, 11 December 2014)

Once children had signed their names, they joined the teacher who was writing

down the question of the day (discussed later during the circle time) on a white

board that was used specifically for this purpose. In this activity, through

shared writing, the teacher wrote the question and the children's answers then

asked the children to put their name cards beside their answers. It is worth

noting that the question of the day was written in Arabic and English on

consecutive days of the week (Figures 6.12 and 6.13). This period, from 7.30

am to 8.00 am, was free time where children could play in any interest area or

watch a visual story in the Computer area until 8.00 am when the circle time

started.
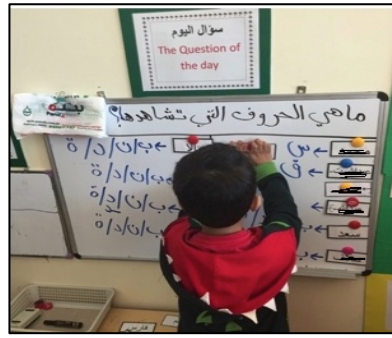
Figure 6.12 The question of the day written in Arabic *"Which letters do you see in this (a supermarket plastic bag)?"*

(Visual data, 19 April 2015)
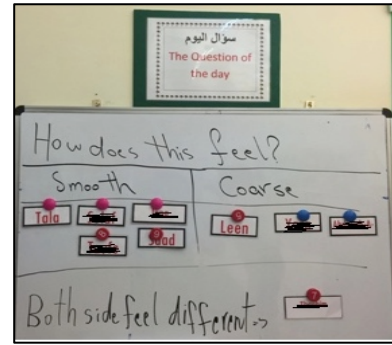
Figure 6.13 The question of the day written in English *"How does this (a leaf) feel?"*

(Visual data, 2 February 2015)

Circle time

As mentioned above, circle time was led by one of the teachers on consecutive days. Thus, all the activities that took place in this period were done in Arabic if the Arabic teacher led the period and done in English if led by the English teacher. With regard to the religious literacy, the English teacher recited the Qur'an in Arabic and revised the Islamic concepts in English.

By 8.00 am most of the children were present; circle time began and lasted for 30 minutes. The children and the two teachers sat on the circular rug. The lead teacher started this period by greeting the children, and taking the attendance by displaying children's name cards without calling out the name. While taking the attendance, the teacher greeted each child with a welcoming song. Next, led by their teacher, the children counted the attendees and the absentees. The teacher then asked two children to write these numbers on small boards placed on the wall in front of the circle area (Figure 6.14). Following this, the teacher recited short verses of the Qur'an by pointing to each word on a printed text of the verses, and then asked a number of children to recite the Qur'an verses that were read. After that, the teacher revised key Islamic concepts with children;

she then discussed the calendar and the weather chart, and asked some children to write the date on the board along with their names.

Thereafter, the lead teacher moved to discuss the question of the day by writing it down and recording children's ideas on the paper chart (Figure 6.15). During the discussion, the teacher asked open-ended questions and encouraged conversation (this point is discussed later in this chapter). Throughout the circle time, usually the teacher discussed a study-related topic, introduced a new material, or discussed plans for the day.

Before circle time ended, the teacher chose the leader of the day and the flag holder (the leader's assistant), and asked the chosen children to write their names on the classroom's leader board (Figure 6.16). Before moving to the next period, the interest areas, the teacher raised children's name cards, each child took the name card, placed it in the entrance of the chosen interest area and began play.
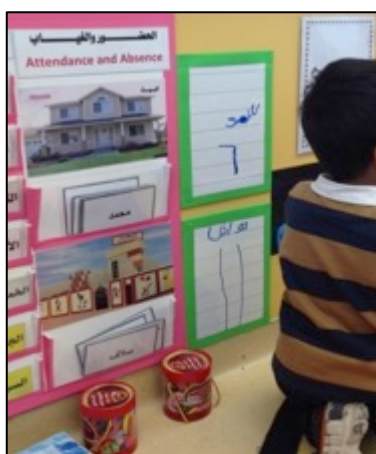
Figure 6.14 Writing the number of attendees and absentees during the morning circle time.

(Visual data, 11 December 2014)

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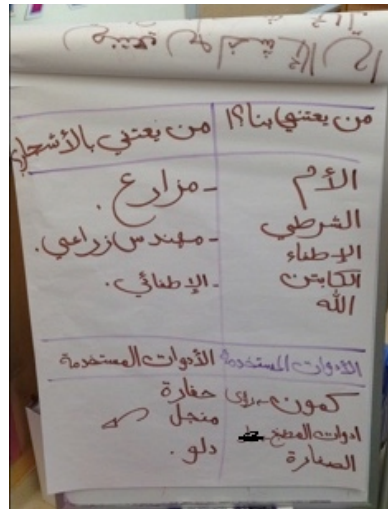
Figure 6.15 Teacher's shared writing during the circle time.
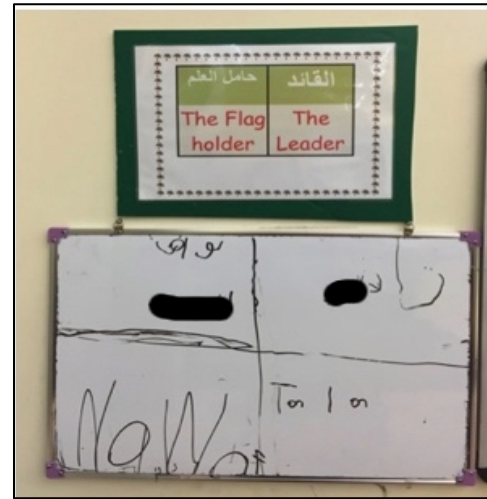
Figure 6.16 The board of the leader and the flag holder where children write their names in Arabic and English.

* Hereafter, the family names of the participant children are blurred for ethical considerations.

Interest areas time

Time spent in the interest area was one hour. In this period, children played individually or with their peers in any of the different interest areas. Throughout this hour, there was much talking, laughing and moments of simple fighting among children. During this period, teachers walked between the interest areas, observing, and sometimes participated in children's play. Some days, predetermined activities took place during this period where a small group of children, led by one of the teachers, worked in particular areas such as the Art and the Cooking areas. In all interest areas, literacy tools such as pencils and paper clip boards were available.

Throughout this period, children went through different literacy practices. Examples included writing their names on any produced work (Figure 6.17), drawing and mark-making in different interest areas (Figures 6.18 and 6.19)

and browsing books that were incorporated in different areas such as the Library, Blocks and the Science area.

Figure 6.17 A child's writing in the Art area "*Leen's mosque*".

(Visual data, 16 March 2015)

Figure 6.18 Mark-making in the Blocks area.

(Visual data, 19 April 2015)
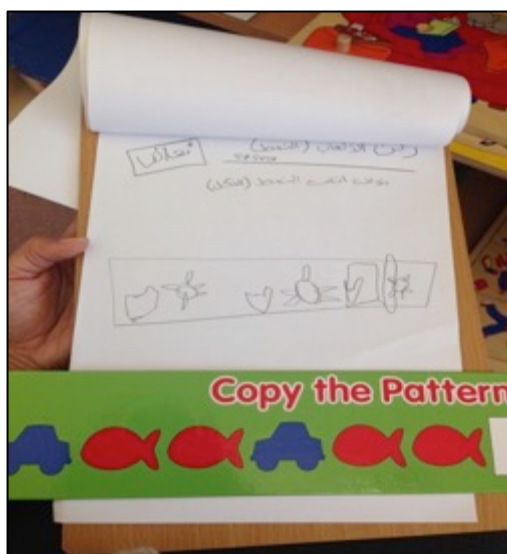
Figure 6.19 A child's drawing and name's writing in the Table Toys area.

(Visual data, 8 December 2014)

In addition, during children's play in these areas, they were exposed to different types of print. For example, rules related to each area were printed out and placed on the wall at the level of the child. Moreover, interest areas were enriched with print related to the implemented study. Figures 6.20 and 6.21

were taken from the Dramatic Play area, which was prepared as a laundry during the clothes' study. The figures show Arabic print that was incorporated in this area.

Figure 6.20 A print in the Dramatic Play area during the clothes' study says *" the accountant"*.
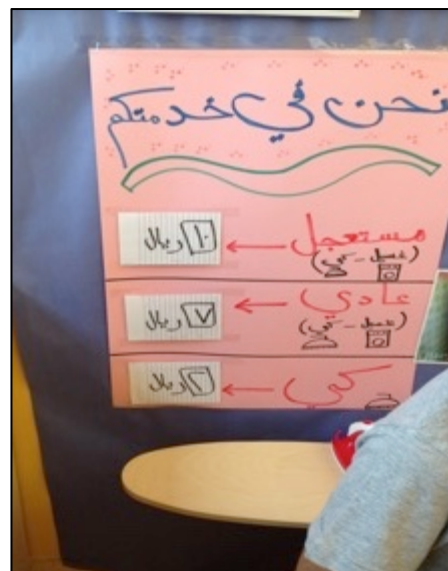
Figure 6.21 A print in the Dramatic area says *"we are at your service, Express (10 riyals), Normal (7 riyals), Ironing (2 riyals)"*

(Visual data, 1 December 2014)

At 9.30 am the teacher sang a "cleanup" song, in Arabic or English (depending on who the lead teacher was that day), to indicate the end of the interest area activities, and to indicate to the children that they were to replace the toys on the shelves and clean up the classroom. When children finished cleaning up they sat on the rug in order to move to the next period, the snack time.

Snack time

Before starting the snack time, children lined up to wash their hands. After that, the children returned back to the classroom with their lunch boxes, took a tray and had a seat. When all the children settled around the table, the teacher and the children said the Islamic supplication for having a meal together. It is

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worth noting that the supplications that were said before and after eating were written on a doubled-sided sheet of paper and placed in the middle of the table. When children finished eating, the teacher recited another supplication with them. Figure 6.22 was captured during the snack time when a child was pointing to the printed supplication while reciting it with the other children. Hence, it can be seen from this latter literacy event how the Saudi culture that is grounded in the Islamic values shaped educational practices in an institutional context.

Figure 6.22 A child pointing to the written
supplication during the snack time.

(Visual data, 15 April 2015)

Playground

After the children had their snacks and cleaned up the table, led by the leader child and one of the teachers they lined up ready to go to the playground. This period lasted for one hour, and took place at the outdoor playground or the indoor playground, depending on the weather conditions. This period was led by one of the teachers who observed the children and sometimes joined in their play. During this period children enjoyed playing in the sand area, on the slides

or riding bicycles. In both playgrounds, rules related to this period were printed out and illustrated with pictures (Figure 6.23).

Figure 6.23 The playground and a print shows one of the playground's rules *"Share with my friends"*.

(Visual data, 2 March 2014)

Reading aloud

This literacy event took about 25-30 minutes. The books and stories presented in this period were from the Creative Curriculum children's books collection, which was discussed in Chapter 5. Each story came with a discussion card designed to help teachers develop children's vocabulary and critical thinking. Throughout this period, the teacher asked the children different questions related to the book/story and encouraged them to engage in the reading. In the light of the Curriculum's framework, there were three readings for each story; in each reading the teacher sought to achieve different objectives;

1. in the first reading the focus was on the characters and the main plot,

2. in the second reading the teacher focused on explaining the new vocabulary, and

3. in the third reading some storybook-related activities took place such as the children drawing and retelling the story by using different objects, props and puppets (Figure 6.24).

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Figure 6.24 A child retelling an Arabic story during the
Reading aloud time.

(Visual data, 15 March 2015)

Small groups

By 11.30 am children finished with the story time and moved to the next
literacy event, the small groups. During this period, children were divided into
two small groups, one with the Arabic teacher and the other with the English
teacher. Basically, this period focuses on objectives related to language,
physical, social and emotional development with particular stress on literacy
and mathematics learning. A number of intentional-teaching cards are provided
with the Curriculum's toolkit (see Chapter 5). The following excerpt
exemplifies one of the Arabic literacy activities observed during this period.

Excerpt 3

It was 11.30 am. The Reading aloud time is over and the children were divided into two small groups. The Arabic teacher sat down in the Library area besides a paper chart. She said: "Today we have cards that have some words from our current study (the Buildings). The game says that we will try to identify the word, choose a letter in the middle of the word, then search for this letter in the letters' cards. After that we will try to write this letter on the paper". The Arabic teacher gave each child a pencil and a paper (Figure 6.25).

(Field notes, observation 39, 11 March 2015, translated from Arabic)

Figure 6.25 Snapshots of the Arabic literacy activity during the small-groups time.

Excerpt 3 and the photos in Figure 6.25 show that the main objective of this activity was to develop children's knowledge of alphabets. In particular, the focus of the activity was on the multiple shapes of the Arabic letter, one of the key features of the Arabic script.

Final meeting

At midday the children gathered again on the rug for the final meeting. The main aim of this period was to recall what they had done during the day. Throughout this period, several literacy practices took place such as teacher's shared writing, conversation with children, songs or reading a story chosen by

the children. The following excerpt from the field notes is an example of what took place in the final meeting.

Excerpt 4

It was 12.00 pm. The children moved from the small-group time session to the circle area in preparation for the final meeting. Both teachers sat with the children on the circular rug. The Arabic teacher, the lead teacher today, greeted the children with the Islamic greeting "*As salamu alaikum*" (Peace be upon you). The children replied in one voice "*Wa alaikum assalaam*" (And upon you be peace). The teacher asked in Standard Arabic, " How was your day?" and the children replied also in one voice "*Alhamdulillah*" (Praise be to Allah). After that, the teacher said, "Today we have started a new study. Who can remind us of its name?" A child raised his hand and said "Recycling". The teacher replied, "Yes, recycling, thank you". The teacher pointed to the paper chart which had some writing from the morning circle. Then, the teacher revised with the children what had been done throughout the day. The teacher talked briefly about the next day, then closed the final meeting and asked children to wash their hands before moving to the light snack time.

(Field notes, observation 50, 26 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 4 illuminates the nature of the final meeting in the observed classroom; it shows that the main aim of this time was to wrap up the day by revising the day's main accomplishments with the children. From this it can be deduced that, compared to the morning circle time, this period was less structured and children were given a larger space to talk. The excerpt also shows how the Arabic teacher greeted the children in a religiously (Islamic) appropriate way, providing further evidence of how learning and teaching practices in this classroom were culturally framed.

Snack and departure

After the final meeting, children moved to the snack table to have a light snack. It is worth noting that the light snack time was less structured than the morning one. In other words, this period was not religiously framed as the morning snack period was, and teachers did not sit with children. During the light snack

time, some children started leaving the classroom to go home. Teachers said goodbye to each child and gave him/her any letters or produced work that should be taken home.

Transition periods

The above section provided an overview of the daily schedule in this classroom. Observational data captured some literacy events that took place during transition times, fell between the periods of the daily schedule, and lasted for less than ten minutes. The following excerpt from the field notes provides an example of one of the Arabic literacy activities that took place during the transition times.

Excerpt 5

It was 9.30 am. Children put away the objects in their places in the interest areas and gathered on the circular rug where the Arabic teacher was sitting. The teacher greeted the children and said, "I have here some words from our study. Whoever identifies a word will go first to wash his hands for the snack time".

(Field notes, observation 8, 31 March 2014, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 5 describes some of the activities that took place during the transition periods. As shown above, the Arabic teacher took the transition time between two periods as an opportunity to read some Arabic words that were related to the applied study.

The above section described the key literacy events that occur as part of the daily routine in the observed classroom. It can be said that the preschool day in this classroom was structured and the literacy activities that took place in each period were stated in the teaching guides of the Creative Curriculum. Indeed, although this preschool day reflected a usual day in any preschool in Saudi Arabia, it differed in two periods; the reading aloud and the small-groups. In

addition, throughout participant observation I noticed that elements such as teacher-children interaction, interaction among children, rules and discipline varied among the different periods of the daily schedule. The following section shows how the participant teachers performed these literacy activities throughout the daily schedule.

6.3 Teaching practices

The previous section described a preschool day in the observed classroom with a particular focus on literacy activities from a curricular perspective. This section discusses three main themes;

- teachers' perspectives on early literacy,
- teachers' literacy practices that were aligned with the Curriculum, and
- adaptations and changes that were made to the Curriculum.

6.3.1 Teachers' perspectives on early literacy

Educators' perspectives about what literacy means and how it developed shape their literacy practices (Scull et al., 2012). Since this study investigated early literacy practices applied in a Saudi Arabian preschool classroom, it was crucial to show how Saudi preschool teachers viewed early literacy. The following examples from the interview data show what counts as literacy from the perspective of the participant teachers. The first excerpt illustrates how the Arabic teacher viewed early literacy.

Excerpt 6

1		From your point of view, how do you view early literacy?
2	I	How can we describe the child's early literacy development in
3		preschool?
4	P	In preschool? In what way? Is it in the view of the preschool's
5		teachers, who are aware, or is it in the parents' view?
6	I	From your own point of view as a teacher.
7		The general view is that the child should read and write and
8		recognise letters and so on. In the new Curriculum it is enough
9		for the child to recognise the letters, know his own name and
10	P	his peers' names, and also the names of the classroom objects,
11		and recognise the words as a whole. At this point, not all of the
12		children can identify the letters; 70% of children know some
13		letters.
14	I	So, do you mean that the child becomes able to read and write
15		if he could identify the letters?
16	P	At the beginning, no. The child recognises the objects around
17		him, and even the written words on products such as "milk".
18	I	Earlier you said, 'Do you mean my definition as a teacher or
19		from the point of view of the parents'? What is the difference?
20		Parents want an alphabet poster to be put in the front so that the
21		children can recognise the letter-shapes and then they write
22		them. But the Curriculum, which I am content with to some
23	P	extent, suggests starting from the whole to the part. In fact, the
24		collective method is more effective. At the beginning of the
25		next year, I will concentrate on teaching letters more because
26		children have got enough experience.
27	I	In what way do you think children acquire early literacy?
28		To write in front of children, write with children in the interest
29		areas, and to point out the place of the child's name on
30		children's work. During this term, some children began to
31		write their names by themselves. However, some of them still
32	P	write the opposite way, but it is not a problem, it will improve.
33		I expect the children will be able to write the name of the
34		interest area, why not? By the continued discussion, pointing at
35		the letters, and drawing the letters, I mean the slow writing of
36		the letters makes children aware of the details. All these things

37		take time and effort, but they are enjoyable and fruitful. Even
38		in the Cooking Area we write. The classroom should be rich
39		with print.
40	I	Which of the literacy practices are you keen to do daily on a
41		daily basis?
42		Read the letters from the alphabet poster. After two years
43		experience in applying this Curriculum, I now have a belief
44	P	that we should read the letters. However, we are still in the
45		pilot implementation and we are not allowed to do any
46		modifications.
47	I	But the curriculum has addressed the knowledge of the
48		alphabet?
49		Yes, but in an indirect way. From the teacher's writing and
50		reading only. For example, some activities in the small-group
51	P	times focus on the letters; however all these activities are built
52		on the child's name.
53	I	What is the relationship between drawing and early literacy?
54	P	When children are drawing, their ability to write will improve.

(First interview with the Arabic teacher, 27 May 2014, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 6 shows the Arabic teacher's perspective on early literacy and to what extent this view was congruent with the curricular perspectives. Lines 4 and 5 show that the Arabic teacher assumed that teachers are more aware than parents about children's literacy learning. This finding is in keeping with Kelly's (2010) argument that there is an assumption between practitioners that families lack the knowledge and experience about children's early literacy.

In addition, in line 22 the interviewed teacher stated partial agreement with the curricular perspective in early literacy learning. Specifically, she indicated a number of curricular principles which she believed had an influence on children's early literacy such as shared writing, child's name experience, print-rich environment, literacy across the curriculum and enjoyable literacy practices (lines 28-39).

The interview also shows that the Arabic teacher tended to stress the importance of learning letters in her view of early literacy (lines 25-26). Specifically, she pointed out that reading the letters was one of her daily literacy practices. She also emphasised the significance of the direct instruction in learning letters (lines 42- 46). In addition, data reported in lines 49-52 show a level of discrepancy between classroom practice and the teacher's reported practice. In particular, the Arabic teacher mentioned that all literacy activities that address the knowledge of letters are related to children's names. However, Excerpt 3 shows that the presented activity aimed to develop children's knowledge of Arabic letters through using word cards from the applied study.

These data suggest a tension between the teacher's beliefs and the principles of the Curriculum. For instance, the Curriculum aims to develop children's knowledge of letters through regular exposure of children to their names and through literacy activities incorporated into the daily routine and interest areas and through a number of intentional teaching activities presented during the small-group time (see Chapter 5). However, the interviewed teacher expressed her belief in the importance of the direct instruction in learning letters as shown in line 41 "*Read the letters from the alphabet poster*". The following excerpt presents the English teacher's views of early literacy.

Excerpt 7

1	I	In your opinion, how does the child become literate?
2	P	[Umm] I am not sure, in English? My point of view…
3	I	Yes, from your point of view as an English teacher
4	P	Wait [Laugh]
5 6	I	Okay. Let me say the question in a different way. If we would like to define literacy in preschool age?
7	P	I do not think…. can you explain?
8	I	Okay. The simple definition of literacy is the ability to read and write.
10 11 12 13 14 15	P	[Umm] I think it is different at each age; at 3 years they can notice the difference between letters; at 4-5 they start to know the letter sound; at 6 they know how to read and write. I think it is difficult, being able to read to identify the letters and the sounds, identify this is (a) and this is (b), the shape of the letter, this is the most they can do, the similarities in their names.
16	I	How do you think young children learn early literacy?
17 18 19	P	Listening - the words to be clear for them, the spelling, the difference between capital and small letters, letter (a) where do you find it in the class?
20	I	In what way do you think children develop early literacy?
21 22	P	I think reading simple things, like simple stories, and certain things such as juice.
23	I	As a foreign language learner I mean.
24 25	P	Pictures to define what you are saying are important to the children to understand, or using my body language (stand up).
26	I	In your opinion, what factors impact children's literacy development?
27 28	P	Affect them [umm], parents will be the first factor. If the parents are helping the child, I can notice the development.

(First interview with the English teacher, 27 May 2014)

Excerpt 7 illustrates how the English teacher viewed children's English early

literacy. I should acknowledge here how the interviewed teacher might be

prompted by my question (line 8) as a response to her explanation of the meaning of "literacy". Her response showed that, based on her view of early literacy, the English teacher tended to focus on the linguistic features of the language such as learning letters (lines 10-15 and 17-19). Data reported here also indicate that the English teacher tended to use multimodal semiotic tools such as pictures and gestures in order to facilitate children's learning of a foreign language. Furthermore, the above excerpt indicates how the English teacher emphasised the vital role of parents in children's early literacy in a foreign language.

The discussion above illuminated the participant teachers' view of early literacy. Excerpt 6 reflects the Arabic teacher's understanding of some of the curricular principles in early literacy learning. In contrast, Excerpt 7 shows that the English teacher's view of early literacy learning did not reflect her understanding of how the Creative Curriculum conceptualised early literacy learning. These excerpts also suggest that both teachers tended to focus on the importance of learning letters in their view of early literacy. Arguably then, although the Arabic teacher's view of early literacy converged to some extent with the curricular perspective on literacy, both teachers still seemed to view early literacy from an autonomous perspective.

6.3.2   Teachers' literacy practices

This section shows how the participant teachers performed during the literacy events described earlier in this chapter. Of note is that this section discusses literacy practices derived from the Creative Curriculum, including any changes and adaptations. Discussion of these practices in particular situates them in

their specific context throughout the daily schedule. This section focuses on four literacy events during which the literacy practices occurred most:

- circle time,

- interest areas,

- reading aloud, and

- small groups.

Circle time

It was discussed above that different literacy activities took place during circle time. A wealth of research has emphasised the vital role of the teacher as a social mediator in children's early literacy acquisition (Neuman and Wright, 2010; Wasik, 2010; Scull et al., 2012). With respect to the Arabic teacher, observational data showed that she tended to use a mix of Standard Arabic and vernacular forms in her oral language with children. The following excerpt shows how the Arabic teacher's use of Standard Arabic during the circle time impacted children's spoken language.

Excerpt 8

It was 8.00 am, the time for the circle period. The Arabic teacher said, "Let's see who came today" (in Standard Arabic). The teacher raised children's name cards to record the attendance. When the children saw their names, each child raised his/her hand and said, "I am here teacher" (in Standard Arabic). After that, the teacher with the children counted the number of the attendees and the absentees. Then, the teacher asked, " Who do you think are more, the attendees or the absentees? (in Standard Arabic). A child said, "the attendees" (in Standard Arabic).

(Field notes, observation 29, 3 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 8 shows how children used the Standard form of Arabic in their verbal communication with the Arabic teacher who modelled this form of Arabic during the circle time. With respect to the oral language, observational data

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showed that the Arabic teacher encouraged conversation through asking questions and inviting children to share their opinions using a mixture of Standard Arabic and vernaculars. The following excerpt from the field notes presents an example of the type of conversation that occurred during the circle time.

Excerpt 9

It was circle time. The Arabic teacher was sitting with the children on the rug. The teacher reminded the children about their current study (Recycling). The teacher wrote the following questions on the paper chart: "Do you think that the classroom's wastebasket is similar to the one in the kitchen?", and "What do we put in the classroom's wastebasket?" A child answered, "papers". The teacher wrote down the child's answer and his name, then asked the children about their opinion.

(Field notes, observation 52, 3 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 9 shows an example of the teacher-children verbal interaction during the circle time. Here, the teacher encouraged conversation by asking different questions that stimulated children's thinking. Following is another example that shows how the Arabic teacher manages children's feelings and frustration during the circle time.

Excerpt 10

It was circle time. After the Arabic teacher discussed the calendar, she asked one of the children to write that day's date. The child said, "I don't want to". The teacher replied, "You can". The child said," I don't know". The teacher said, "Try, you can". The child stood up, walked towards the board, and wrote the date correctly.

(Field notes, observation 46, 12 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

This is an example of how the Arabic teacher dealt with children's discouragement. The excerpt demonstrates that the teacher's encouragement appeared to emotionally scaffold the child's learning as the child accomplished

the task successfully. In particular, through joint interaction between the teacher and the child, zones of proximal development emerged. In other words, through the teacher's support and encouragement the child moved from the actual developmental level to the level of potential development. This finding is in line with what Gregory (2001) reported that managing children's feelings is one of the roles that the adult might play in the process of scaffolding. Excerpts 9 and 10 provide evidence of the role that joint interaction play in children's early literacy learning, a notion considered crucial from socio-cultural perspectives of literacy learning (Razfar and Gutierrez, 2013).

In addition, observational data showed that shared writing was a common pattern of teachers' literacy practices that occurred during this period. In other words, both teachers modelled writing by documenting parts of the discussed topic on a paper chart. Moreover, both teachers most likely encouraged children to engage in the writing experience by asking them to write the date, the number of absentees and attendees and their names. The following figures were captured during the circle time show an example of the participant teachers' shared writing.
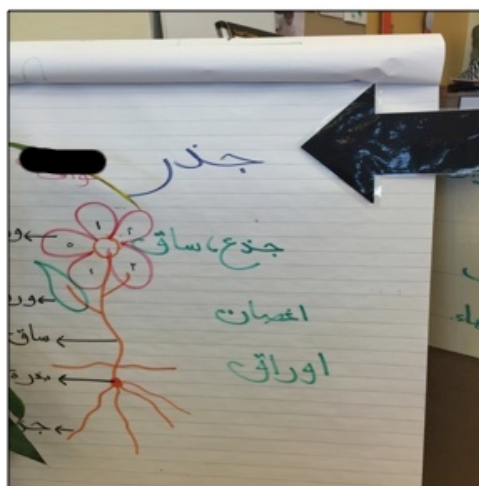
Figure 6.26 An example of the Arabic teacher's shared writing during the circle time.

(Visual data, 3 February, 2015)
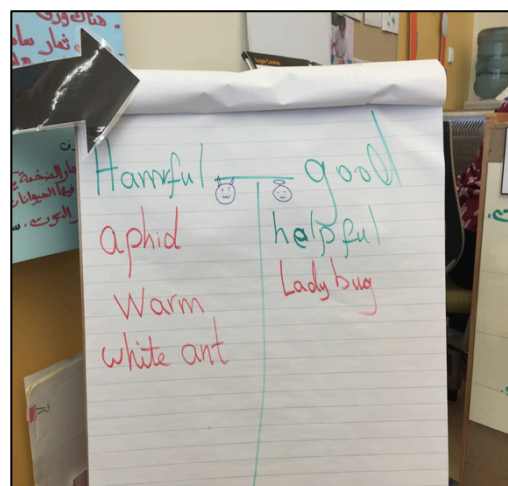
Figure 6.27 An example of the English teacher's shared writing during the circle time.

(Visual data, 9 February, 2015)

Figures 6.26 and 6.27 show examples of teachers' shared writing both in Arabic and English. The observed teachers used drawing besides writing and used different colours in the script. The participant teachers also used a technique (the black arrow) to draw children's attention to the directionality of the language being used. It is worth noting that this technique was suggested by the participant teachers and was not stated in the Curriculum (this point is further discussed later in this chapter). Data reported here support Palmer's (2007) argument on the significant role of scaffolding in learning English as a foreign language for Arabic-speaking children. In the light of this argument, it can be seen how both teachers used the black arrow to facilitate children's bi-literacy learning through turning their attention to the directionality of the text, one of the key differences between Arabic and English. The following figure provides another example of teachers' shared writing for a different purpose.

Figure 6.28 Children hold a list of questions that
was written by their Arabic teacher during the circle
time in order to use it during the visit of the firemen.

(Visual data, 23 December 2014)

Figure 6.28 was captured during a visit of the firemen to the preschool. Before

the visit, during the circle time the Arabic teacher, the lead teacher on that day,

and the children prepared a list of questions that the children wanted to ask the

firemen. Here, the Arabic teacher acted as a model through shared writing

which in turn mediated children's literacy learning. Moreover, this example

shows how literacy was incorporated in a real-life experience which made

literacy learning meaningful and authentic. This finding contradicts Gerde's

(2012) argument that although early childhood settings provide many

opportunities to involve children in writing experiences, teachers were not

often observed modelling writing.

Interest areas

I discussed this period in detail earlier in this chapter. This section focuses on

the teachers' role during the interest areas time. As mentioned, this period was

less structured than the circle time as it was designed to encourage the child-initiated activities. Basically, during this period, teachers observed, participated, and managed children's behaviours. Observational data captured a number of teachers' literacy practices that took place during this period. During this period a constant verbal interaction occurred between the teachers and the children. This verbal interaction appeared in giving instructions and explanations, asking questions and reminding children with the classroom's rules. Specifically, the Arabic teacher used a mix of vernacular and Standard Arabic, and the English teacher interacted with children in English only. The following photo taken during the interest areas time shows the interaction that took place between the Arabic teacher and the children during this period.

Figure 6.29 The Arabic teacher joined the children
in the Dramatic Play area.

(Visual data, 15 February 2015)

Figure 6.29 was captured during the interest areas time. A number of children were playing in the Dramatic Play area. The Arabic teacher joined the children who were engaged in a family role-playing (make-believe play). As the photo

shows, one of the children gave the teacher a cup of coffee and another child gave her a plate. While the teacher was holding the cup and the plate as part of joining in with their role-play, she took a newspaper that was written in Arabic and suggested that the children search for the letter (ف) in the printed text.

This example shows how the teacher joined in with the children's role-playing and took advantage of children's dramatic play, a vital medium for children's learning, to involve them in literacy activity by searching for a particular letter in a newspaper. In the light of socio-cultural perspectives of learning, the Arabic teacher scaffolded children's learning. More specifically, the kind of scaffolding she used started with recruiting children's interest through holding the newspaper and drawing their attention to the printed text. The teacher then clarified the required task verbally, searching for a particular letter, and by writing the letter on the newspaper. The children then started to search for the letter (ف) in the printed text. The teacher removed the scaffold when one of the children pointed with his finger to the text searching for the letter.

This finding is consistent with earlier literature that indicated that the dramatic play provides zones of proximal development for early literacy learning (Roskos et al., 2010). The example above also supports earlier studies which argued for teacher's intervention in children's play as one of the scaffolding strategies, and suggested that literacy-rich play areas could enhance early literacy development through effective scaffolding from adults (Morrow, 2001; Gestwicki, 2012; Massey, 2013).
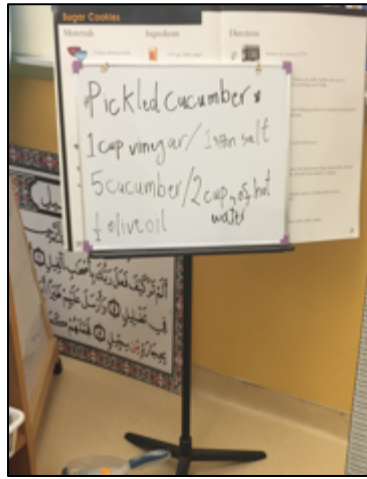
Figure 6.30 Shared writing by the English teacher in the Cooking area.

(Visual data, 15 February 2015)
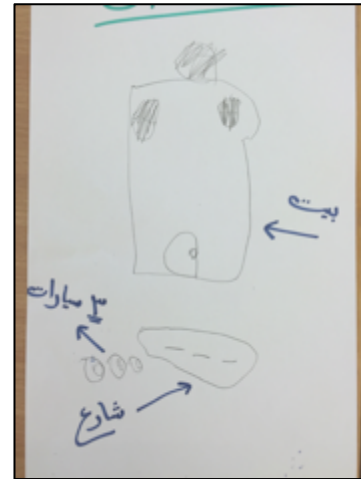
Figure 6.31 A child drawing in the Blocks area with explanation written by the Arabic teacher "*House, street, 3 cars*".

(Visual data, 2 February 2015)

Above are examples of teachers' shared writing during the interest areas time. Figure 6.30 illustrates the English teacher's writing of the ingredients during a cooking activity in the Cooking area. In Figure 6.31, an explanation of the child's drawing was written by the Arabic teacher based on the child's verbal description.

In both examples, it can be deduced that the observed teachers modelled writing in Arabic and English throughout different activities that occurred in the interest areas time. It is also worth noting that teachers' practices of writing in both examples were carried out in a meaningful way and embedded through children's play. This finding is in line with Gerde's (2012) suggestion that early childhood settings should expose children constantly to teachers modelling writing. With respect to this finding, the following excerpt from the Arabic teacher's interviews shows her perspective on her literacy practices during the interest areas time.

Excerpt 11

1	I	In what way do you think children acquire early literacy?
2	P	To write in front of children, write with children in the interest areas,
3		and to point out the place of the child's name on children's work.
4	P	I didn't imagine how the explanation that I write on children's
5		drawing would influence children's literacy development.

(First interview with the Arabic teacher, 27 May 2014, translated from Arabic)

The above example shows the Arabic teacher's perspective on her literacy practices during the interest areas time; it illustrates how the Arabic teacher emphasised her role in modelling writing in front of the children. In addition, lines 4 and 5 indicate that the teacher's belief about her practice of writing explanations on children's drawings increased after she recognised the impact on children's literacy development.

Moreover, line 3 above shows that the Arabic teacher tended to remind children to write their names on any produced work. Indeed, data obtained from the Arabic teacher's interview were supported by observational data which indicated that reminding children to use writing during their play is a common teaching practice in the observed classroom. The following visual data illustrate this point.

Figure 6.32 A child wrote her name on a painting after being reminded by the Arabic teacher.

(Visual data, 24 April 2014)

Figure 6.33 A child mark- making in the Table Toys area after the Arabic teacher suggested he document his work.

(Visual data, 19 April 2015)

Figure 6.32 shows a child painting in the Art area; the child wrote her name with the paint brush on the upper right corner of the paper after being reminded to do so by the Arabic teacher. Figure 6.33 shows another example of teachers' literacy practices where the Arabic teacher suggested to a child who was playing in the Table Toys area that he document his work. Through these examples it can be said that the Arabic teacher scaffolded children's early writing by reminding them to incorporate writing during their play. Specifically, in Figure 6.32 the Arabic teacher scaffolded the child's learning through two steps; she recruited the child's interest by reminding her verbally to write her name, and simplified the task by pointing out the place for the child's name on the paper. This finding is in keeping with what Gerde (2012) indicated that teacher's verbal recalling to use writing in children's work is a way of scaffolding children's writing.

Observational data also showed that individual teacher-child activities, initiated by the teachers, took place during this period. In Figure 6.34, captured during the interest areas time, an individual activity between the Arabic teacher and the child in the Library area was taking place. As the figure below shows, the

Arabic teacher chose three Arabic letters and asked the child to write each letter on a piece of paper.

Figure 6.34 An individual teacher-child activity during the interest areas time.

(Visual data, 21 April 2015)

The Creative Curriculum strikes a balance between teacher-directed activities and child-initiated activities (Teaching Strategies, 2013a). As mentioned previously, the interest areas period was designed to encourage the child-initiated activities where children had the opportunity to choose the activity they want. The following figures illustrate this point.

Figure 6.35 A construction made by a child in the Blocks area using sponge blocks and shapes.

(Visual data, 8 December 2014)
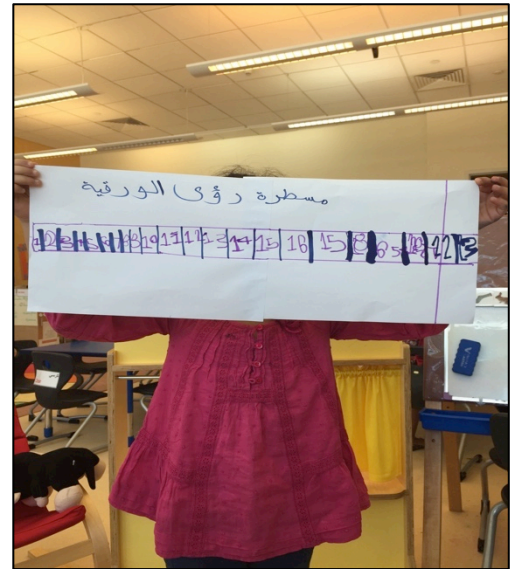
Figure 6.36 A paper ruler created by a child during the interest areas time with explanation written by the Arabic teacher *"Ruaa's paper ruler"*.

(Visual data, 10 May 2015)

Above are examples of activities that were initiated by children. Figure 6.35 was captured during the interest areas time and shows a construction that one of the participant children in the Blocks area built. Figure 6.36 was also taken in the interest areas time and shows a paper ruler created by one of the participant children in the Art area. On the other hand, observational data indicated that some activities that took place during this period were likely to be more teacher-directed than child-initiated. The following examples from field notes and visual data provide evidence of teacher-directed learning.

Excerpt 12

> It was 8.30 am, the time for interest areas. The Arabic teacher raised the children's names cards to distribute them to the interest areas. Each child chose a particular interest area. The teacher held the hand of one of the children and asked him to go with her to the Writing area. In the Writing area, she gave him two cards containing words from the current study and asked him to write them down.

(Field notes, observation 50, 26 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

Figure 6.37 A child in the Writing area writes words chosen by the teacher.

(Visual data, 26 April 2015)

Excerpt 13

It was 8.25 am. The Arabic teacher was sitting in the circle time area with the children. The teacher raised children's name cards in order to distribute them to the interest areas. The teacher raised one of the children's cards and said, "Do you want the Library area or the Table Toys area?' The child said [sadly], "Why?" The teacher answered, "Choose then you can change". The child went to the Table Toys area. I joined the child in the Table Toys area, he looked at me and said, "When I finish, I will go to the Art area". I said, "Do you like the Art area?" He said, "The teacher told me". I asked him, "Do you like to choose the interest area by yourself or do you like the teacher to choose for you?" The child said, "I like to choose".

(Field notes, observation 52, 3 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

The above excerpts describe teacher-directed activities that took place during

the interest areas time. In Excerpt 12 the Arabic teacher selected the Writing

area and chose a particular activity for the child to work with. In Excerpt 13, the Arabic teacher also offered the child a choice of two areas, and gave the child the opportunity to choose the activity that he would like to do. In addition, the latter excerpt showed the child's perspective on choosing the area that he would like to play in during the interest areas time. From both examples, it might be said that, according to the Curriculum, the interest areas time is the period that provides most multiple opportunities for child-initiated activities; however, observational data showed a tendency of the Arabic teacher towards applying teacher-directed activities during this period. This finding is supported by data obtained from the interviews with the Arabic teacher and the director as indicating by the following excerpts.

Excerpt 14

1 2 3 4	I	The presented activities in the kindergarten class are numerous. Some are called teacher-directed activities and some are called child-initiated activities. In your class, where do most of the activities lie in? And in your view, which are more effective in the child's literacy learning?
5	P	What do you mean by the child-initiated activities?
6 7 8	I	It means the activities that are chosen by children themselves, while the teacher-directed activity is the one that is chosen by the teacher, and that is planned and organised in advance.
9 10 11	P	Most of the activities lie within the teacher-directed activities. For example, if a child does not know what to choose at the interest areas time, I try to draw his attention to a certain area or a certain activity.
12 13	I	Which approach do you believe is more effective in the child's learning, especially in early literacy?
14	P	The first one of course, that which is guided by the teacher.
15	I	Why?
16 17 18	P	Because I can't overlook my role as a teacher. Some children may initiate by themselves, but most of the activities are guided by the teacher.

(First interview with the Arabic teacher, 27 May 2014, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 15

1	I	In your opinion, does the Curriculum balance between the teacher-directed activities and the child-initiated activities?
2		
3	P	What do you mean?
4	I	I mean is there a balance between the activities that are more teacher-directed and the activities that are initiated by the children?
5		
6	P	The teacher-directed activities occupy a bigger area in the daily timetable. The short school day could be a cause. By the way, even in the Self-Learning Curriculum the proportion of guided activities is more. You have drawn my attention to this point; the videos that were displayed by the American trainers showed that the proportion of the child-initiated activities was indeed much higher.
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		

(Interview with the director, 12 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpts 14 and 15 illustrate the views of the Arabic teacher and the director on the teacher-directed activities. Line 5 in Excerpt 14 shows that the concept of the child-initiated activities appeared unclear for the Arabic teacher although this concept is a key principle in the Creative Curriculum (Teaching Strategies, 2013a). The same excerpt also indicates that the activities that occurred in the classroom, from the teacher's perspective, were more teacher-directed than child-initiated. Furthermore, it could be inferred from the above that the Arabic teacher viewed the teacher-directed activities as more effective than those initiated by the child; her reason for this view was that her role as a teacher should not be overlooked. These latter data, the Arabic teacher's view of her role as a teacher, supports the findings of Alfayez (2013) that Saudi kindergarten teachers showed a level of reluctance to relinquish their controlling role in children's learning. Data reported here are also in line with

earlier literature that indicated that the Chinese teachers tend to view their role as instructors rather than facilitators of children's initiated learning (Li et al., 2011).

Interestingly, lines 10 and 11 contradicted the observational data reported in Excerpts 12 and 13. To illustrate this, in Excerpt 14 the Arabic teacher said that she would direct the children to a particular interest area or activity if they did not choose by themselves. However, Excerpts 12 and 13 show that the Arabic teacher directed the children to a particular area although the children did not show any hesitation in choosing the interest area.

Excerpt 15 shows the director's perspective on the teacher-directed activities; the excerpt revealed an agreement between the director and the Arabic teacher that there were more teacher-directed activities than child-initiated activities. The director also indicated (lines 8-11) that in the Self-Learning Curriculum, the activities that are directed by teachers outweigh the activities initiated by the children. These data therefore suggest that teachers were more familiar with the teacher-directed approach than with the child-initiated approach. Of interest in Excerpt 15 was the director's observation that during the training workshops delivered by the American trainer, the presented videos showed that the proportion of child-initiated activities was greater than that of the teacher-directed activities.

Indeed, these findings have revealed another tension between what is stated in the Curriculum and how it was applied. This led me to question why there were more teacher-directed activities than child-initiated activities despite the implementation of a Curriculum that emphasises a balance between the two approaches. A possible explanation might be that the participant teachers were

professionally socialised to apply teacher-directed activities, evidencing that teachers' practices were shaped by the socio-cultural context.

Reading aloud

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, reading aloud was a key literacy event of the daily schedule in the observed classroom. The following excerpt from the field notes presents part of the reading aloud time led by the Arabic teacher.

Excerpt 16

It was 11.00 am. Time for reading aloud. The Arabic teacher and the children were sitting on the rug.

Teacher: [holding the storybook] said, "Today our story title is Kareem and the Bird's Nest, this is the first reading of this story". The teacher identifies the author and the illustrator (in Standard Arabic).

Teacher: Who do you think will be in our story? What do you think will happen to Kareem? Let us read to know what will happen to Kareem (in Standard Arabic).

A child: Let us (in Standard Arabic).

Teacher: "One day, Kareem saw a bird piling sticks on top of each other. [changing her voice tone and pointing out to the text while reading] what does it mean (piling)? [highlights the word with a highlighter]

A child: put (in vernacular).

Teacher: " there was a pile of bricks", what does it mean (a pile)?

A child: a set (in Standard Arabic).

[The teacher continued reading the story, and asked some questions at the end].

(Field notes, observation 44, 5 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

In the above example of the Arabic teacher's practices during storybook reading, she started this period by identifying the title, the author and the illustrator. In addition, before reading, the teacher asked the children some predictable questions about the story. While reading the story, the teacher

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pointed to the printed text and the photographs and used different tones of voice according to the characters and the events. The teacher also used gestures and facial expressions throughout her reading. The excerpt also shows that stopping at new vocabularies and explaining their meanings was a common practice during storybook reading. Indeed, it would appear that this practice was significant for Arabic-speaking children since vocabulary is one of the elements where Standard Arabic differs from the vernacular Arabic (Farran et al., 2012).

Moreover, the example showed how the teacher modelled the Standard Arabic during the reading aloud time. In this respect, Abu-Rabia (2000) argued that in a diglossic situation, such as in Arabic, reading aloud has a significant influence in reducing the gap between the Standard Arabic and vernacular. In addition, a kind of teacher-child interaction occurred during this period through asking multiple questions. Data reported here support the argument that adult-child interaction during reading aloud has a vital role in scaffolding children's literacy learning (Lennox, 2013; Massey, 2013). I should perhaps mention here that examples of children's Arabic early literacy learning during the reading aloud time are discussed in the next chapter.

Small groups

As mentioned above, the small group time mainly focused on literacy and mathematics activities although activities related to physical, social and emotional development also took place during this period. The following example comes from a transcript of a video recording of the small-group time led by the Arabic teacher.

Excerpt 17

T: the Arabic teacher   C: child

1	T	The title of our group today is Buried Treasures [writes down the title and coloured the letter (و)] What is this coloured letter?
2	C	(و)
3	T	At the beginning, the middle or at the end?
4	C	At the end.
5	C	Arabic is from here [pointed his hand to the right]
6	T	Today we have many letters. I will hide some of them in the sand bowl, then you will search for a letter and tell us if the shape of the letter is at the beginning, middle or at the end of the word.
7	C	Or alone.
8	T	Yes, or alone. After you know what the letter is, we will write it. Agree?
9	C	Agree.
10	T	Close your eyes [put some letters and covered them in the sand, then asked one of the children to find a letter].
11	C	[Picked up the letter (ع)].
12	T	What is this letter?
13	C	(ع)
14	C	There is still a dot?
15	T	If there is a dot, that will be another letter?
16	C	(غ)
17	T	Let us write the letter (ع) on the paper [writes the letter].
18	C	I do not know.
19	T	Try.
20	C	I will try to write it.

21	T	Your writing is beautiful [said to one of the children].
22	T	Now we will pick another letter.
23	C	[Picked up the letter (ـحـ)]
24	C	(ح) [Said the letter's sound]
25	T	Like whose name?
26	C	Mohammed Mohammed (محمد محمد)
27	T	Is this the shape of the letter at the beginning, the middle or at the end?
28	C	In the middle.
29	C	At the end.
30	T	[Took the different shapes of this letter and put them beside each other and wrote a word beginning with the letter (ـحـ)] (Figure 6.38)
31	C	[Children wrote the letter (ح) on their papers] (Figure 6. 39)
32	C	[Put a dot inside the letter (ح)]
33	T	Now it becomes (خ)

Figure 6.38 The Arabic teacher is writing a word that begins with the letter (ـحـ).	**Figure** 6.39 The children are writing the letter.

(Visual data, 26 April 2015)

The above example of the Arabic teacher's literacy practices during the small-group time shows how the Arabic literacy activity was introduced through guided play. Lines 3 and 27 reveal how the teacher explicitly emphasised the multiple shapes of the Arabic letter, one of the unique features of the Arabic

orthography. To illustrate that, Figure 6.38 shows how the teacher explained the differences between the multiple shapes of the letter (ح) by comparing the magnetic letters. The teacher then modelled writing through writing a word that began with the letter (هـ). Figure 6.39 shows children's attempts to write the letter. Furthermore, data reported in this example showed an interaction that took place between the teacher and the children, and between the children themselves. In other words, in the above transcript the teacher tended to ask questions, encourage conversation and respond to children's suggestions. Lines 18, 19 and 21 show how the teacher managed children's frustration by encouragement and praise.

Through this example it was possible to identify some concepts of socio-cultural perspectives. For instance, the notion of scaffolding appeared in teacher's shared writing, managing the activity to achieve its objectives, and managing children's feelings and frustration during the activity. In particular, the scaffolding process progressed through three steps; modelling, maintaining direction and controlling frustration (Wood et al., 1976). Another significant notion was the verbal interaction during this activity, which socio-cultural theorists have considered a vital factor in children's development and learning (Smidt, 2013b). In order to provide multiple perspectives, the following excerpt presents the Arabic teacher's perspective on the small-group time.

Excerpt 18

1	I	Do you think that the activities that are provided in the whole group, small groups and the interest areas meet children's individual needs?
2		
3	P	Yes, the small-group time does meet children's individual needs, as each activity has gradual objectives according to the level of the child's development.
4		
5		

(Second interview with the Arabic teacher, 10 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Here the Arabic teacher emphasised that the small-group time allowed her to focus more on children's individual needs since the presented activities had gradual objectives to meet children's developmental needs.

Teachers' literacy practices throughout the daily routine were discussed above. Data collected through observations and interviews indicated that the participant teachers gave significant attention to children's discipline in their teaching practices. In this specific context, 'children's discipline' means that children are behaving in accordance with the classroom's rules. In the Saudi educational context, well-disciplined children are an indicator of successful teaching. The following examples from a mind map session, observations and teachers' interviews, demonstrate the emphasis on discipline in the observed classroom.

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Excerpt 19

I	Do you like this place (the school's library)?
P	I am not used to coming to this place; we are not always coming here.
I	Why?
P	Only when we are well behaved.
I	Can you remind me about your daily routine in the school?
P	Circle time, interest areas, snack, playground, reading aloud, small groups (says in English), final meeting, then the waiting room.
I	What is the period you like most?
P	Playground.
I	Another period?
P	Snack. I told you why I like the Snack time?
I	Why?
P	Because I can sit and be comfortable and I don't have to sit down properly.
I	What is the period you like least of all?
P	Circle, reading aloud, small groups and final meeting.
I	You don't like them?
P	Yes, annoying.
I	Why annoying?
P	Because it is sitting only, sitting, sitting, sitting.

(Mind map session, 18 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 20

It was 8.00 am, time for the morning circle. The English teacher chose the leader of the day (Saad). A child: "Saad was the leader yesterday?" Teacher: "Yes, he will also be the leader today because he was quiet during the circle time."

(Field notes, observation 51, 29 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

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Excerpt 21

1	I	How do you see children's discipline and their learning?
2 3 4	P	In the circle, we need them to be very quiet so they can hear the teacher. If they are playing they will not be able to listen to me and will not get what I am saying.
5	I	Is children's discipline a priority for you?
6 7	P	Sometimes; I try to turn the child's attention if he starts fidgeting during the circle time.
8	I	Does the child's fidgeting during circle time annoy you?
9 10	P	Yes, especially because we have a large number of children in the classroom (19).

(Second interview with the English teacher, 25 May 2015)

Excerpt 22

1 2	I	We will move now to talk about the classroom's rules and children's discipline. What does this matter mean to you?
3 4 5 6 7	P	[Laughs] As a preschool teacher I always call the children "my friends". I have never called them "children". The classroom's rules were set with the children. I believe that children cannot sit without moving. This matter has annoyed me since I started teaching.
8	I	Why?
9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16	P	The visitor teachers who came from the Ministry of Education give this matter high attention. My background during the university years focused on the importance of children's discipline. When I attended the training workshops with the Western trainers, I saw in the presented videos how children have the freedom to sit down or lie down during the circle time. Indeed, this matter confused me; although I believe that children should have a certain amount of freedom, I found myself

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17		focusing on their discipline in case one of the administration
18		staff entered the classroom.
19	I	Have you noticed that the administration focuses on this matter?
20	P	Indeed, no. But you still feel that their background and their
21		previous experience influence them.
22	I	What about the Western and the Saudi trainers?
23		The Western trainers have never focused on children's
24	P	discipline, whereas the Saudi trainers comment and say, "Why
25		do you not catch their attention?"

(Third interview with the Arabic teacher, 21 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

The above examples show multiple perspectives on focusing on children's discipline in this classroom. Excerpt 19 introduces the voice of one of the participant children. In this example, the child indicated that they only visit the preschool's library if they have behaved well. In addition, from this example it can be seen how the child preferred a particular period, the snack time, where she did not have to sit down properly unlike the other periods where she had to. Observational data reported in Excerpt 20 also show how the English teacher gave high consideration to children's discipline through selecting the same child as leader for two consecutive days because he was quiet during the circle time.

Excerpts 21 and 22 illustrate the teachers' views on children's discipline. In Excerpt 21 the English teacher indicated that children's discipline is a priority in her teaching. Data reported in Except 22 are quite revealing in several ways. Firstly, despite her personal belief that the children in this developmental stage need a degree of freedom, the Arabic teacher found herself focusing on children's discipline. Secondly, she indicated that her educational background

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and the surrounding environment gave high attention to children's discipline. The most striking finding from this example was reflected in the Arabic teacher's response; she reported a disparity between how the American trainers and the Saudi trainers approached children's discipline.

These examples illustrate how Saudi trainers adopted a different stance about children's discipline from that adopted by the American trainers (see Excerpt 10, Chapter 5). In addition, the teachers' interviews showed that although the Arabic teacher held the belief that children should be given space of freedom, she found herself focusing on children's discipline under the pressure of the prevailing educational beliefs.

The section above illuminates teachers' literacy practices in the observed classroom. Although the discussion revealed some divergences between the Creative Curriculum and its application, the following teaching practices were aligned with the Curriculum:

- Literacy incorporated throughout the daily routine and into the different interest areas.
- Teachers' shared writing during the circle time, small groups and interest areas time.
- The approach adopted by teachers in the daily reading aloud periods.

On the other hand, the data showed some teaching practices that were not aligned with the Curriculum such as teacher-directed activities and the focus on children's discipline. The following section provides examples of the adaptations and changes that were made to the Curriculum.

6.3.3 Adaptations and changes to the Curriculum

6.3.3.1 Changes related to linguistic considerations

Data obtained from observations and interviews showed that some literacy practices applied in the classroom were not stated in the Curriculum's framework. Figures 6.40 and 6.41 are examples of one of the Arabic literacy activities applied in the observed classroom.

Figure 6.40 Magnetic Arabic letters in their individual form.

(Visual data, 26 December 2013)

Figure 6.41 Magnetic Arabic letters used in their connected form.

(Visual data, 15 February 2015)

Figures 6.40 and 6.41 show an activity introduced by the Arabic teacher in the observed classroom. In this activity, on a weekly basis, the teacher chose one of the children's names to display on the wall in front of the circle time area. Under the child's name card was a black magnetic paper where the child could use the magnetic letters to shape his/her name. Figure 6.40, which was taken when the participant children were in KG2 (children aged 4-5years), shows the magnetic letters in their individual form; while in KG3 (children aged 5-6 years), where Figure 6.41 was taken, the magnetic letters were used in

connected form. The following excerpt highlights the Arabic teacher's perspective as 'insider', and shows the underlying aims of this activity.

Excerpt 23

1 2 3 4	I	Regarding the child's name that is displayed on the wall in front of the circle time area, last year the magnetic letters were used in their individual form, while this year they have been used in their connected form. Would you kindly elaborate on this?
5 6 7 8 9	P	As the Arabic letter has multiple shapes when it is presented individually and when it is connected to other letters, in KG2, I aimed that children deal first with their name's letters in its individual shape and when they moved to KG3 they would deal with their name's letters in their connected form.
10	I	Have you found this activity effective?
11	P	Yes.
12	I	Is this activity stated in the teaching guides?
13 14	P	No, it is my idea. I discussed it with the preschool's director and she welcomed the idea.

(Second interview with the Arabic teacher, 10 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

The above excerpt explains the Arabic teacher's view of the activity shown in Figures 6.40 and 6.41. It shows how the teacher emphasised the significant role of the child's name experience on Arabic early literacy development. The most interesting point in this example was the teacher's application of additional activities that she believed may promote children's Arabic early literacy.

Further evidence for teachers' attempts to adapt the Curriculum appeared in an example discussed earlier in this chapter. In particular, Excerpt 17 showed that although the Arabic teacher considered the multiple shapes of the presented

Arabic letter, documentary data showed that this feature was not addressed in the intentional-teaching card (Appendix 6). Hence, data reported here suggest that the Arabic teacher tended to adapt the Curriculum to be compatible with the special features of the Arabic language.

Another significant literacy practice taken into account for linguistic considerations was the Arabic teacher's use of Standard Arabic in her spoken language with children (Excerpt 8). The following example is from the Arabic teacher's interview regarding her use of Standard Arabic.

Excerpt 24

1	I	How do you deal with the diglossic feature of the Arabic? I mean the Standard Arabic and vernacular?
2		
3	P	I try to use a simple form of Standard Arabic in my oral language with children. The applied Curriculum does not mention this matter at all.
4		

(Second interview with the Arabic teacher, 10 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

In this brief excerpt the Arabic teacher indicated her attempts to use a simple form of Standard Arabic in her spoken interaction with the children. Interestingly, the teacher mentioned that the Curriculum does not address the diglossic nature of the Arabic language. Data reported here are supported by triangulated data obtained from documents (teaching guides), which showed that the diglossic feature of the Arabic language was not addressed. The above excerpt reflects the Arabic teacher's agency in her literacy teaching practices.

In the light of this, it can be said that a key feature of the Arabic language (diglossia) was overlooked in the Arabic version of the Curriculum. Hence, it may thus be argued that the special characteristics of the Arabic language were

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not fully considered when applying early literacy pedagogies that were designed for a different language (English).

6.3.3.2   Changes related to cultural considerations

Books and stories: The previous chapter reported that some of the Creative Curriculum books were translated into Arabic with some modifications to be appropriate to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. It is worth noting that these modifications were made by the Saudi education company before the Curriculum was applied. Moreover, these modifications were made only to the Arabic books, whereas no modifications were made to the English books. However, data obtained from interviews showed that the practitioners had some cultural concerns regarding the children's books. The following examples from the interviews with the director and the participant teachers show their perspectives on the Curriculum's literature used in this preschool.

Excerpt 25

1	I	What about the cultural aspect? As you know, the Creative Curriculum
2		has been designed and developed in the United States.
3	P	There is no difference except in the stories, which we altered.

(Interview with the director, 12 May 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 26

1	I	What about the cultural aspect of the Curriculum? As the Curriculum
2		has been developed in the United States.
3	P	Some stories include things that are inappropriate for our culture such
4		as celebrating birthdays, so I skip them.

(First interview with the Arabic teacher, 27 May 2014, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 27

1 2	I	I have seen some stories which are culturally inappropriate. What do you do with this kind of story?
3 4	P	I skip it and choose another story, while some of them I read but try to skim through the pictures, and giving them the general idea.
5 6	I	Do you think that the English literature for the Curriculum is appropriate for our culture?
7	P	Not all of them.
8 9	I	What about the information books which have pictures that reflect American life?
10 11 12	P	Actually, I do not focus on the pictures, I focus on the content. Sometimes I do not read the books that I feel are not suitable for our children.
13	I	Have you discussed this issue with the administration?
14 15	P	They removed some books which contain some concepts that clash with our religion.

(Second interview with the English teacher, 25 May 2015)

The above examples reveal agreement between the three interviewed participants that some of the Curriculum's children's books were culturally inappropriate. Excerpts 26 and 27 indicate a number of strategies used by the teachers when dealing with this kind of books. Some of these strategies were replacing the whole book with another one, skipping inappropriate content, and focusing on the content rather than the pictures in the case of irrelevant illustrations. Furthermore, line 7 in Excerpt 27 indicates that some of the English books were culturally inappropriate from the English teacher's viewpoint. The above-reported data reflect teachers' sense of agency about the appropriateness of children's books. In the light of this finding, it can be said

that the participant teachers showed a kind of cultural awareness, which Durden and colleagues (2015) argued is a crucial requirement in providing culturally relevant pedagogies.

Religious literacy: It was mentioned earlier in this thesis that Saudi society is driven by Islamic principles. Given this, religious subjects are taught in all stages of the Saudi educational system. In preschool education, the general objectives stem from the Islamic values and emphasise children's Islamic attitudes (see Chapter 2) (General Presidency for Girls' Education, 1999).

The previous chapter, *the outer layer,* showed how the institutional context was influenced by the religion (Islam) through adding a number of objectives related to the religious and moral education to the Arabic version of the Curriculum. In addition, data reported in the outer layer showed that the religious literacy was a key literacy practice within the context of children's homes. Bearing in mind that the classroom is part of the wider socio-cultural context, in the observed classroom, religious literacy was also a key component of the daily programme. However, documentary data showed that religious literacy was not addressed in the Curriculum's teaching guides. At the beginning of this chapter, examples of religious literacy were mentioned as part of the description of literacy practices throughout the daily schedule. For instance, daily religious literacy events appeared in reading the Qur'an, supplications and revising key Islamic concepts. The following figures demonstrate the incorporation of religious literacy in this classroom.

Figure 6.42 After-meal supplication placed on the snack time table, *"All praise belongs to Allah, who fed us and quenched our thirst and made us Muslims"*.

Figure 6.43 Supplication said when going out placed on the classroom's door, *"I depart with Allah's name, relying on Him. It is Allah who saves us from sins with His guidance"*.

Figure 6.44 A print shows a verse of the Qur'an used by the teacher when reading the Qur'an in the circle time.

Figure 6.45 Printed words related to the religion - (*Allah*), (*Mohammed*), (*Islam*) - are placed on the wall in front of the circle time area.

Figures 6.42 and 6.43 provide examples of Islamic supplications that were incorporated in the classroom environment, while Figures 6.44 and 6.45 show prints related to religious literacy that were used daily in the circle time. The following excerpt from the Arabic teacher's interview shows her perspective on religious literacy.

Excerpt 28

1	I	How did you find the impact of religious texts [the Qur'an and
2		supplications] on children's early literacy?
3	P	There is a result in reading. In the past, for example, the children
4		were not aware of the text direction while I am reading verses of
5		the Qur'an, but now I feel that they are following the printed text
6		with their eyes, and they are thoughtful about some letters.

(First interview with the Arabic teacher, 27 May 2014, translated from Arabic)

This excerpt reveals an emic perspective on the religious literacy practices applied in the observed classroom. In this example, the Arabic teacher indicated the influence of reading the Qur'an on children's early reading. Specifically, the teacher said that pointing to the text while reading the Qur'an supported children's knowledge of directionality. Data reported here showed that religious literacy was a crucial cultural mediator for Arabic-speaking children's early literacy development. I should mention here that examples of children's learning during religious literacy events are discussed in the next chapter.

Examples of adaptations and changes to the Curriculum were detailed above; as shown, some of these adaptations were made to meet the special features of the Arabic language such as diglossia and the multiple shapes of Arabic letters. The section also discussed some changes implemented for cultural considerations such as adding religious literacy and modifying some children's books.

Although the findings above inferred a degree of flexibility in applying the Curriculum, there was a discrepancy between the above observed practices and

the interviews' data. The following excerpts from the teachers' interviews show their perspectives on the flexibility of applying the Curriculum.

Excerpt 29

1	I	Do you feel free to apply the teaching strategy that you believe in?
2	P	As a concept, no.
3	I	And in terms of the activities?
4 5 6 7 8	P	In the teacher's guide, for example, the concept and the approach are explained. Sometimes the approach or the steps are inconvenient culturally and environmentally, or they are unfamiliar; hence I like to replace them with something more convenient; but they say "no, apply them as they are".
9	I	Who says so?
10	P	The Curriculum.
11	I	And even if it was inconvenient?
12	P	Yes, it is applied as it is.
13 14	I	What do you mean by the Curriculum? The administration or the teaching guides?
15 16 17	P	The teaching guides. It is a general consensus to adhere to their content. However, I can modify the sequence. Even in the small groups we don't add any extra activity.

(First interview with the Arabic teacher, 27 May 2014, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 30

1	I	Do you feel free to apply the teaching pedagogy that you believe in?
2 3	P	We are forced to follow what is written in the teaching guides. We cannot change it, but sometimes, I do change it.

(First interview with the English teacher, 27 May 2014)

These excerpts reflect a sense within the interviewed teachers that they were obliged to apply exactly what was stated in the teaching guides. In Excerpt 29 the Arabic teacher indicated that they were told to follow the teaching guides regardless of their appropriateness. In Excerpt 30 the English teacher indicated that although they were forced to follow the teaching guides, she made some changes. Data reported here contradict observational data that captured some changes and adaptations to the Curriculum (see Excerpt 23). Moreover, the data from the excerpts above exposed a contradiction with the Curriculum's principle which indicates that the Creative Curriculum provides general guidance for the teacher unlike other curricula that give teachers rigid script to follow (Teaching Strategies, 2013a). Data reported here would suggest a tension between what the teachers ought to do and what they actually do. In other words, although there appeared to be a tendency in this preschool to adhere to the pre-structured curriculum, clearly, there were attempts to apply additional practices by the teachers.

6.4   Summary

This chapter presented the middle layer of the ethnographic data, the classroom context. It started with a holistic description of the learning environment where the study took place. Next, the chapter discussed literacy activities from the curricular perspective and how the teachers applied these activities. The chapter also addressed examples of adaptations and changes made to the Curriculum.

Findings from this chapter indicated that organising the physical learning environment aligned with the Creative Curriculum. In addition, the collected data showed that although literacy-teaching practices were determined by the

applied Curriculum, there seemed to be a gap between the teachers' beliefs and the Curriculum's philosophy, in particular, the tendency towards teachers' directed activities, which is inconsistent with the Curriculum's philosophy that emphasises child-initiated learning. This chapter also highlighted teachers' attempts to adapt the Curriculum to be compatible with the Arabic language and Islamic culture by modifying some of the Curriculum's activities or introducing additional ones. The next chapter discusses *the inner layer* of the data, children's early literacy learning.

Chapter 7   The Inner Layer: Children's Early Literacy Learning

7.1   Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the middle layer of my data, the classroom context, where findings related to literacy practices that took place in the observed classroom were analysed and discussed. This chapter focuses on the inner ethnographic layer of data, children's early literacy development. In particular, the following research questions are addressed:

- How do children in a Saudi Arabian preschool that uses the Creative Curriculum develop Arabic early literacy?
- In what ways are the preschoolers' Arabic early literacy development linked to their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity?

In Chapter 5, data related to these two questions were discussed as part of the outer layer of the data analysis (the home context); however, this chapter seeks to provide insights into these questions from the classroom context.

Data reported in this chapter were obtained from observations, teachers' interviews and children's mind maps sessions, and these data were discussed in relation to the three main themes; children's perspectives on early literacy, children's early literacy development, and peer learning. In particular, children's early literacy development was discussed in terms of oral communication, early writing, early reading, alphabet knowledge, vocabulary development, phonological awareness and digital literacies.

7.2 Children's perspectives on early literacy

Although a wealth of research exists in the area of early literacy development from different perspectives, less research has considered children's views on their early literacy learning (Fisher, 2010; Orellana and Peer, 2013; Harris, 2015). An active line of research from socio-cultural perspectives indicated that children from different cultural contexts would have different views of literacy (Gillen and Hall, 2013). As mentioned earlier, I situated my work within the rights-based perspective that views children as social actors and competent producers for their culture (Cheney, 2011; Roberts-Holmes, 2014). In view of this, children's voices were actively listened to throughout participant observation, conversations with children and using mind maps as participatory research techniques (see Chapter 4 for more details about the mind maps sessions). Through the analysis, it was possible to see what counts as literacy from the children's perspective. Data reported in this section were obtained from multiple sources; children's mind maps, observational data and teachers' interviews. Following are two examples from the mind maps sessions illustrating how the participant children, Ruaa and Tala, view literacy as a meaning-making activity.
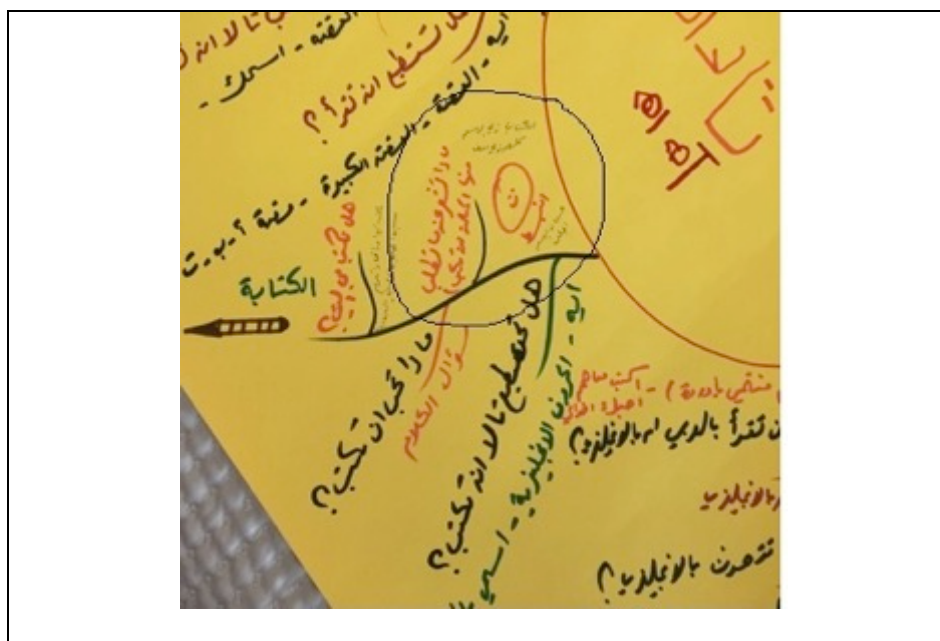
Excerpt 1

1	I	Can you write?
2	P	Yes.
3	I	What can you write?
4	P	Sad face, smiley face, my name, mobile. (Circled text in the photo below).
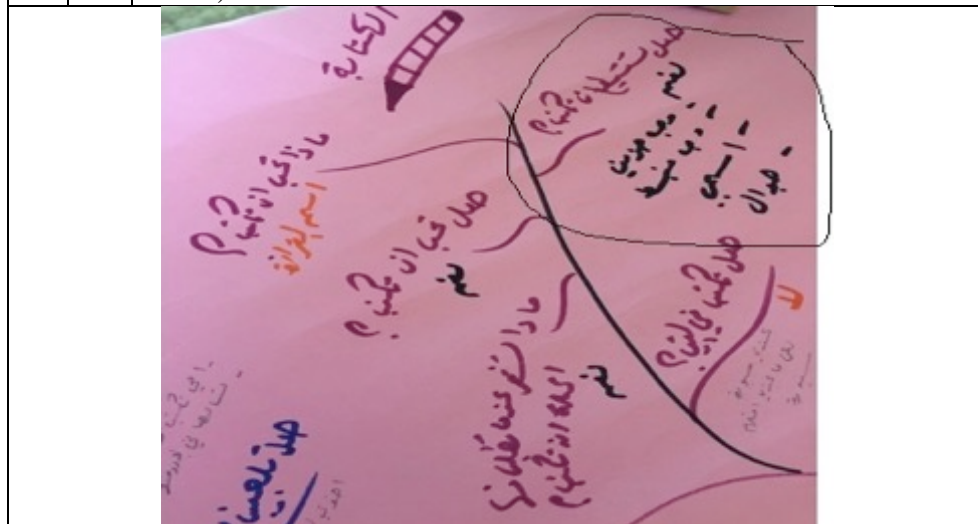
(Ruaa's mind map, 24 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 2

1	I	Can you read?
2	P	Yes.
3	I	What do you read?
4	P	My name, story, Qur'an.
5 6	I	How do you feel when the teacher asks you to write something in the circle time?
7	P	Happy.
8	I	Why?
9	P	Because drawing is the best thing.
10	I	Which one do you like more, writing or drawing?
11	P	Both are the same.

(Tala's mind map, 25 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpts 1 and 2 show Ruaa's and Tala's perspectives on literacy where they viewed themselves as able to read and write. Excerpt 1 shows how Ruaa viewed drawing and writing as one process (line 4). In particular, Ruaa said that she could write smiley and sad faces (emoticons), her name and the word "mobile". The second excerpt also provides evidence that Tala considered drawing as writing (line 11).

The above examples support the notion that literacy is a meaning-making activity, and children tend to generate meaning by using multimodal semiotic tools such as drawing (Kim, 2011). This finding is also in line with reports in relevant literature that children's ability to distinguish between writing and drawing is not steady (Welsch et al., 2003). Studies on the writing-drawing relationship showed that although older preschoolers could differentiate between the two systems, they may still deal with writing as a drawing print (Rowe, 2013). Through analysing samples of children's work it was possible to see how children generate meaning using multimodal semiotic tools in their

early writing. Figures 7.1 and 7.2 show samples of children's work that support this point.
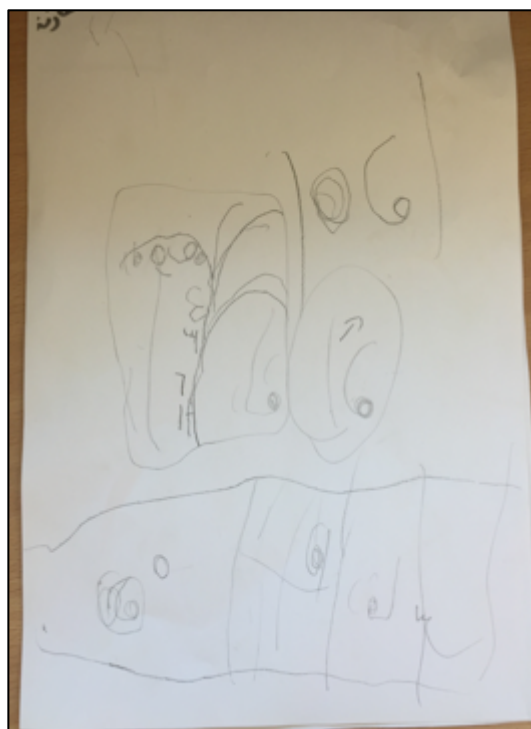

Figure 7.1 Mark making in the small groups time, including Arabic letters, numbers and drawing.

(Visual data, 2 February 2015)

Figure 7.2 Drawing with a child's name written in Arabic and English.

(Visual data, 3 December 2014)

The above figures demonstrate that children's early writing is a combination of drawing, and attempts to write letters, words, numbers in more than one language, Arabic and English. Data reported support the argument that children tend to use different signs in order to express their thoughts (Tolentino and Lawson, 2015). (Children's early writing is further discussed later in this chapter).

Data obtained from mind maps sessions with the participant children (Table 7.1 and 7.2) also showed children's perspectives on their literacy learning in two languages, Arabic and English. The following tables conclude children's responses to the following questions;

- *Which do you like more, Arabic or English stories?*

- *Do you like to read and write in Arabic or in English?*

- *Do you think it is important to learn English? Why?*

Table 7.1 Children's perspectives on learning in two languages

Participant	*Which do you like more, Arabic or English stories?*	*Do you like to read and write in Arabic or in English?*
Leen	Arabic.	Arabic and English.
Tala	In Arabic, I like the Arabic teacher's voice.	English and Arabic.
Faris	Both.	Arabic and English.
Nawaf	Arabic and English.	Both.
Ruaa	Arabic.	Arabic. In English, only my name.
Saad	Arabic.	Arabic.

(Extracts from mind maps with the children, translated from Arabic)

Table 7.2 Children's perspectives on learning English as a foreign language

Participant	*Do you think it is important to learn English? Why?*
Leen	Yes. Because in the case of war, if we travel to another country, we can speak English with them.
Tala	Yes. So we can know English.
Faris	Yes important. When we grow up we can speak Arabic and English. When we become a policeman or a doctor.
Nawaf	Yes. So we can speak with English people.
Ruaa	No. It is not important. When we grow up we learn both Arabic and English.
Saad	No. Why it is important?

(Extracts from mind maps with the children, translated from Arabic)

The above tables illustrate children's perspectives on their bi-literacy learning.

Table 7.1 shows a tendency towards the Arabic stories between the participant

children. For instance, although Faris and Nawaf enjoyed listening to stories in

both languages, the other four children mentioned that they preferred Arabic

stories. One of those children, Tala, justified her preference for the Arabic stories as she liked the sound of the Arabic teacher's voice during story reading. This finding, children's preference for Arabic stories, can be explained in the light of Kenner and Gregory's (2013) argument that unfamiliarity with the cultural content of the books/stories is one of the difficulties that children faced in their bi-literacy learning. In addition, data reported in the same table showed that reading and writing in both languages, Arabic and English, was favoured by all the participant children excepting Saad who expressed his preference to read and write only in Arabic.

Table 7.2 shows children's perspectives on learning English as a foreign language. Interestingly, children who were in favour of listening to stories, reading and writing in both languages (Table 7.1) showed their beliefs in the importance of learning English as a foreign language. In particular, children expressed their beliefs that learning English is significant for travelling, communicating and future careers. In the light of this finding, it appears that some of the Saudi preschoolers, who participated in this study, were aware of the important role of bilingualism in an increasingly multilingual world. In this respect, Tibi and colleagues (2013) argued that, in the UAE, bi-literacy learning in Arabic and English is considered a key feature of the Emirati educational system.

To present multiple perspectives on children's bi-literacy learning, the excerpts below present data from the interviews with the participant teachers that also indicating children's preference to the Arabic language.

Excerpt 3

1		In the reading aloud time, books and stories are read in Arabic and
2	I	English. Have you noticed any differences related to the language
3		being used?
4	P	Definitely, children prefer the Arabic books.

(First interview with the Arabic teacher, 27 May 2014, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 4

1	I	In your classroom there are two languages. Do you think that
2		children vary in their literacy learning in each language?
3		They focused more on the Arabic teacher. Arabic is their mother
4	P	tongue and everything surrounding them is in Arabic. The
5		children's families are not using English. One of the mothers told
6		me, "my child does not need to learn English".
7	I	What other factors do you think affect children in learning English
8		as a foreign language?
9	P	Media, some children sing English songs from the television.
10		Children enjoy English songs and ask me to sing particular songs.

(First interview with the English teacher, 27 May 2014)

These excerpts illustrate children's bi-literacy learning from the teachers' views. In Excerpt 3 the Arabic teacher emphasised data reported in Table 7.1 regarding children's preference to Arabic stories. In Excerpt 4, the English teacher also noted a tendency to the Arabic language. The most significant data reported in Excerpt 4 related to the English teacher's perceptions of the influence of the surrounding socio-cultural contexts, family and media, on children's learning of English as a foreign language. Data obtained from her interview were supported by the data obtained from the mothers' interviews

(Chapter 5, Table 5.4), which showed that the participant children had a limited exposure to English at home.

Data reported in Table 7.2, children's different views on learning English as a foreign language, can be explained in the light of previous studies which found that the disparity in children's learning of a foreign language refers to children's abilities and motivations, and parental attitudes towards teaching their children a foreign language (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000; Alhussein, 2004). In this sense, these findings about children's bi-literacy learning can be interpreted in the light of data from interviews with the children's mothers (Chapter 5, Table 5.4). In particular, the mothers who emphasised the importance of learning English at an early age, their children (Leen, Tala, Faris and Nawaf) also expressed their beliefs on learning English. In contrast, the mothers who expressed reservation on learning English in early years, their children (Ruaa and Saad) also showed lack of interest in learning English.

Above, data related to how the participant children viewed their early literacy learning were analysed and discussed; findings suggest that the participant children viewed early literacy as a meaning-making activity where they generate meaning by using multimodal semiotic tools such as language(s), numbers and drawing. For instance, the above-reported data showed how children's writing became more multimodal as they used writing with other semiotic systems. In addition, the above discussion provided examples of how children's early reading was influenced by cultural interest that appeared in children's preference of reading the Qur'an and Arabic stories. The influence of the socio-cultural context also appeared in children's views of learning

English as a foreign language as data showed that children's beliefs were influenced by their mothers' attitudes.

7.3   Children's early literacy development

Data related to children's early literacy development were collected through participant observation, mind maps and examples of children's work. Since this study investigated children's Arabic early literacy in a Saudi Arabian preschool that used the Creative Curriculum, data analysis in this section was structured in the light of the key components of the emergent literacy in the applied Curriculum (Figure 7.3).

Figure 7.3 Components of emergent literacy in the Creative Curriculum

7.3.1   Oral communication

Since this study was carried out in a Saudi Arabian preschool where Arabic is the mother tongue of the children, and because of the diglossic nature of Arabic, it is crucial to point out how Arabic-speaking preschoolers develop

their spoken language within this dual diglossic context. Chapter 5 noted that in Saudi Arabia, as other Arabian countries, children are exposed to several vernaculars in their everyday life and their spoken language develops within this complex context (Al-Azraqi, 2014). In preschool settings, children are exposed more to Standard Arabic through literacy activities, religious literacy and teachers' oral language (Fedda and Oweini, 2012).

Observational data showed that although the vernacular Arabic was the predominant form of language in children's speaking, they not only showed a good deal of understanding of Standard Arabic, but also used this form in their communication with teachers and peers, in dramatic play and in their answers to the questions asked by the Arabic teacher. Three examples that show children's use of Standard Arabic follow.

Excerpt 5

1	I	At home, do you have a computer or an iPad? (in Standard Arabic).
2	P	Not for me, for mum and dad (in vernacular).
3		Not for me, for mum and dad (in Standard Arabic).

(Ruaa's mind map, 24 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

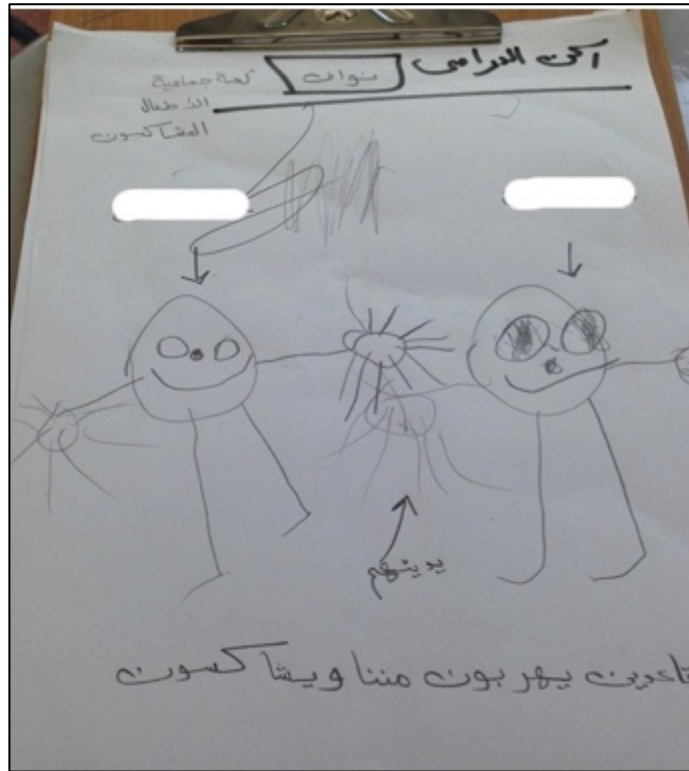| 1 | ب | في البيت، هل لديك كمبيوتر؟ اي باد؟ |
| 2 | م | مو لي انا لامي وابوي، ليس لي لامي وابي |

Figure 7.4 Nawaf's drawing in the Dramatic Play area with explanation written by the Arabic teacher showing the child's use of Standard and vernacular Arabic in his verbal description of a narration about the child and his peers in the classroom "*escaping* (in vernacular) *and wrangling* (in Standard Arabic)".

(Visual data, 4 May 2014)

Excerpt 6

It was 11.00 am; time for reading aloud. The Arabic teacher was sitting with the children on the circle carpet. The teacher started by reading the title of the story, the author and the illustrator. Then, she asked some predictable questions regarding the story. After that, the teacher began reading the story (in Standard Arabic) from the book and pointing to the text while reading. After telling the story, the teacher asked some questions regarding the story's events and characters. Faris described one of the story's events saying, "Samir did" (in vernacular سمير سوى) "Samir did" (in Standard Arabicسمير وضع).

(Field notes, observation 26, 18 December 2014, translated from Arabic)

The above examples show three different situations where the participant children used the two forms of Arabic. In Excerpt 5, during the mind map session Ruaa answered the question, which I said in Standard Arabic, in vernacular then repeated the answer in Standard Arabic which shows her

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awareness of the variety forms of Arabic. This example reflects "metadiglossic awareness" - awareness about the various forms of Arabic. Some argued that metadiglossic awareness plays a crucial role in Arabic-speaking children's literacy development (Khamis-Dakwar and Makhoul, 2014) as Arabic linguistic research found that the various forms of Arabic have a positive impact on language and learning (Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky, 2014).

Figure 7.4 shows how Nawaf used a mix of Standard and vernacular Arabic words in his verbal description of the drawing. This example supports Khamis-Dakwar and Makhoul's (2014) argument that "code-switching" appears in moving between both forms of Arabic in the spoken language. Hence, it can be said that the term "code-switching" applied not only between two different languages, but could also refer to the combination of two forms of the same language such as in Arabic. In other words, Arabic-speaking children combine the two forms of Arabic with the possibility of using different vernaculars in their spoken language.

I documented Excerpt 6 during the reading aloud time. In this example, Faris described one of the story's events by using a vernacular word then replaced the same word in Standard Arabic as mentioned in the story. From this, it may be argued that Arabic-speaking children develop their Standard Arabic through particular mediators such as stories and verbal interaction with adults. In other words, adults' modelling of Standard Arabic seems to have a significant influence in developing children's Standard Arabic at an early age.

7.3.2   Early writing

Chapter 6, the classroom context, showed examples of incorporating children's names in different areas of the classroom environment and showed how

children engaged in a variety of writing activities throughout the daily routine. Previous research showed that writing is a crucial element of children's early literacy as it is considered a social mediator for children's interaction and learning (Welsch et al., 2003). The following figures show samples of early writing for one of the participant children.
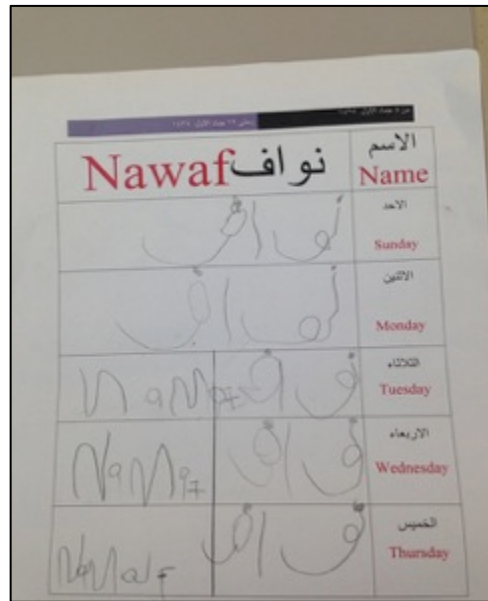
17 April 2014   *8 December 2014*
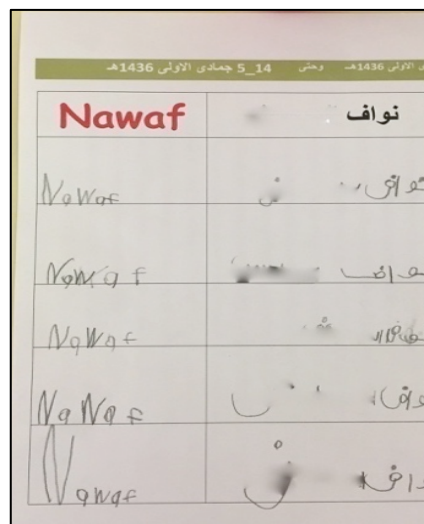
11 March 2015

Figure 7.5 Nawaf's name signature over a period of one year.

Above are samples of one of the participant children's signatures that were addressed bilingually. Figure 7.5 demonstrates three samples of Nawaf's

signature sheet that were collected over a period of one year; the samples showed a considerable improvement in the child's attempts to write his name. In other words, the progress appears in the fine motor skills, use of space on the page, the correct number of letters, the correct directions of letters and moving from writing the first name to write the family name as well. The following figures provide more illustration on children's early writing showing how one of the participant children performed during writing her name and other words.
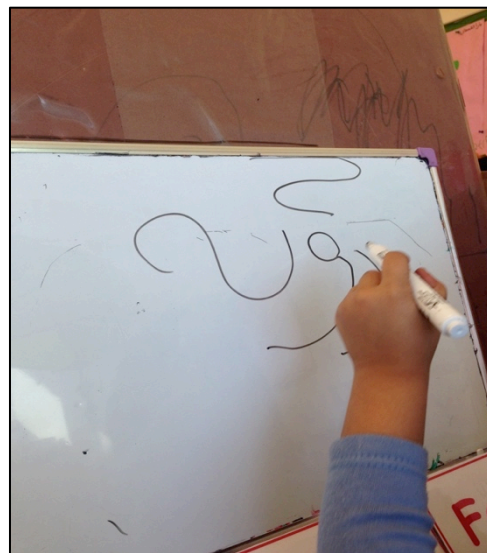

Figure 7.6 Ruaa writing her name in Arabic in the Library area.
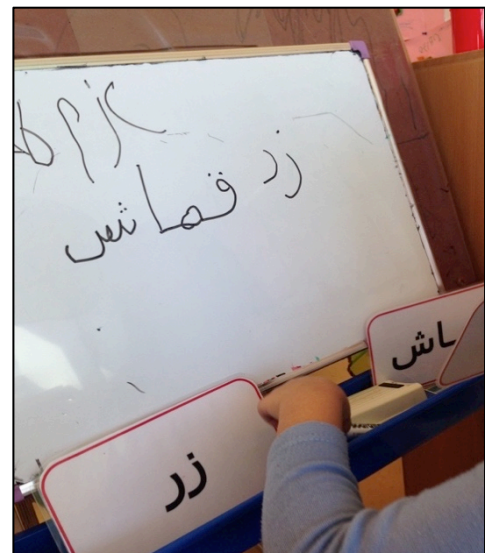
Figure 7.7 Ruaa copied two Arabic words from the word cards.

(Visual data, 11 December 2014)

Figures 7.6 and 7.7 show examples of Ruaa's early writing during the interest areas time. In Figure 7.6, relying on her memory, Ruaa wrote her name on the whiteboard in Arabic without referring to her name card. However, in Figure 7.7 Ruaa wrote two Arabic words by copying them from the word cards. This suggests that Ruaa's conventional writing of her name was developed earlier than writing other words. This example also shows that copying was one of the strategies that children used in developing their writing.

This finding is in keeping with previous research that children reach conventional writing in their name writing faster than when writing other words (Welsch et al., 2003). This finding also agrees with existing literature findings that name writing is a vital tool for investigating children's early literacy development (Haney, 2002; Welsch et al., 2003; Diamond and Baroody, 2013). It may thus be argued that name writing is one of the fundamental meaningful early language experiences during the preschool years. The following figures provide insights into how teachers' literacy practices influenced children's engagement in writing activities.
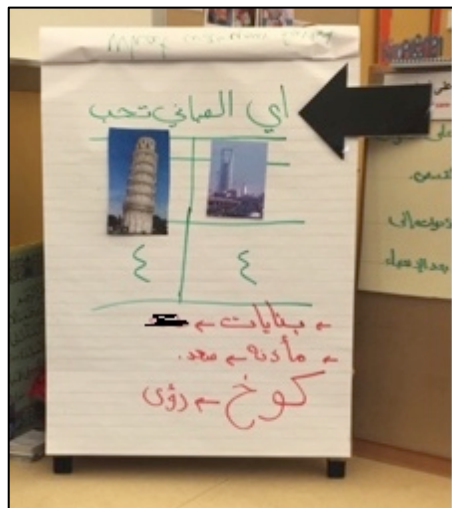

Figure 7.8 The Arabic teacher's shared writing during the circle time.
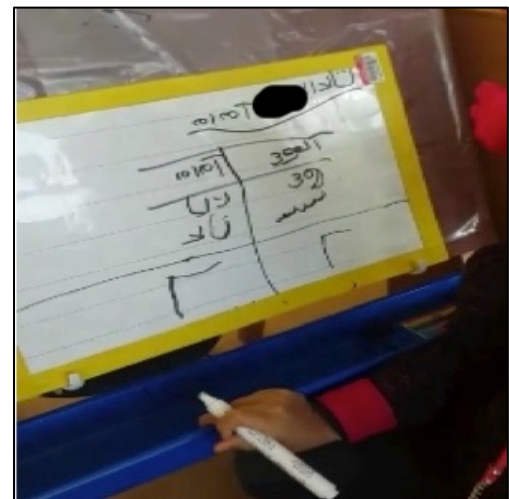
Figure 7.9 Tala imitated the Arabic teacher's writing during the interest areas time.

(Visual data, 17 February 2015)

Chapter 6 explicated that shared writing was one of the common teaching practices in the observed classroom. Figure 7.8 shows an example of the Arabic teacher's shared writing during the circle time. Figure 7.9, which was captured on the same day during the interest areas time, shows that Tala drew a table and wrote her name and her peer's name with some numbers. These figures suggest that the child imitated the teacher's writing (Figure 7.8) by

drawing a table with words and numbers as the Arabic teacher did during the circle time.

Data reflected by these two figures show how the teacher's shared writing was taken on board by the child; this could infer that the teacher's shared writing positively influenced children's attitudes to writing by stimulating their interest to engage in writing activities. This suggests that young children develop their early literacy through interacting with adults (teacher) who act as a model for writing. In addition, it may be suggested that through careful scaffolding, using the black arrow, the teacher facilitated children's learning by turning children's attention to the directionality of the text. These observational data were supported by data obtained from the mind maps sessions. Following are children's perspectives on their teachers' modelling writing.

Excerpt 7

1	I	What do you like in the classroom?	
2	P	Toys, Dramatic Play area.	
3	I	And, what else?	
4		The Art area, papers, stories, teacher's	
5	P	writing in the circle time. I like all	
6		times.	

(Tala's mind map, 25 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 8

1	I	Your daily routine in the classroom is circle time, interest areas, snack, playground, reading aloud, small groups and the final meeting. Which period do you like best?
2		
3		
4	P	I like the circle time.
5	I	What do you like in circle time?
6	P	I like the question that the teacher writes.

(Faris's mind map, 25 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

In Excerpts 7 and 8, both Tala and Faris indicated that they like the teacher's writing during the circle time. The above examples reflect a sense within the participant children that they admired the teacher's writing. This supports findings in existing literature that incorporating writing materials throughout the classroom is not enough to promote children's writing development, and that teachers are crucial social mediators in children's learning (Gerde et al., 2012).

A growing body of research supports the view that children become multi-literate at an early age (Kenner et al., 2004; Gregory, 2008; Kenner and Gregory, 2013). The previous chapter showed that the children were exposed to two languages, Arabic and English. Although the main focus of the current

work is Arabic early literacy, as my research continued, I became interested in understanding how children become bi-literate in the observed classroom. The following figures show examples of children's bilingual writing.
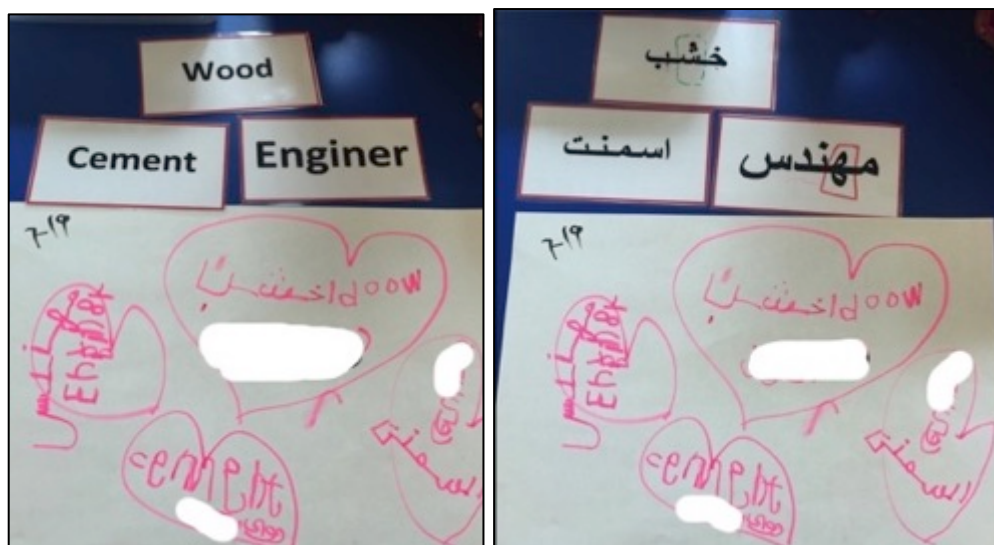

Figure 7.10 A script shows the use of two languages and drawing within one text.

(Visual data, 8 April 2015)

Figure 7.10 was captured during the interest areas time where Ruaa was working in the Writing area; it shows that Ruaa copied the words printed on the cards in both languages, Arabic and English, and incorporated drawing in the same script. Indeed, the above figure supports data reported previously in Excerpt 1 that showed how Ruaa viewed early literacy as a meaning-making activity through the use of multimodal semiotic tools. In addition, this finding may reflect the notion of "language mosaic" used by Mor-Sommerfeld (2005) in her description of bilingual children's writing using more than one language within the same text. This finding is also a good example of "linguistic creativity" where children combine different linguistic scripts (Kenner and Gregory, 2013). The following figures further illustrate children's bilingual writing.
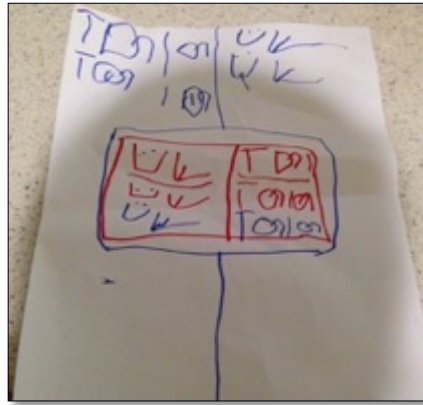
308

Figure 7.11 Tala wrote her name in Arabic and English.

(Visual data, 11 May 2014)
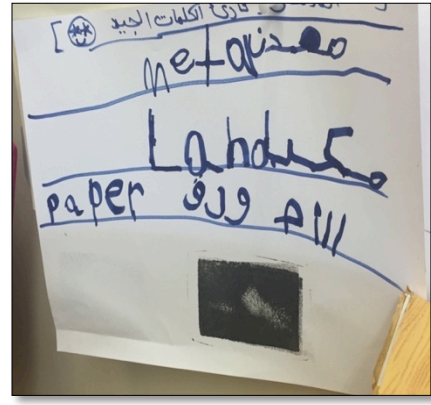
Figure 7.12 Nawaf copied some words in Arabic and English with the right directionality.

(Visual data, 3 May 2015)

Figure 7.11 shows how Tala wrote her name bilingually with the correct directionality of the English and incorrect directionality of the Arabic. In Figure 7.12, Nawaf copied some words from the word cards in both languages with the right directionality of each language. Data reported here suggest that although some children were able to differentiate two writing systems in terms of the directionality of each script, other children were still unable to discriminate the directionality of each writing system. This finding reflects "moments of transitions", a term used by Kenner and colleagues (2004) in their explanation of children's transition between two languages systems in their bi-literate learning. The following excerpt and figure from observational data show how one of the participant children engaged in a bi-literacy activity during the interest areas time.

Excerpt 9

It was 9.00 am. Time for interest areas. Leen was holding a sewing bag in the Dramatic Play area. She looked at me and said, "Can I take your measurement?" I said, "Sure." She took the measure which has English numbers, put it around my waist, then wrote the number in Arabic on a piece of paper (Figure 7.13).

(Field notes, observation 27, 23 December 2014, translated from Arabic)
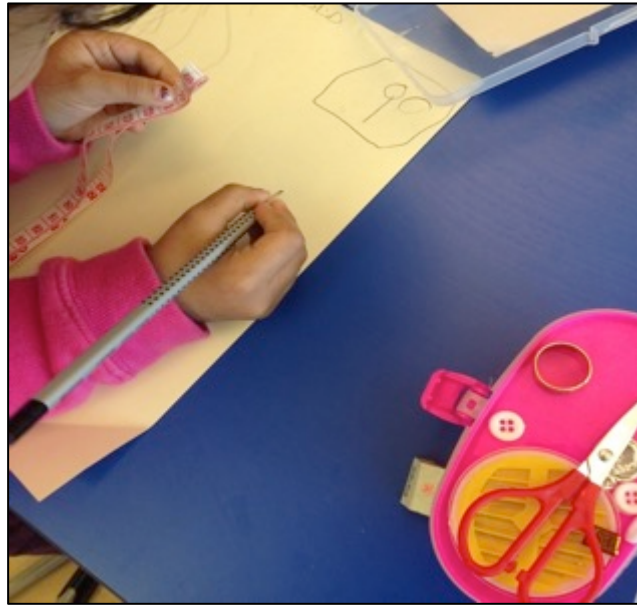
Figure 7.13 Leen performed a task bilingually during the interest areas time.

(Visual data, 23 December 2014)

This presents another example of children's bi-literacy learning. Excerpt 9 and Figure 7.13 show that Leen performed the task bilingually in a playful context. Specifically, although the child identified the number, which was written in English, she read and wrote it in Arabic. In the light of relevant literature, this example shows how the child used different linguistic semiotic tools in a bi-lingual context, "translanguaging".

Observational data revealed a common tendency among the children to write in Arabic rather than in English. The following figure provides evidence for this point.

Figure 7.14 Nawaf wrote his name in Arabic during an English activity.

(Visual data, 14 December 2014)

Figure 7.14 was taken during the small group time with the English teacher. The activity was about the geometric shapes. Although the activity was presented in English language, Nawaf wrote his name in Arabic besides the drawing. In addition, although the child showed the ability to write his name in English (Figure 7.5), he chose to write his name in Arabic despite the instructional language of this activity (English).

Data reported above showed how some of the children's bilingual writing seemed to have emerged spontaneously while other writing occurred through bilingual activities that were teacher-directed. A possible explanation for this finding can be referred to the classroom environment that was attributed as a bi-literacy-rich environment (see Chapter 6). This finding supports the argument that a print-rich environment in both languages has a crucial influence on children's bi-literacy learning (Chan and Sylva, 2015).

7.3.3 Early reading

It was mentioned above that children participating in this study were given the voice to hear their own views regarding literacy learning. The following table captures children's views about their early reading during the mind maps sessions.

Table 7.3 Children's perspectives on early reading

Participants	*Can you read?*	*What do you like to read?*
Saad	Yes.	Stories and Qur'an.
Nawaf	Yes.	Stories, magazines in the Dramatic Play area, word cards, and attendance cards.
Faris	Yes, I can.	I like stories and Qur'an.
Leen	I am trying.	Read Qur'an from my mind, read story by myself instead of mum reading it.
Tala	Yes.	A story, the large book story, the alphabet story, my name and Qur'an.
Ruaa	Yes.	Stories and Qur'an.

(Extracts from mind maps with the children, translated from Arabic)

The above table illustrates children's views about their early reading. Interestingly, the above answers showed that the participant children viewed themselves as able to read. Moreover, the responses also showed that reading a story and the Qur'an were on top of the list of things that children like to read. These data obtained from the mind maps were supported by observational data. The following excerpt is from the field notes showing children's reading of the Qur'an.

Excerpt 10

It was the morning circle time. The children were sitting on the carpet with their legs and hands crossed. The Arabic teacher held a printed text of a short *Surah* of the Qur'an. The teacher recited the Qur'an individually and pointed to the printed text while reading. After that, the teacher read the *Surah* again with the children. Then, the teacher asked one of the children to read. The child read and looked at the printed text. The teacher said, "Thank you for looking at the letters while you are reading".

(Field notes, observation 44, 5 April 2015, translated from Arabic)
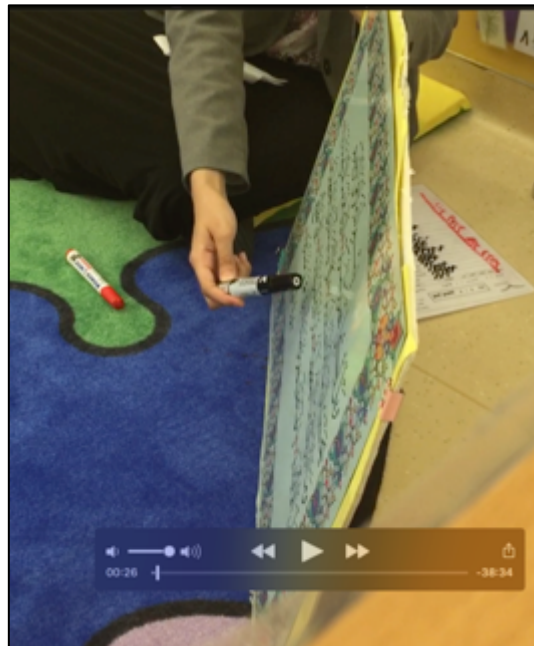
Figure 7.15 The Arabic teacher pointing to the printed text of the Qur'an while reading.

The above excerpt was documented during the circle time where the religious literacy such as reciting the Qur'an took place. As the excerpt shows, the children learned the Qur'an through listening to the teacher's recitation, echoing, reading out aloud as a group, then reciting the *Surah* individually. Specifically, during this literacy event children developed different skills. Although children were memorising the Qur'an by heart, through this reading session they also acquired linguistic skills such as listening, pronouncing and identifying the directionality of the text. Besides this, children also developed

cognitive skills such as observing, memorising and concentration. Moreover, during this large-group reading activity the children acquired social skills such as building a sense of belonging and performing appropriate behaviour while reciting the Qur'an such as listening, avoiding any distracting noise, and sitting properly.

The above excerpt suggests that the Arabic teacher acted as a social mediator through modelling and scaffolding children's learning. In other words, the teacher presented a model through reciting the *Surah* at the beginning of the reading session. In addition, there was a kind of verbal and physical scaffolding that took place during this reading session. Specifically, the verbal scaffolding appeared in teacher's reciting and her acknowledgment of the child's looking at the text while reciting the *Surah* - "*thank you for looking at the letters while you are reading*". This finding supports past research which found that verbal scaffolding has a significant influence in promoting early reading (Ankrum et al., 2013); extending this, however, the current study argues that the physical scaffolding used by the teacher is also crucial in developing early reading.

Through data collection, features of early reading were documented. For instance, children showed the ability to read their names and their peers' names. The following examples provide evidence showing how the child's name experience played a crucial role in developing the children's early reading skills.

Excerpt 11

It was 8.00 am. Time for the morning circle. The Arabic teacher took the children's attendance by displaying children's name cards without saying the child's name. The teacher raised Ruaa's name card, Ruaa said, "I am here teacher." The teacher displayed Samar's name, Ruaa said, "Samar is absent." The teacher displayed Khalid's name, Ruaa also said, "Khalid is absent."

(Field notes, observation 30, 8 February 2015 translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 11 shows an example of children's reading during the circle time. As seen in this excerpt, Ruaa recognised particular words, her name and her peers' names. This supports the notion that literacy learning is a social practice. In other words, through the classroom's community and interactions that took place in this context, children developed their early reading; an example was identifying their peers' names. The following figure was captured during the interest areas time showing an example of children's early reading.
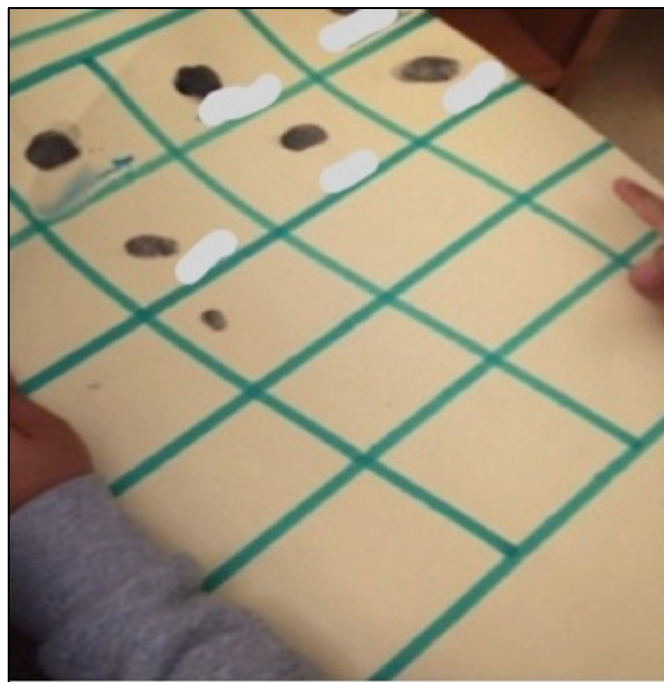

Figure 7.16 Leen in the Science and Discovery area reading her peers' names on a fingerprint chart.

(Visual data, 1 December 2014)

Figure 7.16 shows triangulated data on children's early reading. This figure was captured during the interest areas time where Leen was playing in the Science and Discovery area. As shown, Leen held a chart that had samples of children's fingerprints with children's names written by the Arabic teacher. Observational data showed that Leen was able to identify her peers' names that were written beside their fingerprints. The following excerpt is another example of children's early reading showing how children engaged in reading activities while playing.

Excerpt 12

It was 9.00 am. Time for the interest areas. "Trees" was the topic of the study. A number of materials, objects and study-related words were added to the Dramatic Play area to reflect the applied study. Faris and other children were playing in this area. Faris pointed to one of the words in an attempt to read the word. The Arabic teacher entered the Dramatic Play area and asked Faris, "What is this word?" Faris sat on his knees, looked at the word, pointed with his finger to the letters, then said " س". The teacher said, " Yes, (س) is the first letter, what is the next letter? Faris said " م". The teacher said, "Yes, very good, and the last letter? Faris said " ك ". The teacher said, "Great, so the word is?" Faris (silent). The teacher said, "Let's read it from the beginning". Faris read the first and the second letters, then he read the word (سمك) (fish). (Figure 7.17)

(Field notes, observation 32, 15 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

Figure 7.17 Early reading in the Dramatic Play area.

In Excerpt 12 Faris involved in an early reading experience while playing in the Dramatic Play area. While Faris was playing he pointed to the printed word that was incorporated in the Dramatic Play area. Then, the Arabic teacher intervened by asking him "*What is this word?*" In particular, the Arabic teacher took advantage of the child's pointing to the printed word to initiate the reading task. This shows that through stimulating the child's interest to read the printed word and simplifying the reading task, the Arabic teacher scaffolded the child's learning and the child was able to read the printed word successfully.

Observational data also documented exemplars of children's early reading appeared in pretending reading by the children. Figure 7.18 demonstrates a child in the Library area reading a story.

Figure 7.18 Nawaf reading a story in the
Library area.

(Visual data, 10 May 2015)

Figure 7.18 was captured during the interest areas time. Nawaf was in the Library area holding an Arabic storybook. He read the story by describing the pictures. In particular, he attempted to make up the story (pretend to read) by linking the illustrations in the story. Interestingly, Nawaf pointed to the text and followed its directionality while he was reading. This shows how the child

developed several skills such as holding the book properly, turning the pages, hand-eye coordination, following the text directionality, thinking, narrative and comprehension skills. Data reported here suggest that Nawaf was influenced by the Arabic teacher's reading practice, as he pointed to the text while reading (see Chapter 6, Excerpt 16). The following excerpt from the field notes illuminates another aspect of children's early reading.

Excerpt 13

It was 9.00 am. Time for interest areas. Children were distributed to the different interest areas. Nawaf and Saad were in the Library area. Nawaf asked me if I could join them to read a story. I asked them to choose a book. Saad chose a magazine about Riyadh city. Nawaf said, "This is a magazine not a story." I read the magazine trying to summarise the written text, while I was turning the page, Saad stopped me, pointed to the text and said, "Continue reading, what is written is too much."

(Field notes, observation 14, 24 April 2014, translated from Arabic)

Here, Nawaf showed his knowledge of books by differentiating between stories and magazines. The above example also shows children's understanding that print conveys meaning which appeared in Saad's comparison between what I had read and the written text. It could thus be inferred that children develop different learning skills such as talking around texts, listening, observation, and visual discrimination. The following visual data provide another example of children's early reading that is related to environmental print.
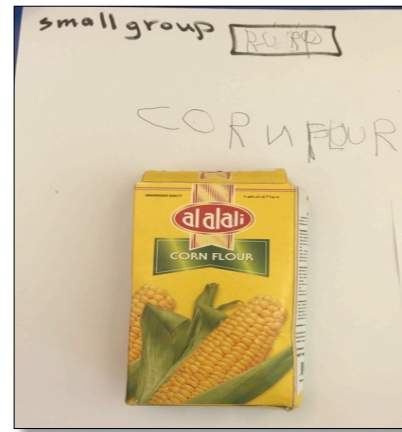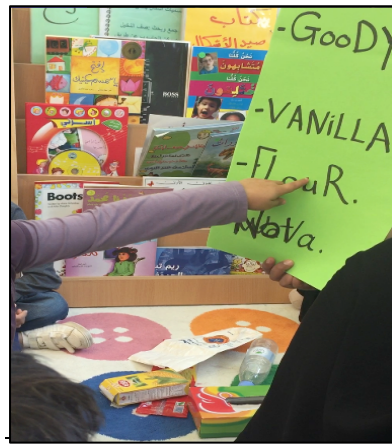
Figure 7.19 Children read and wrote words from environmental print during small groups time.

(Visual data, 19 April 2015)

Figure 7.19 was captured during small groups time where the English teacher used samples of environmental print to engage children in reading and writing activity. Noteworthy is that the Arabic teacher carried out the same activity (in Arabic) with the other group of children. As shown above, the English teacher encouraged the children to choose a word from the list, try to read it, search for the word on the food containers, then copy the word. Existing literature indicated that identifying environmental print is one of the forms of early reading during preschool years (Anderson et al., 2012); this example supports Foorman's (2002) argument that interaction with environmental print develops children's emergent literacy skills such as early print awareness and letter knowledge. Excerpt 14 is another example of children's early reading through identifying environmental print.

Excerpt 14

It was time for interest areas. A number of children were in the Library area. A child took a magazine from the shelf and sat on the chair. Another child sat beside him, pointed out to the logo "Sabic" printed on the cover page and said, "This is where my father works." (Figure 7.20)

(Field notes, observation 43, 1 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

Figure 7.20 A logo of a company was identified by a child in the Library area.

(Visual data, 1 April 2015)

Excerpt 14 provides further evidence on how environmental print can develop early literacy; it shows that the child identified the logo of his father's work place that was printed on the magazine. Although the child was not reading the printed logo, he identified it through visual discrimination. Thus, in this case, environmental print helped children develop the knowledge that print conveys meaning.

The above examples show how environmental print was not only incorporated in the classroom environment (Figure 7.20) but was also employed as a literacy source through a literacy activity and extended children's learning through teacher's scaffolding. This finding supports existing literature which argued that although environmental print is an everyday literacy source available for all children, it can be a valuable learning source through scaffolding with parents and teachers (Neumann et al., 2011). My study has provided new

insights to this area of research by showing the role that Arabic environmental print plays in developing early literacy for Arabic-speaking preschoolers, an area that has not been fully researched.

7.3.4 Alphabet knowledge

In the observed classroom, children were exposed to both Arabic and English letters. For instance, activities related to letters were incorporated into different interest areas in the classroom such as the Writing area, Library area, Art area and Table Toys area (Figures 7.21, 7.22 and 7.23).

Figure 7.21 Saad matching Arabic letters in the Table Toys area.

(Visual data, 12 March 2015)

Figure 7.22 Nawaf and another child play with Arabic magnetic letters in the Library area.

(Visual data, 1 May 2014)

Figure 7.23 Nawaf formed his name with English letters in the Library area.

(Visual data, 25 February 2015)

The above are examples of employing letters in different interest areas. In Figure 7.21, as Saad played in the Table Toys area, he matched identical Arabic letters by comparing them, then wrote them down. In Figure 7.22, two children played together in the Library area, trying to form words from the multiple letters. Observational data showed that throughout this activity children talked to each other, shared the magnetic letters, negotiated, and took turns. In Figure 7.23, Nawaf played individually in the Library area, and formed his name in English with the magnetic letters. In all three figures it appears that children built their knowledge about letters through playful activities.

The above figures also reflect a number of learning skills that took place during playing with letters; these included (a) linguistic skills such as visual discrimination, letter identification (Figures 7.21, 7.22 and 7.23), and conversational skills (Figure 7.22) and (b) social skills such as turn-taking, interaction and negotiation (Figure 7.22).

Observational data suggest that the participant children showed their knowledge of some letters in both Arabic and English. Interestingly, through

observations it was possible to see how children showed their awareness of some of the special characteristics of the Arabic letters such as fine differences between some letters and the multiple shapes of the letter. The following examples from observational data illustrate children's knowledge of some features of the Arabic letters such as letters joined together to form a word.

Excerpt 15

It was 11.30 am. Time for small groups. Children were divided into two groups, one with the Arabic teacher and the other with the English teacher. The Arabic teacher displayed a shopping list with different samples of food containers. The Arabic teacher wrote down on a paper chart one of the food containers' labels. While the teacher was writing, Leen said, "Teacher, say the letters separately then join each two letters together!"

(Field notes, Observation 48, 19 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

Excerpt 15 is an example of children's awareness of the special features of the Arabic letters. In particular, while the Arabic teacher was writing, Leen asked her to pronounce each letter individually then join each two letters together. This shows that the child was aware of the special features of the Arabic orthography; that letters are joined together and are pronounced differently when the letters form part of a word. The following excerpt from a short video clip transcription is another example of children's knowledge about the multiple shapes of the Arabic letters.

Excerpt 16

Teacher	[In small groups time, the Arabic teacher was sitting, holding a white board, and wrote down a name (Ibrahim)].
Teacher	Where is the letter (ي) in this name?
Leen	Here [pointed to the letter].
Teacher	[Displayed a word that has the letter (ي) at the end] Where is the letter (ي) in this word?
Leen	Here [the child pointed out to the letter (ي)]. The letter (ي) here is at the end of the word, while in (Ibrahim) it is in the middle.

Figure 7.24 A screenshot of a video clip showing Leen differentiating between two different forms of an Arabic letter.

(Visual data, 1 December 2014, translated from Arabic)

Above, Leen identified the two different shapes of the Arabic letter (ي) when it is in the middle and at the end of the word. This example suggests that, despite the complex nature of the Arabic alphabetic system, some children not only showed their capacity to identify some letters, but also showed their awareness of the multiple shapes of the letter. This finding concurs with Kenner (2004) study which found that a six-year-old Arabian child showed her knowledge about the different forms of the Arabic letters during a peer-teaching session. This finding also extends the very limited literature on this area of Arabic early literacy.

In relation to this finding, the previous chapter showed that, in her teaching practices, the Arabic teacher considered the special features of the Arabic letters, such as the differences and similarities between some letters and the multiple shapes of the letter. Excerpt 17 is from my field notes showing how the Arabic teacher drew attention to the special features of the Arabic letters, placement of dots in the letter when teaching the children.

Excerpt 17

It was 8.00 am. Time for the morning circle. The Arabic teacher took the attendance by displaying children's name cards. The teacher displayed Yasmeen's name,(ياسمين) pointed to the first letter and said, "What is the first letter? Are the dots up or down?" Nawaf said, "Down."

(Field notes, observation 12, 17 April 2014, translated from Arabic)

This shows that the Arabic teacher took advantage of taking children's attendance to draw the children's attention to the first letter of Yasmeen's name (ياسمين) and the position of the dots. Data reported in this excerpt and Excerpt 16 suggest that, through teacher's scaffolding, children developed their knowledge about the Arabic alphabets. In particular, in Excerpt 16 the Arabic teacher displayed a word where one of the Arabic letters appeared in the middle then displayed another word where the same letter appeared at the end.

In Excerpt 17, the Arabic teacher drew children's attention to another feature of Arabic letters, dots placed above or below letters, by asking the children "*Are the dots up or down?*" emphasising the importance of differentiating the placement of dots in some letters. Both excerpts show that the teacher's scaffolding occurred through marking critical features and interpreting discrepancies between the Arabic letters (Wood et al., 1976). Hence, it may thus be argued that "scaffolding" is a significant notion in preschool classrooms particularly with the complex orthography of the Arabic language,

an area that has not received great attention from researchers in Arabic early literacy learning studies.

7.3.5   Vocabulary development

Observational data showed that the reading aloud period was a significant literacy event for developing children's learning in the two forms of the Arabic language, Standard and vernacular. In other words, most of the documented evidence for children's vocabulary development appeared through the reading aloud time. Excerpt 18 is an example of how children's vocabulary development may occur while reading a storybook.

Excerpt 18

It was 11.00 am. Time for reading aloud. The Arabic teacher held the storybook and pointed to the title: "Who remembers the title of this story? We have read it before." One of the children said the title of the story. The teacher started reading the story and asked some questions throughout the reading. The teacher stopped after saying a sentence and asked the children: "What does 'scared me' (أفزعتني)mean? (in Standard Arabic). Saad answered, "Scared me" (خوفتني)(in vernacular Arabic).

(Field notes, observation 50, 26 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

The above excerpt shows a common practice of the Arabic teacher during the reading aloud time (see Chapter 6, Excerpt 16). In particular, the teacher stopped at the new vocabulary and asked the children about its meaning, which emphasised the argument that Arabic stories provide valuable opportunities for exposing children to lexicon of Standard Arabic (Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky, 2014). These data are quite revealing in several ways. As shown, Saad gave the meaning of the word (in Standard Arabic) by using a synonym word (in vernacular). In other words, the child drew on his existing knowledge of the vernacular to make sense of and interpret the new lexical item in the standard. This infers that children flexibly draw on all their linguistic resources -

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vernacular and Standard - in their learning. This example supports data reported earlier (Excerpts 5 and 6) which revealed how children showed their metadiglossic awareness of the differences between the two forms of the Arabic language. Hence, I argue that both forms of Arabic play a vital role in Arabic-speaking preschoolers' language and literacy learning.

7.3.6 Phonological awareness

There is evidence from observational data that the participant children showed some phonological awareness skills such as rhyming, alliteration and sound matching. The following example from the field notes illustrates children's developing knowledge of rhyme.

Excerpt 19

It was 11.30 am. Time for small groups. Children were divided into two small groups, one with the Arabic teacher and the other with the English teacher. The Arabic teacher held a story titled (الدجاجة بياضة)(Henny Penny) and said, "Do you remember this story? It has many funny names that end with the same sound." A child said, "*Battah* (duck) *Nattah*" (بطة نطة). The teacher said, "Let's pretend that there is a cat in the story, what name will you give it?" Saad said: "*gettah* (cat) *Mattah*"(قطة مطة) . The teacher wrote down on the paper chart the rhymed words then said, "Where are the similar sounds?" A child walked towards the paper chart, and pointed out to the last letter in each word (Figure 7.25).

(Field notes, observation 33, 18 February 2015, translated from Arabic)
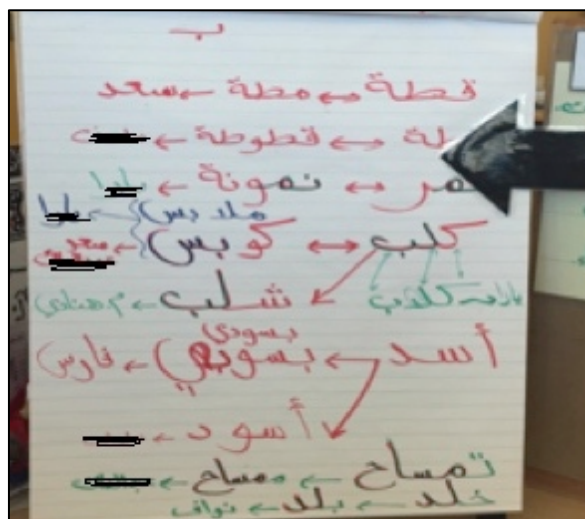
Figure 7.25 Developing knowledge of rhyme during the small groups time.

Excerpt 19 is an example of a literacy activity to develop children's phonological awareness. Specifically, in this example the teacher focused on identification of rhymes by retrieving with the children the rhyming words in the story. From the above example, some children showed an understanding of some phonological awareness skills such as rhyming. Observational data also captured moments where some children showed another phonological awareness skill. The following example is from a short video clip transcription illustrating a child's knowledge of phonemic segmentation.

Excerpt 20

[The Arabic teacher and the children were sitting in the large group area]

Teacher: [holds the Arabic alphabets board]

Leen: [walked towards the board, pointed out to the word written beside the letter (h)] and said:(هدهد) "*hud hud*" like a pattern.

Teacher: How?

Leen: h-d –h-d.

Teacher: Great.
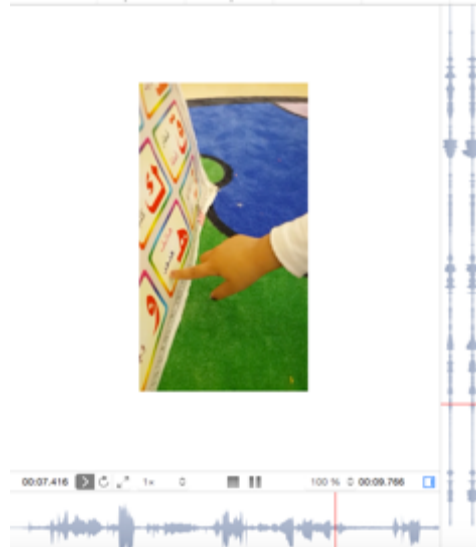
Figure 7.26 A screenshot from a video clip showing Leen pointing out to the segmentation of an Arabic word.

(Visual data, 17 December 2014)

The literacy event above shows Leen's knowledge about the segmentation of an Arabic word. The most interesting finding to emerge from this example is the way the child described the word components as a pattern, since the word consists of a repetitive syllable. This supports Kenner and Gregory's (2013) argument that children tend to make their own inferences about the writing system throughout their literacy learning.

The above examples concur with previous research in the area of Arabic literacy that stressed the significance of phonological awareness in promoting

Arabic early literacy (Taibah and Haynes, 2011). In this respect, some scholars considered that the developing of phonological awareness skills during preschool years is a vital predictor for Arabic-speaking children's reading skills in the future (Mahfoudhi et al., 2011; Callaghan and Madelaine, 2012).

7.3.7 Digital literacies

In this study, data obtained through observation showed that digital technology such as computers and mobile phones appeared to be a vital mediator to children's literacy development due to its attraction and multimodal representation. The following example from the field notes shows the use of technology in children's Arabic early literacy.

Excerpt 21

It was 9.00 am. Time for interest areas. Leen was in the Library area, sitting on the floor and writing on the white board. When I passed near the area, she said, "see how I can write the word (حيوانات) (animals)." The child wrote the word with separated letters (Figure 7.27). Leen said, "No, it is not right." I said, "Let's search for this word in the bookshelf." The child browsed some books then said, "I did not find it, could I have your mobile phone?" I gave her my mobile, she opened Google and typed the word (حيوانات) (animals), then said, "Like this" (Figure 7.28).

(Field notes, observation 10, 9 April 2014, translated from Arabic)
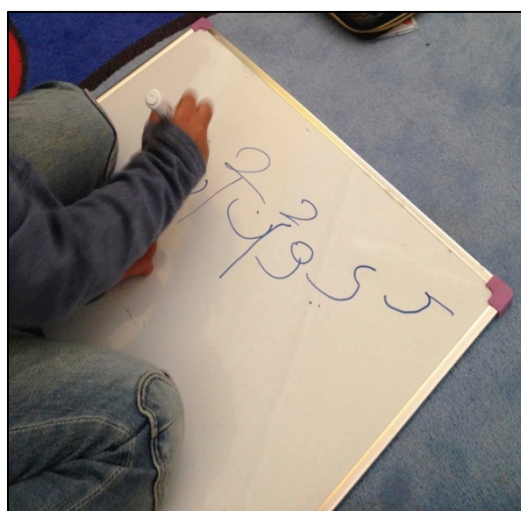
Figure 7.27 Leen writing a word in Arabic without joining the letters.
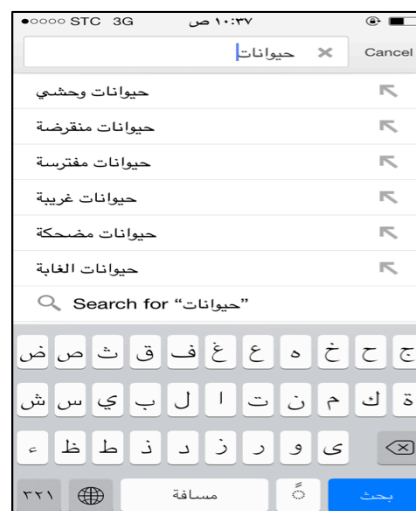
Figure 7.28 Leen typing an Arabic word on the mobile keyboard.

(Visual data, 9 April 2014)

The above example is quite revealing in several ways. In Figure 7.27, Leen wrote the Arabic word with separated letters, then realised that it was not correct; thus, it could be said the child relied on her visual memory while she was writing. In Figure 7.28, Leen suggested using the mobile phone's keyboard to see the word in its correct form.

This example shows how the child used a digital device as a mediator to Arabic early literacy. In other words, the mobile phone's keyboard helped the child in solving the problem (visual complexity of the Arabic orthography).

Arguably, then by using a digital device, (mobile phone keyboard), zone of proximal development occurred where the child moved from the actual development level to the level of potential learning. From a socio-cultural lens, Razfar and Yang (2010) suggested that the keyboard is a semiotic mediation tool that children use besides other semiotic tools in an increasing multimodal world.

Data reported above were triangulated from data obtained from the mind maps. The mind maps showed that the children were familiar with different technology tools such as computers and iPads not only in the classroom but also at home (see Chapter 5). The following example from a transcription of a mind map session illustrates Leen's perspectives on digital literacies.

Excerpt 22

1	I	At home, do you have a computer or an iPad?
2	P	Computer for mum and dad, I have an iPad.
3	I	Here in the classroom, there is a computer; do you like to work on it?
4	P	Yes, I do. The ones I most like are the iPads.
5	I	Do you use the iPad in Arabic or English?
6	P	English.

(Leen's mind map, 18 February 2015, translated from Arabic)

From the above, Leen was familiar with different technology tools such as computers and iPads at home. The example also shows that the child liked to use the computer in the classroom. In addition, the excerpt shows that the child used the iPad in English which indicates that the spread of digital technologies has contributed to linguistic multiplicity. Data reported here can be explained with Moll's (1992) notion "funds of knowledge" which referred to the

knowledge children brought to school from home (Burnett, 2010). In other words, in the current digital age, children interact with culturally appropriate tools from homes and communities that influence their learning.

7.4 Peer learning

Observational data suggested that peers were a crucial source for early literacy learning not only in children's first language, but also in their learning of a foreign language. The following are examples of how children act as mediator for literacy learning through their interaction.

Excerpt 23

It was 8.00 am. Time for the morning circle. The Arabic teacher took the attendance by showing the children their name cards. The teacher with the children counted the attendees and the absentees. Then, the teacher asked one of the children to write the number of absentees on the board (7) in Arabic (٧). The child stood up, walked towards the board, held the marker and said, "I don't know." Saad and other children started writing the number (٧) on the rug. Leen said, "(٧) is looking up to the star." The child wrote down the number successfully.

(Field notes, observation 49, 21 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

Figure 7.29 Screenshot from a videotaped of the morning circle time.

(Visual data, 21 April 2015)

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Excerpt 23 presents one of the literacy events that occurred in this classroom. During the morning circle the Arabic teacher asked one of the children to write the number of the absentees on the board. When the child said that he did not know how to write this number, some children started to facilitate the task by writing the number with their fingers on the rug, as in Figure 7.29. The excerpt also shows that Leen provided explicit verbal support by describing the shape of the number (٧), that it looks up to the star, signing that this number differed from another number which has a similar shape (٨). It is important to point out that the Arabic teacher in this situation did not intervene and left space for children's initiatives. At the end of this scene, the child wrote the number successfully.

The above showed that the child was able to accomplish the task by listening to and observing his peers' gestures and verbal explanations. Hence, it can be asserted that the peer group guided the child's learning. From a socio-cultural lens, this finding also supports the notion of mediation since children act as mediators in their early literacy development. Specifically, to some extent, this example reflects Rogoff's (1990) concept of "guided participation" as the peers played an active role in the child's learning. In addition, data reported in this example support Norling and colleagues' (2015) contention that teachers play a crucial role in peer learning through facilitating peers' interaction and responding to children's suggestions. The following is also from the field notes and provides another example of peer learning that took place in the observed classroom.

Excerpt 24

It was 9.00 am. Time for interest areas. Children were distributed to the different interest areas in the classroom. A child went to the writing area, and chose paperwork about the letter (ن) (in Arabic). Leen came, pointed with her finger to the letter (ن) in the text. Then said, "Search for the letter with the upper dot only."

(Field notes, observation 47, 15 April 2015, translated from Arabic)

Figure 7.30 Leen helps her peer in the Writing area.

(Visual data, 15 April 2015)

Above is another aspect of peer learning that took place in the observed classroom. The child doing the activity did not show that she could not do the activity, compared to the child in the previous example, and she was immersed in her work. Nevertheless, Leen came and pointed to the letter (ن) and gave a verbal description of the letter by saying, "*Search for the letter with the upper dot only*". Indeed, Leen pointed out the position of the dot as if she was concerned that her peer might be confused between the letters with similar shapes.

This example proved that children learn through interaction with their peers and they tend to be interdependent rather than dependent, as the child did not reject the other child's intervention. Data reported here reflect Gregory's (2001) notion of "synergy" where more equal learning is taking place between peers. In other words, in this example, both children seemed to learn from each

other; the one who provided the help was practising what she knew about the Arabic letters, and the other child learned from her peer's verbal explanation. The following excerpts from the interview with the English teacher, and the visual data, provide more insights into peer learning.

Excerpt 25

I	Do you think that the children are supporting each other in learning English?
P	Yes, you see some children are translating what I am saying in Arabic.

(Second interview with the English teacher, 25 May 2015)

Excerpt 26

Teacher	We have asked a question in the morning [points out to the question of the day board].
Teacher	What kind of job would you like to do when you grow up?
Child	(Translated what the teacher said into Arabic "vernacular").
Teacher	That's right.

(Videotape's transcription of a circle time led by the English teacher, 1 April 2015)

The above data provide another example of peer learning in this classroom. In Excerpt 25 the English teacher indicated that children supported each other through their learning of a foreign language (English) by translating the teacher's words from English to vernacular Arabic. In Excerpt 26, observational data support what the English teacher mentioned in Excerpt 25. The transcript illustrates that the child translated the teacher's question into Arabic (vernacular) without being asked to do so. It should be pointed out here that the child used the vernacular Arabic in the translation, thus emphasising the importance of the meaning. This finding, children's use of vernacular Arabic in their learning of English, is in keeping with Mahmoud's (2000) study which found that Arabic-speaking students rely on both forms of Arabic in their learning of English as a foreign language. This example is also consistent

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with Gregory and colleagues' (2004) findings that in a bilingual classroom, English and Spanish, more expert children acted as a mediator of other novice children's learning through translation.

7.5   Summary

This chapter discussed the inner layer of the collected data, children's early literacy learning, and illuminated children's perspectives on their literacy learning. Data reported in this chapter provided evidence that early literacy learning is a multimodal meaning-making activity that is constructed by the socio-cultural context. Specifically, notions from socio-cultural perspectives of learning were identified through the collected data. For instance, children were learning through "scaffolding" provided by teachers, "guided participation" through interaction with more expert peers, and through "synergy" when more equal learning opportunities took place among the children.

In addition, this chapter showed how children's early literacy learning was influenced by the "funds of knowledge" that they gained from the surrounded socio-cultural contexts. In particular, children's preference for reading the Qur'an, their attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language and the familiarity with the digital tools were affected by the knowledge developed through interaction with their social context.

Finally, this chapter raised the link between literacy learning and cultural identity. The examples illustrated how language is a key tool to express social and cultural identities. In particular, data reported showed children's tendency towards the Arabic language despite their learning in a setting where both languages, Arabic and English were taught. Examples of this appeared in

children's preference for Arabic in writing, reading Arabic stories and the Qur'an.

The next chapter interweaves and combines the key findings from the data collected from the outer, middle and inner layers. It discusses the research findings in relation to the research questions, and states the contribution of the research in terms of methodology, theory and practice.

Chapter 8   Concluding Discussion

8.1   Introduction

This research was driven by personal and professional motives that were developed throughout my career in the field of early childhood education (Chapter 1). Since I have built a particular interest in the area of early literacy development, and in order to formulate a researchable question, it was crucial to highlight the context where the research took place to narrow the scope of the desired research area and determine the phenomenon to be studied (Chapter 2). After that, I began this work guided by a main research question; *How can literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum that were designed for a different linguistic and cultural context contribute to Arabic early literacy development for preschoolers in Saudi Arabia?* In the light of this overarching question, I reviewed the relevant literature to situate my work within the context of past research, address the gaps in the literature and determine a theoretical framing that underpins the current research (Chapter 3).

Chapter 4 in this thesis outlined the methodological part of the current research in terms of the research methodology, methods of data collection, fieldwork and data analysis approach. On the basis of this study sitting within socio-cultural perspectives of early literacy, analysing the data through multiple-layers helped me in investigating early literacy as a social practice that is embedded within layers of socio-cultural contexts (Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

This final chapter brings together the key findings and discusses them as responses to the research sub-questions that were designed to answer the main

research question. Moreover, this chapter illuminates the contribution of the current research to the existing body of knowledge and suggests implications for theory and practice. Finally, the limitations of the current work and the recommendations for future research are stated.

8.2 Key findings

This section discusses the main findings of the current research. These findings are presented and discussed according to the research sub-questions that were generated throughout my fieldwork. The discussion of the key findings in this section provides insights into the main research question; *How can literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum that were designed for a different linguistic and cultural context contribute to Arabic early literacy development for preschoolers in Saudi Arabia?* This section also situates these findings in the relevant literature with reference to the key socio-cultural concepts that underpin the current work.

8.2.1 Question 1: How was the Creative Curriculum implemented at an institutional level?

8.2.2 Question 2: How do the Saudi practitioners perform and interpret early literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum?

Since the findings of the above two questions were interrelated, this section discusses key findings related to both questions. In the light of these questions, I sought to provide a thick description of how the Creative Curriculum was implemented in a Saudi Arabian preschool. I also intended to explore the actual literacy practices that were implemented by the Saudi preschool teachers and how they interpreted early literacy practices that were derived from a Western

curriculum. Findings in relation to these research questions showed that the imported Curriculum went through three main processes:

1. adopting,

2. adapting, and

3. transforming.

8.2.2.1   Adopted practices

This section discusses findings related to literacy practices that were adopted from the Creative Curriculum and were applied in the observed classroom. Observational data analysed in Chapter 6 showed that organising the classroom environment as part of the process of implementing the new Curriculum was done smoothly. However, this finding does not imply that no adaptations were made in relation to the classroom environment, a point discussed in the next section. This finding agrees with Yuejuan and Yan's (2008) study, which found that the classroom organisation was one of the educational reforms' objectives that has been achieved in the Chinese early childhood education when importing Western educational curricula.

Chapter 6, literacy practices in the classroom context, showed that a number of principles and practices underpinning literacy learning were adopted from the Creative Curriculum. These were

(a) print-rich environment in both languages Arabic and English;

(b) literacy across the curriculum;

(c) incorporating literacy in real-life, meaningful and authentic activities;

(d) play-literacy pedagogy;

(e) daily reading aloud;

(f) teachers' shared writing, and

(g) child's name experience.

The above findings support existing literature in the area of importing educational ideas, which found that early childhood educators all over the world have shared a number of educational principles (Rao et al., 2010). In the area of early literacy, Rao and colleagues reported that the implementation of some principles such as literacy-rich environment and reading aloud in kindergarten classrooms in Hong Kong is an influence of the international research and practices in early childhood education.

The above section discussed certain curricular principles and practices that were adopted in the observed classroom. In the light of these, I argue that the seemingly smooth integration of these literacy practices into the Saudi educational context may be because philosophical principles underpinning these practices do not conflict with the educational beliefs of the Saudi practitioners, and some of these practices are not that different from the existing practices in the provision of preschool education in Saudi Arabia.

8.2.2.2 Adapted and transformed practices

Findings related to literacy practices that were adapted and transformed suggested three main factors that underlay this process:

- cultural,

- linguistic, and

- contextual factors.

Cultural factors

This section discusses findings related to literacy practices that were adapted and transformed, drawing their influence from cultural factors. Chapters 5 and 6 reported attempts to adapt the Curriculum to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. Findings in Chapter 5, the institutional context, showed that although the objectives of the Arabic version of the Curriculum were adopted from the English version, five objectives related to religious and moral education were added as part of adapting the Curriculum to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. In this respect, Chapter 6, the classroom context, showed how religious literacy was a daily practice in the observed classroom although the documentary evidence showed that religious literacy was not addressed in the teaching guides. This finding provides further evidence for the socio-cultural theory of learning in how educational and literacy practices in this classroom were shaped by the Saudi culture that is grounded in Islam. This finding also supports past socio-cultural research that emphasised the crucial role of culture in constructing learning and teaching (Kelly, 2010).

Above, I drew attention to the fact that organising the classroom environment was done smoothly as part of applying the new Curriculum; however, observational data clearly showed that there were some culturally relevant artefacts and print related to religious literacy that were incorporated into different areas of the classroom (Chapter 6). This finding supports Wong's (2008) argument that although there are some similarities between early childhood classrooms in Canada and China, there are differences due to the cultural variations in each context. In the current study, the culturally relevant artefacts that were incorporated in the observed classroom reflect the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and are evidence for the cultural disparity between

early childhood classrooms. In light of this finding, the current study argues that the observed classroom reflects and reproduces aspects of the wider Saudi society and culture.

Further evidence of adapting the Curriculum appeared in children's books. Evidence obtained through observations, documents and interviews with the participant teachers and the director showed that children's books were one of the Curriculum's elements that clashed with the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. These books were adapted by translating them into Arabic with some modifications to the content and pictures, as shown in Chapter 5. In addition to the translated stories, a number of Arabic stories replaced the Curriculum's English stories that were considered culturally inappropriate. This finding supports Kenner and Gregory's (2013) argument on the significance of choosing children's literature which has texts and drawings that are culturally relevant. With respect to the English books, earlier literature also indicated that bilingual education needs to be appropriate to second-language learners' development and culture (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000; Palmer et al., 2007).

In this respect, the current study also found that the participant Saudi teachers were aware of the cultural aspects of the stories that might clash with the Saudi culture. This finding, teachers' cultural awareness, may serve to fill the current literature gap mentioned by Al-Jadidi (2012) that there is no reliable evidence of how Saudi kindergarten teachers consider culturally appropriate pedagogies in their teaching.

Linguistic factors

This section discusses literacy practices that were adapted and transformed for linguistic considerations. My study found that some literacy activities within the framework of the Curriculum were adapted to be compatible with the special features of the Arabic language. For example, Chapter 6 showed that although the multiple shapes of the Arabic letters was not addressed in the intentional-teaching card of the presented activity, the Arabic teacher considered this feature of Arabic orthography when performing the activity. In addition, findings of this study showed that the Arabic teacher applied additional activities that were not stated in the teaching guides. For instance, Chapter 6 showed how the Arabic teacher included an additional activity that aimed to develop children's knowledge of the Arabic letters, in their separated and connected forms, through constructing children's names.

Grounded data also showed that some of the translated songs and rhymes were not appropriate linguistically or culturally. This finding provides evidence for the argument that children's songs play a crucial role in shaping their social identity; thus they needed to reflect social and cultural values (Abdulkareem, 2010).

Data obtained from documents (teaching guides) and teachers' interviews showed that a key feature of the Arabic language (diglossia) was overlooked in the Arabic version of the Curriculum. Despite this, the current study found that the Arabic teacher took into account the diglossic nature of the Arabic language by using the Standard form of Arabic language in her oral communication with children (Chapter 6). This finding supports past research that argued for the crucial role of teachers' agency in any educational reforms

(Rao et al., 2010). This finding provides further evidence in support of Al-Azraqi's (2014) study, which found that the diglossic feature of the Arabic language was not considered in the existing language programmes in Saudi Arabian preschools, and also supports the work of Riman and Darwish (2008) which found that, in the Middle East, the imported literacy pedagogies were not compatible with the features of the Arabic language.

The above discussion suggests that the Arabic teacher's literacy practices were influenced by the special Arabic linguistic features such as diglossia and the letters' multiple shapes. Hence, this study extends and contributes to existing literature on importing educational curricula, which found that despite the implementation of literacy pedagogies that were borrowed from Western societies, kindergarten teachers' literacy practices were influenced by the linguistic features of the Chinese language (Li et al., 2011; Li et al., 2012). However, this research offers new understanding of the imported literacy pedagogies as it studied this phenomenon in a different context both linguistically (Arabic) and culturally (Saudi Arabian Islamic). Thus, this study argues that early literacy practices could have much greater impact if they are compatible with the special features of the Arabic language. In other words, early literacy practices need to be linguistically appropriate and although some literacy practices can move across different languages and cultures, there are still particular features of the Arabic language that need to be fully considered in applying new literacy pedagogies in Saudi Arabian preschools.

Contextual factors

This study suggests that some findings that are related to literacy practices that were transformed referred to a number of contextual factors such as the Saudi educational system, teachers' beliefs and educational background.

Data analysed in Chapter 5 and 6 showed that some of the curricular principles were transformed when put into practice reflecting the Saudi practitioners' beliefs about learning and teaching. This study in particular found a tension between some of the Curriculum principles and teachers' beliefs and practices. This tension was seen in a number of transformed practices, including the tendency towards teacher-directed activities, adherence to the prescribed curriculum, and a focus on children's discipline.

This study found a divergence of the participant teachers' views of early literacy learning and the Curriculum view. In particular data showed that although the Arabic teacher expressed her beliefs on some of the curricular principles on literacy learning, both teachers tended to have an autonomous perspective that views literacy as an array of skills. In other words, both teachers expressed their beliefs in the importance of learning letters through direct instruction. This autonomous view contrasted with the Curriculum's conceptualisation of literacy and children's learning. A possible explanation for this finding (teachers' autonomous view of early literacy) is that teachers constructed their teaching beliefs through previous education and experience. This agrees with Al-Qaryouti and colleagues' (2016) study findings that kindergarten teachers in the Arabian Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, give high consideration to children's acquisition of the knowledge of letters in their literacy teaching practices. This finding also supports Tibi and colleagues'

(2013) argument that the traditional view of literacy is still ascribed importance in the UAE and other Middle Eastern countries.

In this respect, my study also found that not only the participant teachers showed an autonomous view of early literacy but also some of the involved mothers viewed literacy through the same lens. This finding supports the argument that cultural and social background influences parents' and educators' perspectives and interpretations of children's learning and development (Korat, 2001; Khoja, 2015). It may thus be argued the significance of considering teachers' educational and professional backgrounds when planning to apply literacy pedagogies that were developed in a different context as such imported pedagogies might be in conflict with the teachers' beliefs.

Findings revealed another tension between some of the observed teaching practices and the Curriculum's principles. These tensions in particular related to the flexibility in applying the Curriculum. In the first place, the study found that the studies topics were predetermined in the teaching guides and were not suggested by the children, which contradicts the following Curriculum's principle - selecting a topic for the study should emerge from the children's expressed interest (Teaching Strategies, 2011). This does not imply, however, that there was not also tension between the *principles* of the Curriculum (as stated by its authors) and their *realisation* in the teaching guides. Since the teaching guides are the source of this tension, this inconsistency is, arguably, the responsibility of the authors.

Nevertheless, this could also mean that teachers applied the Curriculum without clear understanding of its theoretical principles, which led to deviate

the Curriculum from its original intentions. This was evident in the previous section, where a divergence in the view of early literacy between the participant teachers and the Curriculum was observed. Another possible explanation of this finding is that preschool teachers in Saudi Arabia were professionally socialised to follow teaching guides in their pedagogic practice.

In this respect, existing literature showed that in the Self-Learning Curriculum, which was built on a number of Western educational theories, there is a tension between the theoretical framework of the curriculum, and its implementation in Saudi preschools (Gahwaji, 2006). This finding supports Cheng's (2006) argument that although educational ideas might move across different cultures, theories underpinning these ideas might not easily transferred. This finding also provides evidence for Fleer's (2006) suggestion that learning theories need to be bounded to the context where the learning occurs as social and cultural contexts shape teaching practices.

The current study also identified a tension between the actual implementation of the Curriculum (adhering to the pre-structured curriculum) and one of the Curriculum's principles (providing general guidance for the teacher unlike other curricula that give teachers rigid script to follow) (Teaching Strategies, 2013a). Indeed, it is quite difficult to explain this finding; but it could be referred to contextual factors that are related to practitioners and the educational system in Saudi Arabia's preschool education. One possible explanation for this finding can be related to the practitioners in Saudi Arabian preschools. Chapter 2 reported that the content of the Self-learning Curriculum, the official curriculum of Saudi preschools for more than 30 years, consisted of a number of predetermined learning units; from this it can be inferred that the

practitioners in this particular context are more familiar with the prescribed curricula. This explanation can provide more insights into why the Creative Curriculum, which is supposed to be more flexible in its implementation according to its authors, was transformed into a pre-structured curriculum when implemented in a Saudi Arabian preschool classroom.

Another possible explanation for the above finding can be ascribed to the Saudi educational management system. It was mentioned in Chapter 2 that the Saudi Arabian educational management system is a centralised one. Given this, the tendency towards applying a prescribed curriculum might reflect this centralised management system. This finding supports the work of Li and colleagues (2012) that the educational system in China impacted the applied teaching pedagogies which were adopted from the Western societies. Hence, it would appear that it is crucial to take into account the nature of the educational system when planning for curricula changes, as what is appropriate in one educational system might be in conflict with another educational system.

Another significant finding in relation to literacy practices that were transformed was a tendency among the participant teachers towards applying teacher-directed activities despite the implementation of a Curriculum that emphasises a more even balance between the child-initiated activities and teacher-directed activities (Chapter 6). The study also found that the participant teachers considered that the activities they direct are more effective than the ones that are initiated by the child, as they (the teachers) tend to view their role as instructors of children's learning.

The above finding supports Al-Jadidi's (2012) argument that in the official curriculum of Saudi preschools, the Self-Learning Curriculum, there is more

emphasis on the teachers' role in guiding children's learning. This concurs with past research which reported that one of the tensions in applying the Self-Learning Curriculum was the lack of balance between children's free play and teachers' directed activities (Gahwaji, 2006). A possible explanation for this may be that the Saudi teachers were familiar with the teacher-directed approach and may lack the skills to apply the child-initiated approach. This also supports past research which found that teaching practices in early years education are influenced by social context, educational policy, teachers educational background and their teaching beliefs (Vong, 2005; Teale et al., 2010; Harris, 2015).

In relation to literacy practices that were transformed, this study also found further clear evidence of how teaching practices varied across different cultures; for instance focusing on children's discipline was identified as a common and valued teaching practice in the observed classroom (Chapter 6). Findings also showed that although the Arabic teacher expressed her belief that children need to be given space and freedom, she focused on children's discipline under the pressure of the predominant belief among the administration, Saudi trainers and the other teachers, even though this was not given so much focus in the Curriculum.

In this respect, a disparity was identified in the views of children's discipline between the American trainers and the Saudi trainers. A possible reason for this might be that while focusing on children's discipline was seen as part of successful teaching from the perspective of Saudi practitioners, this practice was given little attention by the Western practitioners. This finding can be explained in the light of Al-Jadidi's (2012) argument that teaching practices of

the Saudi kindergarten teachers were shaped by the broad socio-cultural assumptions of education. In this respect, Rabaah et al. (2016) argued that Saudi culture considers that ensuring children's discipline is one of the essential roles of schools. Hence, it may thus be argued that although some educational principles can be borrowed from another culture, cultural assumptions about teaching and learning might not be easily imported as teaching practices are socially and culturally constructed.

In the light of the findings discussed above, I argue that the imported literacy pedagogies might have different linguistic, social and cultural features than the context where they have been transferred to. Hence, this study contributes to the small but growing body of research in the area of importing educational curricula which asserts that imported educational pedagogies should be adapted rather than implemented directly into a new context (Vong, 2005; Rao et al., 2010; Li et al., 2012). Moreover, this finding agrees with those of studies conducted in the Chinese context, which revealed that, despite the implementation of Western pedagogies in Chinese kindergarten classrooms, traditional Chinese teaching methods still exist such as teacher-directed activities, direct instruction and focusing on children's discipline (Rao et al., 2010; Li et al., 2012). However, this study contributes to this area of research by offering further insights from a very different context, Saudi Arabia, which has different language and culture as compared to China.

In summary, the above discussion provides a new understanding of how the imported literacy pedagogies were influenced by linguistic, cultural and contextual factors when transferred to the Saudi preschool educational context.

The above findings also support and extend socio-cultural perspectives on literacy by providing evidence that:

- Literacy practices are intimately tied to their social and cultural contexts, reflecting the ideological model of literacy (Street, 2003). My study provided clear evidence on how the Saudi practitioners' literacy practices were strongly embedded in the Saudi socio-cultural and ideological contexts.

- Early literacy practices applied by the Saudi children and practitioners in the observed classroom were constructed by the Saudi society and culture.

- Saudi parents' and practitioners' perceptions of teaching and learning were shaped by the Saudi socio-cultural context.

8.2.3   Question 3: How do children in a Saudi Arabian preschool that uses the Creative Curriculum develop Arabic early literacy?

Guided by this question I sought to gain better understanding of how Saudi preschoolers develop Arabic early literacy within their socio-cultural contexts. Since this study is ethnographic in nature, I investigated children's early literacy from the insiders' perspectives by giving voice to the participant children, teachers and mothers.

Through the lens of the participant children and drawing from observational data, this study supports the notion that early literacy is a multimodal meaning-making activity where children generate meaning by using multiple semiotic tools such as language(s), numbers and drawings. For instance, data reported in Chapter 7, the inner layer, provided clear evidence of how children's early writing became more multimodal as they used writing in both languages,

Arabic and English, besides other semiotic systems such as numbers and drawings. For instance, this study showed how children were able to combine Arabic and English within the same text in their early writing experiences. This is in keeping with past research findings in the area of bilingual learning that children used more than one language in the same text (Mor- Sommerfeld, 2005). This finding agrees with researchers from socio-cultural perspectives, who adopted a broad view of early literacy as a meaning-making process that is not limited to a set of cognitive skills or alphabets (Kim, 2011; Kennedy, 2013; Kim, 2014). Hence, I add my voice to Haggerty and Mitchell's (2010) argument of the significance of adopting a broad view of early literacy as a meaning-making activity with a particular focus on the tools preferred by children at this early age.

The current study also stressed the notion that early literacy is a social practice that is embedded in children's socio-cultural contexts. In particular, my study found that children develop their early literacy through "mediation", "scaffolding" and "modelling" provided by teachers and mothers, "guided participation" through interaction with more expert peers, and through "synergy" when more equal learning took place between the peers.

The theoretical concepts described above provided valuable insights into literacy learning for Saudi preschoolers. In this thesis, however, I argue that the concept of *'mediation' (*Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985; Rogoff, 1995; Cole, 1996) was particularly prominent. Specifically, I concur with Drury's (2004b) argument on the role the mediator plays in the provision of scaffolding, guided participation and synergy. Another important theoretical concept that clearly appeared in the data related to children's early literacy learning is the *'funds of*

knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992). Given this, the following sub-sections discuss the findings of this research in relation to children's early literacy learning in the light of the two key socio-cultural concepts – mediation and funds of knowledge.

Mediation of Arabic early literacy: new theoretical dimensions

The present study supports the findings of a great deal of past research which confirmed the significance of different forms of mediation in children's early literacy learning such as mediation through mothers, teachers, peers and play. However, my research has extended these studies by providing further evidence from a different context, the Saudi cultural context. This study has not only provided deeper insights into the crucial role that the concept of *mediation* plays in children's early literacy learning but has also contributed new knowledge in our understanding of the notion of mediation and its role in developing Arabic early literacy. Specifically, my study highlighted three forms of mediation that contribute substantially to children's Arabic early literacy; these forms of mediation are (a) religious, (b) linguistic "the vernacular Arabic", and (c) digital.

In this sub-section, firstly I discuss key findings of the present study that support what past research found in relation to the role of mediation in children's literacy learning. Secondly, I highlight the new forms of mediation that have emerged from my study, which demonstrate a novel aspect of the current work.

Consistent with the findings of past research this study showed that, through *maternal mediation,* children develop their early literacy within the context of their families. In particular, the current study revealed how the participant

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mothers served as role models in some literacy practices such as reading Arabic stories and reciting the Qur'an. This finding adds further evidence from the Saudi cultural context to the existing knowledge gained from the few studies that investigated Arabic early literacy from socio-cultural perspectives, which stressed the important role of maternal mediation in early literacy development for Arabic-speaking children (Aram et al., 2013a; 2013b; Tibi and McLeod, 2014; Korat et al., 2014).

The research findings supported previous studies into the significant role that *siblings' and peers' mediation* plays in developing children's early literacy in the preschool and at home; it also explicated how peers serve as a social mediator in children's bi-literacy learning. In particular, through data analysis it was possible to show how siblings and peers learn from each other. This finding is in line with previous studies that investigated informal learning that takes place between siblings at home, revealing that siblings learn from each other through synergy within the home context (Gregory, 2001; Chen and Gregory, 2004; Gregory et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2011). However, my study differs from the previous studies as it explored the role of siblings and peers in Arabic-speaking children's early literacy learning, an area that has not been investigated by researchers in the Middle East.

Consistent with findings of a large body of research, the present study provided further evidence on how play *mediates* children's early literacy learning. In particular, this study found that through guided play and incorporating literacy tools throughout the different interest areas, the participant children engaged with different literacy experiences. This supports the argument that play is not only a pivotal social and cultural mediator in children's learning but also is a

multimodal literacy tool as it provides a natural context for literacy learning (Wohlwend, 2009; Kim, 2011; Rowe, 2013).

Findings of the current work supported past research by providing clear evidence that children develop their early literacy through *teacher's mediation*. Data analysis showed that the participant teachers served as social mediators to children's early literacy learning. In particular, through shared writing, teachers acted as models of writing. For instance, Chapter 7 showed how the Arabic teacher's shared writing influenced children's attitudes towards writing through stimulating their interest to engage in writing activities. Data obtained from mind maps with the children also provided more evidence of children's admiration of teachers' shared writing. With regard to children's early writing, observational data showed that the participant teachers mediate children's early writing by reminding them to incorporate writing during their play, a common teaching practice in the observed classroom (Chapter 6).

This outcome supports the study of Ihmeideh and Al-Maadadi (2015) which found that teachers showed positive attitudes towards teaching early writing in preschool settings in Qatar. In contrast, it disagrees with the work of Tibi and McLeod (2014), which found that kindergarten teachers were rarely observed reminding children to write their names on any produced work in Emirati kindergartens. A possible explanation for this contradiction could be the content of the Creative Curriculum in the research site that emphasises shared writing and child's name experience as daily literacy practices. In the light of this finding and the relevant literature, it can be seen how preschool teachers' literacy practices not only varied in different educational and cultural contexts,

but were also shaped by the opportunities and constraints of each institutional context and curricular aims and demands.

The findings of this research also provide a new understanding of how the participant children develop their knowledge about some features of the Arabic orthography through the Arabic teacher's *mediation*. In other words, data analysis showed that the Arabic teacher mediated children's Arabic early literacy learning through marking critical features and interpreting discrepancies between the Arabic letters, where some letters are similar in shape and sound. For instance, Chapters 6 and 7 showed how children developed their knowledge about one of the special features of Arabic letters, multiple shapes, where the teacher displayed different shapes of the Arabic letters that varied according to the placement in the word. Further explicit evidence from Chapter 7 showed how the Arabic teacher stressed the importance of differentiating the placement of dots in some letters by drawing children's attention to a particular feature of Arabic letters, dots placed above or below letters.

Data analysis provided clear evidence that the Arabic teacher *mediates* the participant children's knowledge of Standard Arabic through modelling this form of Arabic while reading Arabic stories, reciting the Qur'an and using Standard Arabic in her oral communication with children (Chapters 6 and 7). This supports the findings of several studies on the significance of the teacher's role in exposing children to Standard Arabic (Ibrahim, 2011; Aram et al., 2013b; Russak and Fragman, 2013). This finding also agrees with the work of Tibi and McLoad (2014) which found that in the UAE kindergarteners used Standard Arabic when they were interacting with a teacher who used this form

of Arabic. My data also support Al-Dannan's (1999) longitudinal study on using Standard Arabic in spoken language with his children at an early age. He found that children can naturally acquire the Standard form of Arabic if they were exposed orally to it in their early years (Al-Dannan, 2014).

The current study found that Saudi preschoolers started to develop their knowledge about the Standard Arabic at an early age. In particular, Chapter 5 revealed that, at home, children were exposed to the Standard form of Arabic through several *mediators* such as the Qur'an, Arabic stories and children's Arabic television programmes. In the classroom context, the current study also found how the participant children were able to understand and use the Standard form of Arabic throughout different literacy events. This provides further evidence to support the work of Leikin and colleagues (2014); they found that Arabic-speaking preschoolers were able to understand and use different words in Standard Arabic. This finding also supports what existing literature indicated that reading stories is a vital source in developing vocabulary for diglossic languages such as Arabic (Foorman et al., 2002).

With regard to children's bi-literacy learning, my findings support Palmer et al. (2007) study on the importance of *teacher's mediation* and the culturally appropriate programmes in bilingual learning for Arab children. The current study also provides evidence for Mahmoud (2000) argument that Arabic as a first language plays a crucial role in learning English as a foreign language for Arabic–speaking children. This study contributes to and extends this line of research by offering further insights into Arabic-speaking children's bilingual learning from a Saudi Arabian preschool, a context that has not been fully researched.

I now discuss the new forms of mediation that emerged in this study.

The first form of mediation that the current work has illuminated is *religious literacy*. The current work contributes to a new line of thinking by highlighting the crucial role that religious literacy plays in mediating children's Arabic early literacy. In particular, my data suggest that religious literacy such as reciting the Qur'an and Islamic supplications is a crucial *cultural mediator* for Saudi preschoolers' Arabic early literacy development at home and in preschool. In other words, the Qur'an and the supplications are valuable sources for Standard Arabic, and early exposure to such Islamic texts can have a vital impact on children's Arabic literacy learning.

A number of studies investigated the role of the Qur'an in promoting Arabic language and literacy (Allan, 2013; Ibrahim, 2013a) and have shown that Qur'anic learning enhances Arabic literacy through developing several linguistic skills such as listening, reading, pronunciation, comprehension and building up new vocabulary. However, my research adds new knowledge to this area by highlighting religious literacy as a crucial cultural mediator for Arabic early literacy. This finding also may extend the knowledge gained by Gregory and colleagues (2014) who studied how young children from four different faith communities (Bangladeshi Muslim, Ghanaian Pentecostal, Polish Catholic and Tamil Hindu) became literate through faith activities in London. The latter research project revealed that, through religious activities, children not only learned to worship, but also acquired a variety of academic, social and cultural skills. Indeed, although this latter study focused on the learning skills that children develop during religious literacy, my study addressed religious literacy as a valued cultural mediator for early literacy learning and teaching in a Saudi Arabian preschool, an aspect not considered

previously by researchers in the field of early literacy for Arabic-speaking children.

The second form of mediation that emerged from this study is *linguistic mediation*. Findings showed that, as a linguistic mediator, vernacular Arabic plays a central role in children's Arabic and English language and literacy learning. In particular, Chapter 7 showed that although the vernacular Arabic was the predominant form in children's oral communication, it was evident that the participant children develop and use both forms of Arabic language in their learning. This study in particular found that children used the vernacular forms of Arabic to develop their Standard Arabic. For example, children used both forms of Arabic in responding to teachers' questions, translating from English to Arabic, and retelling a story. In view of this, I add my voice to the calls from previous research for greater attention to be paid to the diglossic feature of the Arabic language when planning for Arabic literacy pedagogies (Tibi and McLeod, 2014), as this would improve Arabic early literacy pedagogic practices.

From this finding, it can be concluded that, in languages with a diglossic feature, such as Arabic, children rely on the spoken form (the vernacular) as a linguistic mediator in their learning of the written form (Standard Arabic). This offers further support for Dakwar's (2005) study which found that Palestinian primary school children used both forms of Arabic – Standard and vernacular (the Palestinian dialect) – to perform better in their reading and writing.

This finding also supports Myhill's (2014) study on the effects of diglossia on literacy in Arabic and other languages. Myhill suggested a pedagogic approach whereby Arabic-speaking children should learn their basic literacy in the

primary school in the vernacular (native dialect); that is, in a written form that is close to their spoken language. Myhill argued that the Standard form of Arabic is a non-native language for Arabic speakers (Eviatar and Ibrahim, 2014), and supported his claim that a written form of vernacular Arabic has been used widely by Arabic speakers in their electronic writing, particularly with the massive spread of the social media.

This approach to vernacular literacy has been a matter of debate among researchers in this area. In this respect, Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky (2014) stated that it is difficult to apply the vernacular literacy in educational settings for a number of reasons; all the educational materials are written in Standard Arabic, Standard Arabic has cultural and religious values as it is the language of the Qur'an. What is more, applying vernacular literacy means that instead of learning one language (the Standard Arabic), different vernaculars will be taught which vary among Arab countries (Myhill, 2014). In this sense, the use of vernacular literacy contradicts the nation-state ideology of promoting 'one language, one nation, one religion', which privileges the Standard over other language varieties.

In Saudi society, as is the case with other Arab countries, the Standard Arabic is valued socially and culturally as it links to the language of the Qur'an. Thus, the Qur'anic literacy has been given high consideration in the Saudi educational settings. I should make it clear here that the vernacular Arabic, including all the regional varieties, is also valued by Saudi society as it represents the Saudi citizens' cultural identity.

All of these understandings point to the need for a more integrated pedagogic approach that uses both vernacular and standard. By this, I do not advocate for

applying the vernacular literacy approach in the educational settings; my stance, though, is that more attention needs to be given to the vernacular Arabic as it is a crucial linguistic mediator for Arabic-speaking children's literacy and bi-literacy learning.

Digital mediation is the third form of mediation that I have explored in my research. In particular, I have shown the significance of digital mediation in developing children's Arabic early literacy. For example, Chapter 7 showed how one of the participant children used the mobile phone's keyboard to overcome the visual complexity of the Arabic orthography. This finding tallies with Dinehart's (2015) argument that digital tools scaffold young children's learning; it also supports Beam and Williams's (2015) argument on the vital role of technologies as meditational tools for the teaching and learning of writing. In addition, this finding supports existing calls in the literature for the employment of technology in literacy practices in early childhood settings (Wohlwend, 2009; Burnett, 2010; Razfar and Yang, 2010).

Although the relationship between digital tools and Arabic early literacy has been investigated by a few researchers in the Middle East (Gahwaji, 2011; Ihmeideh, 2014b), the way the current work views digital tools is very different from the stance taken by existing studies. In other words, these studies examined technology as an interaction pedagogic tool; however, the current study differs in its socio-cultural view of digital devices as cultural tools for early literacy and in viewing early literacy as a meaning-making activity where children generate meaning by using several semiotic tools including digital technology. This view of digital devices as cultural meditational tools for literacy learning is aligned with a recently published research report which

argued that, in the current technologically mediated societies, digital devices are not merely interaction tools in classrooms, but are part of the broader socio-cultural context (Kontovourki et al., 2017). I should make clear that this finding, to the best of my knowledge, is the first in the field of Arabic early literacy. This contribution to the knowledge is discussed later in this chapter.

Funds of knowledge

This research also established how participant children's early literacy learning was influenced by Moll's (1992) term "funds of knowledge"; which explained how children's learning at school is influenced by the knowledge they gained from the wider socio-cultural contexts. For example, children's preferences to read Arabic stories and Qur'an appeared to be impacted by home reading experiences as it was shown in Chapter 5 that reading Arabic stories and Qur'an were common maternal literacy practices in the children's homes.

Further evidence of how the "funds of knowledge" influence children's literacy learning was revealed in the data analyses in Chapters 5 and 7. These data showed that the participant children's attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language were influenced by the knowledge they gained from the wider socio-cultural context. One possible explanation for this finding could be that the rapid spread of digital tools has increased Arabic-speaking children's exposure to the English language as it is the main language for many devices and applications (Al-Harthi, 2014). Another explanation might be the positive parental attitudes towards learning English at an early age as the current study found how mothers' beliefs about learning a foreign language influenced their children's views. In addition, this study showed that the participant children's engagement with digital literacies at home was transferred to the preschool

setting where children demonstrated their familiarity with digital devices such as computers and mobile phones.

Viewed through a socio-cultural lens, findings related to children's perspectives on their literacy learning can be also referred to Moll's (1992) term "funds of knowledge". This contributes to the growing body of international research (Pahl and Allan, 2011; Harris, 2015) on children's perspectives on their literacy learning. One of these studies was the work of Pahl and Allan (2011) that investigated children's perspectives of literacy practices in a library setting in Britain. In their study, the researchers argued for the crucial role of the context in exploring children's views of their literacy practices. My study's finding also extends the few studies that explored children's perspectives on their learning in the Middle East. One such study was that of Khoja (2015), which found that Saudi preschoolers' views of gender and learner identities were shaped by the Saudi context. Accordingly, the current research findings and the reviewed literature have provided further evidence of the crucial role of children's socio-cultural contexts in constructing their beliefs on literacy learning.

The above paragraphs show how this study has extended the concept of *funds of knowledge* by providing evidence from a very different context, the Saudi cultural context. Although my study builds on the concept of funds of knowledge that was introduced in Moll's (1992) seminal work undertaken in the USA context, it differs in several aspects. In my study, children's funds of knowledge was not explored through home visits by teachers and researchers, as it was in Moll's study, but was identified through mothers' interviews and children's mind maps conducted only by the researcher. Additionally, in

contrast to Moll's work, the children involved in my study came from "advantaged families" whereas the families involved in Moll's study were disadvantaged and marginalised.

8.2.4 Question 4: In what ways are the preschoolers' Arabic early literacy development linked to their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity?

This section discusses findings related to children's Arabic early literacy development and its link to their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity. This study provided clear evidence of how the preschool as a social institution framed teaching and learning in culturally and religiously appropriate ways. It was mentioned earlier in this chapter that, as part of adapting the Curriculum to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture, five objectives related to religion and moral education were added to the main objectives of the Curriculum, some modifications were also made to children's books, and some culturally relevant artefacts and print related to religious literacy were incorporated into the classroom context. Chapter 6 also contained discussion on how the Saudi culture that is grounded in Islam framed educational practices in this classroom; for instance, incorporating religious literacy (reading the Qur'an and the Islamic supplications) as a daily practice, and using religiously appropriate ways to greet the children. Hence, the children in turn were immersed in this learning environment, and through their participation in these routines and practices they negotiate and reproduce their religio-cultural identities.

Chapter 7 provided insights into children's early literacy learning in the observed classroom. The current study found that despite the bilingual learning context in the observed classroom, there was clear evidence that the whole

thrust of the children's preferences and literacy learning was towards Arabic more than English. In particular, this research found that early literacy learning is linked to the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture as not only the participant children showed their preferences to read the Qur'an and the Arabic stories, but also the interviewed mothers indicated that reciting the Qur'an and reading Arabic stories were common literacy practices at home.

In the light of the above findings, I argue that the religious literacy events such as reading the Qur'an or saying particular supplications have a socio-cultural importance to the Saudi preschoolers who live in a society built on the Islamic principles. This supports the argument that cultural interest is a crucial motivation for reading and children tend to read stories that reflect their language and culture (Palmer et al., 2007; Rowe, 2013). This finding also can be interpreted in the light of Gregory's (2008) argument that children's learning to read in formal educational settings is impacted by their out-of-school reading experiences and cultural expectations. Moreover, this finding adds to the knowledge offered by previous research that children become literacy learners through engaging in literacy activities that are valued by their own culture and society (Tolentino and Lawson, 2015).

Further evidence of how Saudi preschoolers' early literacy learning links with their cultural identity appeared in their tendency to write in Arabic more than in English (Chapter 7); this was despite the complex orthography of the Arabic language. This finding tallies with what existing literature indicated that children's choices of using a particular language in their writing reflect their cultural identities as they are influenced by literacy practices that are valued in their socio-cultural contexts (Bloodgood, 1999; Rowe, 2013). In this respect,

Rowe (2013) also added that learning to write is not only a cognitive process but also an expression of cultural identities. This finding is consistent with socio-cultural perspectives that view writing not only as a mechanical process, but also as a socio-cultural practice (Welsch et al., 2003; Fisher, 2010; Kenner and Gregory, 2013). In addition, this finding supports the argument that literacy practices are means for shaping children's identities (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Rowe, 2013).

Furthermore, my findings showed that the vernacular forms of Arabic have not only played a central role in children's learning but have also reflected children's cultural identities. In other words, through their use of the vernacular Arabic in their literacy learning, children construct, develop and produce their cultural identity. For instance, findings in Chapters 5 and 7 illuminated how the cultural identities of the participant children appeared in their use of vernacular Arabic as a predominant form of oral communication at home and the classroom context. In the light of this finding, I add my voice to past research that espoused the value of preserving the vernacular forms of Arabic as these strongly linked with Arabic-speaking children's national identities and culture (Tibi and McLeod, 2014). Tibi and McLeod (2014) argued that in the Emirati society which has been influenced by globalisation and language diversity it is crucial to maintain the Arabic language in its various forms in order to sustain the national identity and the Emirati culture.

Hence, the findings discussed above support the findings in international literature that literacy learning has a strong link to children's identities and culture. The above findings also support the view of identity as a social and cultural construct. In the area of Arabic early literacy, the current study

generates more thoughts in how Arabic early literacy development links to children's cultural identities, an area that has been rarely discussed (Shaban and Al-Awidi, 2013; Tibi and McLeod, 2014).

8.3   Reflection on the main research question

The above section discussed the key findings of this study in relation to the research sub-questions. In the light of grounded evidence identified herein, the following section highlights my reflections on the main research question:

How can literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum that were designed for a different linguistic and cultural context contribute to Arabic early literacy development for preschoolers in Saudi Arabia?

I found that a number of the adopted literacy practices in the Creative Curriculum make a significant contribution to promoting Arabic early literacy. However, the study showed that other literacy practices were adapted or transformed. In other words, some literacy practices were adapted to comply with the linguistic features of the Arabic language and the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture; it was also showed that some literacy practices were transformed influenced by contextual factors such as the Saudi practitioners' cultural assumptions about teaching and learning. My findings have also provided clear evidence that the participant preschoolers' Arabic early literacy was strongly linked to their Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity. In the light of these findings and concurring with the existing literature, I contend that early literacy learning and teaching norms in this preschool were constructed by the Saudi socio-cultural context. This suggests, therefore, that early childhood curricula and early literacy pedagogies cannot be designed in

isolation from their socio-cultural context and the cultural identity of the learners.

A further finding was that Saudi preschoolers' early literacy learning is a social practice and a multimodal meaning-making activity that is embedded in their socio-cultural contexts. This offers insights into what counts as early literacy and how Saudi children become literate in a rapidly changing digital era.

8.4 Theoretical and methodological contributions

This section illuminates the theoretical and methodological contributions of the current work. It was noted in the literature review chapter that this research was driven by a number of gaps in the existing literature. In this section, I highlight the contribution that this study has made to the field by outlining its findings that extend existing knowledge, and that fill a number of current gaps in the literature. I also illuminate the novel aspects of my study. Indeed, the originality of this research lies in its topic, the prolonged fieldwork period, the use of participatory research techniques with children, the extension of some socio-cultural theoretical concepts, and the context in which it took place. To ensure that the findings of this research are widely disseminated, I intend to publish it in both English and Arabic.

As I discussed in section 8.2.3, this study contributes to socio-cultural perspectives of early literacy learning by supporting what past research has confirmed – that children develop their early literacy through several social and cultural mediators. It also provides supporting evidence from the Saudi socio-cultural context. In addition, this study extends theory by broadening our understanding of the concept of mediation. My particular contribution to theory

is illuminating three significant forms of mediation in developing Arabic early literacy; these are

- religious,
- linguistic (vernacular Arabic), and
- digital.

In the area of Arabic early literacy, this study is one of the first to highlight the important role of religious literacy as a cultural mediator for Arabic early literacy learning in a Saudi Arabian preschool, a socio-cultural context that highly values religious literacy, reading the holy Quran and the Islamic supplications, which are rich sources for the Standard Arabic.

Another significant contribution to the area of Arabic early literacy is this study's exploration of the significant role of vernacular Arabic as a linguistic mediator for children's Arabic early literacy and bi-literacy learning. The findings of this study have gone some way towards enhancing our knowledge of the relationship between Standard Arabic and vernacular Arabic and how both forms play a crucial role in children's language and literacy development, an area that has not fully investigated (Levin et al., 2008).

A growing body of literature has emphasised the important role of digital tools as cultural meditational tools for literacy learning (Beam and Williams, 2015; Dinehart, 2015; Kontovourki et al., 2017). However, this study has made a unique contribution to the field of Arabic early literacy by providing clear evidence on how digital tools are crucial cultural mediators for learning Arabic early literacy, particularly with the complex nature of the Arabic orthography.

This study has also made another significant theoretical contribution by, for the first time, extending the application of the funds of knowledge as a theoretical

construct to the Saudi socio-cultural context. My study showed that the knowledge that Saudi preschoolers developed from their families and society has a significant influence on their early literacy learning. Although past international research investigated the funds of knowledge through visiting children's homes (Moll et al., 1992; Cremin et al., 2012), this research adds new ways of exploring children's funds of knowledge through carrying out mind-map sessions with the participant children and interviews with their mothers.

The findings of this study support and extend the knowledge gained from past research in the area of importing educational curricula. Although few studies, mostly conducted in China, have focused on the notion of importing educational ideas (Li, 2004; Vong, 2005; Cheng, 2006; Grdeshaber, 2006; Li et al., 2011; Li et al., 2012), only one study (Li et al., 2012) investigated this area in relation to early literacy pedagogies. In addition, the review of the literature indicated that, to date, no research has investigated this area in the Arab world including Saudi Arabia. Acknowledging this gap in the literature, my study has not only supported what past research confirmed in this area, but also has provided contextualised findings on how early literacy pedagogy, which was designed for a different language (English) and was developed in a different culture (US), was implemented in a new context that varied in language (Arabic) and culture (Saudi Arabian Islamic culture). This study also presented a detailed description of the process involved in importing the Creative Curriculum from one cultural context to another, which has not been provided by past research either at the international or the local levels. Indeed, this can be considered another aspect that demonstrates the originality of this study.

My contention in this research is that early childhood curricula and early literacy pedagogies need to be locally produced to assimilate the linguistic and cultural features of the Arabic language and the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. By this, I do not mean that the provision of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia is not encouraged to share and benefit from the successful experiences of the international community. However, it should design its own curricula drawing on the successful international experiences that fit with the Saudi society and culture. In brief, instead of *transplanting* educational curricula, they need to be *planted* and developed in the context where they will be implemented.

In addition, this study has made significant methodological contributions to the area of Arabic early literacy research. Existing literature indicated that there have been very few attempts to investigate Arabic early literacy using the ethnographic approach (Myhill, 2014); hence, the current work contributes to this area of research by using an ethnographic approach that afforded us a deeper look at the topic being studied and allowed the exploration of the cultural explanations of the studied phenomenon from the insiders' perspectives. Moreover, the current study is considered a contribution to the research in Saudi Arabia's educational institutions where most of the research conducted used quantitative methods (Al-Sultan, 2008). This is also one of the first studies, in the Middle East, that involves children actively by hearing their voices through the use of participatory research techniques – mind maps. This latter methodological contribution demonstrates another aspect of the novelty of this work.

Following on from the existing studies in the area of early literacy, this research contributes to and extends the findings of these studies by offering further evidence from the Saudi cultural context. The review of the literature indicated that limited research has been conducted on Arabic early literacy compared to the large body of research that has been taken place in literacy in different languages. In particular, only limited research has investigated Arabic early literacy from socio-cultural perspectives (Aram et al., 2013a; Aram et al., 2013b; Korat et al., 2014; Tibi and McLeod, 2014). In Saudi Arabia, where the current work took place, the review of the literature identified only a few studies that were conducted on early literacy practices in preschool education (Taibah and Haynes, 2011; Al-Azraqi, 2014; Al-Qaryouti et al., 2016). In this sense, this study contributes to the field of Arabic early literacy by investigating the phenomenon through a socio-cultural perspective to enhance our understanding of how Arabic-speaking children develop their early literacy in a preschool classroom. In this respect, the current study also provides insights into early literacy learning at home, an area that has not been given great attention in the Arab world (Aram et al., 2013a; 2013b; Tibi and McLeod, 2014).

The influence of specific preschool curricula on early literacy development has not been fully researched (Lonigan et al., 2011). In light of this void, this study provided detailed description of literacy practices within the framework of the Creative Curriculum and how these practices contribute to Arabic early literacy development in a Saudi Arabian preschool setting.

Finally, this research adds to the existing international studies that investigated the relationship between literacy, culture and identity (Tobin et al., 1989;

Korat, 2001; Li, 2004; Grdeshaber, 2006; Cheng, 2006; Compton-Lilly, 2006; Wong, 2008; Rao et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011), how Arabic early literacy learning links to the Saudi preschoolers' Islamic culture and identity, an area that, to date, has been overlooked by researchers in the Arab countries.

8.5   Implications

Since this research is ethnographic in nature, the aim was to gain a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon instead of generalising the findings. In recognising this, the current work provided detailed description of the research context in order to help other researchers think about the possibility of the transferability of the findings of this research to other contexts. In the light of the research findings, the following section provides a number of implications for policymakers and curriculum designers, preschool administration, teachers, parents, and researchers.

For policymakers and curriculum designers, the current study offers several important implications. This study has provided clear evidence on how teaching and learning in a Saudi Arabian preschool classroom were constructed by the Saudi socio-cultural context. My findings corroborate implications offered by past research (David et al., 2001; Li et al., 2012) that, in the case of importing educational ideas, several considerations needed to be taken into account such as educational management system, teachers' education and training programmes, teachers' educational beliefs, and parental expectations. Since the Creative Curriculum was applied as a part of the Comprehensive Project to Develop Preschool Education by *Tatweer*, this finding not only encourages policymakers and curricula designers in the Tatweer project and the MOE to reassess the value of importing educational curricula, but also may

give them a better understanding about the significance of designing early childhood curricula and early literacy pedagogies in the light of the Saudi Arabian socio-cultural context and learners' cultural identity.

For curriculum designers in the area of Arabic early literacy, findings herein suggest that much more attention needed to be given to the special features of the Arabic language, such as diglossia and the visual complexity of the Arabic orthography, the aspects that have, to date, not been thoroughly considered in designing Arabic early literacy curricula. In addition, one of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is the vital role that religious, vernacular Arabic and digital literacies play in developing Arabic early literacy. Hence, this finding may help in developing teaching pedagogies that better contribute to the Arabic language and the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture through considering religious literacy, the vernacular Arabic and digital tools as crucial cultural mediators for children's Arabic early literacy learning.

Furthermore, findings of this research hold critical implications for policymakers in the MOE in relation to preschoolers' bi-literacy learning. In particular, since this study found a positive attitude towards learning English at an early age among the participant preschoolers and their mothers, this study advocates that policymakers rethink the inclusion of teaching English as a foreign language in the Saudi public preschools as educational policies need to comply with the contemporary needs for children living in a digitised, multilingual, and an interconnected globe.

For preschool administration and trainers, findings of this study also have important implications. The findings support the implications from past studies in the case of applying a new curriculum or new early literacy pedagogy on

how crucial it is to provide well-planned training programmes that meet teachers' professional needs (Li et al., 2012). However, my study posits that these training courses not only need to focus on the implementation of the curriculum but also need to address the theoretical principles underpinning this curriculum and how they are implemented in daily practice.

In addition, my research findings have important implications for teachers in Saudi Arabian preschools that may help in improving their early literacy practices. It has been shown how early literacy is a multimodal meaning-making activity where children rely on several semiotic tools. According to this finding, this research extends the existing calls in the literature for preschool teachers to view early literacy beyond a set of skills and adopt a much broader understanding that views early literacy as a meaning-making construct, where children develop early literacy by using a variety of communication tools in their socio-cultural contexts. When Saudi teachers understand this, they will be able to provide early literacy activities that rely on multimodal literacy tools such as language(s), drawing, play and digital tools.

Furthermore, clear evidence has been provided that early literacy is a social practice that is embedded in children's socio-cultural contexts where children develop their early literacy through several social and cultural mediators. In recognising this, Saudi teachers are encouraged to apply early literacy pedagogies that characterise the Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. This study also advocates preschool teachers to consider the important role they have as crucial social mediators for children's early literacy learning. They are also encouraged to consider the significant role that children's peers play in such learning and to consider the funds of knowledge that children bring from their

wider socio-cultural context and how this knowledge influences their learning in the classroom. In addition, Saudi preschool teachers could learn from the new insights provided by this study that raise the importance of considering religious literacy as a rich opportunity not only to practice worship but also to develop Arabic language and literacy.

Saudi parents may also benefit from the findings of this study. This research has shed light on early literacy practices within the context of Saudi preschoolers' homes. In particular it has shown how mothers and siblings served as social mediators for children's early literacy at home. In light of this, these findings may enhance the Saudi parents' understanding not only about how young children develop their early literacy at home, but also about the significant role of parental mediation and siblings' interaction in children's early literacy learning and how it affects children's school learning.

This study has significant implications for researchers in the area of early childhood studies. The current study revealed how the participant children were able to express their own perspectives on learning through using child-friendly methods such as mind maps. Hence, this leads to calls to researchers in the field of early childhood education to contribute to this line of research by involving children actively in their research through using participatory research techniques.

8.6   Limitations and future research

Like any other research a number of limitations needed to be acknowledged. First, although this ethnographic research investigated the studied phenomenon through the lens of the following insiders - teachers, preschool director, children and their mothers - involving more participants such as policymakers,

trainers, and other teachers might provide more comprehensive perspectives. Second, because this study took place in just one classroom, richer data could be obtained if other classrooms in the preschool were also observed as part of the ethnographic research. This would deepen our understanding of early literacy learning and teaching practices in this preschool. Third, although this study used mind maps as a participatory research method to hear children's voice, using other child-friendly methods, such as photographs taken by children, as well as their drawings and scrapbooks, could also provide additional perspectives. Finally, this study explored to some degree home literacy practices through interviews with the participant mothers and mind maps sessions with the children. Observations in the children's homes could provide deeper insights.

My work has paved the way for future research in the area of early childhood education, particularly in the area of Arabic early literacy. Researchers could investigate to what extent and in what ways the imported curriculum may have changed the Saudi practitioners' beliefs about teaching and learning in this preschool at an institutional level. The answer to this question is important in helping us assess the benefits and values behind importing educational curricula. In addition, questions regarding the relationship between teachers' beliefs, their agency and their literacy teaching practices remain to be answered. The investigation of this latter area is crucial to deepen our knowledge about the relationship between teachers' perceptions and their pedagogic practices. Further research may also explore how the different forms of Standard Arabic and vernacular Arabic contribute to children's Arabic early literacy and bi-literacy learning. Future research in this area could generate

interesting insights into the best pedagogic practices for Arabic early literacy learning.

By reaching this final section of my thesis, I find myself reflecting on all the initial questions and concerns that drove this research, as discussed in the opening chapter. In particular, I recalled my earlier questions about Western theories, imported early literacy pedagogies, and how they could be applied in Saudi preschools, a different linguistic and cultural context. Indeed, this research journey has not only answered my questions but has also sufficiently aroused my curiosity to pursue further research in the area of early childhood curricula and early literacy pedagogies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Observational field notes form

Observation No: 10   *Date:* 9 April 2014   *Time:* 8.30-11.30

Time	Description	Reflection
8.30- 9.30	Time for interest areas. Leen and Nawaf were in the Library area. Nawaf was in front of the whiteboard, wrote his name in Arabic, then erased the letter (أ) and asked Leen, "What is the word now?" Then he said "Nawf". Another child joined them, took the marker, and wrote Faris' name in Arabic from left to right. Leen took the white board and sat on the floor. When I passed near the area, Leen said, "See how I can write the word (حيوانات) (animals)." She wrote the word with separated letters. Then said, "No, it is not right." I said, "Let's search for this word in the bookshelf." Leen browsed some books then said, "I did not find it, could I have your mobile phone?" I gave her my mobile, she opened Google and typed the word (حيوانات) (animals), then said, "Like this". The English teacher was in the Cooking area with a group of children. At 9:30 the English teacher sang the "clean up" song. Children replaced the toys on the shelves and cleaned up the classroom.	How do children learn from each other? How do peers influence each other's learning? What role do the digital tools play in facilitating children's early literacy and especially in Arabic with its complex orthography? Today, during the reading aloud which was led by the English teacher, children were interacting using vernacular Arabic with English: what role does the vernacular Arabic plays in children's bi-literacy learning?
9.30- 10.00	Children sat on the rug to move to the next period, the snack time. Children lined up to wash their hands. Then, each child returned with his/her lunch box, took a tray and had a seat. The Arabic teacher and the children together said the Islamic supplication for having a meal. By 10.00 am the children lined up to go to the playground.	

11.00- 11.30	At 11.00 am, the children returned from the playground, and sat on the rug for the Reading Aloud time. The English teacher (the lead teacher today) held a book titled "Buildings" and asked "What is a building?" Leen: "Can I tell them in Arabic?" (Leen explained the question in vernacular Arabic). Faris: "A place with workers and people come and see the house" (in vernacular Arabic). The teacher: "Shelter, what does shelter mean?" The teacher: pointed to one of the illustrations in the book and asked "What is this place?" A child: "A place that has stories." The teacher said: "Yes, a library. The teacher pointed to a photo of a shopping centre, and asked, "What is this?" Leen: "Start with (sh)." No body answered. The teacher: "Leen, say the first sound in Arabic." Leen: "(s) (Souq)." By 11.30 the Reading Aloud finished and children moved to the next literacy event, the small groups. During this period, children were divided into two small groups, one with the Arabic teacher and the other with the English teacher.	

Appendix 2- Interview schedule (Teachers)

First interview

<u>Personal background:</u>

Qualification:

Experience:

Professional development (in-service training):

View of early literacy

- In your opinion, how does the child (preschooler) become literate?
- How do you think young children develop early literacy?
- In what way(s) do you think children should develop early literacy?
- What factors impact children's literacy development?
- As your classroom is bilingual, do you think that children vary in their literacy learning in each language? Example?

Teaching practices

- What is your role in young children's learning in the area of literacy development?
- What literacy concepts do you think are most important to focus on in preschool?
- What curriculum experiences do you provide to promote literacy development?
- What resources are available for children in your classroom that develop early literacy?
- In a preschool classroom there is a variety of daily activities; some are described as "teacher-directed" and others are described" child-initiated". What do you think about each of these activities? In your classroom, which category do the predominant activities fall under? Which has a greater impact on the child's literacy learning?
- Can you describe your plan in teaching early literacy? What are the key literacy teaching activities?
- Do you feel you are free to apply the teaching pedagogy that you believe in? How did you develop the perspective you have about early literacy?
- Are there any obstacles that you face in your literacy practices?

Reading aloud

- From your point of view, what are the key aims of the reading-aloud period?
- Are the books that are read in this period chosen previously by the teacher (within the weekly plan) or could the children choose the books?
- Are the books that are read in the reading-aloud period available for the children in the library area?
- As the reading-aloud period is presented in your classroom in both languages, Arabic and English, have you noticed any differences related to the language being used? Example?

Parents' involvement

- What role do you think parents play in children's literacy learning? Can you describe the parents' role in children's learning in your classroom?
- In what ways is information shared between you and parents about children's literacy learning? Example?
- Have you found a relationship between the child's performance and his/her parents' (family) background? Can you give an example?
- In the library area, there is "a story tree". Would you please elaborate about this activity?

Appendix 3 - Information sheet and informed consent

Participant Information Sheet (Teachers)

Title of Study:

Implementing Early Childhood Curriculum in a Different Context: A Study of an Arabic Early Literacy Model in a Saudi Arabian Preschool.

I would like to invite you to take part in the above named study but before you decide, please read the following information.

What is the purpose of this study?

There is a remarkable growth all over the world in early childhood care, and the enrollment rates of children who attend early childhood care centres are increasing dramatically; subsequently there have been calls in the literature that early childhood settings have a crucial impact on early literacy development. Early literacy experiences have a significant influence on a child's confidence and independence, and other major skills that are fundamental throughout life.

The outcomes of this study are expected to contribute to the development of preschool curricula with a particular focus on promoting early literacy skills for Arabic speakers. It is hoped that this research will offer a deeper understanding about early literacy acquisition in Arabic and how to apply literacy practices that are appropriate developmentally, linguistically and culturally in preschool education in Saudi Arabia.

Who is doing the study?

The study will be conducted by Hanadi Al-Othman, a PhD student at Goldsmiths University of London, the UK, and the External Joint Supervision Program (EJSP) at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia. The research will be supervised by Professor Eve Gregory, Dr John Jessel from Goldsmiths, and Dr Azza Khalil from King Saud University.

Who is being asked to participate?

Participants of the research will include a number of preschool teachers, pre-schoolers aged between 4 and 6 years from both genders, and a number of children's mothers.

What is the expected period for conducting of the study?

As the current study is following the ethnographic approach, the main data collection will take about three terms starting from the school year 2013-2014 to the end of the school year 2014-2015.

What will be involved if I take part in this study?

The primary research methods are participant observation, teachers' interviews and gathering relevant documents and artefacts. Participants will be observed throughout the daily routine in the classroom and will be invited to an interview with the researcher. In addition, some relevant situations will be photographed and videotaped without your personal appearance, taking into account your personal and social privacy.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of taking part?

Although there is no direct advantage to taking part, your participation is essential for achieving the research aims in understanding the early literacy practices from the teachers' perspective. In addition, your participation will contribute highly to the development of early literacy practices in preschool settings in Saudi Arabia.

Can I choose to not participate or withdraw from the study at any time?

As your participation is voluntary, you have the right to not participate or to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without prejudice. If you have agreed to participate in the study and later the study is changed in any way, which could affect your decision to continue to participate, you will be informed of the changes and you may be asked to sign a new consent form.

Will the information I give be kept confidential?

Yes, data will be accessed only by the researcher and the supervision team. In addition, data will be used only for research purposes and will be stored safely and destroyed after finalising the study. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity for your name and the institution will be highly considered during the data collection and writing up of the thesis.

What will happen to the results of the study?

After collecting and analysing the data (data will be anonymised) the results of this study will be reported in the researcher's PhD thesis. The results may also be submitted for publication in an academic journal or presented at a conference. All participants have the right to know any information about the research before, during and after the data collection. If you would like to view the results, a copy of the study findings will be sent to you.

Who has reviewed this study?

The study has been reviewed and approved by the research committee of the department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. Also, approval has been obtained from the higher authority of the school administration (the research setting) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

If you agree to participate, and would like more information or have any questions or concerns about the study, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher, Hanadi ALothman: hfalothman@ksu.edu.sa or the research supervisors Professor Eve Gregory: e.gregory@gold.ac.uk, Dr John Jessel: J.Jessel@gold.ac.uk, and Dr Azza Khalil: dr.azzakhalil@gmail.com, who will be happy to provide you with more information.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Participant consent form (Teachers)

Title of Study:

Implementing Early Childhood Curriculum in a Different Context: A Study of an Arabic Early Literacy Model in a Saudi Arabian Preschool

This form should be completed by the participant herself

Statement	Agreement
I have read and understood the participant information sheet.	
I have received satisfactory answers to all of my questions.	
I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and without providing any reasons	
I understand that all provided information will be confidential, only accessed by the research team.	
I understand that data will be stored anonymously and securely, and will be destroyed following completion of the study.	
I understand that any provided information may be included in published documents but that all data will be anonymised.	
I agree to participate in this study.	
Name of Participant	Date
Signature	
Name of Researcher: Date	
Signature	

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Appendix 4 - Children's consent letter

Dear ………………

I am interested in how you learn in your classroom and the different lessons and other activities that you have. I am specially interested in the Creative Curriculum.

I would like to learn more about your play and learning, so that I can help other children and people who work in schools. Thus, I would like you to take part in my study. To be able to do this, I would like to visit your classroom, and watch and join in with you in some of your activities.

I would like to participate in Ms. Hanadi's study.

Ms. Hanadi may observe me and take photos/videos of me and my work.

Agree	Disagree

The Researcher: Hanadi Alothman   The child:

*The letter will be presented orally to the child.

Appendix 5 -The Creative Curriculum learning objectives

Objectives for Development & Learning

Social–Emotional

1. Regulates own emotions and behaviors
   a. Manages feelings
   b. Follows limits and expectations
   c. Takes care of own needs appropriately

2. Establishes and sustains positive relationships
   a. Forms relationships with adults
   b. Responds to emotional cues
   c. Interacts with peers
   d. Makes friends

3. Participates cooperatively and constructively in group situations
   a. Balances needs and rights of self and others
   b. Solves social problems

Physical

4. Demonstrates traveling skills

5. Demonstrates balancing skills

6. Demonstrates gross-motor manipulative skills

7. Demonstrates fine-motor strength and coordination
   a. Uses fingers and hands
   b. Uses writing and drawing tools

Language

8. Listens to and understands increasingly complex language
   a. Comprehends language
   b. Follows directions

9. Uses language to express thoughts and needs
   a. Uses an expanding expressive vocabulary
   b. Speaks clearly
   c. Uses conventional grammar
   d. Tells about another time or place

10. Uses appropriate conversational and other communication skills
    a. Engages in conversations
    b. Uses social rules of language

Cognitive

11. Demonstrates positive approaches to learning
    a. Attends and engages
    b. Persists
    c. Solves problems
    d. Shows curiosity and motivation
    e. Shows flexibility and inventiveness in thinking

12. Remembers and connects experiences
    a. Recognizes and recalls
    b. Makes connections

13. Uses classification skills

14. Uses symbols and images to represent something not present
    a. Thinks symbolically
    b. Engages in sociodramatic play

Literacy

15. Demonstrates phonological awareness
    a. Notices and discriminates rhyme
    b. Notices and discriminates alliteration
    c. Notices and discriminates smaller and smaller units of sound

16. Demonstrates knowledge of the alphabet
    a. Identifies and names letters
    b. Uses letter–sound knowledge

17. Demonstrates knowledge of print and its uses
    a. Uses and appreciates books
    b. Uses print concepts

18. Comprehends and responds to books and other texts
    a. Interacts during read-alouds and book conversations
    b. Uses emergent reading skills
    c. Retells stories

19. Demonstrates emergent writing skills
    a. Writes name
    b. Writes to convey meaning

Objectives for Development & Learning, continued

Mathematics

20. Uses number concepts and operations
    a. Counts
    b. Quantifies
    c. Connects numerals with their quantities

21. Explores and describes spatial relationships and shapes
    a. Understands spatial relationships
    b. Understands shapes

22. Compares and measures

23. Demonstrates knowledge of patterns

Science and Technology

24. Uses scientific inquiry skills

25. Demonstrates knowledge of the characteristics of living things

26. Demonstrates knowledge of the physical properties of objects and materials

27. Demonstrates knowledge of Earth's environment

28. Uses tools and other technology to perform tasks

Social Studies

29. Demonstrates knowledge about self

30. Shows basic understanding of people and how they live

31. Explores change related to familiar people or places

32. Demonstrates simple geographic knowledge

The Arts

33. Explores the visual arts

34. Explores musical concepts and expression

35. Explores dance and movement concepts

36. Explores drama through actions and language

English Language Acquisition

37. Demonstrates progress in listening to and understanding English

38. Demonstrates progress in speaking English

Appendix 6 - Intentional teaching cards (Literacy)

LL34
Library

Alphabet Books

What You Do

Materials: books about the alphabet; construction paper; markers; alphabet cards

Choose alphabet books that feature one letter with appealing illustrations on each page, such as *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin Jr., *Build it A to Z* by Trish Holland, and *Gathering the Sun* by Alma Flor Ada.

Invite the children to join you in reading a book. Before you begin, talk about the letters and words on the title page.

"Let's look at the letters in the title. Here is a curved letter. It's a *C*, just like the first letter in your name, Caroline."

2. **Read the book one time through to familiarize the children with the letters and illustrations on each page. Then read it again. As you do, pause to point out letters to the children. Invite them to look for specific letters on each page. Talk about the features of the letters they find.**

"This letter looks like a circle. It's an *O*."

3. **Invite the children to continue exploring the letters in the book.**

"I see three *M*s on this page, and here are two *O*s next to each other."

4. **Explain to the children that the book will be in the Library area for them to read during choice time.**

Objective 16
Demonstrates knowledge of the alphabet

Related Objectives: 1, 3, 7, 8, 9, 11

Including All Children

- Add texture, such as sandpaper, to the letters on the alphabet cards. Use a contrasting color for the background.
- Offer large magnetized letters for a child to handle, feel, and match to the letter on a page of a book.
- Provide hand-over-hand support for a child to trace each letter with a finger.
- Ask pairs of children to take turns matching letters in a book to those on alphabet cards.
- Address children by name so they know they are being asked to participate.**
- When you think children are ready, begin challenging them to use English instead of nonverbal communication.**

الهجائية

كتب الحروف

ما الذي عليك فعله؟

ركن الكتابة

درس 3م

الوحدة السادسة عشر

الأهداف من المفردة