

## ***How Does the Government Construct the Pedagogical Relationship between Teachers and Children in Saudi Preschool Education?***

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### **Abstract**

A Pedagogy is understood as being embedded in the relationship between teaching and learning. How the teaching-learning relationship is understood, recognized and developed is important, especially in the case of cross-cultural educational reforms (Nyland & Alfayez 2012). Reforms to the Saudi Early Years curriculum are based on the American High/Scope Model and the idea of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: an attempt to move away from traditional (transmissive) methods of teaching towards a more child-centered approach. The Saudi Ministry of Education states 'The aim of the self-learning approach is to allow the child to experiment and discover and do activities supported by teachers' (MOE Educational Policy Document 446/21/1S24/10/2013). This definition seems to reflect empirical work on DAP which reveals that a balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated learning activities 'is most effective in terms of cognitive, social and dispositional outcomes' (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva 2002, p: 154; Siraj-Blatchford 2009).

In Saudi policy documents and the Teacher Guide Books the relationship between the teacher and the child is based on 'direction and guidance' (Saudi Teachers Guide Book, 2014, pp: 61-2). Guidance is an educational skill of the teacher that is based on the religious and moral principles of Islam and the main pedagogical practice is to use the principle of the Prophet Mohammed as the Best Model. In Saudi Arabia the self-learning curriculum is thought to be child-centered but in reality Saudi pedagogy is very different to Western pedagogy, as a result the meaning of child-centered teaching and learning is literally lost in translation.

Keywords: Government policy, Culture, Pedagogy, Child-Centered, Religion, teacher's role

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This title of this poster was developed from my empirical research project which is an investigation into how the concept of child-centered education is constructed in public preschools in Saudi Arabia. My research into the concept of child-centered education is divided into three main themes: Culture, Pedagogy and Religion. A recent report funded by the Department for International Development (DfID) 2013 stated that ‘the classroom pedagogy used by teachers is consistently seen as ‘the most crucial variable for improving learner outcomes and is critical in any reform to improve quality’ (UNESCO 2005, p: 152). As a result, the way that classroom pedagogy is understood, recognized and developed acquires heightened significance in the case of cross-cultural educational reforms (Nyland & Alfayez, 2012). This paper will argue that whilst the Saudi Self-Learning Curriculum for Kindergarten appears to reflect the ideology of western reforms, these ideas, beliefs and values are not necessarily shared. As a result, Saudi pedagogy is very different from Western pedagogy.

### **The definition of pedagogy**

The term pedagogy relates to the ‘how’ of educating. It is defined as: ...that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive process between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, Bell, 2002, p: 28).

Pedagogy also concerns the issue of “how” of adult and child interact, whilst recognizing that how children learn and develop at this stage is not just affected by ‘*what is intended to be taught*, but it is also of particular importance *how it is facilitated*’ (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002, p: 27). According to Rumbold (DES, 1990) in the UK it is widely accepted that play is of central importance in Early Years learning. Bennett, Wood & Rogers (1997) note that this broad consensus does not indicate any uniform model of pedagogy. In Scandinavia, some educators regard teaching as antithetical to early years pedagogy. Another question concerns whether pedagogy should be based on a set of rules and principles or whether it should be regarded as an art or craft (Stephen, 2010). In the context of this research pedagogy is understood in terms of the definition put forward by Alexander in which pedagogy:

Encompasses the performance of teaching together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it. Pedagogy connects the apparently self-contained act of teaching with culture, structure, and mechanisms of social control (Alexander, 2001, p: 214).

According to this definition pedagogy contains not only all the teaching elements but also other factors including ideas about the nature of children, the purpose of education and knowledge and understanding about how they learn.

## Policy context

In the last twenty years many developing countries have embarked on major curriculum and pedagogical reforms to meet the demands of the Education for All (EFA) goals. These reforms are intended to take account of the fact that ‘Children are born ready to learn’ and that ‘good quality interventions ‘have lasting effects on learning and motivation’. (Early Childhood Care and Education In OIC Member Countries [SESRIC], 2013, p:1). It is now widely acknowledged that good quality early years care and education can have lasting benefits for societies as a whole. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] has stated that one major problem in developing countries is the need for governments to shift from teaching practices based on traditional (transmissive) methods of instruction towards more child-centered approaches (UNESCO, 2010). The child-centered curriculum that is currently in place in preschools across Saudi Arabia dates back to 2006 when the Saudi Government issued a policy directive to all public preschools in the Kingdom under the title *The General Structures of the Self-Learning Curriculum in Early Years Education in Saudi Arabia*. This policy:

...sets out the obligation of all government preschools in all regions and cities in Saudi Arabia (2001) to implement the self-learning curriculum on the orders of the Minister of Education and clerics (600/2R( 2/12/2006. This document must provide supervisors in education and head teachers and teachers, with the general structures of self-learning in Early Years as indicated by the Minister of Education and clerics (Ministry of Education: Riyadh, 2006, 600/2R/2/12/2006).

This document initiated the reforms to the Saudi Early Years curriculum which resulted in the Self-Learning Curriculum for Kindergarten based on the American High/Scope Model and the idea of Developmentally Appropriate Practice. It should be noted that no official policy documents use the term child-centered instead the Government uses the phrase self-learning. Also this document emphasizes the central role of the clerics in defining educational aims, values and practices. According to the Saudi Ministry of Education ‘The aim of the self-learning approach is to allow the child to experiment and discover and do activities supported by teachers’ (Ministry of Education (MOE), Educational Policy Document 446/21/1S24/10/2006). The stated aim of these reforms seems to be in line with later empirical work on DAP which reveals that a balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated learning activities ‘is most effective in terms of cognitive, social and dispositional outcomes’ (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009, p: 79). In principle the Government’s definition of self-learning appears to conform to Western based concepts of child-centered philosophy and practice. The fundamental idea is that the child will be naturally predisposed to learn if he/she is driven by their own inner motivations (needs and interests). However, the Government’s policy document also goes on to state:

The teacher can observe each child and take his needs and wishes into consideration but the activities are pre-determined in the curriculum. The activities are pre-determined based on what the government and clerics have decided the child’s needs and interests should be (Ministry of Education, 600/2R (2/12/2006).

This quotation implies that whilst the language of reform is being used, in practice, the concept of choice has, in fact, been removed from the child. This might partially

explain why since 2010 a number of reports investigating the quality of ECCE provision in the Arab Gulf States have noted that the implementation of these reforms has not gone smoothly in Saudi Arabia (UNESCO 2010, United Nations Common Country Strategic Framework [UNCCSF] 2012, SESRIC 2013) where education has its roots in the traditional Koranic schools (SESRIC 2013). It appears that this heritage is reflected in the curricula deficiencies identified by the SESRIC report which include an over-emphasis on the 'child's ability to read and write' (SESRIC, 2013, p: 13). The traditional Koranic schools placed huge emphasis on children learning Arabic by memorizing and repeating verses from the Qu'ran. However, the continued dependence on this traditional method of teaching has created deficiencies in other areas of development such as 'emotional, social, physical, creative and cognitive skills' (SESRIC 2013, p: 13). More recently, evidence from neuroscience research shows that the brains of very young children are not sufficiently developed to respond to this essentially transmissive teaching method (UNESCO 2010). The UNESCO 2010 report also acknowledged the need for the curricula to be 'culturally relevant' based on its 'cultural and religious values' and delivered in 'mother tongue' (SESRIC 2013, p: 17). Hence the report draws attention to the need for reforms which work in harmony with existing cultural beliefs and values wherever possible.

## **Literature Review**

Child-centered pedagogies date back to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and they emerged from the forward thinking ideas and techniques of European philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Froebel (1895) and Johann Heinrich Pestolozzi (1780). One of the core philosophical beliefs was that the innate nature and needs of the child should be at the heart of any system of education. The fundamental idea was that the child should be the central focus in the classroom and that each child learns by 'play and creative activity' (Froebel, 1909, p: xv). This idea is at the heart of progressive (child-centered) education and it was developed further by Western educators such as John Dewey (1958), Maria Montessori and the Reggio Emilia atelier schools in Italy which provide education from birth to six years.

In response to the need for reforms to be 'culturally relevant' over the last decade and a half there has been a global trend towards creating curricula that are 'based on societal goals' whilst simultaneously 'embracing a philosophy that focuses on the individual child as a subject' (Pramling, Sheridan, Williams, 2004, p: 26). The need to focus on each child as a unique individual is in line with human rights principles and with 'socio-cultural theories that see children as attached to specific contexts and cultures' (Pramling, Sheridan, Williams, 2004, p: 26). The key aim of these curricula (which include Experiential Education, The High/Scope Curriculum, The Reggio Emilia Approach, *Te Whariki* and The Swedish Curriculum amongst others) is to support the child in the development of the necessary skills and capacities whilst at the same time 'respecting the child's natural interests and choices' (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). Therefore those in charge of developing a curriculum for young children must position themselves 'at a crossroads between societal goals and the choices of each child' (Pramling, Sheridan, Williams, 2004, p: 26). This balancing act necessarily raises the question of freedom and participation in the classroom: what freedoms exist for the teacher and the child? As my research has revealed, this issue has presented problems in the Saudi classroom.

The High/Scope curriculum is based on three fundamental principles:

- 1- Active participation of children in choosing, organizing, and evaluating learning activities, which are undertaken with careful teacher observation and guidance in a learning environment replete with a rich variety of materials located in various classroom learning centers.
- 2- Regular daily planning by the teaching staff in accord with a developmentally based curriculum model and careful child observations

3-Developmentally sequenced goals and materials for children based on the High/Scope “key experiences” (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1989) ( Morrison, 2009, p:129)

The Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches are ‘European based in philosophy and context’, whereas ‘High/Scope puts into practice the learning-by doing American philosophy Morrison, 2009, p: 155). It builds on Dewey’s ideas of active learning and teaching in the context of children’s interests’(Morrison, 2009, p: 155). The curriculum is organized around a ‘plan-do- review’ sequence, in which children learn from the active experience with pupils, materials event and ideas instead of learning directly from teachers (Morrison, 2009, 153). At the centre of the High/Scope Curriculum is the belief is that ‘*active participatory learning* through play is fundamental to the full development of human potential’ (French, 2012, p: 129).

### **Methodology**

Pedagogy is a contested term but this researcher was guided by Alexander’s definition of pedagogy in which teaching ‘is an act while pedagogy is act and discourse’ (Alexander 2001, p: 540).

This research was conducted using three preschools in Makkah, Saudi Arabia as case studies. The research paradigm was qualitative interpretive. The data collection methods were semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The interview participants included fifteen preschool teachers, five Ministry of Education supervisors, the Minister of Education, three administrators and four head teachers. The documents used for analysis included Government Policy Documents, Executive Plans, Government Reports, Teacher’s Guide Books and Lesson Plans. All of these cultural artefacts were analyzed using Nvivo. The interview data was interpreted using narrative analysis and the documents were interpreted using critical discourse analysis.

### **The Western Paradigm and the Islamic Paradigm**

The language of reform permeates Government Policy Documents, Executive Plans, Government Reports, Teacher’s Guide Books and Lesson Plans but it does not necessarily reflect the reality in the classroom. In developing countries the curriculum is ‘encoded’ in the official handbooks and the teacher guides’ which are often the only source material available (DfID 2013, p: 12) because there is no shared

intellectual and philosophical background or shared history and tradition. The Saudi Government has tried to introduce a more flexible and creative approach into its 'Self-Learning Curriculum for Kindergarten' which is defined as follows:

The self-learning approach is focused on different activities and the child learns through engaging with the wider environment including (people, materials or resources and activities) and receiving support from the teacher to achieve their aim (MOE Educational Policy Document 1 600/2R ( 2/12/2006).

This definition seem to be in line with the fundamental principles of the High/Scope Curriculum which emphasizes the *active participation* of the child as the foundation for learning. One of the key factors to consider when implementing a Western curriculum in a different context is the extent to which it is socially and culturally appropriate. The Saudi constitution is based on the Muslim's holy book of the Qu'ran and Sunnah (speech and teachings of the Prophet of Islam: Mohammed) therefore it is not surprising that a strong bond exists between Muslims and Islam nor is it surprising to find that Islam permeates all areas of life including the education system. Religion is the area in which there is a considerable degree of adaptation in terms of the original curriculum design. Given the importance of religion it is understandable that it is deemed to be in the best interests of the child for him/her to become familiar with the religious beliefs, values and practices of the society. *The Main Executive Plan of the Agency* (2013-14) reveals that the Government defines its role in relation to the preschool as follows: 'The Government will prepare children for understanding the Qu'ran and familiarize them with their religion' (Ministry of Education, 2013-14). To this end the Government is committed to providing nurseries that are 'compatible with Islamic beliefs and cultural values' (MOE, 2013-14). Hence the overall aim of preschool education which is copied into the *Teacher Guidebook* (2013-14) is:

...derived from the general educational policy for the country stemming from the Islamic principle, the values of Islamic society, heritage, culture, civilization, tribal traditions and the distinct social, economic conditions and circumstances (MOE, 2013, p: 17).

These aims are socio-culturally and religiously specific and they are supported by the Government in close consultation with the clerics. This is the philosophical framework of beliefs and values which underpins the Self-Learning Curriculum for Kindergarten. In the *Teacher Guide Book* (2013-14) the Government directs that these aims 'must be carefully put together in the curriculum based on Islamic method' (MOE, 2013, p: 17). The *General Structures of the Self-Learning Curriculum* specifies that:

The knowledge the child receives in early year's school cannot be separated from the child's home life or from Islam. If there is a separation the child will not be able to achieve (MOE, 2013-14).

The above quotation makes it clear that the Government does not want a separation between the state, family life and religion and it serves to illustrate the way in which religion is intertwined with all aspects of society. Unlike Western-style democracies, in Saudi Arabia there is no separation between public (matters of Government) and

private (family life and choice of religion). In order for education to be considered appropriate what is taught in Saudi schools must reflect the values and beliefs of the wider social and cultural context. Therefore to implement a Western style curriculum with no degree of adaptability would, in the Saudi Government's view, present considerable barriers to the child's ability to learn. The *Teacher Guide Book* advises that the first aim of preschool education is for the child to 'develop a religious instinct based on monotheism as the natural direction' and the child must 'recognize the concept of God and the Prophet Mohammed based on Islamic beliefs and heritage' (*Teacher Guide Book*, MOE, 2013-14, p: 19). The *Teacher Guide Book* 2013-14 specifies in its brief plan of the early years program that the main role of the teacher is to 'instill the Islamic values and to excite the child about Islamic topics and to remind them of the Islamic rules' (MOE, 2013-14, p: 170-171).

### **Pedagogical practices in Saudi Arabia**

In place of the pragmatic 'learning by doing' approach in the 'High/Scope curriculum, the Saudi preschool uses the pedagogy of the Prophet Mohammed as the Best Model which, as this paper will explain, effectively turns a child-centered curriculum into teacher-centered learning. In High/Scope, the curriculum is organized around a 'plan-do-review' sequence, in which children learn from the active experience with pupils, materials event and ideas instead of learning directly from teachers (Morrison, 2009, 153). In terms of pedagogical practices, the Self-Learning Curriculum uses the term 'scaffolding' (defined as a process in which the teacher guides and supports the child) but in the official *Teacher Guide Book* the teacher's role is 'direction and guidance' which, in practice, results in the child simply watching the teacher and copying what she does (*Teacher Guide Book*, 2013-14, p: 71). This is the opposite of what is intended in the 'plan-do-review' sequence as defined in the High/Scope curriculum. In the Saudi classroom, the role of the teacher is to:

encourage the child to think about his behavior and to apply the correct behavior in his real life so that it becomes part of his personality and controls his behavior (*Teacher Guide Book*, 2013-14, 61).

As a result, there is a tension here between the societal aims of Early Years Education in Saudi Arabia and the democratic principle of 'respecting the child's natural interests and choices' (Sylva, Melhuish., Sammons, & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). The fundamental aim of Early Years Education is to provide the child with 'the necessary skills and capacities' (Islamic beliefs and practices) so that he can become a good Muslim (Sylva Sylva, Melhuish., Sammons, & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). This aim necessarily comes into tension with a curriculum that is based on the idea of the child as an active participant in the production of knowledge because all knowledge comes from the Qu'ran.

The idea of scaffolding is based on a democratic principle in the sense that it is a relationship of equals which is based on a balance between what the child wants to do and the teacher's role as a facilitator. Hence, in a High/Scope setting the idea is that both the teacher and the child are involved in the production of knowledge. This type of equal relationship requires professional knowledge and expertise about age-appropriate activities, the teacher's professional knowledge and socio-cultural knowledge.

## **Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

In the policy documents it is emphasized that the Saudi preschool teacher must relate all aspects of the curriculum to the Islamic heritage and religion whilst at the same time she must be aware of the importance of Developmentally Appropriate Practice. The Saudi Government stipulate that:

The teacher must understand the principles of child development and be knowledgeable about the program for working with children such as games, stories and Islamic songs (Teacher Guide Book, MOE, 2013-14, p: 20).

The Government's requirement appears consistent with the definition of DAP put forward by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2012) which suggests that DAP is the outcome of teacher's decision-making based on three key considerations: knowledge about children's learning and development, the teacher's own knowledge about what is suitable for each child and the school and cultural context in which children are based. The central idea is that children should be taught at a level that is appropriate for their stage of development and socio-culturally relevant. Crucially, in a child-centered approach, the focus is on the whole child in terms of his/her social, emotional, personal and physical skills development. However, an approach which requires teachers to be flexible in their responses to the needs of individual children, in turn, requires that the teachers themselves have autonomy in their decision-making practices. The need for flexibility requires that both children and teachers are free to practice lots of activities and learn from them. This requires observation, discussion, reflection and evaluation which forms the basis of future learning and practical teaching (Johansson and Sandberg, 2011). However, the policy documents revealed that both teachers and children are invisible in the Government's design of the Self-Learning Curriculum.

It should be emphasized that DAP is not a formalized approach but one in which play-based activities are central to children's learning. As Palaiologou (2013) points out 'play is an activity that children undertake for pleasure and is one of their primary needs in their development' (2013, p: 76). In addition, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project (EPPE, 1997-2004) identified 'sustained shared thinking' within adult-child interactions as a necessary prerequisite for excellent early years practice (Palaiologou, 2013, p: 78). This approach highlights the use of 'modeling, demonstrating and questioning while engaging in fun and active experiences' (Palaiologou, 2013, 79). Again, the most crucial factor here is 'a flexible approach to play-based learning, based on the level of development, needs and interests of the child' (Palaiologou, 2013, 79). Certain aspects of this approach are used in the preschool classroom in Saudi Arabia, for example, the idea of modeling and the idea of demonstrating but these concepts acquire a different meaning because they are subject to certain constraints. The word 'experience' occurs frequently in the policy documents but the idea of children learning through their own direct experience as active participants has been replaced by the idea of the child learning through watching the teacher doing 'experiments' and then role modeling her actions based on the idea that the teacher is the Best Model of the Prophet Mohammed. This approach means that even activities which are intended as play are subject to a high level of restraint because the Best Model of the Prophet Mohammed does not incorporate play as a learning strategy. Guidance and direction have replaced any notion of free play.

## **Pedagogy and freedom of choice in a Saudi context**

In line with the developmental aims of the Self-Learning Curriculum the Saudi Government directs that the teacher must 'attend to the child and help him to grow and develop mentally, physically, emotionally and socially and to ensure his physical health' (MOE, 1976, 2013). This policy document also stipulates 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).

However, the extent to which these freedoms can be realized depends not only on how learning in the preschool classroom is facilitated but also on whether the society places a high value on democratic freedoms. The above statement about the child being allowed a degree of freedom because it is viewed as essential to his/her development is apparently contradicted in *Regulation of the inner role of the kindergarten* (1976, 2013) where the teacher's role is defined in terms of guidance and correction because according to the Government 'this stage is so dangerous' (MOE, 1976, 2013). As a result, the Government can be seen as justified when it stipulates that 'the teacher has significant responsibility for directing and guiding the child in accordance with Islamic beliefs and practices' (MOE, 1976, 2013). This statement illustrates how the focus is shifted away from the child and onto the teacher.

## **The knowledge hierarchy in Saudi Arabia**

The *Teacher Guide Book* (2014-15) is produced by the Government and clerics and it is considered the complete and comprehensive resource for Early Years Teachers. The *Executive Plan of the Agency's Education Girls and Boys (2013-14)* states that the aim of this 'self-learning package' is 'for the teacher to become proficient in creative learning and to pass these skills on to the child' (MOE, 2013-14). The *Teacher's Guide Book* 'tells the teachers how to implement the curriculum in the classroom in the right way (to enable the child to reach the aims set out in the curriculum)' (MOE, 2013-14). The teachers follow 'a strict lesson plan that is set out in the guide book daily, weekly and yearly' (MOE, 2013-14).

The *Teacher Guide Book* contains explicit instructions to the teacher in relation to all of the units in the curriculum. The *Teacher Guide Book* directs that:

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).

## The idea of right and wrong

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 and the act of teaching is reduced to delivering information. In an echo of the centuries old tradition of Koranic teaching, the children learn mainly through copying and repeating by responding to the teacher's prompts. As a result, many of the concepts which inform child-centered pedagogy such as 'rights', 'positive relationships' and 'freedom', 'experiential learning' and 'creativity' acquire a different meaning in Saudi preschool education (see Appendix 1). There is no public discourse of rights and freedoms in Saudi Arabia. In the interviews with preschool teachers, the concept of right was strongly associated with notions of 'right and wrong' forms of behavior. It is not surprising that for some teachers the idea of experimental and experiential learning is difficult to comprehend. A high social and moral value is placed on conformity and obedience and for this reason strategies for punishing the 'wrong' behavior are suggested. For example, the *Teacher Guide Book* advises that

the child feels insulted when the teacher says to him that he has the character of an animal, or "you are lazy" or "you are not clever" or "you are dull" or "you are not intelligent" (*Teacher Guide Book*, 2013-14, p: 73-4).

The 'right' behavior is reinforced when 'she rewards him with sweets and toys in order to encourage the child to copy her and follow her instructions in the correct way' (*Teacher Guide Book*, 2013-14, p: 75-6). The idea of pedagogy as an art or craft is absent because it requires a reciprocal relationship in which both the teacher and the child are equally involved in knowledge creation. The concept of positive relationships is cited but many of the activities in the curriculum specify that the children must work alone and in silence. Freedom of choice is also extremely limited in the activity corners of the Self-learning Curriculum which are supposed to encourage creativity. The *Teacher Guide Book* advises that:

Very strict rules apply in this corner which the teacher should put on the wall for the children to read. The construction corner is intended to develop the child's cognitive skills by teaching him how to identify different shapes and sizes guided by the teacher. The teacher organizes all the materials in this corner and chooses what is suitable for each child (*Teacher Guide Book* 2013-4, p: 131-132).

The educational context always reflects the wider society. Saudi Arabia is a very traditional, patriarchal society and the overarching paradigm within which ideas are formulated is the Islamic religion. Islam provides the dominant philosophical and ideological framework, which in turn, governs the limits of social freedoms and freedom of expression. Knowledge transfer systems within the preschool are highly transmissive and operate in accordance with the social hierarchy. For example, according to the Report about Early Years Education in the Preschool in Saudi Arabia (2013):

Supervisors, head teachers, administrators, teachers must follow every single instruction and guidance which is provided in the policy document. The Government asks them to complete their commissions

correctly (Report about Early Years Education in the Preschool in Saudi Arabia (MOE, 2013)

The main Ministry of Education in Riyadh is responsible for deciding the design and content of Early Years Education. This responsibility falls on Government male employees and the clerics, despite the fact that all Early Years teachers are women. Gender segregation is another reason why there are no open channels of communication between the main Ministry of Education and the female employees. As a result, both teachers and children are invisible in the educational policy documents in the sense that they are not active participants in the learning and teaching process and must adhere to a strict set of rules and regulations which govern every aspect of teaching and learning.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

This paper has argued that Saudi Early Years pedagogy is very different to Western Early Years pedagogy. My research has revealed that in the series of '*transpositions and transformations*' (Daniels, Lauder, Porter, & Alexander 2009, p: 16) that take place between the stated aims and content of the policy documents, the stated aims of the curriculum and teacher's practices in the classroom, the meaning of child-centered pedagogy is quite literally lost in translation. Saudi pedagogy is teacher-centered but both teacher and children have a passive role. There is no concept of the teacher as a competent professional who has undergone four years of training and has the relevant qualifications and training to make decisions in the classroom and to contribute to decision-making processes about the curriculum design and content. Similarly there is no acknowledgement of the child as an active participant in the creation of knowledge. Therefore, many of the concepts which inform Western child-centered pedagogy such as 'rights and freedoms', 'positive relationships', 'experiential learning' and 'creativity' acquire a different meaning when they are viewed through the best Model of the Prophet Mohammed which is the dominant pedagogical practice in the preschool classroom in Saudi Arabia.

Despite these difficulties, the Islamic teachings on young children are not incompatible with the principles and beliefs of Western child-centered education and child development (Nyland & Alfayez, 2012, p: 397). The Hadith (sayings from the Prophet Mohammed) advocate that young children should 'be respected, listened to, understood, treated with kindness, offered overt acts of affection and the importance of playing is emphasized' (Nyland & Alfayez, 2012, p: 397). The Government and clerics must focus on meeting social goals but more attention should be given to meeting 'child-related needs' through a more balanced and less hierarchical pedagogical relationship between teacher and child. Both the children and the teachers need the freedom to play a more participatory role in the classroom.

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# Appendix 1

