

*The Idea of Autonomy in Child-Centered Education: The  
Preschool in Saudi Arabia as a Case Study*

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**Abstract**

The Saudi Self-Learning Curriculum for Kindergarten is based on Western models of child-centered education. It is a reformed curriculum that was designed within the frameworks provided by the UNCRC, Education for All (EFA), Millennium Development Goals Program and Saudi Arabia's National Development Plans (UNCCSF 2012). These reforms have created the need for pedagogical practices that incorporate an awareness of children's rights (UNICEF 2014). In order to comply with Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC the main aim of the preschool environment should be on working with children in ways that maximize their autonomy: their right to be 'heard' 'seen' and 'included' in decisions that affect them (UNCRC). In Saudi Arabia both the teachers and the children are embedded in a social system based on religious beliefs and principles and social hierarchy. Autonomous learning is based on social freedoms and participatory rights. Based on documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews in three preschools in Makkah, this paper argues that many teachers have found it difficult to comply with the Ministry of Education guidelines and service rules. Whilst 'choice' is understood as a theoretical concept in self-learning, it seems not to play a role in the classroom. Teachers and children are 'invisible in policy' in the sense that they have no say in the decisions affecting them (Kilderry 2013, p: 242). Thus the philosophy and objectives of Western child-centered education appear to be in tension with the Saudi concept of self-learning.

Keywords: Autonomy, children's rights, curriculum reform, policy, religion, culture, pedagogy

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## **Introduction**

### **Education in a global context**

According to Heckman (2006) 'Early childhood education and development is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice, and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large' (cited in SESRIC, 2013, p: 1).

The above quotation indicates that early childhood development which includes early year's care and education is a vitally important sector in developing countries, not only in terms of the benefits it brings in health, education and social welfare but also as a tool for promoting social justice and economic productivity. UNESCO uses the term Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to refer to all developmental services that are provided in an organized way for children during the period from birth until a child begins formal schooling, usually on entry to primary school at age six or seven. Today, the provision of education takes place within a globalized context. In 1990, the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) proposed that learning begins at birth (SESRIC, 2013, p: 1). In order to acknowledge the importance of learning from birth, in 2000, the UNESCO-Dakar World Education Forum agreed a Framework for Action on specific targets and goals related to 'Education for All' (SESRIC, 2013, p: 1).

Education policy in Saudi Arabia is designed to meet the goals and objectives set out by UNESCO in the EFA program and the Ninth Development Plan (2010-2014) (SESRIC, 2013, p: 1). According to Al-Shaer (2007)

The policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with regard to early childhood education is informed by the conceptual framework of early childhood and is based upon care, play and education, with attention given to the qualities of excellence, fairness and effectiveness (2007, Ministry of Higher Education, 2010).

However, Saudi Arabia is a 'non-harmonized country' because it signed up to the United Nations Convention on Children's Rights (UNCRC) on 26 January 1996 subject to the proviso that none of its recommendations should come into conflict with Islamic law. At least 70 States Parties including Saudi Arabia have entered reservations to the Convention. Many of these reservations attempt to subject the Convention under various religious, cultural or traditional observations. This situation highlights the fact that tensions exist between the universality of rights claims and the specificity of cultural context. Developing countries must achieve a balance between the goals of the international framework which are rights-based and the specific socio-cultural aims of the society.

The Saudi Self-Learning Curriculum for Kindergarten is a reformed curriculum that was designed within the framework provided by the UNCRC, Education for All (EFA) Millennium Development Goals Program and Saudi Arabia's National Development Plans (United Nations Common Country Strategic Framework [UNCCSF], 2012). One specific area of difficulty concerns the concept of children's rights as set out in the UNCRC. Article 12 relates to the child's opinion and it

emphasizes the child's right to have his or her voice heard in all matters affecting him/her. Article 13 relates to freedom of expression and it emphasizes the child's right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds in any chosen medium (United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990). In order to comply with Article 12 and 13 of the UNCRC the main aim of the preschool environment should be on working with children in ways that maximize their *autonomy* (their capacity to develop and participate) using diverse forms of expression. The etymology of the word autonomy derives from the Greek word *autonomia* which means the 'the condition or quality of self-governance or self-direction' (Castle, 2003, p: 4). The current curriculum in Saudi Arabia dates back to 2006 and it represents efforts by the Saudi Ministry of Education to meet its obligations under the Convention whilst remaining socio-culturally specific. According to Gahwaji (2006) these reforms were intended to initiate a shift from traditional methods of teaching towards more child-centered practices in order to provide more high quality experiences for children. This comment highlights another area of tension because as Gahwaji points out, the 'teacher-directed and child-initiated' approach which is synonymous with high-quality childcare is indicative of a 'trend' that 'reflects a rights-based approach to working with children' (2006, p: 70). However, the concept of 'rights' is not part of the prevailing framework of discourse in Saudi Arabia. The concept of 'right' occurs within a moral framework of right and wrong behavior or beliefs and not in association with political rights and freedoms.

## **Two competing paradigms**

Within a Western paradigm of education the aim is to maximize the autonomy of children whereas in Saudi Arabia the aim of early childhood education is 'to prepare children through a righteous upbringing, to be resilient in the face of life's diverse experiences' (Nyland and Alfayez, 2012, p: 396). 'Islam is religion that informs every part of daily life' and the fundamental aim of all educational provision is to teach children about Islamic beliefs and practices (Gahwaji, 2006, p: 24). Government educational policy sets out the basis on which education is provided which derives from Islam 'the religion of knowledge and learning' (Gahwaji, 2006, p: 24). The most important foundation of education is as follows:

To have faith in Allah as a God, in Islam as a religion, and in Mohammed (peace be upon him) as a prophet and a messenger (Educational policy, Article 2, Ministry of Education, (MOE) 1976).

The objective of education: understanding Islam correctly and completely, implanting and spreading the Islamic doctrine, providing students with Islamic values and instructions, acquiring knowledge along with different skills, developing constructive behavioral tendencies; advancing society economically, socially, culturally, and qualifying members in order to become useful in the construction of their society (Educational Policy Article 28, MOE, 1976).

Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state in which *Shari'ah* (Islamic Holy Law) functions as both constitution and legal framework (Sedgewick, 2001, p: 1). The *Wahhabi* interpretation of Islam is the official doctrine and it is rigidly enforced. The literary antecedents are the great Islamic scholars such as Ibn Sina (1058-1111) and Al-

Ghazali (1058-1111) In the Islamic teachings (the Hadith or sayings from the Prophet Mohammad) there is the view that young children should be listened to with respect, they should be treated kindly, they should be shown overt affection and the importance of play is emphasized (Nyland and Alfayez, 2012). The objective of Islamic education is to instill the beliefs, values and practices of Islam. The stated aim and purpose of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia appears to leave no space for the right of any individual to be self-determined i.e. to organize his/her activities. There is no room for autonomy and agency on the part of children or teachers. And yet, this aim is at the heart of the Western paradigm of child-centered education. As a result, the Islamic paradigm of education and the Western paradigm of education are necessarily in tension with each other. The key issue is that the Saudi-Self Learning Curriculum is an *adapted* curriculum in which religion, culture and pedagogy are inextricably entwined. Hence the aims and principles of child-centered education are interpreted very differently. The concepts underpinning the language of reform take on very different meanings when they are transposed from a Western context into an Islamic context.

### **Autonomy as an educational aim**

The roots of child-centered education can be traced back to Friedrich Froebel one of its founding figures and a pioneer who advocated the idea that children learn best when their learning is self-directed or autonomous. Froebel believed that knowledge should come from within rather than outside the child. For Froebel, education involved ‘the unfolding of principles rather than merely following rules by heart’ (Froebel, 1826, p: 156). According to Froebel:

We possess a great load of extraneous knowledge, which has been imposed on and which we foolishly strive daily to increase...we have very little knowledge of our own that has originated in our own mind and grown with it (Froebel, 1895, p: 156).

In order to put Froebel’s ideas into practice and to give autonomy to children in the classroom, the preschool must provide structures designed to allow both teacher and child ‘ownership and control’ (Robson, 2006, p: 75). These structures should be designed to increase participation by allowing children to pursue their own goals and interests in the classroom. Maximizing autonomy necessarily involves children exercising their freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of choice and freedom of association. The Saudi Self-Learning Curriculum (2006) is based on child-centered approaches to education: American High/Scope is the chosen model of curriculum and the teaching methods and content are informed by the idea of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). In a High/Scope setting the children are encouraged to become ‘active learners’ by:

making choices about materials and activities during the day. As they pursue their choices and plans, children explore, ask and answer questions, solve problems and interact with classmates and adults (Pramling, Sheridan & Williams, 2004, p: 8).

In order to give children autonomy, teachers must also be able to act as autonomous agents. According to Pramling, Sheridan, & Williams, (2004) ‘High Scope teachers

give children a sense of control over the events of the day' (p: 9). The above description of a High/Scope setting makes it clear that both teachers and children are engaged in relationships that are 'mutual and reciprocal' (Castle, 2003, p: 6). In the classroom both teachers and children are equal participants in the knowledge creation process. According to DeVries and Zan (1994) autonomy in relationships is dependent on teachers 'providing opportunities for child decision making' and 'reducing their adult authority' (Castle, 2003, p: 6). In addition, De Vries and Zan (1994) advocate that teachers must 'encourage children's thinking, problem solving and rule creating' (Castle, 2003, p: 6). From a Piagetian perspective (1965):

autonomy ...did not mean simple "independence" in doing things for oneself without help. Rather, the individual who is autonomously moral follows moral rules of the self. Such rules are self-constructed, self-regulating principles ...The individual who is autonomously moral follows internal convictions about the necessity of respect for persons in relationships with others (Castle, 2003, p: 6).

According to De Vries & Zan, (1994); Kamii & Houseman, (2000) autonomy is seen as an important goal of early years education because it helps children not only to acquire problem-solving skills but also to pose their own problems and to raise questions in a spirit of 'creating rules for the good of all' (Castle, 2003, p: 6). Producing children that can 'think for themselves' and make choices 'even ...poor choices' allows them to reflect on the consequences and 'helps them to learn better in the future' (Castle, 2003, p: 6). Autonomy is also seen as bringing positive benefits for teachers because it gives them the freedom to 'make intellectual and moral decisions by considering various perspectives and deciding on what is in the best interests of all' in other words it 'enables teachers to exercise their professionalism' (Castle, 2003, p: 6). Classrooms in which autonomy for both teacher and child is the goal are based on the idea that 'learning for understanding' is to be prioritized over 'learning to memorize' (Castle, 2003, p: 7).

### **Autonomy versus constraint**

Teachers who have been trained in child-centered practices recognize the importance of responding to the needs and interests of each individual child. However, this requires a flexible curriculum in which teachers are able to challenge and critique 'taken-for-granted methods' and 'mandated outcomes' (Castle, 2003, p: 7). Collaboration and ongoing dialogues amongst both educators and those involved with children on a daily basis such as friends, parents and so on are another important factor in promoting autonomy. Whilst these ideas are embedded in Western approaches to early childhood education, they have criticized because they do not take into account the impact of culture (Phillips, 1995; Wertsch, 1985). De Vries and Zan, (1994) emphasize the importance of the 'socio-moral atmosphere of the school' which plays a vital role in encouraging and supporting both teachers and children to become autonomous agents. These comments highlight a number of areas of difficulty in Saudi Arabia where the dominant socio-cultural framework is Islam. Islam dominates all aspects of Saudi life and it shapes the beliefs, values and practices of the society. In addition, Saudi society is hierarchical, patriarchal and gender segregated. Islam is the core of the education system. Saudi teachers and children are embedded in a system that is based on religious beliefs, principles and practices, social hierarchy and

adherence to rules. According to the *Report about the Role of Early years education in the preschool in Saudi Arabia* (2013) the first responsibility of the pre-school teacher is as follows:

The teachers must follow the instructions and guidance of the head teachers and supervisors in order to understand how the education process is implemented in the classroom. She must provide her signed agreement paper as evidence (MOE, 2013).

The preschool teachers work under the direct authority of the head teachers. The teacher must meet with head teacher twice a month to be updated on policy directives and any obligatory duties issuing from the Ministry of Education in Riyadh via the regional Ministry in Makkah. The teachers are also under the authority of the Ministry Supervisor from Makkah and must attend monthly meetings during which their teaching practice and training requirements are assessed and monitored. A monthly report on each teacher is sent to the Minister in Makkah to be compiled for an Annual Progress Review. If a teacher does not meet the required standard her salary will be reduced and she will receive a low professional ranking.

### **The socio-moral framework**

The Government regards the early years stage as a crucially important developmental stage because 'his personality is forming and he is discovering his identity' (Ministry of Education, 1976; 2013). The role of the preschool teacher is defined as follows:

The teacher is like a friend, mother and caretaker to the child and an alternative to his mother during the time he spends in the preschool. The teacher must guide the child and correct his behavior because this stage is so dangerous. The teacher has significant responsibility for directing and guiding the child in accordance with Islamic beliefs and practices (MOE, 1976; 2013).

The role of the preschool teacher is to deliver the Self-Learning Curriculum which is the basis of the Early years education policy in the Kingdom. The *Teacher Guide Book* 2013-14 is the key source of knowledge for teachers; the manual has five chapters and is considered essential reading. Teachers are not expected to use any other source of information and they are not expected to exercise their professional knowledge or training. In Saudi Arabia, the idea of the good child is synonymous with becoming a good Muslim which is defined as obedience to God and the Prophet Mohammed. This stage is defined as 'dangerous' because the child is in need of guidance and direction to become a good Muslim. Hence, guidance and direction are seen as the central skills of the preschool teacher. Morality is outer-directed in the sense that it is conceived as adherence to rules rather than being inner-directed which sees the child as 'autonomously moral' and able to form and follow 'moral rules of the self' (Castle, 2003, p: 6). Although the recommended teaching methods are stated as self-discovery, research and investigation which seem to design to allow the child autonomy, in practice, the dominant style of pedagogy is the best Model of the Prophet Mohammed. Using the Prophet Mohammed as the Best Model produces a *transmissive* view of teaching in which pedagogy is based on a set of rules or principles; the art of teaching is reduced to delivering information or modeling a set

of behaviors which the child then copies. In the classroom the teachers are caught between an approach to teaching which values autonomy and an approach to teaching which values conformity. According to Oyler (1996) teachers who are placed between two different sets of values and beliefs are forced to 'negotiate between teacher's authority (as old idea) and children's autonomy (as new idea) in a child-centered classroom' (Tzuo, See Tan & Hui Wang, 2012, p: 247).

### **Limits on autonomy in the preschool classroom**

The Government's educational policy documents do not use the term child-centered however, the concept of Self-Learning is assumed to be consistent with the Western concept of child-centeredness. Whilst these policy documents use the language of reform the dominant ideological framework is Islam. And the aim of educational policy is on directing children's behavior towards Islamic beliefs and practices rather than encouraging active participation. Learning is understood in terms of the learning sets of rules. Children who learn and follow the rules are rewarded and those who fail to follow the rules are punished. There is an emphasis on children carrying out classroom activities quietly and unquestioningly and always in compliance with the wishes of the teacher. Using the idea of the Prophet Mohamed as the Best Model also seems to come into conflict with the notion of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). But there is little evidence that recent research on child psychology or child behavior has informed this approach at the Governmental level.

In *Regulation of the inner workings of the kindergarten* (1976, 2013) it is stipulated that the preschool must provide an place where:

The child must feel free to work and develop his abilities and to express himself without fear this will facilitate the development of the child's natural abilities. The early years teacher must provide a suitable environment which helps the teacher to discover the child's natural abilities and talents (MOE, 1976, 2013).

Whilst educational policy documents emphasize that teachers should give the children choice and increase their autonomy, these ideas are not translated into classroom practice because the dominant pedagogy is the Best Model of the Prophet Mohammed. Many preschool teachers, especially those who have been educated outside of Saudi Arabia find it very difficult to comply with the Ministry of Education regulations. Their own training and knowledge of child-centered teaching and learning puts them at odds with a system that allows little or no autonomy for teachers or children. They are effectively caught between two conflicting paradigms but do not have the freedom and authority to change what they do in the classroom.

The educational policies stress the value of 'creativity' but this concept is very much misunderstood. The *Teacher Guide Book* instructs:

The teacher must deal with all of the units individually and train herself to be skillful and creative in these units and make these activities and units suitable for the children's tendencies and needs (MOE, 2013, p: 13).

Through training she is able to meet the interests of the children. This does not indicate that the teacher can adapt the unit to suit the child but rather that she must match the child to the unit which has already been designed by the government to meet pre-set objectives (MOE, 2013, p: 13).

As one respondent remarked, “How can she understand and be ‘creative’ in the curriculum? This phrase is used by every head teacher and supervisor but in reality the teacher cannot be creative” (School1, Teacher 2, [S1,T2]) Gender is another area in which there strict limits imposed on children’s autonomy. During the preschool classroom corner activities the teacher is advised to, ‘monitor the children closely to observe whether they are carrying out their gender roles correctly and to check whether they are following the correct modes of behavior’ (MOE, 2013-14, pp: 134-5). It is extremely important that the children are allowed to play only those roles that are considered ‘suitable’ for men and women’ and that they do not mimic the roles of ‘the King, or a princes or the government’ as this would be considered highly disrespectful. ‘Swapping gender roles is forbidden’ (*Teacher Guide Book, MOE, 2013-14, pp: 134-5*).

The Wahabi interpretation of Islam as enforced by the King, the clerics and the Government was given as the reason for religion being another barrier to autonomy. Wahabism imposes many prohibitions on what can be represented. Figurative representations of humans and animals are not allowed in Saudi Arabia. As one respondent observed: “The religion hinders the child’s ability to create and think and use their imaginations” (School 2, Teacher 3, [S1,T3]). In addition, the Government uses religion to place limits on freedom of speech. As one respondent noted “There is a lack of interaction socially between each other because we have some topic it is forbidden to talk about” (School 3, Teacher 4, [S3,T4]). The hierarchical and patriarchal nature of society was identified as another barrier to autonomy. In particular, the lack of dialogue between teachers and the Government. According to this respondent: “We try to solve this problem but we can’t because of the society structure and power they have, which makes everybody scared to ask any questions or make argument with them” (School 1, Teacher 5, [S1,T5]). The concept of right and wrong was a very powerful influence shaping people’s behavior. And this is idea is reinforced by the reliance on traditional teaching methods such as prompting in which the teacher imparts information and the child repeats what he or she has heard. Many teachers were critical of this method noting that it “pushes the child to repeat information ...without thinking what it means ...or how it applies in their wider environment” (School 3,Teacher 1[S3,T1]).

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that the philosophy and objectives of Western child-centered education appear to be in tension with the Saudi concept of self-learning. The Government’s educational policy documents use the concept of Self-Learning which, according to the Government, is consistent with the Western concept of child-centeredness. Whilst these policy documents use the language of reform the dominant ideological framework is Islam. And the aim of educational policy is on directing children’s behavior towards Islamic beliefs and practices rather than encouraging active participation. Autonomous learning is based on social freedoms



and participatory rights but the teachers voices reveal that such freedoms are severely curtailed in the Saudi Self-Learning Curriculum for Kindergarten. The comments made by the teachers and the comments quoted from the educational policy documents illustrate the gap that exists between Government rhetoric and classroom practices. This discrepancy shows that when filtered through an Islamic paradigm, the idea of child-centered teaching and learning is literally lost in translation.

Both teachers and children are 'invisible' in policy in that they have no say in the decisions affecting them. They are not given autonomy in the classroom. The focus should be on creating structures that give both children and teachers some degree of choice in the decisions that affect them on a daily basis in the preschool classroom in Saudi Arabia.

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