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**A Critical Exploration of Some Dominant Narratives in Early Childhood Education in
Saudi Arabia**

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PhD in Education



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Lay Summary of Thesis

The lay summary is a brief summary intended to facilitate knowledge transfer and enhance accessibility, therefore the language used should be non-technical and suitable for a general audience. Guidance on the lay summary in a thesis. (See the Degree Regulations and Programmes of Study, General Postgraduate Degree Programme Regulations. These regulations are available via: www.drps.ed.ac.uk.)

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This thesis critically explores the dominant discussions that concern the field of early childhood education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through consideration of both the historical and contemporary conditions that may have contributed to their present-day importance. To achieve this primary objective, the study seeks to highlight the ways in which young children, their teachers and early childhood schools in the Kingdom are portrayed through the language of practitioners and decision makers within the Saudi Ministry of Education. This exploration was conducted by analysing two main sources of data: a number of national documents published over the past fifty years, and a series of interviews with educators involved in a variety of roles in the Saudi early childhood education system. The focus of the analysis was primarily on (a) understanding how

historical conditions may have enabled the dominance of particular narratives in the field over others; (b) how universalised knowledge and cultural assumptions may integrate with and, at other times, contradict the process of constructing certain understandings around the education of young children; and (c) how the current adopted perspectives regarding young children and their education process can impact what is being presented as the truth in the field today.

The thesis concludes that, within the context of Saudi early childhood education, two distinct stories appear to be particularly popular. The first views early childhood as a period during which children need to be developed into socially appropriate individuals, while the other emphasises the need to produce an economically competitive generation. The significance of these conclusions is reflected in how they provide distinct insights into how discourses similar to those found in the Global North can be located elsewhere in the world, as well as the role local conditions play in reconstructing them. Further, by drawing attention to the embedded implications of dominant perspectives within the field, possibilities for alternative views can be opened up, potentially allowing for more diverse and contextually sensitive understandings of young children's education.

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Abstract

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, early childhood education settings were not introduced until the late 1960s. For many years, the field has taken modest steps towards its development, leaving the vast majority of children under the age of six lacking access to early childhood education and care. Yet, during the last 10 years, the Saudi Ministry of Education has placed a significant emphasis on the expansion of the field through the implementation of a number of national initiatives and programmes. Given this significant change, the present work is concerned with exploring the contemporary narratives surrounding the education of young children in the Kingdom and the details of these initiatives and programmes, and many other policies and practices besides. Thus, a theoretical framework informed by post-structural notions of dominant discourses and its rejection of universalised knowledge is utilised to provide insight into how historical conditions may have contributed to the emergence of certain truths and realities regarding the education of young children in Saudi Arabia. It was also proposed that such an analysis would illustrate the ways in which the dominance of these narratives may influence how young children, their teachers and their educational settings are perceived today.

The above aim and the adopted theoretical position allow this work to engage in a critical qualitative inquiry exploring the prevailing existing discourses that may have contributed to the formation and promotion of certain views concerning early childhood education within the local context. Data was primarily derived from two sources: (i) six key national documents published between 1970 and 2019, and (ii) 18 in-depth interviews with educators from various positions within the Saudi early childhood education system.

Data analysis provides one possible way to examine critically the popular images within the field by drawing attention to the historical conditions that may have contributed to their

dominance, the influence of both universalised knowledge and cultural context on constructing certain notions of reality, and how these images are, in turn, altering what we know about the field today. The study concludes that the current scene of Saudi early childhood education has two compelling narratives, each with its own imaginary of young children, their teachers and early childhood settings.

This thesis, therefore, contributes to the existing literature on the dominance of particular discourses concerning the contemporary understanding of young children's education and care by illustrating the emergence of these discourses and their impact on the construction and, perhaps, normalisation of particular knowledge in the field. The significance of this work lies in the fact that it is primarily concerned with a context in which such an analysis has yet to be conducted. As such, it provides an insight into how similar narratives to those found in the Global North can exist in another part of the world and how local conditions may influence both the plot and implications of these narratives.

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Lay Summary of Thesis	4
Abstract.....	6
Contents	8
List of Abbreviations.....	12
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	14
1.1 Setting the Study Context: The Saudi Early Childhood Education	16
1.2 The Aim of the Study	21
1.3 Theoretical and Methodological Overview.....	24
1.4 Research Questions	28
1.5 Organisation of the Thesis.....	28
Chapter 2: Historical Context of Early Childhood Education in Saudi Arabia	31
2.1 The Kingdom’s Early Years	33
2.2 The Saudi Arabian Family in the 20 th Century.....	34
2.3 Historical Developments of Early Childhood Education in Saudi Arabia	41
2.4 Conclusion.....	60
Chapter 3: Imagery of Early Childhood Education-Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Discussion.....	63

3.1 The Scientifically Based Childhood.....	64
3.2 The Market-Oriented ECE	70
3.3 The Universalised ECE	77
3.4 Theoretical Framework	81
3.5 Conclusion.....	86
Chapter 4: Methodology	88
4.1 Research Questions	89
4.2 A Critical Qualitative Research.....	89
4.3 Research Data.....	93
4.4 Analysis of Data	106
4.5 Rigour of the Study	111
4.6 Research Ethics	115
4.7 Limitations	117
4.8 Conclusion.....	121
Chapter 5: The Image of Young Children.....	123
5.1 The Child as an ‘Empty Sheet of Paper’	125
5.2 The Girl-Child vs. The Boy-Child	131
5.3 The Appropriately Developed Child	136
5.4 Children as Future Investment	141
5.5 Conclusion.....	148

Chapter 6: The Image of Early Childhood Teachers.....	151
6.1 The ECT as a ‘Second Mother’ or ‘ <i>Murabbiyah</i> ’	152
6.2 ECT as an Efficient Professional.....	166
6.3 Conclusion.....	179
Chapter 7: The Image of Early Childhood Schools	182
7.1 A Significant Stage	183
7.2 A ‘Preparatory Stage’	194
7.3 Towards Greater Marketisation.....	208
7.4 Conclusion.....	216
Chapter 8: Conclusion.....	218
8.1 The Seed and the Becoming Tree Narrative.....	219
8.2 The Early Efficient Investments Narrative.....	224
8.3 Implications.....	229
8.4 Further Research	236
8.5 Concluding Thoughts	237
References.....	239
Appendix A. Information Sheet	263
Appendix B. Interview Participation Consent Form.....	265
Appendix C. Information Sheet (Arabic).....	267
Appendix D. Interview Participation Consent Form (Arabic).....	269

Appendix E. Interview Guide	271
Appendix F. Interview Guide (Arabic)	272

List of Abbreviations

KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
ECE	Early Childhood Education
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoK	Ministry of Knowledge
GPGE	General Presidency of Girls' Education
GDEC	General Department of Early Childhood
ECSs	Early Childhood Schools
ECTs	Early Childhood Teachers
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
AGFUND	Arab Gulf Programme for Development
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
ETEC	Education and Training Evaluation Commission
PLTT	Professional Licensing Test for Teachers
EPD	The Educational Policy Document

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is an attempt to shed light on an aspect of the field of early childhood education (ECE) that is often neglected within the educational context in my home country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). To put it simply, this work is a critical exploration of the ‘dominant stories’ surrounding the contemporary Saudi ECE (Moss, 2019). It provides a reading of how historical processes could have contributed to the emergence of such narratives and how these popular narratives around ECE may have been influencing our present ‘images’ of young children, their teachers and their educational settings (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021).

Yet, this was not always my primary concern. Following my reading of Gorski's (2017) work during my M.Ed., I became passionate about exploring issues of inequality within early childhood education programmes. Thus, as part of the PhD application, I submitted a proposal entitled *Exploring the Impacts of the Public Kindergarten Expansion Project in Relation to Class Equity in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. I came to my first meeting with my supervisors eager to start exploring how one educational project may have resulted in class inequalities in ECE. While it is not my intention to imply that my previous research interest was not insightful or significant, I consider it now as if I were trying to focus on why one chapter was lacking, while the entire book needed to be revised. My supervisors suggested I begin my journey by reading Peter Moss's work, which transformed my insight and set me on the path I am on today.

I started exploring Peter Moss's work during the time of Covid-19 pandemic. Being in lockdown in a foreign country that I had only moved to a few weeks earlier, I found Moss's writing to be a source of reassurance during those challenging times. I remember the thrill I felt while reading *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood* (2019). I had been feeling disconnected from my field for quite some time but, then, reading this book gave me a sense of resonance as it

challenges certain paradigmatic views that I, also, had found challenging to accept (e.g., objective and universal truths). Perhaps more relevant to the development of this thesis, Moss's work deepened this research's perspective by altering its primary focus. Having realised that the field of ECE is, 'first and foremost, a *political practice*, building on political questions that call for choices to be made between often conflicting alternatives' (Moss, 2019, p. 49, emphasis in original), I was no longer, at that point, willing to study that expansion project, at least not without exploring first the political choices that were made and resulted in that programme, and probably many other initiatives and practices.

Further, the work of Michel Foucault (1970a, 1970b, 1975) and Stephen Ball (1993, 2006, 2013, 2015, 2016) has also had a profound influence on the present research from its earliest stages. By immersing myself in those readings, I became more conscious about the influence of historical processes on the formation of power-knowledge relations (Foucault, 1975) and how dominant discourses work to constitute educational policies and practices (Ball, 2013; Ball, 2015). In light of these readings, and coupled with the political and social transformations the Kingdom has experienced in recent years, at the end of my first year, I submitted the updated proposal for my progression board under the title *The Drive Towards Neoliberalism: The Case of Saudi Arabia's Early Childhood Education*.

Again, I began questioning the chosen topic of inquiry; doubts emerged about approaching the study's subject while presuming that what dominates is a neoliberal discourse. This was particularly concerning given the absence of previous studies on the discourse of neoliberalism (or, indeed, the dominance of any other discourse) within the field of ECE in the KSA. At that moment, it seemed apparent that, despite the importance of conducting an in-depth

examination of the existence of a particular narrative within the field, this would not be feasible while a critical exploration of what these narratives are remains absent.

It was only then that I started to grasp the present focus of the study. This process of the formation of the study's topic was of such significance that the first few pages of the thesis revolve around it. Such a discussion is not intended to be presented as a 'tale whose storyline concludes with a "success-in-failure"'; rather, it seeks to contribute to a continuous reflection on all attempts taken within the research (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). As I approach the topic, acknowledging the significance of researchers' chosen pragmatic positions in shaping the research process, it becomes necessary from the start of the thesis to be upfront with the position that has been taken and to acknowledge that this position was 'a choice carefully made from among alternatives' (Moss, 2019, p. 3).

What follows in the remainder of this chapter is a discussion that explores the basis behind the current work. Firstly, an overview of the research context is provided by describing background information about the field of ECE in the KSA. This is of practical importance to this work since it was written in a place (the United Kingdom) where the meanings and practices surrounding the education of young children differ widely from those explored in the study. The discussion, then, moves to highlight the overall purpose of the inquiry and its potential significance. The theoretical, conceptual and methodological frameworks that mainly constitute the present analysis of the contemporary narratives in SA's ECE are addressed. This is followed by an outline of the main research question and its sub-questions. The chapter concludes with an overview of the organisation of the thesis and a summary of the contents of its chapters.

1.1 Setting the Study Context: The Saudi Early Childhood Education

The ECE is a relatively new field in the KSA. Up until 2019, formal general education was provided at three levels in the Kingdom: primary schools for children aged 6 to 11 years, middle schools for children aged 12 to 14 years, and high schools for children aged 15 to 17 years. Both nursery and kindergarten were optional stages available to only a small number of children under 6 years of age (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016). The first few early childhood opportunities were offered by the private sector. It is believed that Dar-Al-Hannan School's kindergarten was the first ECE facility to be opened in the country back in 1965 (Al Jadidi, 2012). Then, ten years later, the Ministry of Education (MoE), at the time known as the Ministry of Knowledge (MoK), assumed ECE responsibilities, although these were soon transferred to the General Presidency of Girls' Education (GPGE) in 1980 (Al Jadidi, 2012). Yet, despite the significant progress the GPGE made in expanding girls' education over the second half of the previous century (Bin Duhaish, 1998), the field of ECE was regarded as 'a privilege of the wealthy' (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016, p. 314).

Given the recent emergence of the field and its modest development at that time, both early childhood teachers' preparation programmes and its curriculum were also in their early stages of development. Aljabreen and Lash (2016) note that the Gulf Girl Association diploma, launched in 1983, was the first attempt to prepare early childhood educators academically in the Kingdom, which was followed, two years later, by the King Saud University programme as the first college degree in preschool education. Later, in 1991, a collaborative project between the GPGE, the Arab Gulf Programme for Development (AGFUND) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) led to the introduction of the first Saudi ECE curriculum, *The Developed Kindergarten Curriculum: Self-Learning*, and the opening of training centres in four regions of the Kingdom to train in-service teachers on its

implementation (Al Jadidi, 2012). Khomais and Gahwaji (2019) state that the first ECE curriculum in the KSA was founded on ‘Piagetian views that emphasise providing rich learning environments that stimulate learning and development’ (p. 24). Additionally, with a greater emphasis on the concept of self-learning, similar to the notion of child-centredness founded in the Global North, an updated version of the curriculum was published in 2006, *The Self-Learning Curriculum for Kindergarten* (Al Jadidi, 2012), which, as of the writing of this thesis, continues to be utilised in early childhood settings in the KSA.

While the context of the Saudi ECE and its early development will be discussed in more detail throughout the thesis, the above overview illustrates how the period of four decades, from its integration into the educational system in 1975 to its expansion in 2014, can be seen as the founding years of the Saudi ECE. At that time, early childhood settings, though limited in number, started to open, its curriculum was introduced and a few different preparation programmes began to admit some of those wishing to work in the field.

It can be argued that the second stage of the development of the field began with the MoE acknowledging the importance of increasing the enrolment rate in ECE. Perhaps the ambitious 2014 expansion plan was one of the earliest efforts towards realising that goal in which the former Minister of Education, Prince Khalid AlFaisal, approved a five-year plan to increase the number of children in early childhood settings by 123% (Aburiyah, 2014). However, statistics from the MoE show that during the first four years of the plan, the number of children enrolled in public ECE grew from 123,313 in 2014 to only 139,479 in 2018 (MoE, 2018). With only 17% of young children having access to ECE in 2019, the MoE had to take a more significant step towards achieving its expansion goals (Saudi Press Agency, 2019) and, in August 2019, the Ministry of Education launched an initiative known as the Early Childhood Initiative. The

initiative introduced a new form of schooling for children between the ages of 3 and 8, consisting of two distinct educational stages: kindergarten and early primary education. *The Handbook of Early Childhood Schools* (MoE, 2019) states that the primary objectives of the recently established early childhood schools (ECSs) are: (a) increasing the enrolment rate in kindergarten; (b) closing the gap between kindergarten and primary grade levels; (c) improving students' performance in national and international tests; and (d) enhancing the efficiency of school buildings.

As the above discussion provides a comprehensive overview of the Saudi ECE and its early development, it also enables readers to grasp some of the key facets of the transformation that has been taking place between the early days of the field, when it was regarded as merely an optional educational stage, and the more recent years, during which it has become increasingly recognised as a crucial component of the formal educational system, as it is around such changes that the current work started to formulate its primary concerns and questions.

Notes on Key Terms

In light of the specificity of the context highlighted above, it appears necessary to describe, briefly, the key terms within the context of the Saudi ECE.

Young Children. Previously, during what I have described above as the founding period of the field, young children were divided into two distinct developmental groups within the Saudi educational context: nursery children, from birth to age 3; and kindergarten children, between the ages of 3 and 6 (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016). Yet, under the newly implemented education system, the focus shifted, according to the *Handbook of Early Childhood Schools* (2019), to include those from the age of 3 through to the third grade of primary school (generally, up to the age of 9). Given that the current study is concerned with contemporary discourse in the

field of ECE, the term ‘young children’ will be utilised to reflect the MoE’s more recent definition.

Early Childhood Schools. As with the meanings associated with young children, the common perceptions of their educational settings have also undergone significant changes. Prior to the Early Childhood Initiative, although all stages of ECE were not mandatory, the nursery stage was concerned ‘more [with] care and less [with] teaching’, while kindergartens were often expected to provide both care and learning (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016, p. 313). Since the implementation of the initiative, however, the MoE defines ECSs as schools that provide educational services for children from kindergarten through to early primary school (MoE, 2019). The revised MoE definition of young children’s schools, which, again, excludes children under the age of 3, also omits the ‘care’ component of its primary description. Consequently, Saudi ECE is currently split into two types of settings: (a) educational facilities represented in ECSs; and (b) childcare facilities, known in the Kingdom as children’s hospitality centres, which fall under the supervision of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD) (MHRSD, 2021a). While acknowledging that attention to care is of importance to all children, within all settings (Moss, 2019), it is necessary to consider the specific meanings and terminologies adopted within the study’s context. As such, taking into consideration the study’s main objective and questions, the common terms adopted by the MoE will be used throughout the thesis, with reference to the field in general as ECE and young children’s settings as ECSs.

Early Childhood Teachers. From its founding period to the present day, the ECE sector in the KSA has been staffed solely by women. This is, perhaps, one characteristic that sets the current context apart from others around the world. Individuals involved at all levels of the field (including employers in the General Department of Early Childhood (GDEC) within the MoE,

headteachers, teachers and other workers inside ECSs) are female. This may be explained primarily by the fact that the Saudi educational system is a gender-segregated system, in addition to other historical and social factors that will be explored throughout the thesis. Further, it is important to note that, during both periods, those working inside early childhood classrooms did not necessarily occupy the same position. Under the previous system, for instance, those working in nursery rooms were known as *Hadenat* [the Arabic term for sitters], whereas their colleagues working in kindergarten rooms would be referred to as *Mu'allimat* [the Arabic term for teachers] (Bin Duhaish, 1998), with the second group expected to have a higher level of education and, therefore, higher wages. Currently, in the newly launched ECSs, there are also two different groups of teachers: kindergarten teachers (KGTs) and early primary teachers (EPTs). While this classification may beget certain implications that will be explored in the chapter concerning the dominant image of early childhood teachers (ECTs), it is noteworthy that both groups of teachers are required to hold the same level of qualifications (MoE, 2019) and share the same employment status, as per the *Guidelines for Educational Employment* (MHRSD, 2021b).

1.2 The Aim of the Study

The previous overview of the context of ECE in the KSA provides the reader with some insight into the transformation that has been happening in the field as it is around that change that the necessity for this work started to emerge. The study becomes concerned, through an understanding of this particular background, with exploring the ways in which such historical processes during the past fifty years may have contributed to the presence and/or dominance of particular discourses rather than others. Analysis of these discourses is of importance because of their impact on constructing the field as we know it today.

They exercise power over our thought by directing or governing what we see as the “truth” and how we construct the world, and hence our acting and doing... By so doing, they also exclude alternative ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

(Dahlberg, et al., 2013, p. 33)

In recognition of the necessity of problematising the dominant discourse, I concur with Osgood’s (2006) argument that through such exploring and questioning, ‘possibilities exist to develop critical consciousness and to challenge current self-understandings’, which can then possibly allow for ‘a space for new forms of subjectivity’ to appear (p. 7). Conversely, by refusing to engage in a critical examination of the hegemonic narratives that construct meanings and truths within the field, one risks contributing further to an existing narrow narrative and, thereby, to its problematic practices, as well (Cannella, 1997).

To achieve this primary aim of exploring the discourses that construct the contemporary field of ECE within the Saudi educational context, the study proposes another objective: to analyse the ‘normative images’ of young children, ECTs and ECSs related to Saudi’s ECE. This focus is, in large part, influenced by Roberts-Holmes and Moss’s (2021) book, *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education*. In the chapter entitled ‘Neoliberalism and its imaginary’, Roberts-Holmes and Moss illustrate how a dominant discourse (in that case, the discourse of neoliberalism) promotes particular forms of subjectivity that are represented by a group of images that reflect how subjects should act, as constituted by the values and ideology of that dominant discourse. Yet, given the lack of previous local studies on the dominance of certain discourses in the Saudi ECE, this study pursues the issue differently from Roberts-Holmes and Moss. Rather than starting with an analysis of the discourse ideology itself and then proceeding to examine its imaginary of the field, I chose to begin by exploring the images associated with

the field of ECE in the KSA and the individuals within it, hoping that this would provide an insight into the narratives within which such images have been constructed and appreciated. The study of these images and their relations to dominant narratives has also been informed by Foucault's (1970a) analysis of statements within dominant discourses. As such, when exploring such images, I was primarily concerned with what Foucault calls the 'mode of existence' of these images, reflecting on

what it means to them to have come into existence, to have left traces, and perhaps to remain there, awaiting the moment when they might be of use once more; what it means to them to have appeared when and where they did – they and no others. (p. 123)

Having outlined what this study is primarily about, it seems necessary to clarify what it is not about. As the analysis of contemporary images founded in the field, and the narratives from which they were produced, accepted and valued, could contribute to a modest attempt to 'deconstruct' the Saudi ECE (Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1997), the work, nonetheless, does not seek to reconstruct the field in any particular way. Within this process, the objective is, thus, not to provide a solution to existing issues but, rather, to explore critically what potential problems our adopted narratives could pose. While the study may not provide 'alternative narratives' (Moss, 2019) for those seeking one, it can provide a venue for other possible perspectives to be explored.

Before proceeding, I would like to apologise to all those who have worked or continue to work in the field of ECE in the Kingdom. As the study applied a critical lens, it may appear ignorant of previous efforts that have been made in the field. Quite the contrary, I, indeed, hold a deep admiration for every teacher who decides to spend her days ensuring that children have the best possible early educational experiences, for every headteacher who strives to create a

learning environment that is more welcoming to young learners, and for every decision maker within the MoE who seeks to ensure that all children in the Kingdom, whether they live in the capital or a remote village, have access to early childhood learning opportunities. To all of them, I extend my sincere gratitude for their contributions to establishing and expanding ECE opportunities throughout the KSA, while affirming, once again, that this work is not intended to undermine their efforts in any way. It is, in fact, not even about suggesting that young children's education in my context should follow another path than it does today; rather, it is about exploring 'what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking' our accepted narratives are constructed on (Foucault, 1981, p. 456). Thus, from the very beginning, I approached this practical area hoping that readers in my home country would also appreciate the value of critical reflection on opening up new possibilities for the Saudi ECE.

1.3 Theoretical and Methodological Overview

Before exploring the dominant narratives and the related images found in the field, I would briefly like to discuss my own theoretical and methodological perspectives that underpin this research. Similar to most early childhood educators (Cannella, 1997), my beliefs about developmental psychology played a key role in shaping my understanding of young children early in my educational career. It was mainly Piaget's stages of cognitive development that formed the basis of my knowledge about children's learning during my undergraduate studies as this was the only work that was repeatedly covered during the four-year programme. Yet, I have always been concerned with the dominance of Piaget's model as it appears to silence cultural aspects concerning the learning process. This conflict with certain ideas dominating has led to a growing sense of disconnection from the field; a feeling that I mentioned earlier in this

introduction. Later, during my graduate studies, I was able to adopt a set of starting theoretical points with which I am less hesitant to work.

The first of these points, and perhaps the basis for the rest, is the view that childhood is a socially constructed phenomenon; thus, there are no universal realities to be discovered concerning young children's education nor a final conclusion to be reached (James & Prout, 1990; Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1997). Within that perspective, meanings in the field of ECE are viewed as being developed through social involvement rather than through the application of scientific principles that result in the discovery of natural realities and laws. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2013) write 'the world is always our world, understood or constructed by ourselves, not in isolation but as part of a community of human agents, and through our active interaction and participation with other people in that community' (p. 24).

In adopting this position, the construction of knowledge around the education of young children is always understood to be 'context-specific' rather than universally accepted (Dahlberg et al., 2013). What we know about the education of young children, and what we believe to be 'appropriate practices' in the field, is not necessarily the same from one location to the other (Cannella, 1997). This theoretical stand is of significant relevance to the current work since it has been conducted in a context that is distant from those in which popular truths on the stage of early childhood have been constructed, legitimised and globalised.

Within the notion of a socially constructed childhood, the specificity of time, also, becomes important, allowing the influence of historical conditions on shaping childhood to be grasped (James et al., 1998). The task, thus, becomes to examine the historical process under which our contemporary images of young children, their teachers and their educational settings were constructed and appreciated. The objective of revisiting the past is to return to the

phenomenon and examine ‘how it is built up’ (James et al., 1998, p. 27), and, thereby, challenging ‘our embeddedness within the modes of reasoning’ prevalent in our contemporary narratives (Ball, 2013, p. 86).

A further theoretical reference point was influenced by the work of Foucault on the dominance of certain discourses over others. Foucault (1970a) viewed discourse not as ‘groups of signs’ but, rather, ‘as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (p. 54). The dominance of given discourses in any field poses the risk of creating and naturalising what Foucault (2008) describes as ‘a regime of truth’. This process of naturalising such truths will enable one to ‘accept [them] as part of the existing order of things’ (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 12). As accepting such discourses may limit the ways in which young children’s education can be viewed and developed (Cannella, 1997), it is necessary to examine ‘how were they able to come into being and, above all, how did they become so generally accepted?’ (Foucault, 1975, p. 120).

Methodologically, this theoretical position enables the present work to employ a critical qualitative inquiry into the dominant discourses that may have contributed to the construction and popularisation of certain images related to the field of ECE in the KSA. The critical dimension of this approach was utilised to question ‘why we think, talk and act in particular ways; it is about questioning what seems or presents as self-evident and incontestable... and it is about being aware that there are always alternatives, different perspectives, different interpretations’ (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 153). Additionally, a qualitative design was implemented in an attempt to facilitate a deeper exploration of the ‘complexities of the social world’ (Edwards, 2020, p. 155) and allow closer attention to be paid to the influences of both historical and contemporary contexts (Cannella, 2015).

Two primary sets of data were used to shed light on the dominant narratives concerning young children and their education in the Kingdom. First, a number of key national documents were selected for their perceived significance in the field. A total of six documents were included, with the oldest dating back to 1970 and the most recent one published in 2019. All documents, apart from Vision 2030, were issued by the government authority responsible for children's education in the KSA at that time, whether it was the MoK, MoE or the GPGE. The second set of data consists of in-depth interviews with educators from various roles within the Saudi early childhood educational system. A total of 18 interviews were conducted, including eight with teachers, four with headteachers, three with retired educators and three interviews with GDEC officials.

The analysis of the data was largely informed by the work of Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2012) on the 'plugging' of key concepts into the data in order to generate new ways of thinking within the analysis. Thus, during the initial reading of data, two particular concepts 'bubbled up', forming new connections with the data at hand (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). These include: (a) Foucault's genealogy of power/knowledge relations (1970a), and (b) the imaginary of dominant narratives for Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021). Through these moments of 'plugging in' and reading the data with the above works in mind, each concept started to point to a specific 'analytical question' that the present study analysis aimed to address (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). These analytical questions were:

1. How have historical conditions contributed to the dominance of certain narratives over others in the field of ECE in the KSA?
2. How images of dominant narratives are shaping knowledge and truths in the field of ECE?

1.4 Research Questions

The above questions are not to be confused with research questions. While the latter were derived following a thorough critical reading of the specific context and issues surrounding them, the former emerged later, during the analysis of data, with the aim of pushing data gathered beyond their surface. As such, this thesis primarily aims to address the following research question: What are the contemporary dominant narratives surrounding the field of early childhood education in the KSA?

To facilitate a deeper discussion around the main research question, three additional questions were also developed:

1. What are the prevalent images of young children within the field of ECE in the KSA?
2. What are the prevalent images of the ECT in the KSA?
3. What are the prevalent images of the school of young children in the KSA?

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

This introductory chapter has provided some background on the development of the current work. This has been done by offering a brief introduction on the following areas: (a) describing the specificity of the research context, (b) outlining the broad aim of the research and its pertinent objectives, (c) summarising both the theoretical and methodological frameworks underlying the present research, and (d) stating the research's main and further questions. In chapter 2, I expand the discussion on the historical and contemporary educational context in the Kingdom, the insights of which will contribute to the understanding of the historical process related to common 'truths' and 'realities' found in the field of ECE. The third chapter provides

an introduction to the available literature on the popular narratives dominating the field of ECE. Through exploring such narratives and their associated images concerning young children's education, a gap may be identified within the discipline, to which this study may seek to contribute. The other section of the chapter discusses, in more depth, the theoretical framework underpinning the present research, which will be utilised to examine discourses surrounding ECE in the KSA. In light of the theoretical framework discussion, Chapter 4 presents the study's primary methodological design, describing both sets of data and explaining the analytical strategy employed. The chapter also addresses an array of limitations related to the study's design, as well as its rigor and ethics.

In Chapter 5, I begin the discussion chapters by providing a thorough analysis addressing the first study sub-question: What are the prevalent images of young children within the field of ECE in KSA? Aside from exploring the four popular images of young children as revealed by the study's data, the discussion, also, illustrates two significant observations regarding such images (the implications of which are discussed): (i) how these contemporary images differ in their 'points of emergence' (Foucault, 1970a), as some traced back to the foundation of the field in the KSA and others started to appear only in recent years; and (ii) how each of the images, regardless of their differences, perceive young children as 'becomings' rather than 'beings' (Qvortrup, 2005; Uprichard, 2008). In the following discussion chapter (Chapter 6), the analysis revolves around the second study sub-question: What are the prevalent images of the ECT in the KSA? The discussion examines the transformation taking place regarding ECTs' subjectivities and their struggle between taking on a mothering role (Cannella, 1997) and being a 'competent technician' (Osgood, 2009). The last chapter of the discussion provides insight into the third sub-question: What are the prevalent images of the school of young children in the KSA? Three

common perceptions have been identified: (i) the transformation from being regarded primarily as facilities for the care of working mothers' children to a necessity for the nation's advancement, (ii) the view of ECSs as a place of 'readiness' designed to prepare children for their future (Moss, 2012a), and (iii) the notion that ECSs would thrive with greater private sector involvement (Chapter 7).

Prior to answering these questions, the primary research question could not have been addressed adequately. Thus, I have left answering it to the concluding chapter as I felt that only through exploring the images surrounding the field can I gain a deeper understanding of its dominant narrative. The final chapter, then, opens with a detailed discussion of discourses that I deem to be dominant within the contemporary scene of ECE in the KSA. This is followed by discussions on the implications of the study, its intended significance and concluding reflections (Chapter 8).

Chapter 2: Historical Context of Early Childhood Education in Saudi Arabia

‘Teaching and learning, the teacher and student, what it means to be educated are set into history, placed under doubt, subjected to sabotage and distribution’ (Ball, 2017, p. 37).

Building upon Foucault’s notion of genealogy of power/knowledge relations (1970a), this chapter will explore the conditions to which the current knowledge and truths in the field of ECE in the KSA have emerged. It is an attempt to review and present the available local literature in a way that can highlight part of the basis behind our contemporary understanding of the field, and the power relations that may have contributed to the existence and/or transformation of such knowledge. The intent is not to retell the history of the Kingdom; rather, it is to review the literature concerning the Saudi educational system in a way that may shed light on the rules and relations that have permitted certain statements, policies, or practices to appear in the field. Data on the history of ECE in the KSA is limited. However, previous work conducted outside the sphere of education (e.g., history, theology, sociology, etc.) in the region can offer further insight.

To make ‘it possible to think differently about the limits and possibilities of the present’ (Ball, 2019, p. 5), this chapter will look at the history of ECE in the KSA by concentrating on three main areas. Firstly, via a contextual overview of the early foundation of the Kingdom as a state during the first half of the twentieth century in the hope of gaining insight into the transformation of the political organisation at that period and the impacts of the association between the religious and political powers in the region. Secondly, facets of the Saudi Arabian family during the previous century will be reviewed in an attempt to expose the everyday relations that may have influenced the construction of notions around childhood between the 1930s and 1990s. Finally, a glance at the local historical development of the field of ECE will be also explored. This section will be organised around four major periods, during which there were

noticeable changes in the discourse around the Saudi educational system generally, with an emphasis on ECE. The first part covers the time preceding the establishment of formal education for young children, whilst the second part examines their education under the direction of the General Presidency of Girls' Education, although they were two periods in which access to ECE was minimal. The third period encompasses that which began after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, and the decade that followed it, in which a wave of terrorist attacks hit the Kingdom. During that time, massive pressure was placed on the Saudi education system when it was blamed for creating a learning environment that fostered extremism (Elyas & Picard, 2013). This begat a series of educational reforms, the most significant of which was the foundation of Tatweer, the King Abdullah Public Education Development Project, which arguably introduced a new discourse around the education sector in the KSA (Taibah & Jamjoom, 2013; Tayan, 2017). The chapter will then conclude by discussing the fourth and most recent period in which the launch of the Saudi Vision 2030 (2016) and subsequent education reforms were deemed to have an impact on the language surrounding young children's education.

It is important to state that although, for many, these events are seen as 'turning points' or 'critical events' in the Saudi education system (Jamjoom, 2010; Al-Otaibi, 2020; Alhussain, 2020), the following reading of the historical process will rather consider these events as periods in which certain statements were possible to appear and not others. It is not, thus, in any way a form of cause-and-effect logic; instead, a review that aims to shed light on 'our embeddedness' within the contemporary construction of childhood (Ball, 2013). Whilst it is out of the scope of this chapter to analyse the relations that have contributed to the existence of these discourses, it will attempt to explore the nature of the changes that have taken place in the Saudi educational sector in general, particularly the field of ECE, when the literature allows.

2.1 The Kingdom's Early Years

Although the KSA was proclaimed by King Abdulaziz ibn Saud in 1932, the origins of Saudi as a state go back to the eighteenth century, when Muhammad ibn Saud, the tribal ruler of Diriyah, a small town in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula, made a historic pact with the Islamic Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abdulwahhab. This pact formed 'a steadfast union between the political and religious powers, forming two presiding entities that profoundly relied upon one another to maintain their linked legitimacy in a co-dependent fashion' (Almogren, 2020, p. 7). Even though its rule extended to the majority of the Arabian Peninsula, in 1818, the conquering Ottoman Empire ended the first state of Saudi.

While large parts of the Arabian Peninsula were under Ottoman control for centuries, the interior parts remained under the rule of their emirs. These regions, known as Najd, consist of small emirates and sheikhdoms, as well as a large population of Bedouin tribes. Kostiner (1993) believes that, until the twentieth century, 'the tribal chieftaincy, in its various forms, was the most common political organisation in the Arabian Peninsula' (p. 4). Additionally, it is important to mention that, unlike its neighbouring Gulf states, these parts of the Peninsula, which is today the KSA, were never colonised. Thus, aside from pilgrims to Makkah and Medina in the west and trading in the east, contact with the outside world was very limited in the Arabian Peninsula (Khalifa, 2001).

In 1902, King Abdulaziz ibn Saud began to establish the modern Kingdom. Like the first Saudi state, religion continued to be a prime factor in the expansion of the emerging Kingdom. In one of his speeches in 1939, King Abdulaziz said that if [the people of the Peninsula] want our word to come together as one, to settle their affairs, and to preserve their unity, then they had no union except the Quran and Sunnah. That notion was also evident in the transition of the

Bedouin of Najd into a more settled society known as *Ikhwan* (the Arabic word for brothers), which encourages the brotherhood of religion rather than traditional tribalism. Yet, other crucial factors alongside the adoption of religious discourse have contributed to the rise and settlement of the new Saudi state, including, for instance, King Abdulaziz's personality, his alliance with Great Britain and, later, the United States and the transformation of the political organisation. Kostiner (1993) argues that the 'process began with changes in the strategic and economic conditions of the Arabian Peninsula, which shattered the rudiments of the Saudi chieftaincy, making way for the erection of a more statelike entity' (p. 6).

2.2 The Saudi Arabian Family in the 20th Century

As stated above, people living in the Arabian Peninsula had limited exposure to other cultures, therefore, highlighting the unique structure of the Saudi family and the traditional roles for its members can be seen as a key factor in understanding the differences within the perceptions of childhood in the KSA during the twentieth century—a view that perhaps had its impacts on the construction of ECE in the Kingdom. Like so many, the Saudis have experienced radical changes during the last century, with the oil boom and its socio-economic impacts being considered an especially dominant one (Khalifa, 2001). Thus, this section will examine the position of children within Saudi families during two time periods: following the establishment of the KSA and prior to the oil boom, and after the oil boom until the end of the twentieth century. Due to the lack of data on childhood in the KSA, the following section draws heavily on three studies highlighting the changes in childhood socialisation during that era: Alsuwaigh (1984), Al Khateeb (1987) and Khalifa (2001).

2.2.1 Prior to the Oil Boom (1930s–1960s)

The majority of the Saudi population at that time lived in extended families in which married sons, alongside their unmarried brothers and sisters, continue to live with their parents (Alsuwaigh, 1984). Al Khateeb (1987) describes the power dynamics within the extended Saudi family:

Households were structured according to seniority and sex. Elderly people occupied a higher status than younger ones. The youngsters were expected to show respect and obedience for older members of the family. They should not sit while older ones were standing, and they should not argue with them . . . Although Saudi society was a male-dominated society, where men controlled all decision-making, women as mothers had power over their children, and as they became older, their power increased, not only over their own children, but over their daughters-in-law and their siblings as well. (pp. 98–123)

Young Saudi brides, who held the lowest positions of power within the extended family, understood that the only way to gain more power was to become mothers (Al Khateeb, 1987). As such, whilst religious guidance affirms that the birth of children, regardless of their gender, is a blessing (Surat Ibrahim, verse 39), it is understood that the traditional Saudi family welcomed the birth of a male child with ‘more happiness and joy’. This was expressed in various ways, including in the lyrics of songs and lullabies for infants.

The words in the songs usually asserted parents’ attitudes toward the participation of their male child in the society and encouraged him to claim and hold an important position in the society, while they expressed the opposite attitude towards girls. Also those songs expressed parents’ joy at having a male child and the disappointment of having a female child. The boy was described in those songs as the support and the strength of his mother

as well as his family, while the girl was described as an additional burden to her family.
(Khalifa, 2001, p. 221)

This attitude toward the gender of their newborns could have come about due to the notion that a male child can better contribute financially to the family (Alsuwaigh, 1984). Beyond that, in such a tribal community, it is more prestigious to have a male in order to preserve the family name (Al Khateeb, 1987). All of this may, then, illustrate how the image of young boys within the traditional Saudi family in the pre-oil period quite differs from that of girls; a difference that can be observed as early as the time of birth.

However, despite this preference for male babies, the impact of the child's gender on the socialisation process was relatively limited during the first three years of life. As children grew older, the role of their gender became more significant (Alsuwaigh, 1984).

Boys were trained to attend public life by accompanying their fathers at social gatherings. Afterwards, they were encouraged to join discussions and participate. In contrast, girls were encouraged to stay at home . . . Girls also were raised to respect and obey male members of their family and this included their brothers. (Khalifa, 2001, p. 220–221).

Further, girls from the age of seven (or earlier, in some cases) were expected to perform domestic work and take care of any younger siblings (Alsuwaigh, 1984). Children, thus, who were seen as incompetent and immature, were socialised into what their community would define as appropriate gender roles. Alsuwaigh (1984) points out that whilst 'girls are socialised to accept their roles as basically mothers and domestic workers, boys are reared to perceive their roles as protectors and breadwinners' (p. 39).

With regard to daily routines, males (both children and adults) continued to enjoy greater privileges than their female counterparts did. For instance, due to gender segregation in extended families, men and older boys would traditionally eat first, whereas women, alongside their young children, would eat later; a pattern that starts to decline as the younger generation transitions to nuclear-family structures (Khalifa, 2001). Additionally, in terms of children's play, and as the neighbourhood prior to the 1970s was one of the main playing spaces for both genders in the KSA, children would usually play in the streets with their relatives and other neighbours' children. Yet, unlike their male counterparts, Saudi females were banned from playing outside their houses from the age of 10. Instead, as Khalifa (2001) states, girls 'would be given work inside the house in order to prevent their going out' (p. 232).

Moreover, regardless of their gender, child-rearing, particularly during early childhood, was considered to be primarily the duty of women and, because of gender segregation, children would predominantly be in the sphere of females (Alsuwaigh, 1984). Mothers living in the extended family would often receive help from other female adults in rearing their children, such as grandmothers, aunts, sisters-in-law, etc. (Alsuwaigh, 1984). Al Khateeb (1987) argues that, whereas it was the responsibility of women to take care of their young children, men, in general, maintained their distance from them as it was believed that showing love and caring are characteristics of women, and consequently, this led many men to strive to invoke a strict and firm relationship with their children.

Further, the review of the available literature in this area suggests that childhood in the KSA during the first half of the 20th century was significantly shorter the contemporary understanding of childhood. This can be seen from (a) the young age of marriage (on average, at 13 or 14 for females and 16 or 17 for males) (Al Khateeb, 1987), and (b) the early age at which

female children were stopped from playing outside to carry out domestic chores (around the age of 10) and male children were encouraged to participate in social life alongside their fathers (Khalifa, 2001). Given the short duration of childhood at the time, it can be suggested, thus, that there was no further division within the childhood period in the KSA, aside from infancy in the first two years of life, which has its roots in Islamic principles—in Surat Ghafir, verse 67: ‘it is he who has created you from dust, then from a sperm-drop, then of a blood-clot, then brings you forth as an infant, then to reach the age of full strength’.

2.2.2 Following the Oil Boom (1970s–1990s)

When analysing the history of the KSA, two primary factors appear to have played a significant role in shaping the society, particularly the Saudi family, between the 1970s and the end of the 1990s. The first is the rise of the religious movement that was known as the ‘*Sahwa*’, an Arabic term that can be translated as the ‘Islamic awakening’. Lacroix (2011) believes that this movement in the 1970s ‘produced its own counterculture and its own organisations and, through the educational system, soon reached almost all the fields of the social arena’ (p. 52). Further analysis of the impact of the *Sahwa* will be discussed later. The other circumstance that has transformed the status of the traditional Saudi family is the impact of oil revenues in the Kingdom, which has been regarded by many as a ‘turning point’ for the Saudi society as the rapid economic prosperity has resulted in the emergence of a new image of the Saudi family (Al Khateeb, 1998; Khalifa, 2012).

As a result of economic independence and due to the flow of migration from rural and Baudouin areas to the main cities, many families started to shift to a nuclear-family pattern (Alsuwaigh, 1984), a concept that may differ in the KSA from other societies. A ‘nuclear family’ for Saudis at that time had an average of six to eight children, and adult children would live with

their families until they got married (Khalifa, 2001). Many of these families lived in villa-type houses, which started to appear in the main cities during that period. Whilst offering more space for the family, their high fences, which were installed for privacy, isolated its members from the local community (Bahammam, 1998). Furthermore, the villa-type house usually offers children dedicated spaces, which deprives the neighbourhood of its function as a site for children to play (Khalifa, 2001). Another change that was evident in children's play from the mid-1980s is that manufactured toys started to replace natural materials as the main play object (Khalifa, 2001). Children no longer had a need to wander around their neighbourhood, collecting stones, sticks, sand, etc., but would instead stay inside their houses, playing with their siblings and allocated toys. Even though the Saudi nuclear family has greater independence from their extended family, cousins continued to be children's primary playmates. That was especially relevant for young females due to the ongoing traditional perceptions placed on them. Khalifa (2001) writes, 'in contrast to an increasing attention to girls' public life, less control is exerted over boys visiting friends, and attending public places' (p. 362).

Besides children's play, other daily activities underwent significant changes during this period, as well. A few examples of these changes can be found in the literature, including, (a) due to changes in the family structure, more children started to have their meals with the whole family, rather than just with their female relatives, (b) unlike the previous generation, who shared a room with their parents, many Saudi children between the 1970s and 1990s had their own rooms or shared one with their siblings. Additionally, an unusual sleeping arrangement started to emerge in some households where children shared their bedrooms with housemaids (Alsuwaigh, 1984).

Therefore, it can be argued that, whilst several aspects of childhood in the KSA remained relatively stable, others witnessed significant changes between the 1970s and the 1990s. Perhaps one of the obvious differences is that childhood lasted longer when compared with the previous generations; the majority of Saudi females in the '70s, '80s and '90s got married between 19 and 22 years old (Khalifa, 2001). Another possible indication of this phenomenon is the delay in the age at which children joined the workforce, which may have resulted from the great expansion of formal education and the increase in household income. Such a significant economic change had an impact on the increasing variation of meanings associated with the childhood period. As an example, Khalifa (2001) states, '[t]he beginning of differentiation between social and economic class, urban/rural areas, education as well as schooling and the early beginning of the division of children into age groups which schools introduced all affected children's culture' (p. 341).

Even though the structure of the Saudi family transformed during that time, the traditional role of women in looking after their children persisted. Alsuwaigh (1984) writes, 'mothers continue to be the most important socialising agent. Fathers' contribution was seen as very modest or sometimes negligible' (p. 234). As fathers continued to be viewed as 'distant figures' within their families, their mothers-in-law often took on a significant role in caring for the children (Al Khateeb, 1987). The extent of such support can be found in the words of one of the participants in Al Khateeb's 1987 study, who states, 'People always say "There is a woman behind every successful man". And I always say "There is a mother behind every successful woman"' (p. 290). Another norm that resisted significant change is gender bias toward children. While Alsuwaigh (1984) found that there was a noticeable decrease in the preference for the sex of the baby among Saudi mothers at that time, the same study indicates a difference between the

two genders with regards to parental attitudes, the responsibilities of each gender, and the skills and values taught at home.

Throughout the socialization process male and female children are treated differently. Girls are not expected to be outspoken as boys are. A girl's voice should always be soft. Girls are encouraged to show respect and obedience to their brothers, even if they are younger. Boys are always encouraged to be self-controlled and not to show their emotions . . . there are distinctive qualities which are related to gender and cultural norms of "masculinity" and "femininity" in Saudi society. According to these norms, being feminine means to be shy, obedient, decent, quiet and modest. To be masculine means to be outspoken, brave, sociable and reliable. (Al Khateeb, 1987, pp. 140–141)

Khalifa (2001) believes that, for the remainder of the twentieth century, '[g]irls in general, therefore, continued to experience two kinds of control. The first was shared by all children through adults controlling children's behaviour. The second was generated by the fact of being a girl' (p. 283).

2.3 Historical Developments of Early Childhood Education in Saudi Arabia

In 1926, the General Directorate of Knowledge was established by King Abdulaziz, the founder of the KSA. Yet, it was not until 1974 that the first public kindergarten was opened under the GPGE (Bin Duhaish, 1998). Therefore, the history of Saudi ECE can be divided into two main stages: prior to the establishment of formal ECE and the period during which the field was under the supervision of the GPGE.

2.3.1 Before the Establishment of Formal ECE

In the Arabian Peninsula, Islamic primary schools, known as *katatib* (singular, *kuttab*), which date back over a thousand years (Rugh, 2002), were the only means of learning for many children in the region until the early years of the 20th century. In a section of a mosque, a *motawa* ('a religious man') would teach children the Quran (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991). Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) describes the standard method of teaching among Muslim societies in the 14th century:

The Qur'an has become the basis of instruction, the foundation of all habits that may be acquired later on. The reason for this is that the things one is taught in one's youth take root more deeply [than anything else]. They are the basis of all later [knowledge]. (Ibn Khaldun, 1967).

Basic reading and writing skills and Islamic instructions were also taught as part of the *katatib* (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016). Within this educational system, memorisation was the primary teaching strategy; *the Motawa* (or the feminine *Motawa 'a*) would write a verse from the Quran, letters or words on wooden boards. Each child would then take one of the boards and repeat after their teacher what was written on the board until they memorised it (Altorki & Cole, 1989).

It is logical that education fell to the religious leaders. Though *katatib* can be seen as the nucleus of religious education in the KSA, the power of religious scholars during the early years of forming the Saudi educational system is not to be overlooked.

In education, as in many other fields one should not underestimate the influence of the theologians, and their followers in Saudi Arabia. These people take the place of political parties and social groups that play such a large part in forming public opinion and influencing the governments in the Western nations. (Trial & Winder, 1950, p. 123)

The local literature provides different views concerning Saudi girls' enrolment in *katatib*, which may be explained by the historical and cultural differences between the various parts of the Kingdom. For instance, whilst Altorki (1992) mentions that girls attended *katatib* until they reached the age of puberty, Al Rawaf and Simmons (1991) believe that 'for the vast majority of girls there was no education at all apart from that which they picked up at home' (p. 288). Khalifa (2001) states that socio-economic factors may also contribute to that discrepancy: 'girls who went to *katatib* were usually from the wealthier families because it was mainly these children who had the time to dedicate themselves to such activities' (p. 244).

Later, in 1953, the first Directorate for Education, established in 1924, was transformed into a ministry; however, it continues to educate males only (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991). Thus, with the exception of some wealthy families who could afford hiring 'the wives of the boys' teachers' as private tutors for their daughters (Altorki, 1992, p. 104), the majority of Saudi females had no access to any education, apart from *katatib*, until 1960, the year in which the first public school for girls was opened. Prior to that, a very limited number of girls' private schools were founded in the Kingdom between the 1940s and 1950s for 'elite' families (Khalifa, 2001). Al Khateeb (1987) argues that whilst many Saudis at the time recognised the significance of female education, most assumed,

women should have a specific form of education that would enable them to perform their domestic roles properly, and should include knitting, cooking, child-care, and Islamic instruction. They argued that women should not have the same curriculum as men. In their view, women did not need to know "male subjects" and they were concerned that too much knowledge might have negative effects on women's traditional roles as mothers and housewives. (p. 190)

Despite that, in 1959, King Saud Ibn Abdulaziz delivered a formal speech to announce the establishment of the GPGE, a committee that was later responsible for ECE. In his speech, King Saud stated,

Thanks be to God, we have decided to bring into effect the desire of the Ulama [a group of religious scholars] in Saudi Arabia, and to open schools to teach our girls the science of our religion from the Quran, and belief and fuqaha [religious instruction], and other sciences which are in harmony with our religious beliefs, such as home economics and child rearing, and anything of which the effect on their belief will not make us fear for the present or for the future (Al Yamamah, 1959, p. 6, as cited in Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991).

People of the KSA at that time took various positions regarding the matter, from fervent opposition to great support (Hamdan, 2005). Al Rawaf and Simmons (1991) note that King Saud's speech, which affirmed that girls' education would be under religious authority, aimed to reassure the more conservative families that their daughters' education would be consistent with the 'traditional role of women' (p. 289).

2.3.2 ECE Under the GPGE

Almost one year after King Saud's speech, the GPGE assumed its responsibilities, marking the beginning of girls' formal education in the Kingdom (Bin Duhaish, 1998). It is important to point out here that the particular emphasis on the education of girls during this review stems from the fact that the field of ECE in the KSA has always been found in the realm of girls' education, a point that will continue to be examined throughout the thesis.

Even though the GPGE succeeded in opening hundreds of primary, intermediate and secondary schools for girls within the first few years of its establishment, the first public kindergarten facility was not founded until 1975, 15 years later (Bin Duhaish, 1998). However, the private sector began its own efforts in the field ten years earlier when *Dar Al-Hanan* Kindergarten was opened in 1965, followed shortly by a number of other private ECE centres around the Kingdom (Al Jadidi, 2012). Thus, despite the significant quantitative accomplishment in girls' education, which witnessed a great increase in its enrolment figures between the 1960s and the 1990s (Bin Duhaish, 1998), it can be said that the GPGE had made only modest efforts to develop the field of ECE. Based on the GPGE annual report (2000), the enrolment of preschool children, 25 years after the first public kindergarten was opened, did not exceed ten percent of young children in SA.

From the above, it can be seen how ECE in the KSA was introduced during the last quarter of the 20th century. Hence, if, by examining the historical conditions, one can better understand the emergence of particular narratives around ECE, it might, thus, be relevant here to consider one of the predominant religious and political factors of that period. During the final two decades of the 20th century, the Sahwa movement (formerly *Al Sahwa Al Islamiyah*, literally meaning 'Islamic awakening') flourished in the KSA. Lacroix (2011) describes the Sahwa as follows:

The Sahwi counterculture was defined by adherence to an ideology and to certain practices that ran, at the time of their emergence, against the preponderant social norms. The ideology of the Sahwa is located at the juncture of two distinct schools of thought with different views of the world: the Wahhabi tradition and the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood . . . On theological questions connected to creed and on the major aspects of

Islamic jurisprudence, the Sahwis adhered to the Wahhabi tradition and considered themselves its faithful heirs. But on political and cultural questions, their view of the world tended toward that of the Muslim Brotherhood, although it was partly reformulated in terms derived from the Wahhabi tradition. (p. 52)

The fact that the Sahwa movement occupied a significant position within the Saudi educational system means its influence should not be overlooked. To illustrate, in the late 1960s, a subcommittee was formed to develop an educational policy for the country. Chairing the subcommittee was al-Qattan, the Muslim Brotherhood's representative in the KSA (Lacroix, 2011). Then, in 1970, the subcommittee produced what is known as the *Educational Policy Document in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, which, for decades, was the main reference for the field of education. The text created, as Lacroix (2011) argues, 'a very strong, almost symbiotic connection between *ta'lim* (education in the intellectual sense) and *tarbiya* (education in the moral and ultimately religious sense, conveyed through Islamic socialisation)' (p. 48). Education, in that sense, was also evident in the GPGE's objectives for ECE. Bin Duhaish (1998), the former president of the GPGE, describes the ECE as the primary stage of *tarbiya*, in which children are prepared, with an early 'good' upbringing, for future roles.

2.3.3 Educational Reforms in the Aftermath of 9/11

The overwhelming dominance of the Sahwa movement in the 1980s and 1990s may have limited the scope for criticism of its ideology at those years (Alhussain, 2020). Yet, for many Saudi scholars, the horrific attack on September 11, 2001, was a 'turning point' in the Saudi social and political scene, allowing religious discourse to be contested (Al-Otaibi, 2020; Alhussain, 2020). The fact that 15 of the terrorists who directly participated were Saudi nationals generated an extensive debate, both within the Global North and inside the KSA, regarding the

impact of the Saudi schooling system on encouraging the ideology of Islamic extremists (Elyas, 2008). These criticisms, however, differ in terms of their focus and strength.

In the West, the US Congresses, European parliament officials, and media analysts have looked for the roots of terrorist ideology in Saudi textbooks. Saudi critics, meanwhile, have tended to focus on the role of teachers as having indirect potential for creating a frustrated and confused generation of young Saudis who are vulnerable to radicalisation and terrorist propaganda. (Al-Otaibi, 2020, p.11)

As an immediate response to these allegations, many Saudis took a defensive stance, denying a possible relationship between the 9/11 attacks and the Saudi educational system and, at the same time, resisting any potential changes to the schooling curriculum (Prokop, 2003). However, the government later revealed that they would remove five percent of the schooling curriculum due to ‘objectionable messages’ (Prokop, 2003). This unprecedented act paved the way for contesting the traditional religious discourse (Alhussain, 2020).

The urge to challenge extremist religious views became even stronger following a series of terrorist attacks that hit the Kingdom. Led by misguided and narrow interpretations of Islamic texts, ‘al-Qaeda followers in Saudi Arabia perpetrated more than 20 attacks between 2003 and 2007 against Saudi nationals, Western ex-pats, government sites, and oil establishments’ (Al-Otaibi, 2020, p. 11). As a response, the government of the KSA worked with religious scholars to counter terrorism inside the country (Alhussain, 2020), which indicates the significant influence and power held by the religious establishments at that time.

Another threat to the religious authority of education came in 2002 following the tragic fire at a primary girls’ school in Makkah. For more than 40 years, the *ulama*, religious scholars,

were responsible, via the GPGE, for girls' education and, and later, ECE as well. However, the horrific school fire, which killed 15 young girls and injured dozens more, triggered public outrage after members of the Saudi press reported that 'the religious police discouraged the firemen from entering the girls' school, stating that since both the girls and their teachers may not be wearing their hijab [headscarf], it would be sinful to approach them' (Hamdan, 2005, p.44). Whilst the government rejected these reports, the head of the GPGE was immediately dismissed and the institution was finally merged with the Ministry of Education (MoE) (Prokop, 2003). Some saw the decision of merging the GPGE as an exclusion of the traditional religious party and a 'a step towards Westernisation' (Al-Issa, 2009).

This pushback is understandable. As discussed earlier, religious discourse played a major role in the birth of the educational system in the KSA. During the second half of the twentieth century, its significant influence reached major sectors, including education. For instance, the *Educational Policy Document in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (1970) states that the primary purpose of education in the KSA is to understand Islam in a correct and comprehensive way, to implant and spread the Islamic creed, to equip students with Islamic values and teachings, to provide them with various knowledge and skills, to develop their constructive attitudes, to flourish the society economically, socially, and culturally, and to prepare individuals to be valuable members in the construction of their community. As a key reference for the field of education, the language in the document can be seen to reflect the degree to which religious discourse was present in schools. Jamjoom (2010) argues that 'religious education, namely Islamic education, is emphasised throughout all levels of the school system in Saudi Arabia' (p. 4547). Additionally, at that time, up to 30 percent of students' weekly hours were devoted to religious subjects (Prokop, 2005).

Yet, this domination started to decline after 9/11 and a series of terrorist attacks in the KSA. Regardless of the complexity of the issue, the US congress, as mentioned earlier, mainly blamed the Saudi educational curricula for producing extremists (Elyas & Picard, 2013) and pressure from the US government and media pushed the KSA to revise its educational curriculum. Since then, the Kingdom ‘has taken steps to amend the manner in which religion is taught in schools and reduce the overall amount of classroom time dedicated to religious study’ (Al-Otaibi, 2020, p. 17). On the other hand, the criticisms inside the KSA tend to be more towards what has been described as the ‘hidden curriculum’. The term started to be more commonly used after a televised interview with Prince Khaled Al-Faisal in 2004, in which he said,

The school curricula constitute 20% of the issue [extremism and violence], but 80% is the hidden curricula and the way in which these ideas of violence and extremism are inculcated by those who are responsible for the students in the schools, institutes, faculties, and universities. (As cited in Elyas, 2008, p.32)

Dr Ahmed Al-Issa, who was later appointed as Minister of Education in 2015, writes in his book (2009) that what is alarming when it comes to educational reform in the KSA is the hidden curriculum, which Al-Issa believes was propagated by ‘ideologised teachers’ who pervaded the educational system in a time when ‘political Islam’ was rising. As a response, the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz suspended 2,000 teachers ‘who were either sympathetic to al-Qaeda and/or alleged to have propounded extremist viewpoints to their students’ (Al-Otaibi, 2020, p. 15). But condemning parts of the curricula or blaming teachers risked failing to acknowledge more significant issues. For example, considerations of the power/knowledge relations that

operate within the educational system and that could lead, in the first place, to the emergence and acceptance of certain ‘modes of thought’ were not addressed enough.

Regardless of the limitations of the changes made following 9/11, the climate became increasingly open to challenging the dominant traditional religious discourse and its related practices embedded in everyday life. That is not to suggest that such a discourse started to disappear; rather, it was modified over time. An example of this is the emergence of the ‘moderate Islam’ narrative, which was used, initially by those in power, to confront radicalism following 9/11 (Alhussain, 2020). Later, the notion of moderate Islam became appealing to some religious scholars, too, and Alhussain (2020) argues that the concept provided ‘an opportunity for both the state and religious scholars to repackage the religious discourse’ (p. 7). She adds that whilst the state adopted the term of moderate Islam to ‘tackle security concerns by regulating the religious sphere’, the religious scholars, on the contrary, used the same terminology ‘to attract Arab youth, who wanted an alternative religious discourse that was more compatible with their views’ (pp. 8, 18).

Despite this direction, an increased push for educational reforms was evident in the Kingdom following 9/11. Besides the revisions of the schooling curricula discussed earlier, many other attempts were made, and two of probably the most significant ones will be highlighted here. The first had a primary focus on higher education in the Kingdom, whereas the second was more concerned with the development of general formal education.

To begin with, in an attempt to do what Al-Otaibi (2020) deems as ‘moderniz[ing] the Saudi education system’ (p. 18), the late King, Abdullah bin AbdulAziz, initiated the King Abdullah External Scholarship Programme (KASP) in 2005 to provide many Saudi graduates an opportunity to continue their higher education abroad. Prior to the programme, the option to

study abroad was mostly available to those who had the financial means to do so (Al-Otaibi, 2020). However, in its 18 years of operation, the external scholarship programme (known today as The Custodian of The Two Holy Mosques Scholarship Program), has provided tens of thousands of students with the financial support needed to study overseas. During its first year, around 9000 students benefitted from the programme, with the United States being the only destination where applicants were allowed to matriculate (Denman & Hilal, 2011). Since that time, both the number of sponsored students and the geographical range of destinations have expanded. For example, by the end of 2014, approximately 160,000 students from 28 different countries had been enrolled in the programme (Abouammoh, 2018).

A number of studies highlight the political considerations for the development of KASP, particularly the Kingdom's need to improve its international relations following the tension caused by the 9/11 attack (Hilal & Denman, 2013; Hilal et al., 2015). Indeed, the Saudi Unified National Platform website (Gov.sa) states that the scholarship programme was initiated as a result of King Abdullah visiting the USA in 2014 and meeting its president, George W. Bush, where it was agreed to facilitate entry procedures for Saudi students wishing to continue their studies in the US (2023). However, the literature also recognises the importance of economic factors in triggering the need for an external scholarship programme (Determann, 2013; Bukhari & Denman, 2013; Hilal & Denman, 2013). Bukhari and Denman (2013) write that while a number of political and social factors have played a significant role in the development of the scholarship program, the core stated objective of KASP is 'essentially economic: to develop an effective and internationally competitive workforce' (p. 158). As such, the National Platform indicates that while the first phase of the scholarship programme (2005–2010) aimed to enhance the image of the Kingdom abroad, along with promoting the development of human resources,

subsequent phases were primarily focused on building future generations capable of participating in an increasingly competitive market (2023).

Saudi students' significant international mobility over the past 18 years is expected to have a profound impact on the education system as a whole. A few studies have discussed the impact of such a programme, highlighting the achievement of its quantitative goals and related economic outcomes (Hilal, 2011; Bukhari & Denman, 2013; Hilal et al., 2015). For example, Hilal's 2011 study suggests that KASP has made significant contributions to the Kingdom's development 'by significantly enhancing the professional capability of its workforce and by establishing strong international scientific and economic networks' (p. 18). In a subsequent work, Bukhari and Denman (2013) argue that the Saudi overseas scholarship programme had been efficient 'in both achieving its stated aims and in improving the capacity of the students involved to engage internationally' (p. 158). However, unlike the Tatweer project, which will be discussed in more depth below, the local literature available does not appear to address the impact of the external scholarship programme on the emergence and/or popularity of certain discourses within the Saudi educational system. Determann (2013) further argues that the work of some Saudi historians who have studied in the United States has not only engaged with but also challenged a number of global narratives related to the history of the Kingdom. The significance of Determann's work lies in its recognition of the impact that overseas higher education has on the exposure to and possibly adoption of certain narratives that once were foreign to the Saudi context, an area that has received little attention in the field of education studies in the KSA.

Furthermore, in 2007, the Saudi MoE launched the King Abdullah Project for the Development of Public Education, commonly named Tatweer, an Arabic word that can be translated to 'the development of oneself' (Elyas & Al-Sadi, 2013, p.60). With a budget of 9

billion SAR (around 2.4 billion USD at the time), the project aimed ‘to improve the educational competence of the Saudi population in order to create a productive and efficient workforce within a dynamic and innovative economy’ (Tatweer, 2010, as cited in Tayan, 2017, p. 61). This emerging tone that reflects a market-oriented educational reform was also found in Tatweer’s main objective: ‘to ensure that students of public education in the Saudi Kingdom are equipped with the necessary skills to participate in an increasingly globalised society . . . while simultaneously preserving the values and ideology underpinning Saudi society’ (as cited by Allmnakrah and Evers, 2019, p. 27).

While the Saudi education system crisis following 9/11 triggered a significant shift in education reform, the Tatweer project was arguably an outcome of a number of intertwining factors. Tayan (2017) contends that two major events led to this particular direction of change (and resulted in the foundation of Tatweer). The first is the KSA’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2005. Tayan (2017) believes that this decision ‘was symbolic in the sense that it would represent a fundamental step forward in working to create greater economic progress accrued from globalisation and WTO support’ (p. 64). The other factor, according to Tayan (2017), is the Kingdom’s participation in two international comparative assessments: the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). For Tatweer, such assessments allow ‘for the effective education comparisons of nations which can then create improvements in local education policy . . . [the assessments introduce] ‘reassurances’ in a system which is seen to highlight standards of excellence in education within an expert-based impartial assessment framework’ (as cited in Tayan, 2017, p. 65).

In spite of the large budget allocated to the project and the support and enthusiastic response from the community, for many educators, Tatweer did not quite accomplish its assigned objectives (Al-Issa, 2009). An absence of a clear political vision, a lack of communication with the MoE and insufficient training for those involved in implementing the project were all considered possible limiting factors (Al-Issa, 2009; Alshibani, 2015). Perhaps more significant is what Al-Issa (2009) points out as one of the key threats that hinder education reform projects in the KSA, including Tatweer: that the dominated ‘bureaucracy of development’ climate has avoided debates around education reforms with the public. It is what Al-Otaibi (2020) describes as ‘the deliberate lack of transparent discussion . . . [that] helps the policymakers to manoeuvre behind the scenes rather than provoking a huge outcry, which would happen were it out in the open’ (p. 27).

The majority of these criticisms focused on measurable outcomes. However, the influence of Tatweer on the emergence of new trends in the reform of Saudi’s educational system cannot be overlooked (Taibah & Jamjoom, 2013; Tayan, 2017). To start with, various logics of the market were emphasised through Tatweer’s agenda. This can be seen, for instance, in Tatweer’s 2008 transformation into an investment holding company that aims to ‘support educational services; development, establishment, acquisition, operation, and maintenance of educational projects; and execution of related works and activities’ (Taibah & Jamjoom, 2013, p. 232). In addition, reforms within Tatweer have brought about a trend towards a system of accountability. With its New School project, for example, Tatweer was able to invoke a model in which a number of the MoE’s responsibilities were transferred to schools (Taibah & Jamjoom, 2013). Consequently, teachers were increasingly ‘being held to account on their own performance and the performance of their school’ (Tayan, 2017, p. 67). The third major reform

trend that was witnessed during that period is the heavy use of the language of ‘quality assurance’ (Taibah & Jamjoom, 2013). Aside from being Tatweer’s primary objective (Elyas & Picard, 2013), focusing on the quality of education has resulted in setting indicators and standards for students of various educational stages (Taibah & Jamjoom, 2013).

In the field of ECE, for example, the 2015 cooperation between the MoE and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, USA (NAEYC) has resulted in the issuance of the Saudi Early Learning Standards—the first national early learning standards for children from three to six years old (MoE, 2015). In its introduction, the document states,

The goal of this document is to provide administrators, teachers, and parents with guidance on appropriate outcomes and expectations for children at various developmental stages . . . and by providing detailed indicators and examples of what children should know and be able to do at different stages in development, this document provides a point of reference that can be utilised in forming a foundational understanding about early learning throughout the community. (p. 3)

The above may suggest that, in the decade following the establishment of the Tatweer project, a change in the language concerning the reform of the Saudi education system was becoming more apparent. For instance, for many Saudi policymakers, it is now ‘necessary’ to transform education in order to create a ‘dynamic and innovative economy’ (Tatweer, 2010, as cited in Tayan, 2017). Terms like standardisation, globalisation and moderation started to be used more frequently at that time. Moreover, with the challenges that the religious discourse encountered after 9/11 and terrorist attacks inside the Kingdom, the necessity for a new political vision that can guide education reform became even more urgent for many Saudis.

2.3.4 Educational Reforms in the Light of Vision 2030

In 2016, the Kingdom issued its Vision 2030, the blueprint that details the government's long-term expectations and strategic plan. Within its three main pillars—a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation—the Vision discusses transforming various domains of the country, with an emphasis on economic growth. It is worth mentioning that the KSA launched the new vision to be a 'point of reference for our future decisions, so that all future projects are aligned to its content' (Vision 2030, 2016). Accordingly, in his first televised interview as Minister of Education, Hamad Al-Sheikh, when he was asked about his main pillars in achieving the educational plans, he says: the system of government in Saudi Arabia and the 2030 vision: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation (Al-Mudaifer, 2020).

Further, the discourse within Vision 2030 reflects two major notions. First, is the push towards 'moderate Islam', a narrative that, as mentioned previously, had emerged to tackle terrorism and violent extremism following 9/11 (Alhussain, 2020). With this intention, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman declared, in 2017, at an international economics conference, that the KSA aims at 'simply returning to a moderate Islam that is open to the world and all religions', a statement that takes the concept of moderate Islam 'from being a reaction to the state's immediate religious challenges, notably radicalism, into a new approach focused on rearranging and depoliticising the religious scene' (Alhussain, 2020, p. 6). As such, in the foreword of Vision 2030, Prince Mohammed bin Salman writes, 'our Vision is a tolerant country with Islam as its constitution and moderation as its method' (2016, p.7). Additionally, the first quality for a 'vibrant society', the society that the Vision aims for, is to live 'in accordance with the Islamic principle of moderation'. Indeed, values of moderation and tolerance were also stated on top of the Islamic values that the 'vibrant society' would be living by (Vision 2030, 2016, pp.

13–16). Alhussain (2020) argues that embracing such a notion has helped the KSA to carry out its developmental plan and ‘justify social openness while remaining within the new religious boundaries of moderation’ (p. 7).

The second dominant notion within the Vision 2030 can be seen in the shift towards increased appreciation for market-based principles. On this matter, the Vision affirms that it will ensure ‘efficiency and responsibility at all levels’ (p. 11). The objective is to embed the ‘fundamental values of initiative, persistence and leadership’ in children’s character from the stage of early childhood through ‘reshaping’ the educational system (p. 28). Accordingly, the context of the Vision emphasises the need to reform the educational system to advance the market. This can be seen in the title of the first subsection concerning education, ‘Learning for Working’. Under this subheading, the Vision 2030 states,

We will continue investing in education and training so that our young men and women are equipped for the jobs of the future . . . We will also redouble efforts to ensure that the outcomes of our education system are in line with market needs. (p. 36)

Further indication for the use of market-driven reforms within Vision 2030 can be seen in its drive to privatise public services, including education. The following is an example:

We will continue to improve and reform our regulations, paving the way for investors and the private sector to acquire and deliver services - such as health care and education - that are currently provided by the public sector. We will seek to shift the government’s role from providing services to one that focuses on regulating and monitoring them and we will build the capability to monitor this transition. (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 45)

In fact, one of the main Vision Realisation Programs, which was launched to put the Vision's plans into action, is the Privatisation Program. According to the Vision 2030 website, this programme 'will improve the quality of services provided and contribute to reducing costs, encouraging economic diversity and development, and boosting competitiveness to face regional and international competition' (2021, para. 1).

Thus, arguably, since the Vision's launch a few years ago, educational reforms in the KSA have been targeting three major areas. According to Al-Otaibi (2020), the first involves revising the religious curriculum and reducing the religious teaching and, in return, giving more attention to technical skills. Following the results of TIMSS (2019), the Minister of Education at the time, Hamad Al-Sheikh, states that his ministry will continue supporting policies and projects that will contribute to students' success with international assessments. That can be achieved, according to Al-Sheikh, through increasing the amount of school time devoted to core subjects, including maths, science, reading and writing, expanding preschool enrolment and promoting teachers' professional development programmes (MoE, 2020a).

The second target in the educational reform, which started to emerge earlier with Tatweer, is the utilisation of various 'quality assurance' tools. What is new, though, is that these assessments, which mostly were used to evaluate students' performance, are now also targeting the performance of both teachers and headteachers. According to the Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC), the Professional Licensing Test for Teachers (PLTT), which was approved in 2019, is used to issue the Professional Teaching License for in-service teachers those who wish to apply for teaching positions in the public education in the KSA (2021). According to the ETEC, the PLTT needs to be renewed every five years and is a requirement for appointments, promotions and annual pay rises within the MoE. Another assessment that puts

more responsibility upon individuals for their academic performance is the QBOOL Index which, according to the ETEC, ‘categorises high schools based on the performance of their students on university admission tests (GAT, SAAT) as a means to motivate schools to develop their programmes and improve the learning outcomes of their students’ (ETEC, 2021, para 2).

A third target of education reform can be observed in the encouragement of the private sector to invest in education at all levels. This has been increasingly emphasised in recent years, as one of the strategic goals for the Saudi MoE is ‘Empowering the private and non-profit sectors and increasing their participation to improve the financial efficiency of education’ (MoE, 2020b, para. 3). According to Strategic Gears (2018), the KSA aimed to expand the enrolment of students in private schools from 13% to 25% by the year 2020. Yet, the data provided by the MoE indicates that the percentage of students enrolled in private schools declined by one percentage point in 2020 (MoE, 2020c), which could be due to the socio-economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Saudi families. Despite that, in 2020, the MoE took a significant step towards the privatisation of its education by approving the privatisation of three of its largest public universities. Al-Otaibi (2020) says that ‘while the decision will not affect free education for Saudis, it will help higher education institutions to improve their programmes and develop their financial resources in line with the Kingdom’s Vision 2030’s principles of privatisation’ (p. 25).

When it comes to the field of ECE, it is arguable that the expansion of young children’s enrolment has been a major reform theme in the field since the launch of Vision 2030. As a response to having one of the lowest preschool enrolment rates among the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Strategic Gears, 2018), the KSA is now aiming to develop this field particularly (Vision 2030, 2016). Hence, in August 2019, the MoE launched a new initiative

called the Early Childhood Initiative to expand young children's enrolment. The initiative implements a new type of school for boys and girls aged from four to nine (KG2, KG3, P1, P2, P3). A similar language, to what has previously appeared in the rest of the education sector, has also emerged within the new initiative plan. For instance, as stated in the introduction chapter, the four main objectives of the recently established ECSs reflect a narrative constructed around notions of efficiency and performance (Chapter 1.1). However, this reading of history around Saudi childhood and the establishment of the educational system highlights the lack of literature within the local studies that explores the historical and/or contextual aspects related to the construction of the field of ECE in the Kingdom, a gap that the analysis within the present study seeks to address.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter aims to give an overview of the period of childhood within the context of the Saudi family, and to discuss the historical conditions related to the construction of the educational systems for young children in the Kingdom. Reading the history in such a way, which is so far missing from the literature pertaining to ECE in the KSA, can provide an insight into what limits and structures our local knowledge of young children and their education. Additionally, as this study is conducted at a distance from the place under study, it is particularly important to examine this background at the outset of the thesis, given that many readers may have little familiarity with the complexity and particularity of the context in which young children's education was developed in the KSA.

The above exploration of the local background draws attention to several aspects that can be of relevance to the following analysis regarding the contemporary dominant images of ECE in

the KSA. The first of these can be seen in the fact that ECE did not emerge as a stage of learning within the Saudi educational system until the 1970s (Al Jadidi, 2012). While perceiving early childhood as a distinct stage of education with its own pedagogical model is expected to have had an impact on Saudi children's learning, this major step would not have been possible without other changes in the local environment. One example that this review of literature helps to highlight is the shift in the attitude of Saudi families towards their young children. Compared to families prior to the 1970s, following the oil boom, families began to govern their children differently. This included an increase in parental control of children's play (Alsuwaigh, 1984), an increase in children's participation in leisure activities, and a greater emphasis on education (Khalifa, 2001). Hence, with the growing concerns over children's behaviour and education, ECE became another space in which young children could be further protected and guided.

The other key concept that could be of importance to the main concern of this research can be seen in the existence of the notion that childhood is a stage for shaping children and preparing them for their future roles. As the literature suggests, this interpretation of childhood was present in Muslim scholars' work as early as the tenth century (Ibn Khaldun, 1967). Many decades later, Alsuwaigh (1984) states that the traditional Arab family regarded the age from three to six or seven years old as the period for 'disciplining the child' and that the aim is 'to submit to adults' standards and to conceptualise the culturally defined male/female roles in the society' (p. 34). Therefore, when the formal ECE was founded, the GPGE endorsed that notion by asserting that preschools are a space where children are prepared, with an early 'good' upbringing, for future roles (Bin Duhaish, 1998).

While the previous two meanings related to the young children's education can be found in other educational systems, the perception of ECE as predominantly a female domain

distinguishes Saudi ECE to this day. Even though more analysis is needed to trace the origins of such concepts, the review of the history of the Saudi Arabian family suggests that females were, for decades, primarily responsible for rearing children (Alsuwaigh, 1984). Then, later, when ECE began, and due to gender segregation in education, the GPGE (which was established for girls' education) took on the responsibility of preschool education for both genders (Bin Duhaish, 1998), a significant act in the history of ECE in the KSA that needed deeper investigation to uncover its underlying roots and possible impact on the field.

In short, this chapter illustrates how the available literature concerning young children and their education in the KSA can be useful to provide insight into some aspects that can be taken into consideration when analysing the dominant narratives in the field and its related popular imaginary. At the same time, the completion of this chapter shows how there is still an absence of studies in the local context that examine (a) the emergence and/or dominance of certain languages around early childhood in the KSA; (b) the ways in which such dominant discourse surrounding the field portrays children, their teachers and their schools in certain ways; and (c) the impact of the existence of popular narratives on the policies and everyday practices within local educational institutions.

Chapter 3: Imagery of Early Childhood Education-Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Discussion

This chapter provides an introduction to the literature review concerning popular discourses in the field of ECE. It should first be acknowledged that this is a very wide area of research as extensive work has been conducted to explore the narratives surrounding the education of young children in various contexts and at different periods of time (e.g., Burman, 1994; Osgood, 2006; Penn, 2011; Murriss, 2016; Moss, 2019). Indeed, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide such an extensive review. Instead, this chapter covers the key narratives shaping contemporary perceptions of the field of ECE.

A thorough study of the literature allows for the identification of three main discourses common in the field of ECE in which educational policies and practices either thrive or fail. The first of these popular narratives can be referred to as the scientifically based childhood. Through the adoption of a positivist paradigm, this narrative asserts ‘the possibility of revealing, through the application of scientific methods, knowledge that is value- and context-free, an objective Truth (singular)’ (Moss, 2019, p. 32). This narrative has been influenced primarily by human capital theory (Penn, 2010) and, more recently, by the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), in which a set of technologies alter ‘what it means to be educated, what it means to teach and learn, what it means to be a teacher’ (Ball, 2016, p. 1050). The literature available provides a comprehensive analysis of how both dominant stories construct specific images of young children, their teachers and their educational settings, which the current review will attempt to summarise. Conversely, a third popular story, the universalised ECE, appears to be less discussed in the literature as a coherent narrative. Rather, the universalised childhood is generally viewed as a consequence of the knowledge derived from the two previous narratives.

Nonetheless, the third section of this chapter will explain why this narrative should be considered distinct from the others, despite the current gap in the literature.

The final section of this chapter highlights the theoretical framework that constitutes this thesis. The discussion begins by illustrating the struggle one encounters when attempting to subscribe fully to one of the established schools of thought. It then highlights three major theoretical standpoints that may help evoke the popular imagery of the education of young children in the KSA. In this respect, as the two areas can be considered to be closely related, the present chapter serves as both a review of the literature and a theoretical discussion.

3.1 The Scientifically Based Childhood

The previous chapter covers how the institutionalisation of early childhood education did not begin in the Kingdom until the last quarter of the late twentieth century. This was a period in which the work of psychological developmental theorists, including Jean Piaget (1896–1980), started to dominate the understanding of children and their education (Burman, 2008). Driven by a ‘system of classifications and norms’ (Moss, 2019, p. 52), developmental psychology takes its root in the imagery and practices of ECE. The review of the literature provides various explanations for the popularity of this particular language. Firstly, the domain of developmental psychology provides a scientific rationale for everyday practices with young children. Burman (2008) believes that developmental psychology’s ‘use of evolutionary assumptions to link the social to the biological provides a key cultural arena in which evolutionary and biologising ideas are replayed and legitimised’ (p. 4). Whilst ‘there are no constants and regularities in the social world, only movement and diversity, innumerable contexts and complexities’, Moss (2019) argues that ‘all sciences - be they natural or social - can be treated as similar, sharing the same assumptions

about objective knowledge and universal laws and using the same methods of scientific investigation' (pp. 34–35). Thus, Ailwood (2007) argues that developmental psychology has served as a 'legitimizing discourse' for some in the field as it provides them with a means to be perceived as professionals.

Secondly, in an attempt to legitimise decision-making processes, developmental psychology and its evidence-based practices have gained increasing attention as a means of providing politicians with what appears to be more robust and accurate evidence to support their decisions in a process that is, according to Head (2010), influenced by 'demand and supply factors'.

The demand for rigorous social and economic research stems largely from government agencies and legislative bodies which may be seeking information to report on performance and meet the needs of decision-makers . . . The perceived preferences of government bodies for certain types of research have a large impact on how research is conducted. On the supply side, social and economic researchers have developed research capacities that enable them to provide research findings on topics of interest to government. The topics and formats are usually influenced by funders' priorities. (p. 78)

Thus, in the realm of ECE, as with the rest of educational research, constructing policies on the basis of what appears to be scientific and objective evidence lends such policies not only legitimacy but, also, an indisputable position (Osgood, 2006). Here, a relationship between knowledge and policy is established in which the results of certain research are perceived as neutral scientific facts and, in turn, the policies and practices they endorse become further resistant to being problematised and contested.

The third factor as to how psychology development research has constructed a dominant definition of childhood can be found in the absence of interest in children in other disciplines (Mayall, 1996). Prior to recent years, for instance, sociology, as Dahlberg et al. (2013) point out, 'has tended to ignore children and childhood, regarding them as the province of psychology and accepting psychology's definition of children as cognitively incompetent and therefore essentially passive' (p. 107). Such an absence might have enabled the discourse of the scientifically developed child to further deepen its roots and extend its ideas to construct perceptions of contemporary childhood.

Whatever the reasons behind the dominance of this discourse, developmental psychology has had a profound impact on portraying the image of the scientifically based childhood and its associated educational practices. For a better understanding, it may be helpful to start with how such a discipline views young children. One of the key elements developmental psychology expresses about children is the belief in the naturalness of childhood, which, according to Burman (2008), is 'fuelled by the appeal to biology and evolution' (p. 4). With this view of the natural child, it is assumed that 'there are truths that apply to all human beings and that these truths can be revealed through science' (Cannella, 1997, p. 42). James et al. (1998) argue that the notion that 'children are natural rather than social phenomena' is one assumption upon which developmental psychology 'capitalizes, perhaps not artfully but certainly effectively' (p. 17). A second assumption is seen in the 'inevitable process of [children's] maturation' (James et al., p. 17, 1998); this natural and scientifically proven child is believed to go through universal biological stages of development, 'unless, of course, the child has some abnormality' (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 49). Through this image, the child, 'irrespective of context, follows a standard sequence of biological stages that constitute a path to full realisation or a ladder-like progression to maturity' (Dahlberg

et al., 2013, p. 49). It is perhaps the work of Piaget on the stages of cognitive development that most influenced the construction of the image of the staged-developing child (Burman, 2008).

James et al. (1998) describe what they termed the ‘Piaget’s child’ as follows:

. . . poor biological creature that it is, is imbued therefore with a grand potential to become not anything but quite specifically something. It is predicted . . . Within the model, these stages are ordered temporally and arranged hierarchically along a continuum from infantile, “figurative” thought, which has relatively low status, up to adult, “operative” intelligence, which has high status. (pp. 17–18)

In fact, this tendency for stages of development theories in education to separate the child into isolated and measurable components, rather than embracing ‘a holistic perspective’, as well as their neglect of the diversity of childhoods, has been criticised (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

The scientific, biological child is not only “cut up” into different stages through which s/he develops, but this development itself is “cut up” into, for example, the social, the cognitive, the emotional, the moral and the physical with each separate category having its own development (so a child can be in a pre-operational stage for his/her emotional development and in a concrete operational stage for his/her cognitive development). (Murriss, 2016, p. 80)

Further, these conceptions of the child, as an immature individual awaiting certain biological processes to happen, also embedded the image of the ‘poor’ child; a child who is seen as helpless, passive and submissive (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Within that image, children are defined, according to Moss (2019), ‘in terms of what they cannot do or what they need to acquire, a child who is passively waiting for something to happen, whether by biological programming or through

inculcation' (p. 53). One major concern is that this embedded belief in children's passive nature poses a threat to children's agency: 'To construct children as passive actors in their own lives, where adults shape subjective understandings for children, is to prevent the exercise of agency' (Osgood, 2011 p. 69). Thus, in a discipline that depicts the child as 'a person acted upon by others, rather than a subject acting in the world', along with the emphasis placed on the developmental hierarchical process, children's agency is compromised (Murriss, 2016, p. 82).

How children are defined in the discourse of child development also influences the image of the ideal educator who can effectively work with young children. Moss (2019) describes early childhood educators as technicians; those who are 'needing to follow prescribed steps to achieve prescribed outcomes, filling the empty vessel with the correct contents and in the correct way' (p. 53). Therefore, Burman (2008) states that the majority of educators will not complete their education without an understanding of Piaget's stages of cognitive development; the influence of child development on early childhood educators cannot be underestimated. Indeed, Cannella (1997) argues the language of child development dominates not only 'oral communication' amongst those working with children but, also, the professional gaze as a whole in the field of ECE:

We take action in the name of child development. We propose that schooling be designed around child development. We create research agendas, university classes, and practical materials for the lay public . . . We have functioned as a field as if all children would be "better off" if their parents and teachers understood child development. (p. 45)

Moreover, Moss (2019) notes that the image of the 'poor' child found in the dominant narratives, constructed primarily on the basis of developmental psychology discourse, also reinforces certain images of the school of young children. Through the use of scientific and

evidence-based language, the ECE setting, according to Moss (2019), appears as ‘a sort of processing plant where correct technologies applied correctly by technicians can bring about predicted developments and ensure later high returns’ (pp. 53–54). Such a view of young children’s schools is underpinned by the child-centred pedagogy that is, according to Burman (2008), built on five pillars: ensuring readiness for learning; meeting personal interests; attending to children’s needs; promoting play; and encouraging discovery through personal experiences. Further, as discussed above, the developmental stages of Piaget have had a profound effect on ECE, influencing how the learning of children is viewed as a process that advances from ‘the simple to the complex’ (Murriss, 2016, p. 78). Consequently, according to Vandebroek (2017), ‘measurable norms appeared about what a child should be able to do at what age, accompanied by an implicit understanding that the sooner was also the better in a kind of Olympic Games – citius, altius, fortius – of development’ (pp. 6–7). It is perhaps that the *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (DAP), issued by the NAEYC, is a key illustration of how the knowledge dominated in the discipline of developmental psychology is constructing a set of norms, or ‘truths’, regarding the learning of young children (Cannella, 1997). The DAP document can, thus, serve as an example of ‘how developmental psychology functions not as a descriptive science, but rather as an instrument of authorization or validation’ (Fendler, 2001, p. 125).

In short, the previous discussion derived from the literature highlights how the discipline of developmental psychology can be seen to have constructed scientific knowledge regarding young children and their educational process. However, the available literature remains ambiguous as to how such a narrative has been adopted and implemented in many parts of the world, including the KSA. In the present literature review, no local studies have been found that problematise the influence of developmental psychology on established knowledge and practices in the field of

ECE. In fact, one study that aims to facilitate the development of the National Curriculum Framework through an analysis of the theoretical standpoints for international ECE curricula concludes that beliefs derived from developmental psychology remains ‘the bases for ECE . . . [and that the field] retains long heritage of strong evidence-based progressive views . . . All of which are difficult to be penetrated or doubt . . . without quality research-based developments’ (Khomais & Gahwaji, 2019, p. 31-32).

3.2 The Market-Oriented ECE

Building upon the existing knowledge found in developmental psychology, and alongside the influence of human capital theory, another powerful narrative started to dominate the field of ECE in the last few decades of the twentieth century (Moss, 2019). Hart and Boyden (2019) demonstrate how the influence of child development studies has been particularly attached to the economic sphere, demonstrating the significant contributions of the field to the study of ‘the formation of human capital, which seeks to provide insight into the ways that the young can be best prepared for their role in capitalist society’ (p. 80). Linking the development of children to economic effects provides ‘a new way of thinking’ about the early years of education (Gibson et al., 2015, p. 327). Within this intertwined relationship between child development and economics, the former discipline focuses on how to work with children (e.g., evidence-based practices, DAP, etc.), whereas the latter provides the rationale behind such an interest in young children (e.g., James Heckman’s 2007 and 2011 studies on the impact of investment in ECE). This alignment contributes to the notion that ECE matters; yet, as Gibson et al. (2015) argue, it ‘moves the argument from one of children, and their rights here and now, into a space in which early childhood policy is developed for the welfare of the “economy”’ (p. 326). Further, Moss (2019) argues that this narrative, which he calls ‘the story of quality and high returns’, is one of the most dominant in ECE (p. 10). Moss

(2019) adds that a central element in this story is human capital theory as it ‘provides an explanation for the relationship between early intervention with correct “human technologies” and some of the most profitable later returns’.

Nevertheless, Moss (2019) suggests that this story is so prominent today as a result of ‘wider economic and political forces’; specifically, the dominant influence of neoliberalism (p. 16). Neoliberalism, as defined by Connell (2013), is ‘the agenda of economic and social transformation under the sign of the free market . . . [it] seeks to make existing markets wider, and to create new markets where they did not exist before’ (p. 100). Moss (2019) views neoliberalism as a story in which ‘life in all its many facets – including personal relationships – can and should be reduced to economic relationships, based on the constant exercise of competition, choice and calculation’ (pp. 16–17). Within this perspective, education is, thus, perceived as a means of producing human capital, necessary for an increasingly competitive market (Connell, 2013). The neoliberal process of reformation is primarily fuelled by three elements that Ball (2016) refers to as ‘neoliberal technologies’: [i] the market, which ‘consists of arrangements of competition and choice, and various forms of privatisation . . . [that] work, together with other changes, to shift the meaning of education, from a public to a private good, from a service to a commodity’; [ii] management, which is a system designed to alter the social relationships and power relations between community members; and [iii] performativity, which ‘relates effort, values, purposes and self-understanding directly to measures and comparisons of output’ (pp. 1049–1053).

In light of this understanding of neoliberalism, Connell (2013) argues that there are ‘bland and critical’ interpretations of this ideology:

The bland version is that society’s existence requires training up the young in the values and languages of their elders, and then sorting them into appropriate social roles; and that

school systems have been created to do these jobs. The critical version observes that the sorting is an exercise of power that reproduces the privileges of dominant social groups through time. (p. 104)

To further illustrate the critical standpoint, Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) assert that one of the key issues of neoliberalism is found in its ‘insertion of economic rationality into every nook and cranny of life’ (p. 7). Brown (2016) describes how neoliberalism can act as political rationality:

. . . this form of normative reason displaces other modes of valuation for judgment and action, displaces basic liberal democratic criteria for justice with business metrics, transforms the state itself into a firm, produces everyday norms of identity and conduct that configure the subject as human capital, and configures every kind of human activity in terms of rational self-investment or entrepreneurship. (p. 5)

I will return to discuss the literature contesting further aspects of the neoliberal ideology later but, first, I want to highlight how such mode of thought are constructing images related to the field of ECE. To start, scholars concerned with the normative images of young children under neoliberalism emphasise how children are most often seen as economic investments (e.g., Gibson et al., 2015; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015; Moss, 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Hart and Boyden (2019) argue that, through neoliberal understanding, the early childhood stage emerges primarily as ‘the period for human capital formation wherein the central aim is to develop toward maximum competitiveness’ (p.78). In the contemporary context of ECE, Gibson et al. (2015) claim that young children are increasingly produced as ‘economic units’. Lennard (2018) warns that such a construction of young children ‘reduces people to no more than potential earners, with their value determined by their imagined future capacity to make money based on their current skill set and social position. It’s a way of reconfiguring young life into market terms’ (p. 132). A key component

of this neoliberal image of young children as ‘economic contributors’ is found in its orientation towards the future (Gibson et al., 2015). In adopting such an orientation, early childhood is ‘reduced to the status of becoming’ (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 97), with children becoming ‘not valued for who they are now, but rather for who they will become’ in the future (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015, p. 336). While notions of children as ‘being’ and ‘becomings’ have long been a subject of debate within the field of childhood studies (Qvortrup, 1991; James, et al., 1998; Uprichard, 2008), the insight provided by Kjærholt and Qvortrup (2012), while acknowledging that a young child ‘becomes’ an adult, also raises fundamental concerns regarding such constructions:

The underlying vision of “citizen-workers of the future” is doubtless a legitimate one. It can be expanded to include other worthy visions for children’s futurity – to become a good and loving partner and parent, to become a reliable and efficient worker – in other words, to become a contributing and trustworthy member of society . . . Politicians and others are hardly to blame for being future oriented and for making prudent plans for a good life in the future. The problem that *if there is a price to be paid for this future orientation, how high is it and who is to pay for it?* [emphasis added] (p. 266)

Further, Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) describe another image of young children that appears through the ‘neoliberal imaginary’. Within this image, which is seen in the process of ‘datafying’ children, the young child is reduced to ‘a collection of numbers’ and, therefore, the purpose of education is ‘to steer these numbers in a certain direction’ (p. 99). These numbers, which are seen in various common practices in ECE, including daily assessments, measurements, standardised tests, etc., work to reshape young children, according to Ball (2013), as ‘centres of calculation’ (p. 58). As data-driven governance and accountability practices become more

prevalent within the neoliberal system, the focus is increasingly placed on “bare” numbers rather than a life well lived or an idea well thought’ (Stephen Ball in Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. xvi).

Moreover, neoliberal reforms, according to Ball (2016), produce ‘new kinds’ of teaching subjects:

[The reforms] do not make us do things, they do not oppress or constrain us; they enable us to do things differently, they create new roles and opportunities, the possibility of excellence, of improvement, of choice, of autonomy, of innovation . . . They rework the meaning of professionalism, making it into a different thing. Professionalism becomes defined in terms of skills and competences, which have the potential for being measured, and rewarded, rather than a form of reflection, a relationship between principles and judgment. (p. 1050)

The emergence of new meanings of professionalism contributed to the formation of two prevailing images of the early childhood teacher. The first of these constructed images pertains to the image of young children as future investments, as discussed previously. Gibson et al., 2015 state, ‘Where children are “economic commodities”, their teachers are constituted as “economic custodians”. They are now called upon to nurture the child as economic commodity, although more importantly to ensure that the investment is warranted – and pays off’ (p. 328). In the second image, the ECTs appear as ‘technicians, whose task is to deliver prescribed and standardised outcomes efficiently by applying “best practice”’ (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 54). Instead of being seen as a means of ‘reflection, a relationship between principles and judgment’, professionalism has been redefined by neoliberalism as a set of ‘skills and competences, which have the potential for being measured, and rewarded’ (Ball, 2016, p. 1050). This, as Osgood (2006) notes, resulted in a culture

of performativity and accountability, where ECTs find themselves needing ‘to wrestle’ with the increasing demands of becoming recognised as professionals.

As for those in senior administration roles, such as headteachers and supervisors, their image as ECE workers takes on a further dimension. It is an image, as Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) describe, of ‘an entrepreneur, a businesswoman or businessman and a manager, needing to ensure the success of their business’ p. (106). Connell (2013) argues that, much like the role of private sector managers, headteachers and others with senior roles have been transformed into a ‘managerial class’ under neoliberal reforms. Connell further asserts, ‘With schools being redefined as firms competing with each other in a market, of course the firms need entrepreneurial managers to run them – not educators’ (p. 107).

Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) argue that, under neoliberal dominance, such centres are, primarily, economically oriented. They illustrate that the centre for young children is ‘constructed as a business competing to sell a commodity (“childcare”, education) in a marketplace to private consumers, and as such is part of an industry consisting of similar businesses populating the same market’ (p. 101). While the economisation of ECE does not necessarily take the shape of a privately run setting (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), Ball (2016) warns of the ‘ethical and discursive’ impacts of market reforms in the education sector as they ‘shift the meaning of education, from a public to a private good, from a service to a commodity’ (p. 1049). While this aspect of the neoliberal imaginary of the ECS addresses marketplace principles that are intended to govern the setting, Kjørholt and Qvortrup (2012) shed light on what this paradigm defines as the purposes of such settings:

Daycare centres are no longer a site merely for blissful play; they have, for better or worse, become a place where play is increasingly purposeful and combined with education and

training. They are locations for development, yes, *but more and more for development of human capital, of the refinement of precious resources*, more so than simply the development of the child. [emphasis added] (p. 263)

Just like the narrative surrounding the scientifically based ECE, Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) believe that young children's setting within the neoliberal discourse is one of a 'processing plant', as well, both of which are concerned with applying standardised practices to produce specific outcomes. However, while the former narrative focuses on producing appropriate developmental outcomes, the latter is more concerned with the formation of human capital at an early age (Moss, 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021).

The influence of the dominance of neoliberalism within ECE has been well documented in the literature. For instance, in the area of curriculum and educational practices, concerns have been raised about how neoliberal governing processes enable 'school-readiness' discourse to guide the pedagogy of ECE (Roberts-Holmes, 2019), how it encourages 'standardisation of knowledge' (Sims, 2017) and the increasing emphasis on measurable educational outcomes (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Other studies also highlight the impact of promoting neoliberal ideology on the subjectivity of both young learners (e.g., Bradbury, 2019a) and their teachers (Osgood, 2006; Osgood, 2010; Osgood, 2011). Furthermore, neoliberal reforms have been linked to promoting policies that can restrict access to education as a whole (Connell, 2013), and increase inequality in children's access to early learning opportunities (Penn, 2012; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021).

Thus, it can be concluded that, over the last few decades, the literature on ECE has taken a keen interest in studying the influence of market-oriented reforms on the emergence of new perceptions of young children, the roles of their teachers and the learning environments. Yet, like

the previous narrative, there is a gap concerning how such discourse is constructed and reproduced in various locations outside of the Minority World. In the case of the KSA, although there have been a few studies that have examined the influence of neoliberalism on educational reform in recent years (e.g., Tayan, 2017; Aldaghishy, 2019; Al Musaiteer, 2020; Barnawi, 2022), none of the studies I was able to locate discussed its impact on the field of ECE.

3.3 The Universalised ECE

In the existing literature, the universalised ECE narrative might not appear as a distinct, dominant narrative that has its own historical process and its own assumptions and images about young children, ECE educators and early years' educational settings. Rather, it is highlighted as an expected consequence of the other two narratives discussed above (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss, 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Yet, given its importance and relevance to the current study, which concerns the education of young children in one of the Global South countries, this chapter devotes a separate section to this aspect of contemporary ECE.

Dahlberg et al. (2013) argue that theories and practices concerning young children and their learning that emerged in the Minority World, and in particular the United States, have become increasingly influential across the globe. A key assumption behind such a transfer of knowledge, according to Penn (2011), is the existence of 'scientifically sound, universally applicable precepts about child development which can be abstracted and reapplied from the global North to the global South' (p. 105). This leads us back to the first narrative presented in this chapter: the scientifically based ECE. Through the influence of the discipline of developmental psychology and the universal truths it produces, childhood has become a 'globalized' phenomenon (Cannella, 1997). Cannella (1997) further concludes that '[w]e have convinced ourselves that younger human beings are the

same all over the world. We have ignored the variation in cultural values, the position of children in various cultures, and the power held by children' (p. 58). Thus, Burman (2008) believes that the discipline of developmental psychology contributes to cultural imperialism by reproducing Euro-US norms and beliefs regarding the concept of childhood to the rest of the globe. The work of anthropologist Joseph Tobin (2005, 2022) can provide valuable insight into the current discussion. Tobin's (2005) study of Japanese and French preschools challenges the notion of quality in ECE as 'universal, generalizable, and non-contextual' (p. 424).

. . . the beliefs, practices, and standards of our own culture are cultural and as such are no more or less deserving of being considered universal than are those of any other culture. Japanese and French beliefs about early childhood education are a challenge to American quality standards because they suggest that these standards are not universal or culture free but instead are reflections of values and concerns of particular people in a particular time and place. (Tobin, 2005, pp. 425–426)

Thus, while quality early childhood education has some positive impact on children's cognitive and emotional development, the question remains as to whether certain interventions are, in fact, appropriate for young children in a given society and by whom and to what standards should their effectiveness be measured (Penn, 2010).

As the scientifically based narrative impacts the universalised childhood by defining quality education and appropriate practices in ECE, perhaps the second narrative, the marketised ECE, promotes the relationship between financial returns and ECE around the globe. Several studies have demonstrated the significant role of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), mostly based in the Global North, in promoting and spreading human capital-based educational policies and practices to ECE in the Global South (e.g., Penn, 2010; Penn, 2011; Ball,

2016; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) describe such organisations as ‘major players’ in the development of the globalised early childhood educational policies:

[INGOs] have come to play an active role in policy networks, receiving, generating and distributing policy information and ideas. Such influential INGOs, in particular those whose main purpose is economic, have justified their growing involvement in the field of education on grounds of the vital importance of education to economic performance and growth. (p. 45)

Thus, Ball (2016) argues that the educational reforms today, in the time of neoliberalism, are being ‘legitimated, disseminated, sometimes enforced and indeed sometimes “sold”’, by such ‘very powerful and very persuasive’ organisations (p. 1047). INGOs, Penn (2011) argues, rely heavily on knowledge produced from the Global North, especially the United States, but assume these ideas to be ‘constitute universal precepts’ that can be applied around the world (p. 107). Perhaps, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides an example of a major international organisation that exerts a significant global influence on educational policy as a whole, and in the field of ECE, in particular. For instance, Moss (2019) discusses the possible effects of the OECD test for five-year-old children and explains how the test data obtained from young children is reduced to a set of statistics, tables and charts that will, in time, ‘shape the conduct of countless early childhood policymakers and workers, as each government strives to improve its national performance relative to other countries’ (p. 15). It appears possible, according to Morris (2016), that such international assessments may lead to ‘the West exporting its vision of schooling’ to countries around the globe (p. 2), whereas poor performance establishes, according

to Ball (2016), a ‘policy window’ through which ideas, which previously seemed extreme or outlandish, can enter national policy discourses and attract attention and support’ (p. 1048).

Tobin (2005) states that, apart from the powerful impact of the INGOs, the less context-dependent nature of the universalised knowledge surrounding the field of ECE lends this line of discussion further power. Tobin suggests that universal ECE quality standards provide examples of this context-neutral knowledge:

These context-less standards, when backed by national organizations, academic authority, and political mandates, inevitably spread. In many ways, this spread is a good thing. It introduces standards of quality in locales where there have been none and pressures communities to invest more heavily in improving early childhood education. But this approach carries the cost of a loss of local specificity and national diversity. (p. 428)

Therefore, as knowledge of young children and their education becomes universalised or independent of context, local practices that are more tailored to their particular environments may risk being replaced by less context-sensitive ones (Tobin, 2005). While the majority of the INGOs and other bodies responsible for exporting universalised knowledge to the Global South embrace the concept of ‘indigenous practice’, in Penn’s (2011) view, however, the term has become more of a ‘buzzword’ to legitimise non-local programmes (p. 105). Penn (2011) demonstrates further that ‘INGOs and charities promoting “indigenous practice” typically undertake a very basic survey using focus groups or participatory methods and reconcile these on a pick and mix basis with their own prescriptions, making sure that “negative” practices are eliminated’ (p. 105).

In discussing the universal ECE discourse, it is important not to ignore the position of those countries receiving, and sometimes deliberately importing, these approaches. Tobin (2022) discusses the state of being in ‘domestic panic’ caused by a nation’s poor performance in various international ranking tables. This panic, along with the desire to update the education of young children to meet the demands of the global economic race, puts local knowledge and practices concerning ECE at risk. Tobin (2022) adds that some policymakers in the Global South, who are ‘anxious to implement reforms that will redress this perceived deficit, turn to importing solutions from abroad, which both arises from and contributes to an underestimating of the strengths of their cultural pedagogies’ (p. 309).

Briefly, as seen from the literature above, through beliefs founded in human capital theory coupled with scientific-based discourses in ECE, and with the support of powerful INGOs, the story of the universalised ECE was developed and promoted worldwide (Penn, 2011). This narrative could have a significant impact not only in excluding other knowledge that may be more relevant in certain localities (Tobin, 2005) but, also, in avoiding fundamental concerns about inequality (see Penn, 2010). Yet, this literature review was not able to adequately address how the universalised ECE discourse views young children, their teachers and educational settings, as well as the differences and similarities between the images in the current narrative and those of the other two dominant narratives. Perhaps this is due to a gap in the literature concerning the dominant images within the universalised story of ECE, which this study will attempt to address.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The above review of the existing literature suggests the dominance of certain theoretical perspectives have contributed to the construction and justification of the contemporary ECE.

Cannella (1997) argues, ‘Combined with the positivist belief in objective reality and scientific discovery, the [ECE] stage was set for the revelation of universal laws, the truths concerning human beings’. While childhood studies have undergone a significant shift, Murriss (2017) believes that ‘developmentalism’ remains the dominant paradigmatic position in the field. As discussed earlier, a fundamental aspect of constructing meaning around childhood in this discipline is the belief in the naturalness of childhood (James et al., 1998; Burman, 1994). MacNaughton (2005) writes about the danger of naturalising dominant knowledge:

To naturalise something is to accept it as part of the existing order of things. Thus, to naturalise the existing relations of power is to assume that they are as they are because that’s just how it is. The nature of society, the nature of us and the nature of the world just makes them the way they are. There is nothing to be done about them because that’s just how it is. (p. 12)

Thus, to contest the naturalised knowledge concerning the education of young children embedded in my own context, it was necessary to adopt a theoretical perspective that would push me to be more critical. In such critiques, the aim is not to suggest ‘that things are not right as they are’ but, rather, it is to analyse ‘what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged and unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest’ (Foucault, 1988, pp. 154–155).

However, before diving into the thoughts that mostly constitute the analysis of the current study, it is worth stating how difficult it was to adopt an established theoretical position. Ball (2013) describes a similar struggle he encountered prior to reading Foucault’s work:

For a significant period of my academic career I was searching for a sense of identity and security. I wanted to work nicely and productively within a set of historical conditions of

thought that I would never need to consider very seriously or challenge. I wanted to find some body of thought or some key thinker or ideas within which I could feel comfortable and to which or to whom I could turn for the solution to my analytic difficulties and struggles for sense and meaning . . . I was never quite certain enough, so the fact of my identity was never quite established. (p. 2)

Ball continues to state that Foucault's work helped him move beyond the existing theoretical frameworks. While Ball's challenge might have stemmed from the depth of his knowledge, vision and thorough understanding of the wide range of readings, to me, at this humble stage of my academic career, the difficulty in adhering to a single, defined, theoretical position came from somewhere else. Having been born, raised and educated until the completion of my bachelor's degree in a Middle Eastern country that has its own unique system of thoughts and beliefs, while almost every contemporary theoretical position available in the human sciences originates from somewhere outside of my native region, I found it difficult to commit to an established school of thought. While a number of these frameworks have significantly deepened my analytical work, I find myself constantly questioning certain aspects and, thus, hesitant to be identified with such approaches. This is not to suggest that I find it convenient to work with the theoretical perspectives commonly adopted in my culture. Indeed, I believe that completing my postgraduate studies in the US and the UK adds a further layer of complexity to my conceptual standpoint. Returning home after my master's and working with academic colleagues taught me that introducing new ways of approaching and analysing knowledge can be challenging and, often, not welcomed for being the *thoughts of outsiders*. I can, therefore, say that my upbringing, further education and prior experiences have all contributed to me not being willing to be confined to a set of theoretical ideas within a given framework. There is no doubt that this is not an easy stand to take; Burchell (1996)

describes it as ‘the experience of not being a citizen of the community or republic of thought and action’ (as cited in Ball, 2013, p.2).

While I believe that embracing both the power and the challenge of ‘not being a something’ (Ball, 2013, p. 1) needs to be acknowledged, I shall now discuss the various technologies, principally derived from post-modern, feminist and post-structuralist paradigms, that largely constitute the analysis of my current work. To understand the central phenomenon under investigation, the dominant images concerning the education of young children in the KSA, I adopt an ontological position that acknowledges the dominance of certain discourses over others in the field of ECE. This is done by positioning the meaning of discourse as ‘sets of concepts and the language through which they are thought as inseparable from and fused with social practices and institutions’ (James & Prout, 1990, p. 25). Through that understanding, discourse is not to be confused with language but, rather, should be seen as the conditions that enable particular language to appear (Ball, 2013). The significance of recognising dominant discourses for this study emerges from two factors: (a) the capability of these discourses to create and constitute certain forms of subjects, in this case, young children and ECE practitioners (James & Prout, 1990); and (b) their role in establishing and legitimising what Foucault (2008) describes as ‘a regime of truth’, in which such discourses appear as ‘the only way to think, talk and behave’ as ‘the only reality’ and as ‘the Truth’ (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 5). The purpose of being concerned with the powerful influence of dominant discourses on the field is not to demonstrate ‘how limited or constrained or determined we are, but exactly the opposite, it is about showing the contingency and revocability of what and who we are and unmaking of solidity and inevitability, creating the possibilities for transgression (Ball, 2013, p. 35). For such possibilities to be created, rather than merely naming

the discourse that constitutes the education of young children, Vandebroek (2017) believes that it must be asked, ““where does it come from” and “how does it operate”” (p.2).

Vandebroek’s first question brings the discussion to one of the epistemological perspectives that largely inform the analysis presented in this research; that is, how historical processes have shaped the knowledge surrounding contemporary ECE. By taking inspiration from Foucault’s work on genealogy, this study revisits history to illustrate ‘the power of normalization and the formation of knowledge’ that influenced the imagery of the field today (Foucault, 1975, p. 308). In such a study of history, the focus will not be merely on the education sector but, rather, ‘on the technologies that make up the school as an institution, that constitute its functioning and effects, and the form and methods of the state’ (Ball, 2013, p. 45). In acknowledging the perspective of social constructionists, the concept of time becomes crucial for the analysis as it allows childhood to be understood as ‘historically contingent’ (James et al., 1998). As such, the study will, therefore, draw on research conducted in the area of childhood studies concerning the role of historical processes in the emergence and dominance of certain discourses in the field of ECE, in particular, the work of Burman (1994) and Cannella (1997). By recognising that analysing the history might provide a chance to ‘navigate’ the current imagery of ECE, the ‘ethical importance’ of discourse diversity and the ongoing need for alternative theories (Vandebroek, 2017), the history I touched upon in the previous chapter does no longer seem ‘alien and irrational, [rather] it is who we are in the present, and it is modernity in its past and present forms’ (Ball, 2013, p. 87).

Another conceptual point that is reflected throughout the analysis of the thesis is the necessity to acknowledge the contextual aspect of understanding childhood. In adopting a postmodernist view of the influence of children’s local context and cultural backgrounds on the

construction of the meaning of childhood (Dahlberg et al., 2013), I adopt an ontological framework that acknowledges that how the image of young children is portrayed in one place is not necessarily the same in another (Cannella, 1997). This position, in which childhood is seen as ‘a local rather than a global phenomenon’ (James et al., 1998), is critical to the present study since it addresses a context that is quite distinct from the established Truths concerning the ‘universal child’ (Cannella, 1997). Further, by doubting the existence of knowledge that is free from contextual influences (Dahlberg, et al., 2013), children can be viewed outside of the ‘constraints of naturalism’, thereby allowing the dominant images of childhood to become ‘available for discussion’ and, consequently, ‘open to contestation’ (James et al., 1998).

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the literature concerning the dominant discourse in the field by discussing what could be seen as the major narratives in contemporary ECE: the scientific-based, the market-oriented and the universalised childhood. My aim was, to the extent that the literature permitted, to highlight the meaning of each narrative, as well as its associated images, concerning young children, their educational environments and the teachers in the ECE sector and the possible implications of the dominance of each of these theories.

I recognise that the vast majority of the work I have cited here originated in the Global North. Nevertheless, I also understand that, as a result of power relations and the influence of many INGOs, such dominant narratives can move easily from one context to another through a process Ball (2016) describes as being ‘naively called “policy borrowing”’ (p. 1048). Therefore, the reviewed literature suggests the necessity for further research that examines (a) whether similar narratives also dominate ECE in other contexts of the Global South; (b) if so, how the context

influences the plot of each narrative; and (c) what other implications a dominant discourse would have if it were to be found elsewhere.

By drawing on theoretical ideas that acknowledge the power/knowledge relations that can result in the dominance of certain postulations, as well as the influence of historical processes and contextual backgrounds that shape them, I approach this study bearing in mind that I am only attempting to provide ‘a partial interpretation of the world . . . [that] is made from a particular perspective’ (Moss, 2019, p. 40). Thus, considering the research gap identified above, I intend to use the previously outlined theoretical and conceptual framework to explore the dominant discourses surrounding the field of ECE in the KSA, how they have emerged and how they construct and, perhaps, normalise certain images of young children, their teachers and their schools.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter details the implemented research design, its methodological and analytical decisions, along with their rationales and possible limitations. Prior to presenting the discussion, the chapter begins by reminding the reader of the study's questions, which, to an extent, informed the choice of methodology. The discussion then starts with illustrating why the use of a critical qualitative approach is deemed more appropriate for the present work, highlighting its main features and potential contributions to the study. Afterwards, I describe the methods used to collect the data, including the reasoning behind these methodological choices. There, the focus is primarily on describing the two main sets of data: key national documents and interviews with educators from various levels within the Saudi ECE sector. Next, I reflect upon the process of data analysis as influenced by the work of Jackson and Mazzei (2012). Two key theoretical concepts were 'plugged into the data' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 7), thereby generating their own analytical questions that then constituted the analysis of the current study's data. In the fifth section of the chapter, I discuss issues related to the rigour of the study. While the frame of this work problematises the use of conventional indicators to validate data, the use of such tools aims not to present the only objective truth about the topic but, rather, to facilitate the production of a 'fuller' and more comprehensive understanding (Flick, 2018). The following section briefly describes the ethical considerations that were taken during the development of this thesis to minimise its potential negative impact on study participants. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of the limitations embedded in the chosen methodology. Specifically, two issues are addressed: (a) the absence of field observations due to the impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent school closure; and (b) the implications of translating Arabic data into English.

Before proceeding, I must caution the reader that the discussions within this chapter range from being descriptive in some places to reflective in others. The methodology chapter covers a broad scope of topics, each of which needs to be addressed differently. For instance, to address the specificity of the research context, I provide detailed information about the contents of the documents I used and the participants I interviewed. In contrast, a topic such as self-reflexivity requires an approach to writing that has a more subtle, personal and insightful tone. This reflective writing is not intended to be ‘a simplistic tale’, but rather ‘an ongoing critique of all of our research attempts, a recognition that none of our attempts can claim the innocence of success (even in failure)’ (Pillow, 2003, p. 192).

4.1 Research Questions

This thesis seeks, primarily, to answer the following research question: What are the contemporary dominant narratives surrounding the field of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia?

To address this main research question, three further questions were developed:

1. What are the prevalent images of young children within the field of ECE in the KSA?
2. What are the prevalent images of the early childhood teacher in the KSA?
3. What are the prevalent images of the school of young children in the KSA?

Additional analytical questions were employed during the analysis of data to facilitate a critical exploration of the dominance of certain narratives within the field. A discussion of these questions is presented below (Chapter 4.4).

4.2 A Critical Qualitative Research

In broad terms, this study can be viewed as a critical qualitative inquiry into the dominant narratives that may have contributed to the construction of certain powerful images of young children, their teachers and the educational settings founded within the contemporary field of ECE in the KSA. The decision to adopt a critical qualitative approach was a reflection of both the research questions and the theoretical framework behind the research. The critical aspect of this approach gives particular attention to three key areas that are of great importance to the research at hand. Firstly, it acknowledges the existence of power relations and shows their presence in everyday life but, above all, refuses to naturalise them (MacNaughton, 2005). This was relevant to the current study as it seeks to understand how such power relations may have contributed to the emergence and/or dominance of certain narratives in the field over others. Secondly, critical inquiry, according to Cannella (2015), recognises the historical and contextual influence on the production of certain realities in any given place and time. As discussed in the previous chapter, this study was largely guided by an epistemological perspective that recognises the significance of historical and contextual conditions in shaping the knowledge surrounding contemporary narratives in ECE. Thus, given the locality of the study and considering the time and place during which existing dominant knowledge in the field was founded, it becomes necessary to adopt a research methodology that takes into consideration the influence of such variation in historical and contextual conditions. Thirdly, being critical can facilitate a deeper understanding of the power of language and how discourses might be used to govern society (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009). Moss (2019) argues that ‘different language creates a different reality; and if you want to change how you think and understand things, you need to find a new language for thinking and talking about them’ (p. 36). Through adopting a critical lens, then, it becomes more possible to explore the narratives that govern the ways the education of young

children is being viewed in the Kingdom, and to analyse how these discourses work to produce and promote the use of certain language and vocabulary in the sector.

Further, the use of qualitative design was consistent with the nature of the question posed in the study and its theoretical and conceptual framework. As a term often used to describe a range of approaches, qualitative research offers an opportunity to explore the ‘complexities of the social world’ (Edwards, 2020, p. 155). In a general sense, qualitative research can be defined as ‘a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 10). These practices, according to Creswell (2013), start with ‘the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems’, followed by the application of an ‘emerging’ method of inquiry, with the outcomes reflecting ‘the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem and its contribution to the literature or a call for change’ (p. 44). With such an understanding, adopting a qualitative methodology was essential to answer the primary questions of the study since it can facilitate exploring dominant imagery of ECE that cannot be simply seen on the surface, and illustrating the complex ways in which these images are constructing knowledge and practices in the field. The implementation of this methodology, also, stems from the adoption of a theoretical framework that acknowledges the multiplicity of realities. As highlighted in the discussion on my theoretical frame (Chapter 3.4), I assume an ontological position that values diversity, complexity and multiple views in regards to the education of young children (Dahlberg, et al., 2013; Moss, 2019). Cohen et al. (2018) argue that the ontology of qualitative research is, indeed, grounded in the belief that ‘there are multiple realities, not single truths’ (p. 288). Also, Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the process of conducting qualitative research involves the researcher ‘embracing the idea of multiple realities’ (p. 20). To

capture this complex diversity, qualitative research relies on an epistemological approach that asserts that developing a deeper knowledge of a topic requires an understanding of ‘the whole picture’ (Cohen et al., 2018) by attempting to be ‘as close as possible’ to the phoneme under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). This epistemological position appreciates the value of being attentive to the influence of historical and contextual circumstances on the construction of knowledge; a position that is, once again, central to the current study (e.g., Foucault, 1975; James et al., 1998; Cannella, 2015).

In addition to being in line with the research questions and chosen theoretical framework, I found that a qualitative approach can significantly contribute to the study in a number of ways. To begin with, qualitative designs give researchers ‘access to the web of interactions’ (Edwards, 2020, p. 155) between, in the present case, participants’ own narratives and the representations and language found in related documents. The study of this complex ‘web’, although challenging to analyse, can, nonetheless, be of benefit as it can contribute to developing ‘a complex, detailed understanding’ of the subject matter (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45). Moreover, as it aims to ‘explore’ the issue under study, the process of qualitative research has an ‘emergent’ rather than a ‘tightly prescribed’ design (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 44). This characteristic gives qualitative research a higher level of openness to the subject of the study and, hence, opens up ‘the unknown in the apparently familiar’ (Flick et al., 2000, p. 5). This aspect, in particular, facilitated a deeper exploration of unpredicted images of young children’s education within dominant narratives in the field. By adopting a qualitative approach, it was possible to explore prevailing, existing perceptions of what it means to be a young child and what constitutes ECE in the Kingdom. Additionally, the design of qualitative research presents the world ‘from the inside out’; from the participants’ perspectives (Flick et al., 2000, p 3). Creswell and Poth (2018) write that a

qualitative approach is used when researchers wish to ‘empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study’ (p. 45). While I acknowledge my position as a researcher who has been absent from the field for several years, I cannot claim that merely adopting such a study design would provide an insider’s perspective of the field. Rather, it is my hope that this approach helped reflect some narratives within the field that are otherwise unheard.

4.3 Research Data

In keeping with Denzin and Lincoln’s (2018) definition of qualitative research, stated above as ‘a set of interpretive, material practices’ (p. 10), and as they further argue that ‘each practice makes the world visible in a different way’, it is considered necessary (to develop an in-depth understanding of the research topic) to utilise more than one of these ‘interpretive practices’ (p. 10). Therefore, to conduct this research, I collected two main sets of data: a selection of key national documents in the field; and individual interviews with both early childhood educators and decision-makers. Detailed explanations will be provided for each of the data sets below but, before proceeding, it is important to note that the data collected within this study was interpreted as statements that may or may not reflect the existence of particular images of young children, their teachers and their educational settings. A formation of such images may, consequently, indicate the dominance of certain narratives or discourses within the field. This approach to data was informed by the relationship between discourse and statements suggested by Hall (1992):

A discourse is a group of statements that provide a language for talking about - i.e., a way of representing - a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed. (p. 201)

This relationship between statements and discourse is also aligned with the Foucauldian understanding presented in the theoretical framework discussed earlier in which the study of discourse is not primarily concerned with linguistic signs (Ball, 2013) but, rather, with ‘the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse’ (Foucault, 1970b, p. xiv).

Hence, to explore critically the conditions under which certain images dominate the field of ECE in the KSA and the narratives that enable these particular perceptions to be seen as the only truth, the study utilised the aforementioned two sets of data: key national documents and interviews.

4.3.1 Key National Documents

For its ‘broad’ nature (Yin, 2018), a collection of relevant governmental documents, including visions, reports, official decrees and other forms of national written statements, was used as a major source of data. This ability to explore the variation of narratives around the education of young children over an extended period was critical to answering the three research questions (Osgood, 2012). This was particularly true in the case of the first analytical question (see 4.4), which concerns the historical processes that have contributed to the emergence of dominant imagery in the field. As I was concerned with exploring the origins of such a ‘system of thought’ (Foucault, 1970a) and recognising that interviews can be limited in adequately tracing this history, the use of documents became necessary. Additionally, the materials are

considered relevant to the other questions as they provide insight into contemporary written narratives that might have contributed towards the construction of knowledge and truths in ECE in the Kingdom. Prior (2002) writes that '[w]riting is as significant as speech in social action and the medium through which writing is carried should always be attended to' (p. 26). To this understanding, as a means of expressing power/knowledge relations, this medium has been used to ask critically 'why the document was produced, what is being said (overtly and covertly) and what is not being said' (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 324).

As I began my fieldwork, I created a list of documents I believed would provide an insight into the contemporary popular images surrounding the field of ECE in the particular context, as well as the historical processes that might have contributed to their emergence. I left this list open for any additional documents that might be found to be significant throughout the remainder of the data collection period. The selection process of the documents was based on whether their contents would provide information in one or more of the following areas: (a) the historical process that might have contributed to the emergence and dominance of certain discourses to be visible in the field; and (b) the context from which the dominant narrative in ECE 'derives its legitimate source and point of application' (Foucault, 1970a, p. 56). A further factor considered in the selection of documents was the timeframe in which they were produced. Given my epistemological understanding of the role that history plays in the construction of knowledge (e.g., Burman, 1994; MacNaughton, 2005; Vandebroek, 2007), I deemed it necessary to look into the past when conducting this study. As such, I attempted to include any relevant document related to the education of young children in the Kingdom from the time of the establishment of the Saudi formal educational system in the 1930s to the completion of the

study's data collection phase in January 2022. The initial stages of this process resulted in the selection of six key national documents (listed here chronologically):

1. The Educational Policy Document (EPD) (1970): The document is an Arabic-written statement consisting of 236 articles, developed by the Supreme Committee for Education Policy in 1970, to define the general purpose and the primary objectives of the educational system in the Kingdom (Al-Minqash, 2006). The significance of the document arises from the fact that it served, for decades, as the 'primary' reference governing MoE policies and practices (Lacroix, 2011). It is, also, the earliest available attempt by the Kingdom to develop an educational policy framework at the national level. Though the public education system for young children was not initiated until 1975 (Bin Duhaish, 1998), the EPD still defined the nature of Saudi nursery and kindergarten education and established its primary objectives (Articles 62 to 71). With such a high level of influence and an extensive description, I gleaned that the analysis of the EPD would offer insight into the local political and historical construction (MacNaughton, 2005) of dominant discourses at a time when the field of ECE was just emerging in the KSA.

2. Girls' Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1998): This 290-page document was written by the former president of the General Presidency for Girls' Education (GPGE), Abdulmalek Bin Duhaish. Through its four main chapters, the document illustrates the early days of formal public education for girls in the KSA and its development during the second half of the 20th century. Given that the field of ECE was placed under the supervision of the GPGE soon after its formal establishment, and continued to be so until the GPGE was merged with the MoK (later known as the MoE)

in 2002 (Al Jadidi, 2012), the use of this document seemed essential. I approached the document wanting to explore how the education of young children in the KSA was constructed in certain ways (Cannella, 1997) and how these early constructions may have impacted how we perceive the field in the present day.

3. Regulations for the Internal Organization of Kindergartens (2002): Following the merger of the field with the MoK in 2002, this guide was issued to serve as a reference for the internal administration of the Saudi ECE. Within its 21 articles, the document outlines a detailed explanation of who may enrol in ECE, a description of the kindergarten and its objectives, and the requirements for those working in early childhood settings and their responsibilities. It is relevant since it provides insight into the ‘political choices’ that were made early on to construct knowledge around the education of young children (Dahlberg, et al., 2013). The importance of such ‘choices’ lies in their ability to be ‘productive’ of what ‘desirable’ or ‘good’ ECE looks like (Moss, 2019, p. 52).

4. Saudi Early Learning Standards (SELS)—Children 3 to 6 Years Old (2015): In partnership with Tatweer Company for Educational Services and NAEYC, the MoE published the Kingdom’s first ECE standards in 2015. With a goal of providing ‘administrators, teachers and parents with guidance on appropriate outcomes and expectations for children at various developmental stages’, the document presents a series of tables illustrating ‘what children should know and be able to do’ at a given age (MoE, 2015, pp. 3–9). SELS’s significance for this study is derived from the fact that it represents an emerging change in the language concerning the reforms of ECE. While I understand that major changes cannot simply be implemented through a single document but, rather, through a series of actions and programmes (Ball, 2016), I believe, after a

thorough exploration of the field, that the SELS could be seen as the earliest available indication of such an emerging change.

5. Vision 2030 (2016): With being described by His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, as the ‘blueprint, which expresses our long-term goals and expectations’ (Vision 2030, p.6), the use of this influential national plan becomes necessary. While the Vision may not provide detailed information about ECE as a stage on its own, the inclusion of a macro-level perspective might make it possible ‘to see realities which otherwise remain opaque, because we are too close to our research object’ (Qvortrup, 2017, p. 47). Some of these ‘realities’ that can be traced from Vision 2030 include, for instance, defining the purpose of education and its values, reflecting policymakers’ reform language, positioning young children’s education within the government’s strategic plan, etc.

6. The Handbook of Early Childhood Schools (2019): This document represents the general guidelines for the newly established educational system for young children that replaces the previous kindergarten system in which ECE was excluded for children between the ages of 3 and 6. Even though children under the age of 3 have yet to gain access to public ECE, the updated system extends the definition of ECE to include children up to third grade—approximately 9 years old (MoE, 2019). Thus, I included this document for its potential to highlight the contemporary understanding of key stakeholders regarding the education of young children, their expectations of the roles and responsibilities of those working in early childhood schools, and their vision and design for such settings.

While these documents were identified and read in depth at an early stage of the data collection, the list should not be seen as fixed or closed. In fact, several other national written statements were reviewed during the writing phase. One example of a prominent document among these in terms of its impact on the discussion of the current study is the Saudi National Curriculum Framework (MoE, 2021), which was not made available online until the completion of data collection.

4.3.2 Interviews

The second method used to collect data involved a series of in-depth individual interviews. The selection of interviews as a primary data collection tool was driven by the chosen approach to inquiry. As I wanted to explore the what and how of the dominant narratives around Saudi ECE, flexible interviews allowed for the complexity of the issue to be examined more deeply (Cohen et al., 2018). Another important reason I chose to conduct in-depth interviews is due to my willingness to capture the complexities of everyday experiences within early childhood settings; places that I have not been a part of for many years now. Hence, I approached the interviews wanting to hear and learn from those who are currently working in the field or had much longer experiences than mine so I could gain insights into ‘more reflective understandings about the nature of that experience’ (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012, p. 102).

Obtaining Permissions. In August 2021, I began collecting my second set of data by contacting the Ministry Agency for Planning and Development (MAPD) within the MoE. This was an important step since public schools in the KSA are not authorised to grant permission for any research project to be carried out. After submitting a couple of documents, permission was granted in less than a week. What presented a challenge, though, was that I had to obtain additional permission from each of the regional educational departments where the study was to

be conducted. Since I am aware of the cultural differences between various regions of the Kingdom, I attempted to include participants from four different local schools in the hope that this step would reflect part of that diversity. The chosen schools were located in Riyadh (the capital), Dammam (the eastern shore), Tabuk (the north) and Al-Baha (the south). Thus, I needed to go through the same process of contacting, completing forms, submitting and following up with four different offices. A further challenge was that contact information could not always be found online or was outdated. This, in addition to the fact that this occurred in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which the majority of people worked online, made the second stage of obtaining permissions particularly time-consuming. While one regional department, the Eastern Province, contacted me after receiving my permission letter from the MAPD, I had to find ways to contact the other three offices and obtain their permissions, which took between three weeks and two months.

Contacting Schools' Participants. Upon obtaining permissions, each of the regional departments selected a local Early Childhood School (ECS) and provided me with its headteacher's (HT) contact information. Because of the lengthy and complex process of obtaining permission (described above), and considering that including the private sector would require following a further different set of steps, it became necessary to focus on either the public or the private sector. I started to look at both the benefits and the limitations of studying each and ultimately concluded that the public ECSs could provide more relevant insights into the current research questions. While the private sector, from its early foundation in the Kingdom (see 2.3), has certainly played a significant role in the education of young children, two factors were key to this decision. First, the newly established model of young children's schools launched by the Ministry in 2019 (MoE, 2019) cannot always be found within the private sector. Rather, as

discussed in the introduction to this thesis (see 1.1), the private settings can take a broad range of forms including, for instance, independently operated kindergartens, kindergarten classes within girls primary schools, and children's hospitality centres, which are under the supervision of the MHRSD and not the MoE (MHRSD, 2021a). As each of these settings is distinct in its structure, pedagogical orientations and educational practices and thus potentially bears different implications, the ECSs are more consistent with the current objective of the department responsible for the education of young children within the MoE: 'to provide distinguished educational services for children from the age of 3 until the third grade of elementary school' (MoE, n.d. a). The other factor that influenced this decision was the in-person work experience of early childhood teachers participating in the study. Namely, many newly graduated teachers consider working for the private sector merely a path to teaching in a public school. Comparing the employment conditions between public and private preschools in the KSA, Gahwaji (2013) writes that the public sector 'has been, and still is, very attractive for recent graduates due to high salaries and benefits, job security, and social status' (p. 334). This being the case, I was concerned that choosing to study the private sector may result in interviewing teachers who have had less experience working with young children. This was particularly critical considering that at the time the study was conducted, all schools in the KSA had been moved to online learning for over 18 months due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As such, following receiving the contact information of the chosen public ECSs' headteachers, I made an initial contact to introduce myself, share a brief summary of the current research and provide a copy of the study's Information Sheet (see Appendix A), along with the Interview Participation Consent Form (see Appendix B) translated into Arabic (see Appendices C and D). In addition, I would explain the criteria for taking part in the research. Though the

inclusion of diverse workers within ECSs was important for this study, it was necessary to specify two criteria for the selection of participants, both for the benefit of the participants and for the rigour of the study itself. Firstly, the school HT, a kindergarten teacher (KGT) and an early primary teacher (EPT) should be willing to participate in the study without being under any pressure to do so. In a number of cases, the HTs nominated other teachers in place of those who did not wish to participate. However, if the matter concerned the HT, I would have to return to the regional education department to be referred to another school, as was the case in the first school that was selected in Dammam. Secondly, a participant had to have a minimum of three years of work experience in schools; there was a concern that teachers with less than three years' experience might not have an adequate perspective on what happens inside ECSs. This criterion was in line with the conditions of the data collection phase, which commenced about 18 months after the closure of Saudi Arabian schools in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. This selection process resulted in the participation of four HTs, four KGTs and four EPTs (see Table 1 below).

Table 1*Information on Schools' Participants*

	Name*	Position Title	City
1	Nora	HT	Tabuk
2	Dana	KGT	Tabuk
3	Mai	EPT	Tabuk
4	Farah	HT	Dammam
5	Mona	KGT	Dammam
6	Maha	EPT	Dammam
7	Alia	HT	Riyadh
8	Jana	KGT	Riyadh
9	Amal	EPT	Riyadh
10	Fai	HT	Al-Baha
11	Raghad	KGT	Al-Baha
12	Asama	EPT	Al-Baha

* *Note.* To ensure the privacy of participants, all names have been anonymously masked.

Reflecting ‘Authoritative Voices’. The term ‘authoritative voices’ is borrowed from Osgood’s 2012 work in which it was used to present data from both key policy documents and stakeholder interviews (p. 31). For the purpose of this study, I am using Osgood’s terminology to include the perspectives and insights of a number of leading educators who have had a considerable impact on early childhood educational policies and practices in the KSA since the early foundations of the field. In early drafts of this thesis, I used the term ‘policymakers’ to

describe this group of leading educators; however, I have since moved away from this term as I have become more aware, through the course of this study, of the limitations within their roles to create or ‘make’ policy, as will be further discussed in the discussion chapters. As I have been concerned with capturing the dynamics of discourse at multiple levels (Ball, 2006) since the very beginning of this research project, it was deemed necessary to include, in addition to participants from schools, individuals who could represent ‘the authoritative voices’ within the Saudi ECE system (Osgood, 2012). Using what Ball (1993) describes as ‘a cross-sectional rather than a single level analysis by tracing policy formulation, struggle and response from within the state itself through to the various recipients of policy’ was thought to facilitate the discussion by ‘tracing the discursive origins’ of the popular imagery associated with ECE (p. 16).

Therefore, after obtaining my initial permission to conduct the research, I requested that the MAPD put me, along with the four regional educational departments, in contact with the General Department of Early Childhood (GDEC), since it acts as the official ‘authoritative institution’ (Osgood, 2012) that governs the work of ECSs throughout the Kingdom. Like all other departments involved in this study, communication with the GDEC was conducted online; yet, the process was straightforward to carry out. Two personnel within the GDEC chose not to participate, while three others expressed an interest in doing so. Additionally, given my adopted theoretical understanding regarding the significance of historical processes in constructing dominant meaning around childhood (Cannella, 1997), I was keen to enable our contemporary narratives around ECE to ‘speak with history’ (Olsson & Vandebroek, 2017, p. ix). Thus, I directly approached several key retired educators who had worked in the field during its early days, three of whom willingly accepted my invitation to participate in this study. Further information about the participants from the authoritative voices group can be found in Table 2.

Table 2*Information on Authoritative Voices' Participants*

	Name*	Position	City
1	Iman	Retired ECE Assistant Professor	Dammam
2	Huda	Former Senior Administrative Officer in the previous General Department of Kindergartens, MoE	Riyadh
3	Tahani	Former Head of a Regional ECE Department, MoE	Dammam
4	Hind	General Administrator, GDEC, MoE	Riyadh
5	Lana	General Administrator, GDEC, MoE	Riyadh
6	Maisa	General Administrator, GDEC, MoE	Riyadh

* *Note.* To ensure the privacy of participants, all names have been anonymously masked.

Conducting the Interviews. A total of 18 individual interviews were conducted virtually between August and November 2021. Even though an in-person setting had been specified as part of the initial design of the study, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that face-to-face interviews were not feasible. Thus, following their approval, participants were invited to an online interview through Microsoft Teams. All participants, except one, chose to keep their cameras off during their interviews, which, further introduced some of the limitations of online, off-camera interviews, such as the lack of non-verbal communication, including posture, facial expression, etc. (Cohen et al., 2018). The length of the interviews varied, based on the flow of the discussion, from 18 minutes to an hour and 13 minutes, with an average duration of 32 minutes.

Interviews with participants from various groups followed a similar protocol, each of which began with me introducing myself, explaining the purpose of my research, providing a

rough estimate of the interview length and assuring the interviewer that there were no right or wrong answers (Cohen et al., 2018). Next, I proceeded with the core interview questions, which had been prepared in advance (see Appendices E and F). It is relevant to note that, for the nature of in-depth interviews, not all the core questions were asked in each of the 18 interviews and that each interview had different follow-up questions. Nevertheless, all the interviews covered three themes: the perceptions of young children; the role of early childhood educators; and the purpose of ECE. Acknowledging Moss's (2019) view that 'education is, first and foremost, *a political practice*, building on political questions that call for choices to be made between often conflicting alternatives' (p. 49, emphasis in original), I found it important for the interviews, as for the research as a whole, to focus on political questions rather than technical ones. Therefore, I tried to avoid asking interviewees 'technical questions', such as which practices work best, what level of quality is needed, etc. (Moss, 2019), not because they are insignificant but, rather, because certain political questions must be addressed first. With this in mind, it should be noted that the purpose of asking these questions was not to find answers that would reflect the 'realities' about our dominant images of ECE but to direct the talk with the participants towards an area that may later be analysed to highlight the 'rules of existence' of such statements (Foucault, 1970a).

The data collection phase was then concluded by manually transcribing the recorded interviews. The decision to not use software was based on their limited ability to transcribe accurately colloquial Arabic.

4.4 Analysis of Data

The outcome of the data collection was a few hundred pages of documents, interview transcripts and reflective notes that needed to be carefully analysed and incorporated into meaningful discussions. Before describing the data analysis approach, it is worth noting that, as is the case in much qualitative research, this data analysis was not a ‘distinct phase’, independent of the remainder of the study (Bryman & Burgess, 2002, p. 217). Rather, the analysis of the data was integrated into the rest of the research process, in a continuous flow, similar to what described by Creswell and Poth (2018) as ‘a data analysis spiral’ (p. 185). Furthermore, instead of following a fixed, outlined and predetermined procedure, this analytical approach evolved and emerged over time. In a modest attempt to respond to Jackson and Mazzei’s (2018) urge to adopt an analytic practice that ‘enters and exits sideways, that begins in the middle emerging from an eruption that occurs when theory and data and problems are thought together’ (p. 733), this study used the materials at hand ‘to map what emerges in the threshold with theory to open up meaning and new connectives’ (p. 724). Consequently, the analytical questions that were adopted to gain new insights into the study’s data ‘did not precede [the] analytic practice . . . but emerged in the middle’ of that practice. (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p. 732).

The emergence of such analytical questions was made possible through the use of a number of theoretical concepts found in the work of scholars across various fields. While I do not claim to do what Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei (2012) described as ‘thinking with theory’, my analytical approach was informed, in part, by their work and, in particular, their use of key concepts to push research data to ‘its exhaustion in order to produce knowledge differently’ (p. 7). Jackson and Mazzei (2012) further illustrate this:

[J]ust as we needed to hone in on specific data episodes, we learned that instead of theoretical frameworks (critical theory, poststructuralism), we needed rather to focus

more specifically on theorists; and not just on theorists, but a specific concept from the theorists . . . (p. 5)

While I already presented some of the philosophical notions underlying my project generally within the discussion of the theoretical framework (Chapter 3.3), I intend, here, to briefly illustrate the two key concepts that I most specifically ‘plugged into the data’ to help facilitate new ways of thinking within my analysis (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p. 7).

1. **Genealogy of Power/Knowledge Relations:** Foucault’s genealogy was used to trace the ways in which contemporary practices founded in the field emerged previously from particular power relations, thereby showing that what is taken for granted today might be more problematic than it appears. The aim of such historical readings was ‘not to think historically about the past but rather to use historical materials to rethink the present’ (Garland, 2014, p. 373). Thus, I read the data with the intention of receiving the discourse around ECE ‘in that punctuality in which it appears’ (Foucault, 1970a, P. 28). This was to demonstrate that such ‘pre-existing forms of continuity’ attached to contemporary narratives ‘do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized’ (Foucault, 1970a, P. 28). This leads me to ask the following analytic question as I read the data: How have historical conditions contributed to the dominance of certain narratives over others in the field of ECE in the KSA?
2. **The Imaginary of Dominant Narratives:** Roberts-Holmes and Moss’s (2021) work, as outlined in earlier chapters, formed the basis for the design of the present study to a great extent, along with its research questions. Yet, upon reading and re-reading this

research data, a particular concept made consistent mention. Roberts-Holmes and Moss's work on the analysis of the imaginary of neoliberalism provides insight into the ways in which dominant discourses produce normative and productive subjectivities of both people and institutions. While the above two philosophical concepts were employed to analyse the process of the emergence of the dominant narratives, Roberts-Holmes and Moss's concept of the imaginary of dominant discourses helped me to stay closer to the contemporary narratives around ECE by highlighting its implications on identities, policies and everyday practices. Hence, working with Roberts-Holmes and Moss's concept of imaginary dominant narratives promoted the following analytic question: How images of dominant narratives are shaping knowledge and truths in the field of ECE?

To outline the overall analytical approach, then, this chapter will briefly highlight the steps taken throughout the process. It must be noted that this was not a clearly defined plan from the beginning; there was no predetermined analytical procedure prior to the collection data, nor was it certain which analysis would be required. Rather, it was through reading both theory and data that a map of what can be done to generate new ways of understanding started to emerge (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). As such, the route to determine the required analysis was one of errors and improvements and is still being developed at the time of writing. The first step involved the use of a more traditional qualitative data analysis technique, in which data was coded and sorted into a number of categories and subcategories with the aim that it could later be combined into several themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Despite attempts to be as inclusive as possible, it became apparent that this method was, to some degree, constraining the data. In some cases, for instance, significant statements were excluded simply because they were not consistent

enough with the established themes. At that time, I was taking a more macro perspective on the data. As opposed to my present focus on images of young children, early childhood educators and ECE settings, I was concerned with defining the dominant discourses in the field. Thus, the initial themes included neoliberalism, developmentalism, motherhood and the notion of *tarbiya*, as well as scientific-based discourse. Using that coding approach at times caused me to feel as if I was '[missing] the texture, the contradictions, the tensions . . . [as if I was locked] into more of a territorialized place of fixed, recognizable meaning' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 12).

Then, following intensive readings of literature and data, discussions with my supervisor and many moments of reflection, I began to notice how the previous analytic questions started to appear more clearly and consistently. Yet, it was only when I read Roberts-Holmes and Moss's (2021) chapter entitled 'Neoliberalism and its imaginary' that I felt I had found a more inclusive way of structuring the data analysis. Rather than searching for evidence within the data that might indicate the existence or absence of certain discourses previously identified and studied in the literature, albeit in different locations, Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) directed me to look at the broader image of young children, early childhood educators and the schools of young children within the Saudi public ECE. This methodological decision allowed me to capture all that has been stated within the data frames about each of the three groups without having to omit any significant statement; at least, not at this very early stage of analysis.

The following step was informed by the work of Jackson and Mazzei (2012) discussed above. This stage involved periods of 'plugging in' or 'reading-the-data-while-thinking-the-theory' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 4), during which the previous theoretical concepts guided the process of reading and re-reading the data. Reading the data while keeping in mind the analytic questions that emerged from the theoretical concepts was not meant to confine the data

or force it in a particular direction; rather, it was an attempt ‘to open up’ new meanings through analysis of the study (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017). With this in mind, Jackson and Mazzei helped me to approach the data with the understanding that it is ‘partial, incomplete, and always in a process of a re-telling and re-membering’ (2012, p. ix). If the same data was to be read with a different set of analytic questions, the narrative would probably be quite different. My analysis process was based, then, on the understanding that it would not eventually reveal one single truth about the narratives of the Saudi ECE, nor would it be able to reflect the data just as it is. Rather, this analysis of data was perceived as an attempt to uncover ‘a reality that already exists among the multiple realities being enacted in an event, but which has not been previously “disclosed”’ (Taguchi, 2012, pp 274–275).

4.5 Rigour of the Study

A rejection of the conventional indicators for the rigour of data, including terms like validity and reliability, within qualitative inquiries, has been well established in the literature. Much work has been done to illustrate how and why qualitative research should be governed by principles of trustworthiness that differ from those employed in quantitative research (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1992; Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Even though I, as well, do not concern my work with following rigid standards to validate the present research, and while I acknowledge that there is no single approach that can be applied ‘*carte blanche*’ to all qualitative research to establish its rigour (Morse, 2018), I recognise that the use of certain strategies, tailored specifically to the current project, may add more depth to the understanding of the topic under study.

One particular strategy may be seen in the study's attempt to reflect various perspectives concerning the imaginary of the Saudi ECE. The present work sought to incorporate a wide range of views through the use of two techniques. Firstly, as illustrated earlier (see "4.3 Research Data"), the selected design involves the implementation of more than one primary method (key documents and interviews) with the objective of capturing the perspectives of both practitioners in the field and those with more authoritative voices. Additionally, in terms of data analysis, the analytical approach to this research has been greatly informed by the work of Jackson and Mazzei (2012) on the use of various key theoretical concepts to allow for 'new ways of thinking' (p. 7) to emerge during the discussion of the topic. Even though scholars may refer to such methodological decisions as a process of 'triangulation' or 'crystallization', by considering the debate on the possibilities and/or limitations of either terminology within the realm of qualitative inquiry (Flick, 2018), the research took a reflexive position where the use of such an approach is not to be seen as a validation tool but rather as a means for providing possible routes to a more comprehensive and thorough analysis of the topic. This view is drawn from Fielding and Fielding (1986) on the use of theoretical and methodological triangulation:

Theoretical triangulation does not necessarily reduce bias, nor does methodological triangulation necessarily increase validity. Theories are generally the product of quite different traditions so when they are combined, one might get a fuller picture, but not a more "objective" one. Similarly different methods have emerged as a product of different theoretical traditions, and therefore combining them can add range and depth, but not accuracy (cited in Flick, 2018, p. 447).

As the impact of the first approach to a more rigorous study remained, to some extent, within the scope of the methodology of the study and its practices, the second approach appeared

to extend beyond these boundaries to incorporate all aspects of the research. In a continuous process of reflecting upon how ‘who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel’ impacts my work (Pillow, 2003, p. 176), it is possible to attain broader rigour through, as Ball (1990) puts it, ‘the conscious and deliberate linking of the social process of engagement in the field with the technical processes’ and the subsequent decisions taken in such a linking (p. 159). This process, which is often referred to as reflexivity, has played a significant role in the development of qualitative inquiry (Finlay, 2002). The present work assumes reflexivity involves constant moments of acknowledging the political and social basis that are embedded in all the research decisions—from the topic that motivated me to those I avoided; from the theories that shaped my analysis to the ones I excluded; from how I represented my participants to how I developed my discussion and conclusion (Hertz, 1997).

As I adopt a theoretical stance that accepts that the developed discussions are ‘partial, incomplete, and always in a process of a re-telling and re-membling’, the act of reflexivity becomes more significant as it questions ‘what we hear and how we hear . . . and [thus] deconstruct[s] why one story is told and not another’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. ix). Within that position, the critical reflexive moments throughout my work are not meant to provide assurance that the written narrative is the only valid one but, rather, to reveal to the reader my personal experiences and backgrounds in the hope that it will enable them ‘to “speak back” to the text and engage in questioning that is different from the dialogue possible’ (Pillow, 2003, p. 190). As such, I concur with Mauthner and Doucet's arguments that ‘the more researchers can be self-conscious about, and articulate, their role in research processes and products, the more readers can engage in symbolic dialogues with the author(s) and the more their confidence in the work will increase’ (2003, p. 424). While acknowledging that the practice of reflexivity is ‘perilous,

full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails' (Finlay, 2002, p. 212), this thesis attempts to engage in several moments of reflection throughout the various chapters (previous examples exist within the introduction and the discussion of the theoretical framework). Nonetheless, one particular reflective point ought to be highlighted here as its influence was not confined to one particular discussion but, rather, to the overall work.

The Researcher. I always thought of my professional identity as that of a Saudi early childhood educator; I hold a bachelor's degree in kindergarten education from a Saudi university and I worked as a kindergarten teacher for a period before entering academia at the same university from which I graduated. Because of this background, I naively believed for a long time that I was part of the field. At the beginning of my postgraduate journey, I thought of my researcher self as the insider and, therefore, that I was better suited to represent those with whom I shared similar experiences. Yet, this sense of self, in which I drew parallels between myself and practitioners in the field to appear closer to them (Pillow, 2003), was challenged when I started to visit ECSs to evaluate students' fieldwork. In the eyes of the practitioners, I was seen as an outsider, albeit an expert, whose role was to pass judgement on the work being performed in these settings. As part of that role, I had brief visits to kindergarten classrooms, where I sat on a chair, far from both the teachers and young children (who often sat on the ground or in tiny chairs), observed, and took notes on what was happening, while remaining entirely uninvolved. Through this role, I started to become more aware that being physically present in a particular field does not necessarily mean that you are close to it.

Then, shortly before I began collecting data for this study, I had an encounter that encouraged me to question my insider/outsider position more urgently. I met with a group of friends from college, all of whom work as kindergarten teachers. At one point during the

evening, they began to complain about recent changes implemented in the Saudi public ECSs. In the beginning, I only listened to their conversation but, soon, felt the need to share that I understood part of their struggles and that my work also aims to address such issues. It was almost immediately that the tone and direction of that conversation changed; they began to tell me how proud they are of the big leap taking place in the field and how the education of young children in the KSA is achieving great success. I understand my friends' position. It is often easy for members of the same family to complain about, for example, their old car, their damaged roof, etc., whereas it is more difficult to involve someone not part of that family in such issues. This encounter, as well as similar experiences I had during my previous visits to ECSs, allowed me to recognise how certain '[I]dentities that I may have held some years ago have become submerged' (Young, 2005, p. 153). I cannot neglect my own background, knowledge and experiences in the field but, also, I am now more aware of the changes within my identity that have been shaped by my academic role and postgraduate education—a subjectivity that triggers its own privileges and limitations. Therefore, I no longer position my researcher self as an insider of the field; rather, I see myself sitting in my corner chair, listening from afar.

4.6 Research Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines and standards of the Moray House School of Education and Sport at the University of Edinburgh regarding ethical practices and procedures published online in 2021. Prior to collecting data, ethical approval for the current research was granted by the School of Education and Sport Ethics Sub-Committee (Ref: SABA12052021). Additionally, this study also adhered to its policy and regulations regarding scientific integrity by being sponsored by Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University (IAU). While there was no published code of ethics for researchers working with SA's Ministry of

Education or its ECSs at the time the present study was carried out, it was necessary to obtain permissions, as outlined earlier, from the MAPD, as well as the four regional educational departments where the chosen ECSs were located.

To address some of the potential ethical issues associated with in-depth interviews, an information letter and a participation consent form (see Appendices A, B, C and D) were emailed to each of the 18 participants. Both documents were written in Arabic, which is the first language of all individuals involved. The information letter contained the following details: (a) a description of the study, stating its objectives, data collection methods, data analysis procedures and the potential risks and benefits of participation; (b) the measures of confidentiality taken; (c) the right to withdraw from participation at any stage and/or refuse to answer any of the interview questions without any consequences; and (d) contact information in case of any questions related to the research (Rivera et al., 2009). The consent form ensured that participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any given time, as well as having the option of approving or refusing to have their interviews recorded, transcribed and translated into English, as well as the possibility of using extracts from their interviews in this research and/or subsequent publications. To further ensure that participants were adequately informed, a brief explanation of the study's purpose and participants' rights was discussed at the beginning of each interview. In recognition of participants' backgrounds, all communications before and during interviews were conducted in Arabic and were later translated into English by the researcher to protect confidentiality. With the aim of giving participants a wider opportunity to revise their interview transcripts that they feel do not reflect the meaning intended, interviewees were offered the choice of receiving the original transcript, the translated version, both versions or neither.

Any materials that participants wished to remove from the original transcription of their interview or its translation were immediately excluded from the study.

To protect the privacy of participants, all names were masked (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and an attempt was made during the write-up of the thesis to avoid developing the discussion in a way that might reveal the participants' identities. As per the ethical recommendation of the University of Edinburgh, all data collected from interviews was stored in a locked electronic file on OneDrive.

Some ethical issues had to be addressed and managed regarding the use of documents (the other set of primary data), even though this method does not involve dealing with personal or confidential information. In particular, the majority of these documents were available only in Arabic, which poses a number of translation concerns for both sets of data. For instance, as translation involves interpreting and giving meanings to both the original and translated data at a deeper level, Gawlewicz (2019) suggests that a continuous reflection on the researcher's identity is needed to consider any potential implications on the translation process. Further discussion of issues related to the practice of translation will be explored in the limitations section below.

4.7 Limitations

I recognise that the chosen methodology, like any alternatives, comes with its own limitations. Based on the details of the study design outlined above, two primary limitations of the methodology must be addressed.

4.7.1 Lack of Observations

It may seem problematic that a study about the education of young children was conducted without stepping foot in such settings. I myself acknowledge and question how this

aspect may have constrained the discussion within my work. The inclusion of observations of early childhood schools is intended to offer two distinct contributions. First, by conducting in-person school visits, it could be more possible to involve young children as participants in the current study. This could provide valuable insights into how they view themselves as learners and could shed a light on their perceptions of the imagery pertinent to them within contemporary dominant narratives. Second, observations could also offer a more complex interpretation of the interactions between young children, their teachers and the children's educational settings. This would thus facilitate a deeper understanding of the ways in which popular images shape the subjectivities of both young learners and their teachers, as well as the everyday practices within Saudi ECSs.

However, the use of observational methods was not an option available at the time of the data collection. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Research Ethics Committee for the College of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh, at the time I applied for ethical approval, restricted face-to-face data collection methods except for in exceptional circumstances. Despite the committee's gradual easing of its restrictions in the middle of the data collection phase, the schools in the KSA were still closed. It was a few months into my third year that the Saudi ECSs reopened to children, although with several restrictions in place.

Due to this, when picturing the dynamic of everyday practices within ECSs, I relied heavily on my previous experience as a kindergarten teacher and more recent experience as a lecturer, a role that required numerous visits to different early childhood settings on a regular basis. It is not my intention to imply that such a brief and limited experience could be compared with that of those who had access to educational settings at the time of data collection. Yet, it is thought that the implementation of some form of historical process analysis and the inclusion of

political voices through key documents as part of my method would shed light on a different angle of the field; an angle that could be even more critical given its significance in exploring the power/knowledge relations that may have contributed to the emergence of the contemporary dominant narrative around ECE.

4.7.2 Process of Translation

When Powney and Watts (2018) write about the implications of perceiving interviews as a method of ‘collecting talk’, they use Whitehurst’s (1979) words to show the influence of the dynamic nature: ‘[it is] like catching rain in a bucket for later display. What you end up with is water, which is only a little like rain’ (p. 16). Whitehurst’s analogy resonated with me in that it captures my concerns as the majority of this study’s data would not only go through a process of transcription but, also, need to be translated from Arabic to English. Soon after I entered the field, I encountered a number of Arabic terminologies that were difficult to translate word-for-word into English. The word *tarbiya*, for example, which I will refer to at different points in the discussion chapter, does not have an English equivalent. This was the reason why the Ministry of Education, known as *Wizarat al-Tarbiya wa-l-Ta’lim* [the Ministry of *Tarbiya* and Education] at the time, omitted the word *tarbiya* in its translation to become known in English as merely the Ministry of Education.

The more data I collected, the more concerned I became about misinterpreting it. I started looking at cross-cultural studies—in particular, those in which Arabic was the source language—yet, few of them critically addressed the issue of translations. The work of Wong and Poon (2010) was one of the early accessed readings that provided practical guidance by allowing the process of translation within the present study to be viewed more than simply ‘a neutral technique of replacing words of one language with words of another language’ (p. 152). It was,

then, that I began to perceive my role as a researcher/translator to be that of an ‘active producer’, instead of a neutral transmitter of data (Temple, 2002, p. 846). Having recognised that ‘the translators’ role is far from innocent; their way of knowing inevitably influences their interpretation of the interviews and subsequently our understanding of the participants’ narrative’ (Wong & Poon, 2010, p. 153), I no longer shy away from acknowledging the influence of my background on the translation process. I am aware that, at many points during the translation, I chose to use one interpretation of a statement out of a number of possible alternatives; decisions that were driven by my prior knowledge of the context and my theoretical and conceptual position. Then again, I recognise the privilege of being able to study my own culture in my native tongue. I did not require the assistance of a translator whose perspectives, values and knowledge would likely differ from mine, thereby would create a further barrier between the data and my analysis.

Another concern regarding the handling of Arabic data was the time at which the translation should be conducted. The literature does not appear to agree on this issue. For some, translation in the early phases of research promotes more homogenous ideas and language between both researchers and translators during the analysis of data (Santos Jr et al., 2015). Others also discuss more efficient factors, including time and money (Abfalter et al., 2021). However, given my theoretical position on the importance of cultural context in shaping people’s own narratives, I took the opposite approach by engaging in the translation of data at a later phase of the study. Temple and Young (2008) provide significant insight into the timing of translation:

The early “domestication” of research into written English may mean that the ties between language and identity/culture are cut to the disadvantage of non-English

speakers. The baseline becomes mainstream English as soon as possible. This is not to deny that insights may come from the cut-off itself but it is merely raising the possibility of an all too early termination of dialogue.

Thus, even though the interviews were translated shortly after being transcribed in order to ‘stay as close as possible to the data’ (Al-Amer et al., 2016, p. 155), I chose to analyse data in Arabic, the source language of the current study data, delaying the use of translated materials until the write-up of the thesis.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has covered the main methodological approach taken in the present work, detailing the two data sets implemented in the study and explaining the analytical approach that was taken. It also explored the key methodological issues related to the study’s methods, rigour and ethics, then concluded by highlighting the two main limitations associated with the chosen methodology.

I do hope, however, that this chapter will not be perceived as an objective justification of the one way that this work and similar studies should be conducted but, rather, as a critical presentation of all the research decisions, steps and attempts taken while acknowledging that ‘none of [those] attempts can claim the innocence of success (even in failure)’ (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). In working with the data, I was ‘attentive’ to my ‘own theoretical and methodological perspectives on voice, truth, and meaning’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 4). Therefore, I am now able to see that if another researcher were to deal with this same data, the analysis and discussions would probably be different. Ball (1990) poses a question on a similar issue:

The answer to that must be “yes.” But it is a qualified yes. I believe that the differences between my analysis and yours typically would be small rather than large. The differences would be matters of emphasis and orientation, rather than in the story to be told. (p. 167)

Thus, in summary, between this chapter and chapters two and three, the contextual, theoretical and methodological bases of this study are now established. The following three chapters will attempt to address the research questions by exploring one of the three sub-questions in each of the chapters. These discussions will be guided by the analytical questions presented above.

Chapter 5: The Image of Young Children

Before the 1960s, childhood in the traditional Arab family consisted of two distinct stages: infancy, which lasted until the age of three; and childhood (Alsuwaigh, 1984), which follows the infancy stage and ends at puberty, with no further distinctions. When coupled with the fact that the common age for marriage was between 12 and 16 years old at the time, the period of childhood was relatively short, as compared to the current common perception, for most people in the KSA during this period (Khalifa, 2001). While the available literature mainly highlights the influence of socioeconomic changes on the emergence of new, and relatively more diverse, perceptions of children (Alsuwaigh, 1984; Khalifa, 2001), the impact of the introduction of the Saudi public education system and the changes it implemented must not be overlooked. To illustrate, during the early 1960s, primary schools began expanding for both girls and boys, dividing them into different classes according to their age groups and creating two distinct groups of children under the age of twelve: early primary school children; and upper primary school children. While it was still perceived that childhood would end earlier than the common present perception, it can be argued that this division in primary school may have provided a new understanding of childhood that categorised children into younger children aged between 6 and 9, and older children aged 9 to 12.

It is important to note that when kindergarten classes first started throughout the KSA, ‘they were very similar’ to those of primary schools, as stated by Iman, a retired educator participating in this study. Yet, with the influence of what Iman describes as ‘a growing momentum towards constructive learning’, more attention was paid to kindergarten children as a distinct age group. This theory is evidenced by the development of the first Saudi kindergarten curriculum in 1992 and the establishment of teachers’ preparation programmes designated for

kindergarten teachers shortly thereafter (Al Jadidi, 2012). Thus, in the realm of education, young children in the KSA between the ages of three and five were described as kindergarten children. Then, with the dominance of human developmental theories in the field, and the impact of the cooperation with the American NAEYC in the 2010s, those young children who were formerly known as kindergarten children became referred to as early childhood children, a term that still excludes infants but also includes children up to eight years of age. As a result, teachers' preparation programmes in various Saudi universities started to change their names from kindergarten or preschool programmes to early childhood education programmes.

By studying this change in the language surrounding the meaning of young children in the KSA, it may be possible to deepen the understanding of the preconceptions and imagery associated with those children. Though the image of children is not explicitly stated in the majority of the documents analysed in this study, Malaguzzi, a pioneering philosopher in ECE, stressed the importance of this act. To Malaguzzi 'a declaration [about the image of the child] is not only a necessary act of clarity and correctness, [but also] it is the necessary premise for any pedagogical theory, and any pedagogical project' (as cited in Cagliari et al., 2016, p. 374). In *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood*, Moss (2019) explains why a response to the question of one's image of the child is crucial: 'education, is first and foremost, a political practice, building on political questions that call for choices to be made between often conflicting alternatives' (p. 49). Secondly, as a deliberately chosen image from many other 'alternatives', Moss (2019) stresses that it can be analysed, criticised and contested, warning that these images should not be viewed as a natural matter or as a universal truth that cannot be replaced. Furthermore, according to Moss (2019), the answer to this political question is also significant in that the chosen image of the child is very 'productive' as it will impact all other images within

the ECE field, meaning that the ‘political choice’ made towards selecting the image of the child will affect the image of everything and everyone else around the child, such as the teacher, the image of the early childhood school, etc.

Thus, in this chapter, I aim to answer the research question concerning the dominant images of young children within the field of ECE in the KSA. While these popular views all appear to be present in the field today, I intend to start the analysis with the earliest images about early childhood children in the KSA, then move to the most recent, bearing in mind when the language associated with these ideas changed and became accepted and appreciated.

Accordingly, I argue that while the first two images about children were present during the early days of the Kingdom, and probably earlier, the third was not clear until the late 1980s, while the language of the last image did not emerge even until the 2000s.

5.1 The Child as an ‘Empty Sheet of Paper’

Among the earliest images associated with the perception of young children in the KSA is the image of them as empty vessels that need to be filled up and modified with good upbringing to become, what was assumed to be, ‘decent’ adults. Khalifa (2001) asserts that ‘Childhood pre 1950 was perceived as a path through which children had to pass in order to get to adulthood . . . there was a belief that children should be taught moral values and their behaviour should be controlled’ (p. 269). Hence, as the path to a so-called decent adulthood, and whilst a child’s infancy in Arab societies back in the twentieth century was defined by ‘permissiveness and protection’ from the parents, the period from three to six or seven years of age was perceived as a stage for serious, and in many cases, ‘severe discipline’ which was seen at the time as the most appropriate to their developmental stage (Alsuwaigh, 1984). This, as Ammar (1954) suggests, is

due to the belief that ‘the boy or the girl at this stage is neither too young nor too old to learn’ (p. 139).

As a relatively new field in the KSA, very few documents can be used to demonstrate the existence (or absence) of this notion of young children within the context of ECE. The EPD (1970) is perhaps one of the earliest references to children as mouldable humans within the Saudi education system. The document states nine different objectives for nurseries and kindergartens, most of which emphasise the view that children are immature human beings whom require guidance and discipline. These objectives focus on ‘protecting the nature’ of children (article 63) by ‘establishing’ their moral orientation (article 64) and by providing them with both pleasure and discipline in a way that does not spoil or exhaust them (article 70). Such ECE objectives were aligned with the common perception, at the time, of children under the age of ten as ‘little adults, who lacked essential cognitive skills and who were physically weak’ (Khalifa, 2001, p. 241). This view of children may go some way to explaining one of the key roles of ECTs that will be discussed in the following chapter. As *murabbiyat*¹, teachers were expected to guide children’s behaviour and to instil proper values in them for the purpose of producing good citizens. The data generated by this study indicates, however, that this particular role for teachers is still significant within the early childhood profession in the KSA, thus suggesting that the notion of young children as mouldable human beings or blank pages to be filled, guided or modified by their teachers (and perhaps other adults too) may still be prevalent today. Such a

¹ A term that is found in Arabic literature on Islamic education which refers to educators who not only impart knowledge to their pupils, but also strive to educate them spiritually and developing their personalities and attitudes.

process, once again, could illustrate how an answer to the question of the image of young children will ‘generate other ‘image’ questions and influence your answers to these questions, questions such as ‘What is your image of the educator?’ and ‘What is your image of the nursery, kindergarten, or school?’” (Moss, 2019, p. 51).

Returning to the discussion of the image of young children as empty/developing objects awaiting to be shaped, it appears from the interviews conducted within the scope of this study that some of those working in the field of ECE in the KSA use such a manner when describing young children. For example, when Mona, an EPT, was asked what distinguishes children in their early years, she answered:

The child at this age is mouldable; it is easy to cultivate concepts and principles in him.

At this stage, a child, I think, is like a large seed in fertile soil, which I plant at this age to invest in this person continuously for years to come.

Through this notion of ‘becoming’, as Young (1990) argues, children are viewed as ‘progressing from a state of vulnerability to sophistication, from an earlier lack of skills to a later possession of abilities’ (p. 41). In this sense, while the young child for Mona is seen as a ‘seed’ that will hopefully grow into something much bigger in the future, for Nora and Maha, the child represents a blank, empty object that must be filled by adults at this critical stage. Nora, an HT, states that, ‘In kindergarten, you start engraving on a clean, clear, white screen. [You engrave] morals, values, behaviours, religion, national identity’. A similar perception also appears in the interview with Maha, an EPT, who says that ‘children are, in my view, like a white sheet of paper that we [adults] shape at this age’.

The above responses also suggest that early childhood educators seem to perceive young children as those who are yet to be; those who lack many capacities and, therefore, in need of being filled and shaped so that they may one day become what is deemed to be ‘decent’ adults. This image reflects a strong emphasis on perceiving young children as ‘human becomings’ rather than ‘beings’ (Kjørholt & Qvortrup, 2012). By placing the focus on the future of the child, there is a risk of neglecting their present. This position, according to Qvortrup (2005) is consistent with developmental psychology's view of the child as 'progressing towards completeness, which renders the child regressively incomplete the smaller s/he is' (p. 5). Uprichard (2008) further asserts

The child is seen as ‘a future adult’ rather than as a ‘young human being’ in his or her own right. This assumption is problematic because the temporal focus necessarily forces us to neglect or dismiss the present everyday realities of being a child . . . to base our constructions of what a child is, primarily on what that child will be, is problematic, even if we accept that the future matters. (p. 304)

This notion of young children as ‘becomings’ was also evident in many major documents in the Kingdom. For example, the Saudi Early Learning Standards (SELS) document (2015) states that its listed expectations for young children in early childhood educational settings can further ‘contribute to character building in the subsequent stages of learning, so that children develop into good, effective, and productive citizens’ (p. v). Considering the status of children as lacking competence, it appears appropriate to adopt a mentoring approach. Children thus appear to be in need of continuous guidance by the adults around them. Yet, Osgood (2011) warns, ‘[T]o construct children as passive actors in their own lives, where adults shape subjective understandings for children, is to prevent the exercise of agency’ (p. 69). While there is no doubt

that young children are less experienced in the social world surrounding them, however, as Qvortrup (2005) notes, 'an extreme emphasis on children's alleged vulnerability may be used by more powerful segments of society as a pretext for needlessly silencing and marginalizing them' (p. 7).

In fact, for some educators, it is that belief in children's developmental immaturity that lends the early childhood stage a particular significance. This believed nature of young children leads to the idea that ECTs can shape a child's character easily and in a way they deem appropriate. The SELS (2015), for instance, affirms in its foreword that the 'uniqueness' of the early childhood stage is that it allows for the comprehensive building of children's 'characters through the guidance and practices of teachers, parents, and caregivers' (p. v). In another example from the study interviews, when Dana, a KGT, was asked why she considers early childhood to be the most important stage of life, Dana replied, 'The child, at the beginning of his life, is empty. He² has not acquired that many things [yet]. So, this is the most important stage in which the child acquires most things'. Due to this view that young children are empty and can be formed and shaped by what adults instil in them, many participants also believe that early childhood is the optimal period in which values can be cultivated. For instance, Amal, an EPT, said:

At this stage, also, the child's personality is formed in a way that all the different aspects of development in later stages are built upon, and [the child's] perceptions and concepts

² The Arabic word for child is *tifl*, a singular masculine noun, which is why the word 'child' is commonly used with the pronoun he.

are formed too. Therefore, values and customs must be inculcated at this stage, as [the child] acquires them now and they stay with him in the various stages of his life.

However, this perception is rooted in a dangerous assumption that young children are poor. Through this belief, children, according to Moss (2019), ‘defined in terms of what they cannot do or what they need to acquire, a child who is passively waiting for something to happen . . . a child who is lacking and needs to be readied’ (p. 53). Hence, this viewpoint takes away 99 of the 100 languages children are born with, as illustrated by Malaguzzi (as cited in Cagliari et al., 2016). In doing so, it ignores the complexities of children and the rich possibilities that they can bring to early childhood settings and, rather, chooses to treat them as those poor and incapable beings.

Further, when it is assumed that young children need to be moulded into decent and desirable individuals during the early years of life and, particularly, inside early childhood educational settings, one of the questions arises as to what sort of values should be instilled in these young individuals. Whilst the Vision 2030 (2016) asserts that ‘The focus will be on the fundamental values of initiative, persistence and leadership, as well as social skills, cultural knowledge and self-awareness’ (p. 28), participants provided a wide range of responses to the question of what values they believe young children should acquire. Among these responses, a range of values can be identified, from stressing the importance of religious values (Alia, an HT, gave one example: ‘what the religion commands of loving and obeying parents’) to focusing on social values (Raghad, a KGT, commented, ‘manners, life skills, communications, building relationships, kindness and empathy’), as well as national values (Asma, an EPT, noted that ‘The most important values that the ministry is committed to in the curricula are the values of

citizenship'). Given the variety of responses, it is difficult to define what sort of 'decent' adult we wish to create from such a 'formation'.

5.2 The Girl-Child vs. The Boy-Child

Previous studies concerning Saudi childhood highlighted the socialisation process of female children as compared to male children (Ammar, 1954; Alsuwaigh, 1984; Khalifa, 2001). Within the traditional Saudi family, the early socialisation of children was in large part intended to teach boys and girls their respective gender roles (Alsuwaigh, 1984). It was thought, as stated earlier, that the period of early childhood is the optimal time for socialisation, during which children were socialised to take on the roles that society deemed appropriate for their gender: 'Girls are socialised to accept their roles as basically mothers and domestic workers. [In contrast, boys] are reared to perceive their roles as protectors and breadwinners' (Alsuwaigh, 1984, p. 39).

As discussed in the review of literature within this study, for many decades, Saudi girls did not have access to the same level of education as their male counterparts. Rather, the general purpose of educating a girl was 'to fulfil her mission in life, to be a successful housewife, an ideal wife, and a good mother', as well as to prepare her for 'what suits the nature of a woman, such as teaching, nursing and medical care' (MoK, 1970, p. 15). Indeed, the Directorate of Knowledge, established in 1926 as a first step towards formalising education in the Kingdom, was responsible for educating only boys. Meanwhile, the GPGE was not established until 1959 and, even then, it was not well received by everyone.

[G]overnment education for girls not only started later than that for boys but was greeted with less enthusiasm by conservative parents. Some refused to let their daughters go to school because they were afraid that they would lose interest in the traditional home-

based role of women and others, who were even more conservative, saw the education of girls as something that would undermine the very foundations of morality and family life. (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p. 289)

Whilst previous studies and documents, such as the above, may demonstrate the root of the gender-equity issue among Saudi children in the twentieth century, the language used in some of the interviews suggests that such bias towards female children may, albeit to a lesser extent, persist today. The following conversation with Nora, an HT of an ECS, serves as an example:

HT: I am concentrating my efforts on this particular stage [EC] since I see it as a men-making stage.

Interviewer: Why do you consider it as ‘a men-making stage’?

HT: This is the stage of building the right child intellectually, psychologically, physically and mentally. If you build a proper structure, you will get the best results. A building that is not built properly collapses. Homes without foundations collapse under any motion. Foundations must be strong. Religious, moral and cultural foundations make the right man.

Interviewer: Why ‘the right man’, though? You spoke more about your experiences with boys than with girls. Could it be, for example, that they were in certain circumstances and, now, the situation has changed [referring to the implementation of the new Early Childhood Schools Project, in which young boys are taught by female teachers]?

HT: The boys were lost. The mother would go out and leave her children with the maid, or she'd return from work tired and so not spend enough time with them. When a child gets attention and spends enough time at school, even if his mother neglects them at

home, and so long as he receives attention at school, here you are building the right structure.

Furthermore, initially, ‘the rise of the state is on the shoulders of its men’ [a traditional Arabic saying], and, in the past, women were completely neglected. Just more recently, women have entered the field of work [the HT adds] and life [referring to recent reforms that have improved the overall status of Saudi women].

Women, in general, are born with higher psychological tolerance level than men. When a woman is destroyed, she rebuilds herself. Yet, when you make a man, you give him immunity, you give him strength. Here, you feel like you are building.

In this context, biological differences are a key tool through which the gendered childhood discourse is operating. Nora, here, is aware of the fact that men dominate women in her own community, yet her views on gendered biological differences and the consequences of traditional roles of men and women have led Nora to perceive ECE as a ‘men-making’ stage.

In addition, a belief in gender differences among early childhood educators is also apparent in the values that teachers expect young students to adhere to. For example, Maha, an EPT, listed a few values she wishes to instil in young children, then articulated, ‘these values are for boys and girls. As for girls, in particular, I like to teach modest shy Arab girls [the costume] of wearing the hijab’. In Maha’s view, ‘the developmental characteristics of boys differ from girls. The female student loves to be contained by others, whereas the male student loves the wardship, as the Lord of the worlds created him [to be]’. Here, once again, the reliance on biological differences serves to justify the disparate values and lessons taught to girls and boys. Maha and Nora's responses raise concerns regarding early childhood practitioners' perceptions of

gender. While I problematise the act of simply adopting dominant/normalised views on gender equity issues in early childhood settings that were constructed in locations far from our own, however, I recognise the importance of highlighting the ways in which meanings associated with gender intersect with cultural common values and beliefs. MacNaughton (2000) states,

in meshing issues of gender and culture the aim is not to produce a homogenised, single understanding of gender equity and its possibilities . . . [this is rather] to produce complex understandings of the shifting struggles, tensions and possibilities in the lived experiences of race-gender-culture in children's and parents' lives. (pp. 220-221)

Gender-equity issues can also be seen in the belief held by a number of early childhood educators involved in this study that young males are more academically capable than their female peers. As an example of this, Nora, an HT, stated, 'I have noticed that male students perform much better than female students'. Similarly, when asked about her experience working in an ECS, Amal, an EPT, said, 'from the experiences of my fellow teachers, boys are much smarter than girls. When they hear information once, they can absorb it directly. They are quick to accomplish tasks'. Another EPT, Asma, responded to the same question as follows:

Boys . . . respond much faster than girls in my distance learning experience. But what will this be like when we return to school? How would they handle learning at school? I think the experience will be different. But in distance learning and through [Microsoft] Teams, I find them [male students] to be obedient and more accomplished, of course.

Asma's statement above also illustrates another important finding. This belief in the gender differences of young children can lead to negative assumptions about young boys'

behaviours. This is evident in Asma's concern regarding male children's disruptive behaviour during in-person learning. Amal, another EPT, also shares Asma's concern:

we have not experienced the situation in face-to-face learning [yet]. I think the problem will be that they [male children] are more active. They are also not like girls in terms of gentleness as boys are [rougher]. That is the character of boys and we appreciate it.

The view that young male children have a particular 'character' may also lead some teachers to adopt a different approach when teaching male children. This was already discussed in an EPT's response: Mai stated, 'Boys require more endurance and patience; they need more discipline than girls from the start'.

The visibility of boys as problems is tied intimately to biological constructions of masculinity. It is assumed that there is a core personality and character-defining masculinity which all boys actually or potentially share. These essentialist arguments work to constrain teachers in exercising power and ensuring a more harmonious classroom that benefits all. (Bhana, 2009, p. 333)

One of the key findings associated with discussions of gender issues among young children stems from the fact that all the responses mentioned above came from individuals working in the recently launched Early Childhood Schools. In contrast to KGTs and other participants from the authoritative voices group, who have worked with both male and female children over a longer period, HTs' and EPTs' language reflects deeper concerns. Even though the Saudi MoE has taken significant steps in recent years towards offering more equal educational opportunities to both genders, the implementation of such a system without

providing its workers with the necessary dialogue may continue to exacerbate education disparity among boys and girls.

5.3 The Appropriately Developed Child

As ECE became more formalised in the KSA in the 1980s and 1990s, the above perception of young children as natural and empty beings started to adopt more scientific language. Iman, who has worked in the field since the 1970s, offers an overview of the changes during that period:

By the late '80s, there was a growing momentum towards constructive learning and that the child has to play, deal with different educational materials and move in order to learn better . . . This intellectual system began to dominate the field of education. In Saudi Arabia, AGFUND, the organisation that was concerned with childhood in the Gulf countries under the umbrella of UNESCO, brought a group of non-Saudi experts and asked them to develop a curriculum that takes into account self-learning and play. Later, AGFUND started distributing its curriculum to ministries of education in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries.

Thus, in the wake of the global popularity of child-centered pedagogy during the second half of the twentieth century, Iman's words show how the first Saudi early childhood curriculum, known as The Developed Kindergarten Curriculum: Self-learning (DKC), was built around such concepts through the work of a group of western 'experts'. Back then, decision-makers strived to implement the child-centered pedagogy to establish a foundation for the Saudi early childhood education, believing that it is 'the universal human pedagogy that is appropriate for all human

beings, the truth for everyone', and perhaps overlooking the fact that its principles may not necessarily be relevant to our children, values, and cultures (Cannella & Viruru, 1997, p. 117).

Several Saudi researchers have indicated how Piagetian theory, in particular, has influenced the philosophy of ECE in the KSA (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016; Alsedrani, 2018). Khomais and Gahwaji (2019), for example, state that the Saudi kindergarten curriculum is based on 'Piagetian views that emphasize providing rich learning environments that stimulate learning and development' (p. 24). The DKC, which is still the official kindergarten curriculum in the Kingdom, utilises Piaget's exact terminology, including referring to young children as being in the 'sensorimotor stage' (Ministry of Education, 2020). The latest edition of the DKC (2020) states that, whilst every child is a unique human being, studies around the world have shown a similarity in the age characteristics of children, which can serve as a guide for teachers regarding 'what is expected' at a certain age, and that teachers should use this 'guide' to better understand children and select activities and teaching methods that are appropriate for them (p. 54-55).

With the growing interest in professionalism within the field, developmental psychology theories have become even more prevalent, particularly in preparation programmes for ECTs, as it 'promote a humanist understanding of the universal child – that there is an innate phase in human development that constitutes 'childhood' and is universally experienced by all children – are accepted as authoritative knowledge, or the prevailing scientific 'truth' (Osgood, 2011, p. 59). Al Jadidi's thesis on the Saudi kindergarten teachers' preparation programmes (2012) indicates that 'Piaget seems to be the main theorist regarding play, learning and development, and the student-teachers seemed to be developing Piagetian ideas about readiness for learning, and appropriate types of activities' (p. 214). Indeed, Piaget was the only theorist mentioned by

the ECTs participating in this study, which further indicates the profound impact of Piaget's work on the field of ECE in the KSA.

As such, this climate adds what seems to be a scientific language to the traditional perception of young children as underdeveloped. It provides what considered as scientific evidence to the perception that young children are lacking something and that only through the biological maturing and help of adults around them can children progress from one cognitive stage to the next; an image that precedes children 'in terms of what they cannot do or what they need to acquire' (Moss, 2019, p. 53). This scientific truth further reinforces the image of the young child as 'passive – a person acted upon by others, rather than a subject acting in the world. Children are seen as dependent on others and are not social persons in their own right' (Murriss, 2016, p. 82). In recent years, therefore, this scientific explanation has increasingly dominated the Saudi ECE, especially among those in higher positions. Official documents, statements and interviews with decision-makers working in the MoE reflect the existence of such a discourse. For instance, the SELS, published by the MoE in conjunction with the NAEYC and Tatweer in 2015 and one of the main resources for ECTs, claims that understanding young children can be regulated to reflect one truth: the appropriately developed child. With an aim of providing 'administrators, teachers, and parents with guidance on appropriate outcomes and expectations for children at various developmental stages' (p. 3), the SELS (2015) states in its introduction that

Technology has provided unprecedented access into the inner workings of the brain, providing scientific evidence that the early years of a child's life is the time to support optimal development . . . Brain science has provided important biological justification for increasing attention to children's early years. (pp. 1-2)

With its detailed expectations and indicators that are arranged according to age groups, the SELS further suggests that conceptions of young children should always be based on human development and neuroscience research. Therefore, in the interviews conducted for this study, the adoption of scientific and evidence-based language was, in some instances, prevalent. For example, Maisa, a participant from the GDEC, provided the following answer when asked about her image of young children:

As a professional, my answers must be based on documents, documents and studies. We have the Early Childhood Development Standards for 0 to 3 and 3 to 6 years old, so all I need to know about a child is where should the child be and where should he go?

In fact, as a teaching faculty in an early childhood department in the KSA, I had the experience of co-instructing a bachelor's course entitled *The Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum*, in which undergraduate students were required to create a learning unit by assigning each lesson and its various activities to at least one of the SELS indicators. This could result in placing both young children and the practice of ECTs within predefined and narrow templates. So, on the one hand, children are viewed as being underdeveloped persons who go through well-known stages before they become appropriately developed. On the other hand, an ECT is viewed merely as the one who 'produces performances' (Ball, 2006, p. 150) who help children move from one developmental stage to another; an image that will be discussed further in the upcoming chapter, within the role of the 'efficient' ECTs.

Hence, the child development discourse over the past twenty years has gradually built what appears to be a scientific understanding of young children and, as an 'evidence-based' knowledge, it hard to be critiqued or challenged and, more importantly, it has 'no alternatives' (Moss, 2019). Such language was more common in the interviews conducted with those in more

senior positions within the field. For example, when asked about the rationale behind enrolling young children in an early childhood programme, Tahani, a retired Head of a Regional ECE Department, stated:

You, as a specialist, and all specialists and educators, know the importance of early childhood and that it is the most important and most dangerous stage in a human's life. I am talking about early childhood, which includes both kindergarten and early primary grades. This isn't a personal opinion. It is based on scientific research and educational studies . . .

Iman, a retired early childhood professor, concurred with Tahani's statements while discussing the rationale for expanding early childhood programmes:

Research concerning child development and brain growth, which has become more popular since the '90s and has been integrated into education, has all shown, through scientific evidence and devices, that brain structure changes rapidly during the first six years of life and that later change becomes slower and more difficult.

Yet, this prevalent reliance on what is perceived as 'scientific' evidence derived from studies of the brain, albeit appealing, does raise some concerns. Vandebroek (2017) explores the misuse of neurosciences and brain research in the 'constructions of Truth' surrounding young children's development and the significance of their education. In another work, Vandebroek and his colleagues (2012) discuss a number of ethical and methodological issues regarding the references to such research within early childhood educational policies, stating that many developmental neuroscience researchers fear that 'conclusions made about their work might be too simplistic if the documented correlations serve to prove linear and causal relations' (p. 542).

Nevertheless, it can be suggested that this proven one scientific knowledge about the universal appropriately developed child was consistently apparent throughout the interviews conducted for the present study, especially those with participants from the authoritative voices group. To give a further example, when Lana, another participant from the GDEC; was asked about her personal perception of young children, Lana states:

They are not supposed to be personal perceptions because a child is a child, anywhere and for everyone. They are educational perceptions, they are scientific perceptions . . . the general perceptions that an educator is supposed to take into account is [to consider] the characteristics of a child's development: physical, psychological, social, emotional or cognitive.

Through such perspective, it is construed that 'the language of child development represents Truth and benefits all children, from whatever culture, socioeconomic background, or historical period. If others would just view children from a child development perspective, children would always profit' (Cannella, 1997, p. 46). The SELS has, thus, 'become taken for granted, treated as normal' (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 132). Its predefined indicators and the body of discourse emerging around it are now shaping the image of young children in the Saudi ECE and, therefore, what children are and what they can be has been restricted mainly to a set of appropriately developed standards.

5.4 Children as Future Investment

The review of the historical and contemporary background within the current study suggests that the Tatweer programme was one of the major responses to the crisis the Saudi education system encountered following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Tatweer, upon its

establishment in 2007, launched what seems to be a ‘market-driven set of education reforms’ (Tayan, 2017, p. 61), which, arguably, introduced a new language to the realm of education in the Kingdom. Despite the criticisms concerning the measurable outcomes of the project, the influence of Tatweer on initiating new trends in the Saudi education system cannot be overlooked (Taibah & Jamjoom, 2013; Tayan, 2017). In the field of ECE, it is perhaps the SELS documents issued collectively by the Saudi’s MoE, Tatweer and NAEYC that provide the strongest indicator of such a shift in the perception of the education of young learners. In its introduction, the first early childhood standard refers to the logic of human capital theory to justify the trend towards investment in ECE. The SELS (2015) states:

economic analyses consistently show the value of investing in early childhood education. Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman has shown that every dollar governments spend on high-quality early childhood education yields a 7–10 percent return on investment. Economists suggest that children enrolled in quality early childhood care are less likely to become involved in crime and are more likely to contribute to the social and economic framework of their communities. Likewise, children with access to quality care both inside and outside of school are more likely to form foundational life skills that support societal economic development through employment and socially conscious behavior. (p. 2)

To gain a deeper understanding of the shift in the perception of young children within the Saudi early childhood settings, it may be helpful to examine the first-ever objectives for the early childhood educational stage, as described in the Educational Policy Document (1970), or even the more recent objectives of the stage, which were published following the merger of the GPGE and the MoK in the guide titled *Regulations for organizing the internal work of kindergartens*

(2002). Both documents have a similar perspective toward young children and the aim of their learning, with a strong emphasis on Islamic upbringing, child development across various domains and school readiness. Throughout both documents, there is no reference to children as future investments, or what Gibson et al. (2015) describe as ‘economic units’, in which young children ‘are valued for what they are potentially able to contribute to the economy in the future, under the right conditions’ (p.327).

This is not to imply that such a notion was absent back at that time, yet it might be not sufficiently compelling to be presented as the rationale for teaching young children. In fact, part of this perception was already visible in the above images, where young children are seen as empty and poor human beings who need to be appropriately developed or socialized in certain ways. Here, in all these images arise from the data, young children have been seen as

appropriate vehicles for solving problems in society. The notion was that if we can somehow intervene in the lives of children, then poverty, racism, crime, drug abuse and any number of social ills can be erased. Children became instruments of society’s need to improve itself, and childhood became a time during which social problems were either solved or determined to be unsolvable. (Hatch, 1995, pp. 118–119)

This perspective is also evident in the current study. When asked about the reasons behind the expansion programmes of ECE in the Kingdom, Nora, an HT, refers to young children as problem-solving agents, whose enrolment in ECE will guarantee the nation’s survival:

When you have a good citizen in kindergarten from an early age, prisons will be empty. [There will be] no drugs, no crime, no violence, no bullying. By raising children from an early age, you will ensure the safety of the entire community.

What could be new about the image of young children as future investments is that, through ECE and later educational stages, it is a means to produce valuable, market-ready adults who can save the nation by their effective participation in the labour force. With this understanding, young children appear as those who can ensure 'national survival and success through the prospect of abundant human capital – a source of future hope, but all dependent on early intervention with effective technologies' (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 98).

Further, a year after the publication of the SELS, the government of the KSA released its Vision 2030, which immediately became the most influential document in all public domains. Hind, one of the participants from the GDEC, explained that 'Vision 2030 is our reference in all matters. Every programme that has been established and built was linked to the Vision'. The Vision 2030 (2016) further endorses the image that was introduced in the SELS document: that children are economic resources. Under its second pillar, 'Thriving Economy', the Vision 2030 (2016) states the following:

The skills and competencies of our children are one of the most important and cherished assets. To make the most of their potential, we will build a culture that rewards determination, provides opportunities for all and helps everyone acquire the necessary skills to achieve their personal goals. (pp. 36-37)

The Vision 2030 has several programmes to implement its ambitious aims. One of its latest is the Human Capability Development Programme (HCDP), which was launched in 2021. The programme, with its focus on preparing 'citizens for the challenges and opportunities of the future global labor market' (p. 52), also affirms that 'investment in human capital will add value to the economy, whilst increasing efficiency and productivity' (p. 22). According to the HCDP's first pillar entitled 'Develop a resilient and strong educational base', which includes the period

during which ‘a child starts his/her educational journey until entering the labor market’ (p. 63), the programme highlights numerous initiatives, the first of which focuses on expanding the enrolment of young children in preschool settings. Thus, the HCDP could further contribute to the notion of young children as future investments that need to be instilled with certain values and skills, so they can grow up to be ‘globally competitive’ citizens (HCDP, 2021).

Embedded in the lines of the key documents, again, is the image of young children as ‘human resources’ who are becoming more appreciated ‘for what they are potentially able to contribute to the economy in the future, under the right conditions’ (Gibson et al., 2015, p. 327). While I concur with Kjørholt and Qvortrup (2012) statement that ‘[p]oliticians and others are hardly to blame for being future oriented and for making prudent plans for a good life in the future’ (p. 266), there are some concerns regarding the use of such language within the context of ECE. First, as Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) assert, there is a need to examine whether the education of young children has the ‘near miraculous effects’ that have been attributed to it (p. 113). They further illustrate that such statements about the economic returns of early education are often based primarily on a number of local studies, mostly from the United States. Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) then continue, ‘even if we do accept, without question, the results of such local studies, there is no evidence that ‘quality’ early childhood education and care has, by itself, made any difference at a national level’ (P. 113). In addition, Kjørholt and Qvortrup (2012) write that the image of young children as future investments also indicate a significant emphasis on them as ‘human becomings rather than as current beings’ (p. 272), a recurring theme that can also be found in other dominant images of young children in the KSA.

Returning to the study data, it can be seen how this perception of young children gradually began to emerge as a rationale for providing ECE in the Kingdom. This is reflected in

the responses of many participants, particularly those who held senior positions. One example may be found in the response provided by, Tahani, a retired Head of a Regional ECE Department, who explained the reasons for enrolling children in an early education programme:

Countries that take care of the education of their young children can indeed benefit their economies. Additionally, children with access to early childhood programmes have a higher chance of continuing their education, fewer chances of engaging in delinquent behaviours and a higher chance of increasing their income and enrolling in higher education.

Further, in response to a question about the reasons behind the current expansion of ECE in the KSA, Iman, a retired ECE professor shared a similar view:

all of the research that was conducted with children who enrolled in high-quality children's programmes, that deliver high-quality education by specialists, has all shown that these children, when they grew up, were more likely to continue their education [and] had more chances of succeeding at work. Their chances of deviating from the normal path, of being sent to prisons or juvenile detention [and] of committing crimes were lower than others. Many well-known studies show that spending one dollar during early childhood can pay off up to seven dollars later on. It is, thus, a great investment: 700%.

Iman and Tahani's responses illustrate one narrative that is frequently used to justify the provision and expansion of early childhood educational services, which Moss (2019) referred to as 'the story of quality and high returns'

The beginning is a world full of problems, including national survival in a fiercely competitive, dog-eats-dog global marketplace and a host of economic and social troubles, including a current failure to fully realise the nation's 'human capital'. The middle is the application of the correct mix of 'human technologies' to young children . . . while the end is the promise of large returns on the investment made in early intervention, many pounds, euros or dollars flowing back for every one initially committed. The moral of the story is that if only early intervention is done right, with 'quality', education and employment outcomes will improve, social problems will diminish, and survival in the 'global race', that vortex of ever increasing competition in the global marketplace, will be assured. (pp. 10-11)

As this image begins to spread, it becomes even more critical for many to invest in young children, as it is now believed that the future returns extend beyond the child and to society at large (Gibson et al., 2015). This notion, hence, has captivated a new level of interest in the investment in ECE in the Kingdom in recent years. Nora, an HT, described the change in the field that follows the release of the Vision 2030:

The first change is when the Vision states that the economy of the country is based on the citizen. Since then, kindergarten and early childhood education have received more attention. Budgets and efforts were allocated to serve this programme and the government expanded the preschool to fix the maximum possible number [of students].

Additionally, Maisa, a General Administrator at the GDEC, spoke about the recent growing interest in ECE in the KSA, which stems from the belief that children are the basis of the nation, and that it is only by providing young children with high-quality early education that our nation can thrive:

I have been in the field for 23 years, and I am extremely proud of the significant shift. There is a massive undertaking and direct interest from decision-makers for this stage. There is a great deal of attention paid to ensuring that every Saudi child receives a quality education. It is enough to realise that the idea behind these initiatives is that we want a base, a very good base, a foundation. From these foundations, we can work right, as we have the right base.

5.5 Conclusion

The analysis of interviews and various documents within this chapter highlights some of the major images related to early childhood children in the KSA, the first of which portrays the young child as a piece of clay that has yet to be shaped. The so-called emptiness of children, for many, is what lends ECE programmes such a great significance, as it allows adults to shape children's personalities in ways that adults deem appropriate. In doing so, this perception neglects all the languages children are born with that Malaguzzi (as cited in Cagliari et al., 2016) referred to and, instead, chooses to view the young child as submissive, fragile and dependent. Furthermore, in the second image, for some gender is considered an important factor in determining how a child is perceived in the newly established ECSs. Here, biological factors have been used to support the notion that the childhood of young girls is not as same as young boys. Such differences were evident in the values that teachers wished to instil in the children, the adoption of teaching methods considered suitable for each gender's characteristics and the belief that the cognitive abilities of male children are superior to their female peers. Additionally, in the past thirty years, scientific language has been used to further reinforce this image of the young child as someone in the process of becoming. With the influence of human development theories and neuroscience research, and through active collaboration with the NAEYC, the image

of children within ECE settings in the KSA has been, therefore, carefully constructed to align with those of developmentally appropriate and evidence-based practice. Lastly, and most recently, with the impact of human capital theories, economic discourse has contributed to further shaping the way we view our young children. This image is most often expressed by referring to young children as a future investment, the growing political interest in ECE and the increasing investment in this period that is expected to generate significant returns in the future.

The above perspectives of children seem to fall into two categories: traditional images that have been around as early as the Kingdom's foundation, and more contemporary, emerging ones. What is remarkable is that the overwhelming majority of the interviews' responses used to support the existence of the traditional images, including the image of children as empty beings and gendered children, almost all were provided by ECTs and HTs. The majority of documents used there also served as evidence of the historical process of those images, rather than demonstrating their current existence. On the other hand, the data within the more recent two images of young children, the scientific and economic ones, came mainly from administrators at the GDEC, as well as retired educators who had previously worked in high positions at the ministry. Also, as opposed to traditional images, official documents demonstrating the existence of recent emerging images have only appeared in the past ten years. All of this suggests that, when it comes to the perception of young children in the KSA, there may be two opposing discourses in the field of ECE: the traditional discourse that views children as innocent empty beings who must be filled with knowledge and values that are aligned with their gender roles, and the discourse that perceives children as those who need to be appropriately developed in order to maximise the economic benefits of their early education and upbringing, the effects of which, according to this narrative and through reference to international research, will directly

contribute to the welfare and stability of the nation as a whole. By acknowledging Ball's (1990) statement that discourse is not only concerned with 'what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority' (p. 17), it appears that there are unequal power relations between the two competing narratives on the image of young children, with the latter being spoken and promoted by those in more senior positions in the ministry, thereby suggesting the direction in which our perception of young children will probably take.

Nevertheless, what appears to remain consistent across all highlighted images of young children is that they have been positioned as 'becomings rather than beings' (Cameron & Moss, 2020, p. 192). Children are viewed in this manner as those who are waiting to be filled with values, knowledge and skills to enable them to develop, later in life, into mature and decent adults who can actively contribute to the nation's advancements. This conception of children confines them to what Qvortrup (2005) describes as 'a waiting position'. Qvortrup explains, 'It is children's fate to be waiting – patiently waiting to become an adult, to have their contributions recognized, to have a say in societal matters, to be part of the citizenry' (p. 5). While acknowledging that "looking forward" to what a child 'becomes' is arguably an important part of 'being' a child, a shift in our perception of young children need to be taken in a direction that broadens the scope of children's agency both now and in the future (Uprichard, 2008, P. 306).

Chapter 6: The Image of Early Childhood Teachers

In this second chapter of the discussion, I will attempt to provide an in depth analysis around the second research question concerning the dominant images of ECTs in the KSA by highlighting their historical roots and related educational policies and practices, as well as any implications they may trigger. The aim is to (i) examine critically how the current dominant discourse influences our view of the role of the teacher of young children in certain ways, (ii) define what can be considered as ECTs' valuable characteristics, and (iii) select carefully what are deemed to be their appropriate roles. An awareness of how certain assumptions of what it means to be an ECT have taken root can allow us to critique these unchallenged norms and, thus, create new possibilities for the role of ECTs (Bradbury, 2012). Osgood (2006a) argues that 'by recognising, identifying and problematising the hegemonic discourses through/in which practitioners are positioned, possibilities exist to develop critical consciousness and to challenge current self-understandings' (p.7).

Before addressing the two distinct ECT images demonstrated by the data of this study in more detail, it is essential to mention, once again (see 1.1), the recent change in the definition of the role of ECTs in the KSA, which may reflect something more than terminological differences. Following the MoE's launch of the Early Childhood Initiative in 2019, a revised set of positions for those working in these schools was also introduced, each with its own responsibilities, qualifications, and expectations. According to the *The Handbook of Early Childhood Schools* published by the MoE (2019), the term ECT can fall into one of two categories: (a) the kindergarten teacher (KGT), who works in preschool classes that are designated for children from four to six, or (b) the early primary teacher (EPT), who teaches children between the ages of six and nine. Given that the two stages were separated until relatively recently, the images of

teachers may appear differently and may also trigger different responses among kindergarten and early primary teachers. Additionally, it is also fair to point out that the change in the job titles of those working in ECSs and their inclusion under the title of ECTs will certainly affect the perceptions associated with the roles. Since it is too early to determine the potential impact of this change, as it is, again, a relatively recent move, we instead consider which direction this change may take: will the role of an EPT become more like that of a KGT, or will it be the other way around?

6.1 The ECT as a ‘Second Mother’ or ‘*Murabbiyah*’

As discussed in the chapter concerning the historical background, the traditional Saudi family of the early half of the 20th century always placed young children within the domain of the female (Alsuwaigh, 1984). Having lived in extended families and due to gender segregation norms, Saudi women during that period would bear even greater responsibilities when it came to taking care of children. A mother was expected to look after her young children, with no significant help from the father, throughout the day (Khalifa, 2000). Additionally, since caring for their children was traditionally perceived as a ‘female occupation in which men play a minor role’, mothers often turned to the other females in their extended family, such as grandmothers, aunts, sisters-in-law, etc. (Alsuwaigh, 1984, p. 220).

Later, as the nuclear family began to emerge in the KSA during the second half of the 20th century, it was expected that fathers would contribute more to the rearing of their children than their older generation counterparts. However, data collected by Alsuwaigh (1986) indicates that fathers’ participation did not differ and women were expected to continue as the primary caregiver. Indeed, as Khalifa (2000) states, many Saudi women were not permitted to obtain

higher education and find employment unless these institutions adhered to the traditional value system, including the preservation of family values and supporting their traditional role as women within their families. Accordingly, despite the introduction of women's education and the move toward nuclear families, the traditional role of women in taking care of young children remains 'a woman's job' and, thus, the employment of women 'continues to be marginal, often linked to their ability to employ domestic labour', particularly in the absence of assistance from other female relatives that used to be found in the traditional extended family (Khalifa, 2000, p. 110).

Given these historical circumstances, it should not come as a surprise that as preschool classes began in the KSA in the 1970s and as ECE became more pervasive, it has become the only educational field that is staffed solely by females. Despite the first public kindergarten in the KSA being established by the MoK, which was, again, responsible for boys' education only at the time, the GPGE was soon later made responsible for all public and private early childhood centres across the kingdom (Al Jadidi, 2012), demonstrating, once again, that the responsibility for young children falls to women.

Huda, a former senior administrative officer in the previous General Department of Kindergartens, MoE, recalls those early days of the establishment of ECE in the kingdom:

the presidency [GPGE] has worked, through its public and private schools for girls, to provide nurseries and kindergarten classes for its employees in accordance with Article 159 of Work and Workers, which stipulates that any governmental and private institution should provide a nursery for children of its female employees up to the age of six; "each institution has fifty female workers, with an average of ten children"... At that time,

nurseries were under the supervision of the Ministry of Labor and Workers, with the aim of ensuring the psychological well-being of teachers and employees.

Huda's above statement suggest that, during the founding period of the field, the GPGE offered ECE services primarily to the children of female employees working in its schools.

Consequently, as the field was initially positioned as a place for childcare, workers in such settings were primarily perceived as caregivers. This historical root may therefore have contributed to the prevalence of maternal discourse concerning the role of ECTs in the KSA. Ailwood (2007) defines maternalism as 'the cultural understandings' associated with the role of mothers (p. 157). In the Kingdom, one fundamental cultural belief that facilitates the discourse of maternalism in the field is the assumption that it is the mothers' responsibility to take care of their young children without allowing other factors, such as their education or employment, to interfere with this role (Alsuwaigh, 1984). Mothers were assigned this particular role due to the belief in their 'natural mothering instincts' (Ailwood, 2007, p.163). As women are presumed to possess this natural mothering instinct as well as a set of feminine characteristics, the teaching of young children is deemed more suitable for female teachers. Cannella (1997) writes,

This natural female role is expected to carry over into teaching as we display love and affection to all children, as we are expected to understand the child's thoughts and needs just as mothers can "read" the needs of their own children. (p. 146)

Notions around maternalism were used, indeed, as a recurring argument among participants across various levels during the current study. For instance, Lana, an educator from the GDEC, affirms that 'an early childhood teacher is supposed to be like a second mother'. While Lana did not explain what being a 'second mother' is, Dana, a KGT, provides an overview of the qualities desired in a second mother/teacher:

In my opinion, the most important characteristics of a kindergarten teacher are tenderness, kindness and calmness, because the child is at an early stage of his separation from his mother and his home and, therefore, he needs someone to care for him; he needs a second mother in the kindergarten.

The maternalist discourse, therefore, attributes what Cannella (1997) describes as ‘proposed characteristics that were inherent in the mother-child relationship’ (p. 142) to being a good ECT. In line with this notion, a number of ECTs justify the recent decision to assign the teaching of boys in the early primary classes to female teachers by arguing that women possess feminine characteristics that make them better suited for this role than their male counterparts. Amal, an EPT, explains,

I always hoped that my children would be taught by female teachers. The female teachers are more affectionate and kinder, unlike men who are more rigid and may yell at the children. This is the way men are; they do not possess tenderness or emotional containment like female teachers do. We, for sure, as female teachers of the early primary grades, are often characterised by tenderness, compassion and patience. Men may not have the same mindfulness as women.

It is for this reason that Fai, an HT of an ECS, believes that the assignment of primary classes to female teachers needs to be implemented rapidly.

within two years, all primary classes will be located at early childhood schools because female teachers are better able to contain children during this age than male teachers, given the ability of female teachers, as mothers, to meet the basic needs of children at this age.

One of the key reasons for this perpetual attitude is, according to Ailwood's (2007) explanation of maternalism, is one of the important 'cultural understandings' of the role of mothers in Muslim societies and Saudi society. In particular, their role in the process of *tarbiya*, which is discussed in depth below.

6.1.1 The Concept of Tarbiya

In the book *Awakening Islam* (2011), Lacroix differentiates between the two overlapping terms *ta'lim* and *tarbiya*. Lacroix states that '*ta'lim* [refers to] (education in the intellectual sense) and *tarbiya* [means] (education in the moral and ultimately religious sense, conveyed through Islamic socialization)' (p. 48). AlMusleh (2019) may have provided a more relevant explanation of the meaning of *tarbiya*, explaining that the concept represents a continuous process of upbringing and constant care [that leads to] a gradual progression of those receiving it. Despite its religious connotations, the Qur'an and Sunnah, as primary sources of Islamic teaching, do not use the word *tarbiya* or link it to the role of teachers. Nonetheless, the concept began to emerge in the Arabic literature on Islamic education during the second quarter of the twentieth century (Mursi, 2000).

In the KSA, the concept of *tarbiya* played an important role in the early days of developing the Saudi educational system. This was evident in the lines of the EPD (1970) that states that nurseries and kindergartens represent the initial stage of *tarbiya* through which children are prepared for future roles by ensuring an early good upbringing. Thus, for teachers to fulfil their *tarbiya* role, the EPD asserts that teacher training programmes should be in line with basic objectives that would assist in the process of *tarbiya* of a Muslim generation. The perception of the importance of the process of *tarbiya* in the field of education was prevalent to the extent that Bin Duhaish, the former president of the GPGE, argues that the primary purpose

of educating girls at all levels of education—primary, intermediate and secondary—is to provide them with a proper Islamic *tarbiya*. Bin Duhaish (1998) also adds that the first aim of higher education for girls in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is to help a girl achieve her mission in life as a good mother, an ideal wife, a successful housewife, a capable *murabbiyah* (a female mentor who possesses a capacity for guiding, caring and teaching; the male equivalent is *murabbi*) and a specialised scholar (p. 189).

While this traditional understanding that entails a woman taking on full responsibility for child care gradually decreased following the merger of the GPGE and the MoK, the connection between the role of education and the notion of *tarbiya* persisted in the KSA. For example, in 2004, the name of the ministry responsible for education in the kingdom was changed from *Wizarat Al-Maaref* (the MoK) to *Wizarat Al-Tarbiya wa-Al-Ta'lim* (the Ministry of Tarbiya and Education). It remained under this name until it was changed again to *Wizarat Al-Ta'lim* (the Ministry of Education) in 2015 (MoE, n.d.-b). As a school student myself at that time, I recall how often students were reminded by their teachers that they were under the Ministry of Tarbiya and Education and that *tarbiya* came before education in the name, stressing the importance of the guiding role of the teachers. Moreover, teacher training colleges in Saudi universities are known, to this day, as the Colleges of Tarbiya, which further establishes the fundamental role of a teacher as *murabbi* or *murabbiyah*.

While the ministry has attempted to reduce the association between *tarbiya* and teachers' roles, beginning by changing its name in 2015 and continuing with recent official statements and publications that show little or no evidence of associated language, this study suggests, nevertheless, that the discourse of *tarbiya* still exists among teachers and, to a lesser extent, decision makers. The responses to this study's question concerning the most important roles of

KGTs, or ECTs in general, indicate how clear this notion remains among participants. For instance, Maha, an EPT, says,

As a mother of four children, my role [as a teacher] is the *tarbiya*: to instil gentleness, to raise [children's] awareness, to encourage them, because children are the base, the seed. They are the ones who bring the country up, thus, my main role is to ingrain [these] values.

Mona, a KGT, also stresses a similar role for KGTs:

My most important role is to guide this child; help him get through the problems that appear in front of me. I may not be able to eliminate the problem completely but I am minimising it. So, I think that my role is a guiding role that complements the role of the family.

Thus, it seems the role of ECTs has been defined by the discourse in a way that both Maha and Mona place a high esteem on the concept of *tarbiya* when working with young children.

Consequently, some teachers consider their role to include moral guidance, as implied by *tarbiya*, and that it is of greater importance than their role as knowledge facilitators. For example, Asma, an EPT, argues,

During early childhood, the importance of *tarbiya* and guidance may be much greater than delivering the study material. For example, modifying the behaviour of the child; this is right and this is wrong... Our influence on children's behaviour is greater than [the influence of] the study material itself.

Even though the above data showing that many ECTs believe their *tarbiya* role is critical and has a tremendous impact on the lives of children, this opinion was less prevalent among decision

makers participating in the study. Nonetheless, it still exists, as evidenced by the interview with Maisa, a General Administrator at the GDEC, MoE:

The teacher, in every stage, is a mentor, an administrator, a mother, an academic: she is the full package. I cannot say that a teacher only presents concepts and skills because through presenting these concepts and skills, she is mentoring, which means she is a mentor... If you, as a teacher, wanted to be an academic only, then this means that you did not basically understand the educational process. While you, as a teacher, present a letter, in your behaviour and [in your way of] viewing things, you are guiding. The child learns from you something bigger than this letter.

While the analysis of the data does not provide sufficient information to illustrate an adequate description of the nature of *tarbiya* as seen through the eyes of early childhood educators, the above discussion may reflect the meaning of the process of *tarbiya* as seen by many of the study participants, which could be defined as the guiding process that includes ingraining certain values and modifying children's behaviours. Through this ambiguous understanding of *tarbiya*, a number of participants stressed the significance of the role that ECTs play in this process by referring to several rationales. To begin with, the data suggests that the discourse around *tarbiya* in education may provide ECTs with a greater sense of agency in influencing the lives of young children. For instance, Maha, an EPT, compares the role that mothers play in their children's lives with that of an ECT: 'as mothers have a great influence on their children, so does a [female] teacher. She teaches children, embraces them and instils values in them'. This argument becomes more compelling with the dominant belief that early childhood is the foundation stage for a child's development and, therefore, whatever is sown at this moment will determine that child's future, an argument that was introduced in the previous chapter and

will be further explored in the following chapter concerning the dominant images of early childhood settings.

As such, Asma, an EPT, describes the persistence of the effects that the process of *tarbiya* has on a young child's life. She explains, 'you [as a teacher] can modify the child's behaviour by teaching him that this is wrong and he will consider that behaviour wrong for the rest of his life'. What is particularly striking is that even the participants in the study from the 'authoritative voices' group believe, despite being aware of the limitations of the role of teachers, that ECTs possess a significant degree of influence to change the reality of the children they teach. For example, Tahani, a retired educator who worked as a regional head of an early childhood department, says,

I often say that teachers make something out of nothing. Teachers, in general, are appreciated, as they are the backbone of the education system, but early childhood teachers have an additional significance as their role is not confined to educational aspects alone; they have many roles, perhaps the most important being able to build children. Kindergarten teachers should be proud of themselves because they are the makers of the future generation. The teachers should be proud that building the next generation is in their own hands.

Further, in response to the question regarding the role of ECTs, Maisa from the GDEC affirms that 'creating' children is one of the roles of ECT: 'It is an integrated process; [the ECT] is a mentor and an academic. She builds a person, builds his skills and builds his personality'. Hind, another educator from the GDEC, holds a similar view regarding the ECT's role as a 'community builder':

I affirm once again that a teacher can build a good community... The pleasure that you experience when you see the change in the children, in the way they express themselves, and how they become copies of you as a teacher... makes you feel like you have won.

These statements may imply, then, that the relevance of the process of *tarbiya* can be grounded in the assumption that ECTs, through such a process, can produce a significant and enduring transformation on young children's lives. However, as Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) urge us to question 'whether early childhood education and care has the near miraculous effects claimed for it' (p. 113), it seems problematic to assume that the socialisation of young children can be achieved solely through the guidance of the ECT. This is rather a complex process that involves the influence of many other components, and while the work of ECTs has a significant impact here, it needs to be considered in the context of a much wider picture.

Another rationale that was used to explain assigning ECTs the role of *tarbiya* appears to come more from those who hold higher positions within the field of ECE. A number of retired and current leading educators, as well as some of the current HTs, believe that many Saudi families lack the knowledge necessary to raise their own children properly and, thus, ECTs 'should fill that gap'. An example of this can be seen in the responses of Iman, a retired ECE professor, regarding the importance of enrolling children in an early childhood programme:

Another main reason [for enrolling children in early childhood programmes] in our Arab societies, especially probably in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, is that early childhood educators should fill the gap resulting from parents' lack of knowledge because a large number of parents do not have a sound *tarbawi* [the adjective form of *tarbiya*] awareness. Since there are no specialised courses for parents, they raise their children as they used to, as they were raised or as they see around them. We do not have a *tarbawi*

renaissance for parents of young children. Yet, when a child goes to a kindergarten with specialists, he can at least be treated on a sound scientific basis, as well as on a sound *tarbawi* basis.

At a later point in the interview, when asked about the rationale behind the expansion project for ECE, Iman adds, ‘even if parents choose not to enrol their children in a nursery, we should offer [programmes to them] to develop greater parenting skills. We must not let parents haphazardly raise their children’. Here, the belief in the importance and criticality of the early childhood years has led some to think that all children of this age require the same sort of care and parenting and, thus, some parents, due to their ‘deficient’ background, would probably ‘fail’ to provide that type of care. Cannella (1997) writes,

In our rush to make the world better for younger human beings, we have not, however, questioned the values underlying the concept of early experience, the ways that a societal focus on the early years conflicts with the lived experiences of various groups of people, or the ways that focusing on early experience may disempower people and even ultimately limit human possibility... Families are expected to provide particular types of early experiences for their children and are judged as deficient, pathological, perhaps even in need of intervention if the child exhibits what society has judged to be problematic behaviour. (pp. 65-66)

Similar to Iman’s argument, Hind, from the GDEC, believes that parents’ social class and educational background may hinder their ability to raise their children properly, in which case, ECTs serve as a saviour for the child and the entire community:

Some parents have an average level [of education], some are advanced, some are highly educated and some have limited education. Others might have a large number of children, making it difficult for a mother to focus on each one of her children individually. It is here that the teacher can act as a key for the child. She can develop many things in him, such as self-discipline, respect for others and the foundations upon which a good citizen is built and, by doing so, she [the ECT] becomes the one who makes the child.

Yet, this emphasis on 'parental deficiencies and responsibilities', according to Vandebroek et al. (2010), may prevent critical discussion around the role of the education system as a whole in reproducing social disparities. Here, this parental 'failure' is constructed as a social dilemma in which only through early intervention, seen in this case in the process of *tarbiya* by ECTs, can the consequences be avoided.

6.1.2 Implications of the Notion of Tarbiya

The above analysis of the data demonstrates the concept of *tarbiya* is particularly relevant to the field of ECE in the KSA and has a close association with the role of ECTs. The adoption of such a notion may raise a number of issues concerning our ontological understanding of the term *tarbiya*, what this process includes or does not include and how it could affect children and teachers within the field of ECE.

As seen from the data presented earlier, there is no single definition of *tarbiya*; the concept was associated with different meanings throughout the interviews. One of these definitions, for example, appears in the interview with Maha, an EPT, who describes the concept as a way of 'instilling values'. Asma, another EPT, describes it as a process of 'guiding' children and 'modifying their behaviour'. Also, Tahani, a retired educator, describes the *murabbiyah* as a

‘role model’ whose behaviours help ‘a child [to develop] his own system of values’. The ambiguity of the meaning of the concept can, in part, be explained by the absence of a specific question asking the interviewees to define either *tarbiya* or the role of the *murabbiyah*. It would, therefore, be helpful to examine the meaning of *tarbiya* among educators in future studies, so as to gain a deeper understanding of its implications. Yet, even if the available definitions of *tarbiya* in Islamic education literature were to serve as a reference point for the present study, further concerns exist. According to Kazmi (1999), a *murabbi* is not merely a teacher but ‘a person who combines a life of learning with a life of virtue, and hence a perfect and an ideal person to learn from’ (p. 209) and an ‘exemplary human being’ (p. 223). While it may not be precisely clear how one can define the ‘perfect’ or ‘exemplary human being’, nor to what standards we can refer when evaluating this human, it would still be challenging for an educational system to ensure that all its half a million teachers are meeting that level of moral ‘perfection’. Furthermore, both Kazmi (1999) and Badrasawi et al. (2017) assert that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is considered the ‘true exemplar’ and Badrasawi et al. (2017) add that, nowadays, ‘teachers may embody some of the qualities of a *murabbi*... yet it is extremely challenging for them to become true *murabbis*’ (pp. 340-341). Thus, given this understanding of the concept, one might argue whether it is still appropriate to assign teachers such an unattainable role.

In fact, the interviews within this study demonstrate that the role of the ECT as a *murabbiyah* has vague and unspecified tasks. For instance, I asked Mona about her role as a KGT:

Mona: I think that my role is a guiding role that complements the role of the family

Interviewer: “Guiding” children in what respect?

Mona: I think in all respects.

A similar response was also found in Jana's answer regarding what distinguishes children during their early childhood years:

Jana: The most significant feature of children at this age is that they are mouldable, changeable. If the teacher accepts the child as he is, then [the child] will be attached to her and, in this way, [the child] will accept things from her [the teacher] that he would not normally accept from his family and, because of this, the influence of the teacher is greater than the influence of the family.

Interviewer: In what ways?

Jana: In every way.

As both teachers believe their role in the *tarbiya* of young children is crucial but are unable to define the limits of such a role, this begs an important question. If certain values of the child's home contradict with those of the school, which values would the ECT, as a role model and *murabbiya*, teach to the child? Hence, if the task of *tarbiya* is to be understood as one of the primary roles of teachers, then discussions would be necessary to clarify both the powers this task possesses and the boundaries that are to be considered.

Further, an essential function of a teacher as a *murabbi/murabbiyah*, in Islamic education studies, is to be a good role model in a way that allows their students to emulate their own lives (Sa-u et al., 2014). In that sense, a *murabbi* 'teaches how to think in order to live in a certain way and, how to live so that one can think in a certain way' (Kazmi, 1999, p. 231). The data also show that a similar perspective regarding the importance of ECTs acting as role models. When asked about the mission she believes she must accomplish as a teacher by the end of the year,

Dana, a KGT, answers, ‘apart from the educational materials, I must also set a good example for them; a role model’. One issue with such a notion is the expectation in ‘creating copies’ of that ‘ideal’ model. By providing a role model to children, we hope, while ignoring the narrowing and marginalising implications of that understanding, that all children, by the end of the year, will be able to emulate that role model. Hind, a General Administrator working at the GDEC, affirms that ‘the pleasure that you experience when you see the change in the children, in the way they express themselves and how they become copies of you as a teacher... that makes you feel like you have won’. Through this view, there is a concern of promoting a restrictive perspective of what an ‘ideal’ child should behave, thereby posing the risk of ‘excluding human beings whose lives do not mirror our dominant view of early childhood’ (Cannella, 1997, p. 2).

6.2 ECT as an Efficient Professional

While the teaching of kindergartens did not require any specialisation for some time, the recent development of the first national curriculum for kindergarten, founded by the AGFUND in cooperation with the GPGE, created a new need for those already working in early childhood settings. Iman explains this:

Having qualified teachers and developing this curriculum both made a significant difference. Kindergartens were totally changed; chairs and tables were removed. As a result, in-service teachers, at that time, felt that they lacked the knowledge and training to work with this new approach [to] teaching. So, the ministry started establishing training centres for kindergarten teachers and, later, these centres began to spread throughout the kingdom. These centres provide on-the-job training courses to teach in-service teachers modern educational thoughts to shift from behaviourism to constructivism.

The existence of such a ‘need’ among ECTs led to an ‘appropriate response’ from policymakers (Ball, 2008). This response involved enrolling in-service teachers in one of the Kindergarten Training Centres for a two-month training, during which the teacher ‘leaves her class and the children’, as Tahani, a retired educator, explains, for what both Tahani and Huda refer to as ‘qualifying kindergarten teachers’ to shift the teachers’ approaches ‘from behaviourism to constructivism’, to quote Iman. Here, through the hegemonic pragmatic position of positivism and through its language of science and objective truth (Moss, 2019), one can see how a practical way of constructing professionalism in the Saudi ECE started to emerge, whereby 'alternative versions become marginalised and devalued' (Osgood, 2011, p. 54). Later, as a result of the growing number of academic programmes designed for kindergarten teachers in the kingdom’s various universities, in addition to the ministry’s continuous ‘qualification’ of in-service teachers via its training centres, a new phenomenon appeared, which Iman describes as ‘sort of a professional hierarchy and specialisation’.

This phenomenon soon began to dominate the early childhood field in the KSA until it was moved from being an additional stage, for which employees were not required to have a bachelor’s degree in any field, to recruiting only those who held bachelor’s degrees in kindergarten or ECE, as well as a professional licence test to work in a public kindergarten. With this rapid transformation over the past twenty years, beginning with the recognition of the kindergarten stage in the educational system in 2003 and continuing to this day, a new image concerning ECTs began to emerge: the ideal ECT is represented as someone who can make a significant difference in the lives of young children by acquiring the necessary qualifications and engaging in continuous professional development to achieve the maximum measurable results for both the young learners and for themselves (the teacher) as well.

In recent key policy documents, the previous emphasis on the traditional image of the ECT as a *murabbiyah*, who plays more of a mothering role for the young children inside the early childhood classrooms, has diminished significantly, allowing another image to emerge. ECTs are now viewed as specialised educators who continually seek professional development to maintain ‘high-quality standards’ and maximise the effectiveness of their work. In the following section, I analyse this image of ECTs as ‘efficient professionals’ by examining (a) how teachers are being prepared for this role and (b) what responsibilities come with it.

6.2.1 The Preparation of the ‘Efficient’ ECTs

According to *The Handbook of Early Childhood Schools* (2019), all teachers working in ECSs are now required to possess a bachelor’s degree in specific fields. Kindergarten teachers should hold a degree in early childhood education, while their colleagues who teach early primary classes can pursue a major in early primary education, primary education, science, mathematics, Arabic or Islamic Studies. In addition to holding a bachelor’s degree, teachers wishing to work—or those already working—in a public ECS should pass the ETEC’s licensing test, the PLTT. On its website, the ETEC describes itself as ‘the authority in charge of evaluation, assessment and accreditation of qualifications in the field of education and training in public and private sectors so as to raise the quality and efficiency of education and, thus, enhance its contribution to the national economy and development’ (ETEC, 2021a). The PLTT, according to the ETEC (2021b), is one of the ‘tools that positively contribute in enhancing the quality of teacher performance. It aims at improving their abilities and skills, ensuring that they have the required competencies for their career’. This test consists of two sections: the first covers pedagogical topics and is mandatory for all teachers, while the second focuses on the fundamental concepts of the concerned fields. Upon passing the test, a five-year professional

licence is issued to the candidate. As per the *Procedural Guidelines for Educational Jobs*, published by the MHRSD (2021b), a teacher who fails to obtain or renew a professional licence within the prescribed period will be ‘deprived’ of their annual bonus.

For many of the teachers involved in this study, including Raghad, a KGT, the use of such harsh language in relation to the PLTT is a major concern:

Linking the test to the annual bonus is what annoys teachers. Teachers shouldn’t spend an entire year worrying about whether or not they will pass the test, whether they will get the bonus next year or when they will lose it. It does not recognise the efforts of teachers throughout the year, nor the service of some teachers that exceeds 15 or 16 years. Then, because of one test, [the teacher] is deprived of his annual bonus.

Asma, an ECT, holds a similar view of the PLTT:

What will the licence do for me? For an annual bounce? I will not benefit from the tests or the licence. The issue is now purely materialistic. You want a raise? Study. I honestly find it exhausting as it takes up a lot of our time. Now, I have to divide my time between teaching my students and working in the school, as well as between teaching my children at home and studying to pass the professional licence test. It has been exhausting for me as a teacher and a mother at the same time.

Yet, the problem with the PLTT for many may not only lie in the fact that it is directly linked to the annual bonus of teachers and how teachers consequently lose that bonus if they fail to renew their licence every five years, but also that this policy diminishes the value of real experience in favour of standardisation and measurements. Fai, an HT, says, ‘Even after twenty

and thirty years of teaching, the teacher is required to take the licensing test. This is unfair to the teacher'. Mona, a KGT, also touches on that issue:

If I took the licence test this year, then, after a month, I would not benefit from that test.

There are people who excel in paper tests but cannot perform well in the field and there are people who excel in the field while the paper tests undermine their performance.

Both responses from Mona and Fai may refer to the existence of what Ball (2016) describes as a 'system of performativity' that has appeared in the field of ECE in the KSA. Through this system, '[i]ndividuals and institutions are required to account for themselves in ways that represent education as a standardised and measurable product, as a basis for judgment and comparison' (p. 1055). Hence, due to the dominance of official policy discourses, other possible meanings of 'professionalism' that are derived from the personal experiences of ECTs, as seen above, may be marginalised (Osgood, 2011).

Further, a practice of performativity was also clear in the way ECTs are supervised and evaluated. On every school visit, the educational supervisor will bring a form that includes a list of measurable actions that the teacher is expected to complete during that short visit, which usually lasts no more than an hour. These performance evaluations during the occasional supervisory visits often results in what Ball (2003) describes as 'tensions between belief and representation. On the one hand, teachers are concerned that what they do will not be captured by or valued within the metrics of accountability and, on the other, that these metrics will distort their practice' (p. 223). On that specific dilemma, Raghad, a KGT, notes,

Having a supervisor who evaluates only on one day isn't right. When she visits at the end of the semester, she expects that you will implement fifty items in a day. We have a

flexible curriculum and we are supposed to follow the children's interests... One of the downsides is that, every year, the items for teachers' evaluations change and, each year, this list gets longer.

Amal, an EPT, also refers to the same concern about the professionalism of her teaching not being evident enough during any supervision visit:

Perhaps the only thing that bothers me—not just me, but everyone—is that I can do a lot of things that do not occur during the supervisor's or administration's visit. I have various strategies and methods of teaching that differ according to the lesson. So, it is not appropriate to limit the evaluation criteria to what the teacher did in that [single] lesson.

Thus, by living in a culture of performativity, educators, according to Ball (2003), 'become uncertain about the reasons for actions. Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared? It will make us look good!' (p. 220). While worry about this tension, between doing what is deemed as 'right' or what is 'measurable' is present among ECTs as seen above, the data from this study suggests that participants in higher senior roles do not seem to be experiencing this tension as intensely as teachers. In fact, a number of decision makers and HTs have called for an even more rigorous management system for ECE. For example, when Alia, an HT, was asked about the ministry's current evaluation practices for schools, she answers, 'Not enough really because there are no clear criteria. In the past, we had the *Manthuma* system; it has] now [been] cancelled but it was excellent. It provided indicators to schools, and the schools raced to raise the indicators'. Additionally, Iman, a retired academic, agrees that a stronger supervision system should be applied to ECSs:

It may also be necessary to increase the number of supervisors. I always feel that there are not enough supervisors. The supervisor makes two to three visits to the school each semester. What would she notice in two or three visits? I hope that private schools, and even public ones, will be required to hire a full-time resident supervisor who is more experienced and specialised, to make sure that everything that happens inside the classrooms is at the required level and to push the standards to their highest level.

This position taken by some of those working in higher levels within the Saudi ECE can be viewed as problematic from two perspectives. Firstly, the demand for a tougher management system may reflect a lack of faith in ECTs by those in higher positions. Within such a system, a teacher is viewed as an ‘untrustworthy individual whose performance must be monitored, managed, and moulded through techniques of management, which will ensure conformity and passivity’ (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 116). Whilst I believe that promoting quality in ECTs' work is a worthwhile pursuit, I agree with Osgood's view in problematising the notion that 'quality can be attained through a ‘more consistent regulatory regime’ characterised by heightened accountability, standardisation and credentialism' (2011, p. 49). Further, if those in higher positions believe it necessary to make every act within educational practices countable and measurable, is there a concern about what type of ‘new teachers’ this management system will produce?

[W]hat is originally imposed externally by management can become embodied by those who are managed, so that they end up ‘owning’ the values, assumptions and goals of management—in effect, they end up managing or governing themselves. What began as a possibly contested external imposition becomes internalized and self-evident. (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 132)

In addition to the academic qualifications of teachers and the PLTT, teachers are now expected to participate more often in professional development courses. Indeed, the Saudi 2030 Vision identifies training educators as one of its main objectives in education. It states, '[w]e will invest particularly in developing ECE, refining our national curriculum and training our teachers and educational leaders' (2016, p. 36). Iman, a retired ECE professor, highlights the importance of this current political trend of increasing the number of professional development hours for teachers:

There is a need to invest in professional development for teachers, which is stated clearly in the Vision for its importance. Teachers used to have an average of 20 hours of professional development training each year. Now, they are required to complete an average of 100 hours; a 500 percent increase in the number of hours of professional training for teachers.

This change towards intensive 'professional training' for teachers was already evident in the field. Nora, an HT who has been an educator in the public Saudi schooling system for over 29 years, comments on this recent shift:

There was no training for those working in the ministry; there was no professional development. However, now, in the last five years, the ministry has intensified its efforts in the area of planning and development. Now, every regional department of education in the kingdom has a planning and development office. Professional training programmes are listed on a weekly basis for every position, administrative assistants, teachers, [and] headteachers. The employee now knows what to do.

In light of the kingdom's substantial efforts to increase teachers' training, the data raises two potential concerns that may be worth considering. First, to better meet their objectives, it is important that the content of such courses be tailored to the context of the Saudi ECE settings. This was a concern for Dana, a KGT, who notes, 'there are many professional training courses, but I feel that these courses simulate a classroom environment that does not exist in our schools. They simulate an ideal environment that is very far from our own'. If teacher training courses fail to address the local needs of ECE settings, there does not seem to be much value in requiring teachers to complete professional training that cannot be applied to their classrooms. The other issue is that this narrative around the deficiency of the work of ECTs may legitimise acts of authority and control by those who are seen as experts, or superiors in this 'professional hierarchy' system, as per Iman's above statement. While it is not this study's intention to argue against the value of providing ECTs with further educational opportunities that could benefit both practitioners and their young students, concerns have been raised about the potential for notions of professionalisation to be employed as 'means of control' (Osgood, 2006b). To give an example of the kind of power that can be exercised and, in some cases, even appreciated within this discourse, one of the study participants, Jann, believes that the MoE must 'force' certain teachers to attend professional development courses, claiming that these teachers lack the desire to improve themselves:

Some teachers refuse to attend training courses and the headteacher cannot force them to do so. This is why I feel the ministry should require new teachers to attend training courses as these courses develop teachers—and some teachers do not want to improve...

The new teachers, as well as those in their first fifteen years of teaching, should be forced

to take these courses until they get the licence, but after 20 years of experience, I think it has no purpose.

6.2.2 The Role of the 'Efficient' ECTs

The emphasis placed on teachers' preparation and professional development is in accordance with the expectation that teachers will be able to perform at the highest measurable level of effectiveness. The interviews conducted within this study revealed a common perception that is more prevalent among participants from the 'authoritative voices' group concerning the role of the 'effective' ECT. Within this perception, ECTs are being viewed as the 'spine' of the educational system; those who, only through their exceptional efforts, can truly make a real difference in the lives of young children. Expressions such as 'teachers make something out of nothing', 'they are the backbone of the education system' and '[the ECT] is a maker; she is the one who makes the child' can all be found in the interviews conducted with participants from the GDEC. Although it seems to convey a positive tone regarding the work of ECTs, this notion may be misleading, since learning is far more complex than what teachers do or do not do, as explained earlier in the discussion concerning the impact of the process of tarbiya on young children's lives. It also places more responsibilities related to the success or failure of learning on the shoulders of teachers, thus excusing many of those working in other positions within the system of their responsibilities in the educational process.

The discourse of professionalism has constructed concepts of normality that internally discipline the self-perceptions of teachers. They learn to judge themselves based on professional "truths" that locate success or failure within their individual abilities to "teach well." Teaching is constructed as apolitical and locates educational problems

within teachers and children, rather than within societal conditions or political power structures. (Cannella, 2002, p. 154)

The effective/ideal ECT appears in the data of the current study as a capable teacher who can overcome any difficulties that may occur in the workplace. For instance, Amal, an EPT raised the issue of allocating certain teaching responsibilities to EPTs regardless of their previous experience, personal preferences or qualifications:

Among the issues we face as early childhood teachers is that the primary school teacher must teach any class assigned to her and she has no right to refuse. Sometimes, the teacher tells [the administration] that she does not know [how] or has insufficient experience to teach first grade and they would reply, ‘We do not have enough teachers. There is no problem; you can just enter the class and teach and you will learn.’

Similar language is also used in the kindergarten level. When Alia, an HT, for example, was asked about the ministry’s recent decision to increase the teacher-to-child ratio in kindergarten classes to 1:30 and whether she thinks it will be manageable for KGTs, she answers, ‘it is not really that easy, but it is possible. It depends on the efforts of the teachers’. Tahani, a retired Head of a Regional ECE Department, also believes that a challenging situation like this can be effectively handled through the professionalism of a teacher:

The teacher–child ratio is a complex issue and, just as there are individual differences between children, so there are individual differences between teachers. Some teachers can teach 25 and 30 children successfully and creatively, while others cannot teach 10 children.

Such statements risk further establishing the assumption that 'it is the responsibility of the individual' ECT to enhance the status of ECE and overcome its shortcomings 'through personal motivation and commitment' (Osgood, 2011, p. 45), and therefore any failure would be seen as the result of the individual teacher's incompetence, lack of motivation or effort.

This view of ECTs as the 'backbone' of the educational system introduces a new form of responsibility. Today, ECTs are expected to contribute actively to filling the gaps in early childhood learning environments more than ever before through what is described as 'community participation' or 'community partnership'. While promoting 'a culture of volunteering' is among the 2030 Vision's goals (Vision 2030, 2016), it is perhaps more important now to highlight how the concept of 'volunteering' includes 'choice' and 'willingness'. On that matter, Mona, a KGT, shares her own experience:

Mona: [The ECE stage] lacks the appropriate tools for education or, [in other cases], there is an insufficient number of educational tools available for children. Sometimes, through community partnership and teachers' efforts we try to meet the needs. It is a poor stage. We are expected to do the full workload as any other teacher in the other stages, even though we don't have as much material as they do.

Interviewer: Community partnerships with whom?

Mona: With companies, institutions and families.

Interviewer: Who arranges these partnerships?

Mona: We, as teachers, arrange them. We communicate and follow up. Sometimes, the headteacher organises them, but many times, she would say that 'If you, as a teacher, need these tools, then you communicate'.

Raghad, another KGT, also talks about the issue of a poorly equipped learning environment in public ECE settings and how ECTs appear to be expected to assist in resolving such a situation. In response to a question regarding the ministry's expansion efforts in the field of ECE, Raghad states,

For them, expansion means only increasing the number of children... Another difficult thing is that our classrooms are not fully furnished. We, as teachers, purchase the essentials ourselves. In addition to overcrowded classrooms, there are no materials to help children learn. Expansion... is adding to the teacher's burden.

Considering the growing political interest in the field, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, and the subsequent increase in funding available for young children's education, it may be appropriate at this point to examine the role of their teachers and what it does (and does not) include. This is of particular relevance given that some in more senior positions believe that an effective professional teacher can overcome and accept such challenges. In relation to the issue raised above of assigning teaching responsibilities to EPTs, an HT, Fai, explains what she considers to be one of the most valuable qualities of an ECT: '[an ECT] should embody the quality of complete acceptance, which is a major requirement'. Answering my question about what she means by 'complete acceptance', Fai gives an example, 'teaching certain courses at the primary school does not require specialisation, so the allocation of teaching staff depends on availability... The teacher must accept teaching any subject that is assigned to her'. Hence, within the current notions of professionalism, 'compliance' is viewed as an important quality of every 'efficient' worker, including those in ECE. As Sims (2017) writes, 'what is valued has increasingly become compliant employees who have the skills and knowledge to perform the job required without asking questions' (p. 1). Thus, the above

discussion of the role of the efficient ECT suggests a tendency towards constructing a new form of subjectivity, by which teachers are increasingly appreciated for being involved in daily measurable teaching performances, engaging in continuous professional training, overcoming any limitations they may encounter in their field, and being compliant with the changing rules and regulations that surround them.

6.3 Conclusion

To answer the research questions concerning the image of ECTs in the KSA, this chapter highlights the dominant images of practitioners working in early childhood classrooms in the kingdom. The main aim was to analyse the dominant perceptions of ECTs from the perspective of the study participants and relevant documents in the field by focusing on three particular aspects: (a) the historical roots of the images concerning the role of ECTs, (b) the set of truth and knowledge they construct, and (c) some of their potential implications for young children and their education.

Arguably, the earliest images of ECTs in the KSA portray them in the role of ‘second mothers’. Given the history of ECE in the kingdom, it was expected that this traditional image would be present today as the first early childhood classes were opened to take care of the children of working women according to the above-mentioned 159 Article of Work and Workers; the beginning of Saudi women’s participation in the workforce in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the need to take care of the children of these women. Therefore, the caretakers of these children were expected to take on responsibilities that were traditionally associated with mothers, one of which is the *tarbiya* of young children. Furthermore, although the mothering role was clearly associated with kindergarten teachers, in particular, it was evident that, within the Saudi

educational scene, the role of teachers as implementers of *tarbiya*, or providing moral guidance, extended to other educational levels as well. It is possible that the establishment of the Saudi educational system, at a time when certain discourses were gaining popularity in the kingdom (Lacroix, 2011), may have contributed to the adoption of the concept of *tarbiya* (which is derived from Islamic educational literature) for the role of teachers. The consequences of the image of ECTs as second mothers/*murabbiyah* on the knowledge surrounding the education of young children can be seen in different examples presented throughout the chapter. Perhaps, the present name of teacher's preparation colleges in the KSA, Colleges of Tarbiya, is a reflection of the enduring influence of this notion even to this day. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the MoE in the KSA has recently attempted, through its official statements and published documents, to reduce the emphasis on this traditional image of teachers as *murabbi* or *murabbiyah*, indicating a shift in the perceptions regarding the expected role of teachers.

The other image related to the ECT materialised following the recognition of kindergarten as a formal stage of learning within the Saudi educational system in 2003. This recognition and the following establishment of the General Department for Kindergarten resulted from the emergence of an urgent need to expand this level of education and raise its poor quality. Tahani, a former Head of a Regional ECE Department, states,

There were efforts before, but kindergarten was considered... an additional stage... Learning environments and curriculums needed improvement and teachers were not specialists... After that, the General Administration for Kindergarten was founded and, as a result, kindergarten enrolment expanded and awareness of the importance of kindergarten grew.

Hence, as the 'backbone' of the education system, reforms have begun to focus on teachers' performance as a means of improving the quality of ECE.

Early childhood services are widely presented as failing to meet the needs of children and families and therefore the rationale for regulation is legitimated and a regulatory gaze deemed expedient and necessary. In this climate, early years practitioners increasingly have to wrestle with demands for accountability, performativity and standardised approaches to their practice... (Osgood, 2006, p. 6)

Within this notion, the ECT becomes the ‘magic solution’ for the obstacles in the field and, therefore, achieving a high-quality education for children becomes strongly associated with their performance.

Yet, regardless of this shift concerning the role of ECTs, both conflicting discourses tend to stress the role that the ECT plays in shaping human beings. Within both images, teachers of young children are seen as being the ones who can ‘make something out of nothing’; from ‘making’ humans who hold certain principles and values as a *‘murabbiyah’*, to ‘making’ the ‘appropriately developed’ human being as an efficient professional.

Perhaps one of the most critical aspects that is worth mentioning in regards to the discussion here is the tension that the ECTs in Saudi ECE face when defining their ‘professional subjectivities’; whether to adopt a mothering and guiding role or a more technical one that is aimed at achieving predetermined outcomes, this tension can be attributed to the conflict ‘between discourses of professionalism and maternalism’ (Warren, 2014, p. 263). Understanding the changes in ECTs’ subjectivities and the dominant discourses related to their roles makes it possible not only to better understand the possible implications but also to open the field of ECE to other alternatives: ‘Only through recognition of what has become “unthinkable” can we attempt to interrupt this process and establish spaces for thinking again about the role of early years teachers in the education system’ (Bradbury, 2012, p. 184).

Chapter 7: The Image of Early Childhood Schools

Prior to initiating the discussion around the dominant images related to early childhood educational settings, it is important to point out that the analysis of this chapter will be informed, to a greater degree, by the discussion presented in the previous two chapters. An adequate understanding of the dominant images of young children and the roles of early childhood teachers within a given society would help providing a basis for the analysis of the educational setting of those young children. Given how the chosen images of young children and their teachers can be “productive”, as they produce or construct an early childhood education that is ‘desirable’ or ‘good’ (Moss, 2019, p. 52), and considering that the image of early childhood stage in the KSA has been shifting from ‘a path through which children had to pass in order to get to adulthood’ (Khalifa, 2001, p. 269) to one that portrays young children as future investments, and while the perception of early childhood teachers is also gradually moving from one of guiding and caring to that of a more technical nature (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), one might expect that the image of ECSs would subsequently shift as well. Thus, in light of the history of the education of young children in the Kingdom, and even though the first educational facility for children under the age of 6 was opened less than 60 years ago (Al-Hariri, 2002), the analysis of the data within this chapter suggests that a significant shift is occurring in the perceived importance of early years learning and the primary functions of its settings.

This chapter, then, will address the following research question: What are the prevalent images of the school of young children in the KSA? Towards this end, the chapter will begin with a discussion about how young children’s educational settings have recently captured significant attention of policymakers in the KSA, changing from being regarded as places to care

for young children of working mothers to being necessities for the future of the nation. The discussion will then move on to highlight the image of ECSs as a place of readiness where young children are being prepared for the later stages of life, a notion that has been promoted lately as a rationale for the growing political interest in the field. Lastly, considering this recently acknowledged significance, along with the realisation that a significant expansion of ECSs is needed, a third perception is being increasingly associated with the field in which greater participation by the private sector in the management of young children's schools is being encouraged.

Before proceeding with the discussion, it would be relevant to remind the reader that the settings for young children take several forms in the KSA, including children's hospitality centres, which provide educational and care services for children up to the age of 10 and fall under the supervision of the MHRSD, and independent kindergartens and the newly implemented ECSs, both of which are governed by the MoE. For the purpose of this thesis, children's hospitality centres will be excluded from the analysis as these facilities are not intended to serve as educational settings. As such, only the latter two forms of settings will be considered when discussing the image of Saudi ECSs. For the discussion of young children's settings prior to 2018, the focus will be on independent kindergartens, given that they were the only available form under the MoE's supervision, whereas any discussion of young children's settings following that date will be in relation to ECSs.

7.1 A Significant Stage

During one of my interviews with KGTs, one of the study participants discussed the importance of enrolling children in an ECE programme, stating the following

As you know, kindergarten started when women began working. In the past, a child would remain with his mother at home until he reached the age of primary school. As women began to work, a need to provide places for young children, other than the family, started to appear, and so, kindergarten began to open up to children between the ages of 3 and 5. There was also a need to teach those children rather than just sitting around, because if you don't keep the child busy with something useful, they will keep you busy. If he does not find something he enjoys and challenges his skills, the child will exhaust his teacher. From there, kindergarten began to develop, little by little, so that we are now at a point where kindergarten is an urgent necessity. (Jana, a KGT and participant in the study)

What is noteworthy in the above response is how it illustrates the recent shift in the common perception of the significance of early childhood programmes in the KSA from being merely a place that provides care for children of working mothers to an 'urgent necessity' for every young child. This transformation in the political perception is critical to the current chapter, as it aims to analyse the conditions that enable such an interest (and other dominant images) 'to appear' (Foucault, 1970a).

Such phenomenon can be observed when analysing the relatively recent history of ECE in the Kingdom; during the first few decades of its establishment, kindergarten enrolments grew very slowly in comparison with other levels of education. Bin Duhaish (1998), the former president of the GPGE, provides statistics that show that, nearly two decades after the first Saudi kindergarten was opened, such facilities still had the capacity for no more than 21,000 children while the enrolment of students in primary, intermediate and high schools increased dramatically,

(e.g., the enrolment of female students in primary schools increased from around 350,000 in 1980 to over 900,000 in 1998).

However, Huda, a retired policy maker, who served in senior administrative positions in the department responsible for the education of young children (known as the General Department of Kindergartens, at the time), believes that the field's slow development in its early days cannot be interpreted as a 'neglection' of the GPGE:

the General Presidency for Girls' Education was not provided with the necessary capabilities, such as a royal decree or directive by the Council of Ministers, to expand kindergartens. The decree would provide financial and human resources as well as educational policies to ensure its implementation at a national level and for all children.

Thus, due to this absence of political interest, the education and care of children under the age of six received little attention in the KSA between the 1980s and early 2000s. This was evident not only from the low enrolment rate in early childhood settings but also from the budget made available to the field. Al-Hariri (2002) argues that most, if not all, public kindergartens at that time were unable to deliver their services fully due to inadequate financial resources. In her book on the establishment of the kindergarten field in the Kingdom, Al-Hariri (2002) cites numbers from the GPGE's circulars to demonstrate the low economic support kindergartens used to receive. One example is circular No. 2/214 b/1, issued by His Excellency the General President of Girls' Education in 1983, which directed the distribution of 1,000 Saudi Riyals (equivalent to only 3,750 US dollars) per semester to every public kindergarten and nursery school. Despite this limited budget, a later circular was issued by the GPGE in 1985 to further reduce the funds allocated to kindergartens by 50 per cent (No. 8556/5/1, as cited in Al-Hariri, 2002).

With their very limited spaces, the GPGE's kindergarten classes in most cases accepted only children whose mothers worked at the presidency's schools (MoK, 2002). The vast majority of the spaces in Saudi early learning settings were privately owned, which further made ECE, according to Aljabreen and Lash (2016), 'a privilege of the wealthy' (p. 314). In this regard, the perspective of Iman, a retired educator who worked in the field during that period, may shed some light on how the experience of ECE was confined to those who could afford it.

As the number of children in the Kingdom increased, there was an increasing desire to invest in kindergartens, leading to the growth of private kindergartens. Parents, particularly working mothers, began to appreciate the idea of sending their children to kindergarten. We, also, cannot [forget] that, in the eighties, we experienced an economic boom. Having a financial return enabled parents to enrol their children in kindergarten so that they could learn social skills, languages, and life skills, as well as academic skills.

While Iman's words may suggest that the economic boom resulting from oil revenues in the 1980s allowed Saudi families, generally, to send their children to private kindergartens, the statistics outlined above by the GPGE president indicate that this may not have been the case for the overwhelming majority of Saudis. Still, it can be argued that what prevented many of those families from sending their children to early childhood settings was not primarily due to financial factors but, rather, a lack of appreciation of the field's significance. While the present study does not have the necessary data to further examine this matter, it appears here that ECE in the KSA was, until the early 2000s, viewed by those in charge of ECE at that time as an optional and non-essential stage of education. Tahani, a former head of a regional ECE Department in the MoE, provides an example of this attitude toward the field when speaking about how those in higher leadership positions within the GPGE used to compare ECE to the rest of the educational levels.

In the past, for example, kindergarten was referred to, and I apologize for that, as the sunnah [the Islamic voluntary/optional prayers] and [the rest of educational stages as] the fard [the Islamic obligatory prayers] in a way that diminishes the value of kindergarten in comparison to general education.

The impact of this view toward the field was even greater when considering the globalisation pressures felt by those working in the field at the time when ECE started to be perceived as ‘global issue’ (Mahon, 2016). Tahani, a participant from the authoritative voices group, for instance, describe the way she felt when attending international events in the 1990’s, at the time when the Saudi ECE was part of the GPGE: ‘our enrolment rate was very low, we were embarrassed at international conferences. Learning environments and curriculums needed improvement, and teachers were not specialists’. Nevertheless, it is possible that this sense of pressure resulting from the global competitive race was one of the factors that initially prompted political interest in the field, as Iman, a retired ECE educator, refers to this as one motive of the MoE to increase the enrolment in ECE:

With the great scholarship campaign in 2005, we have opened up to the world. We want to keep up with new developments. We do not want to succeed amongst ourselves only; we want to succeed for ourselves, in front of others, and with others. We want to compete with others in every field. Today, it is not enough for us to take from others; we also wish to export education and ideas.

Here, a language of global economic competitiveness is being used to justify the major reforms started to take a place in local educational policies in the field. In the opinion of decision makers who participated in the study, to succeed ‘in front of others, and with others’, and for the Kingdom to be ‘number one’ in the education rankings (Maisa, a study participant), can provide

compelling motivation for expanding ECE. Within this perspective, ranking matters, and the earlier we start preparing young people to compete in such a race, the better. This emerging notion is similar to what Moss (2019) describes as 'the story of quality and high returns' (p. 10). Moss (2019) illustrates

The moral of the story is that if only early intervention is done right, with 'quality', education and employment outcomes will improve, social problems will diminish, and survival in the 'global race', that vortex of ever increasing competition in the global marketplace, will be assured. (p. 11)

The earlier image of ECSs has, then, slowly started to transform into one that represents the first and significant stage in which better results in the global competitive race can be attained. Hence, over the last two decades, the initially perceived insignificance of the field has gradually begun to fade away; Tahani continues her earlier statement by saying, 'now [the perception has changed], even the Minister, may God protect him, and the whole Vision are focusing on early education'. The available data suggests that political interest in the field began to grow during the time the GPGE was absorbed into the MoE (known then as the Ministry of Knowledge) and the subsequent establishment of the first Saudi general department for ECE (the GDK) in 2002; a period which Huda, a retired Administrative Officer, with years of experience in senior positions in that department, describes as being 'the start of the quantitative and qualitative expansion of kindergartens'. Further, Tahani, who has also worked under the GDK, recalls that at the time the department was founded, 'kindergarten enrolment started to expand, the awareness about the importance of the [early childhood] stage increased, ... investment [improved] and private education started to be encouraged'. Yet, despite many attempts made by the GDK between its establishment in 2002 and 2018 to increase the enrolment rate in ECE, data

on the percentage of children in kindergartens published on the MoE's website indicates limited success (MoE, 2022). Perhaps one of the GDK's most significant examples in this regard was the 2014 expansion project. As discussed previously in the background of the study, the available statistics from the MoE show that during the first four years of the plan, the number of children enrolled in public ECE increased from 123,313 in 2014 to only 139,479 in 2018 (MoE, 2018).

Regardless of this slow pace of growth, the launch of the 2030 Vision, with its particular emphasis on ECE, has given preschool education a further sense of significance. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2013) discuss how the formation of a vision of a modern and industrial society has been linked to the development of early childhood institutions in certain parts of the world. The same logic can also be seen in the case of the Saudi ECE. The Saudi 2030 Vision, upon its launching in 2016, positions the education of young children as 'a necessary technology for progress' (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 72). The Kingdom's future vision states that

We will continue investing in education and training so that our young men and women are equipped for the jobs of the future. We want Saudi children, wherever they live, to enjoy higher quality, multi-faceted education. We will invest particularly in developing early childhood education, refining our national curriculum and training our teachers and educational leaders. (2030 Vision, 2016, p. 36).

The second sentence of this quote, in particular, has been cited by several participants when speaking about the importance of ECE, including, Maisa, a participant from the GDEC.

One of the most important goals of 2030 [Vision] is to expand kindergartens and support early childhood [stage]. There is the well-known phrase of the Crown Prince that every Saudi child, wherever he lives, will have access to early childhood education. This is not

easy, but we are achieving it now with the support that is pouring in for us; not just material support but full logistical support to achieve this vision.

As the chapter on the image of young children highlights how they are becoming increasingly viewed as the basis of the Kingdom's future economy, it should come as no surprise that greater attention is now being paid to the education of these 'economic units' (Gibson et al., 2015). In response to a question regarding whether the 2030 Vision has had an impact on ECS, Nora, an HT, states

Absolutely. The first change occurs when the Vision states that the country's economy depends on its citizens. Since then, kindergarten and early childhood education have received more attention. Budgets and efforts were allocated to serve this program, and the government expanded kindergarten to *fix* [emphasis added] the maximum possible number [of young children].

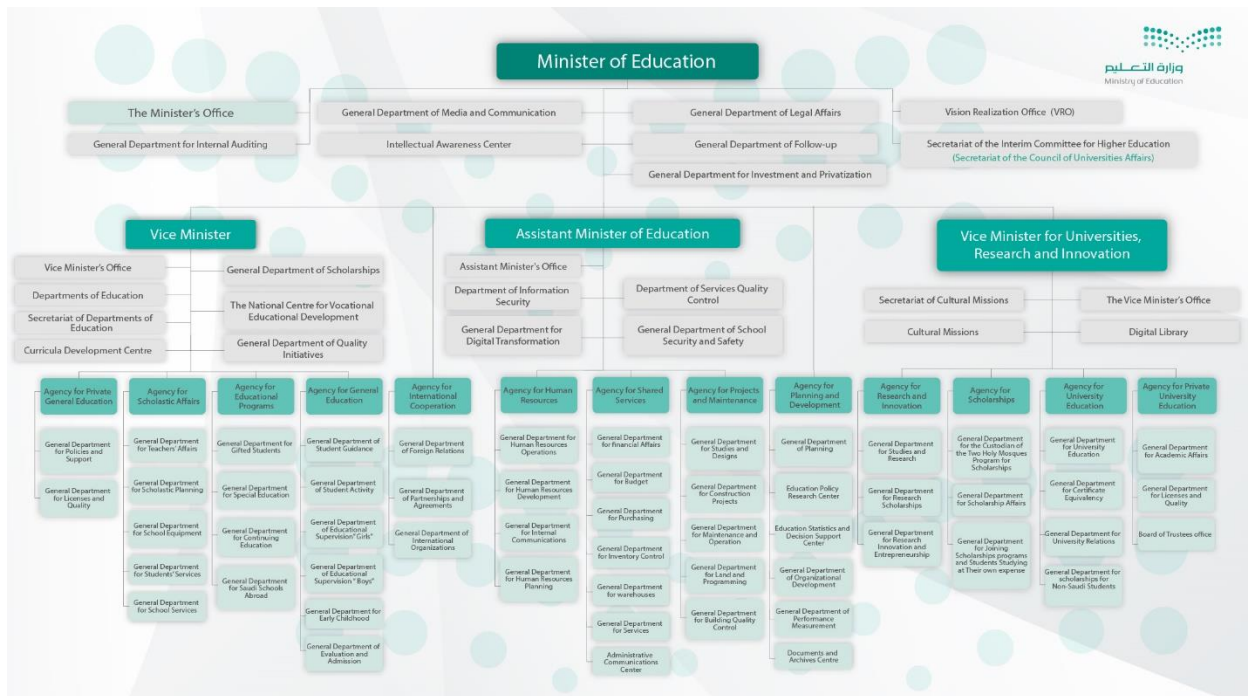
Thus, with the perception of early childhood changing from being primarily 'a path through which children had to pass in order to get to adulthood' (Khalifa, 2001, p. 269), to being 'a unique and critical stage of development and learning' (MoE, 2015, p.3), it would be expected, therefore, that the perception of early childhood educational settings would also shift from being a social and *tarbawi* institution, whose focus is on the care of children during the three years preceding their entry into the primary stage (MoK, 2002, p.1), to being of particular importance, as outlined in the 2030 Vision. Gibson et al. (2015) describe how using economic language when discussing the education of young children can broaden the scope of the interest paid towards the stage:

The benefits of investing are, apparently, multiple. It seems that everyone will have something to gain through funding early childhood. This moves the case for investment into a new discursive space, where it is not just the domain of children and their families, but now also for 'the wider community'. The 'wider community' becomes a stakeholder in the early years, making a case for the level of investment to be higher. (p. 328)

It is worth noting that when discussing the tangible impact of the 2030 Vision on the field, ECTs and HTs emphasize two distinct effects. For ECTs, the quantitative expansion of early childhood schools appears to be the most significant outcome of the 2030 Vision in their field. As an example, Jana, a KGT, says: 'Certainly [the Vision has affected ECE]. The number of kindergartens has already increased, but I hope that quantity does not outweigh quality'. Meanwhile, HT's responses seem to focus more on how the 2030 Vision has contributed to a greater interest in the field of ECE. To give an example, Fai, an HT, states that following the launch of 2030 Vision, '[t]he sector has gained a great deal of interest. We have seen it in terms of buildings, equipment, and the budget'. Despite the lack of specificity in their responses, both participant groups, nevertheless, appear to believe that the Vision has a positive impact on ECE.

An examination of the developmental process of the early childhood field in the KSA helps highlight one significant recent change that has occurred since the launch of the Vision. In 2019, a decision was issued by the Council of Ministers (No. 511, dated 9/2/1440 AH) to replace the GDK with a new department responsible for the education of young children named the General Department of Early Childhood (GDEC). In comparison to the GDK, which, according to Al-Hariri (2002), was under the direction of the General Department of Educational Supervision/Girls, the GDEC, as seen in the Ministry's Organizational Guide (2019), is now an independent department (see Figure 1), with the same level of authority as the General

Department of Educational Supervision, the department responsible for all other levels of general education.

Figure 1*The Organizational Chart of the Ministry of the Education*

Arguably, this illustrates how the Ministry has started to perceive ECE as just as important as other educational levels. That can be also noted from the responses provided by a number of study participants who state that the establishment of the department coincided with a growing interest and increasing support for the field of ECE. As an example, a former head of a regional ECE department Tahani notes that the changes following the establishment of the GDEC represent a ‘quantum leap’ in the field. Maisa, who is currently working in a senior position within the GDEC, also comments,

I have been in the field for 23 years, and I am extremely proud of the significant shift.

There is a massive undertaking and direct interest from decision-makers for this stage.

There is a great deal of attention paid to ensuring that every Saudi child receives a quality education.

Furthermore, the main aim of the recently established early childhood department is ‘to provide distinguished educational services for children from the age of 3 until the third grade of elementary school. In addition, follow-up on the performance of the early childhood stage according to the approved indicators to prepare students for enrolment in basic education’ (MoE, 2019). Through this objective, the concept of ECE in the KSA was, thus, extended from merely being a kindergarten stage for children ages 3 to 6 to one that included children up to the age of 9, and from primarily ensuring the care of young children to a structured programme to ‘prepare students for enrolment in basic education’ (MoE, n.d. a).

7.2 A ‘Preparatory Stage’

In light of the discussion above, it can be seen how the establishment of the GDEC in 2018 has not only reflected the change in attitudes towards the importance of ECE but has also changed its primary function to that of ‘[preparing] students for enrolment in basic education’ (MoE, 2019). Thus, a year following its foundation, the GDEC launched an initiative that established a new schooling system for children from 4 to 9 years old, known as the early childhood schools. According to the *Handbook of Early Childhood Schools* (2019), the newly launched schooling system has four main objectives: (a) increasing the enrolment rate in kindergarten, (b) bridging the gap in teaching between kindergarten and primary school, (c) improving the performance of students in national and international tests, and (d) enhancing the efficiency of school facilities (MoE, p. 6) To further emphasise the role of ECSs in introducing a new relationship between ECE and primary schools, and upon establishing the first ECS in Tabuk, KSA, Allsmail, the GDEC’s General Director at the time, explained in a television interview (2019) that the ‘most important reason’ behind creating the new schooling system was ‘to close the gap’ between kindergarten and early primary years to better prepare young children

for the following stage of learning. Allsmail's argument, thus, helps promoting a new relationship between ECE and compulsory school education (CSE) in the KSA that relies on the language of school readiness. Moss (2012a) states that this 'readying' relationship

has had and continues to receive most attention, fitting a dominant narrative of normativity and performativity, in which the purpose of education is conformity to predetermined performance criteria. In this narrative, ECE is talked of as an intervention that can improve the performance of children in CSE, in particular those at high risk of 'under achievement'. (p. 5)

Even though the data presented in this study was collected only two years following the opening of the first ECS in the Kingdom, the association between early childhood years and school readiness was clear in the interviews of all groups of participants: KGTs, EPTs, HTs, and those from the authoritative voices group. For starters, the participant practitioners working inside the new model of ECSs describe how ECE can prepare young children to be ready for primary school both academically and socio-emotionally, and thereby easing the burden on primary school teachers. Hence, working with children who have previously attended kindergarten is considered a preference for a number of EPTs. For example, Maha an EPT, says,

As a primary school teacher, I would prefer that a child comes ready for primary school in terms of letters, numbers, names, abilities, and skills. I prefer working in an early childhood school since the children come to me well prepared from kindergarten and I help them develop their skills.

In a further example, when asked about her experience following the initiation of kindergarten classes at her school, Amal, another EPT, explains how it can be more convenient for teachers to work with children who already know ‘how to hold a pen’:

It is so wonderful. I am a first-grade teacher, but those entering my class after completing kindergarten take a lot of pressure off me. They ... know some of the letters and how to hold a pen—I can tell who has attended kindergarten from those who have not by the way they hold a pen. They will also be prepared, [and] know the classroom rules, including [those concerning] sitting, talking and listening.

Here, by using that language of school readiness, where ECE is regarded as a stage to prepare young children for later stages of learning, EPTs justify their preference for working in the new schooling system since it ensures that teachers will be working with 'school-ready children', despite the limitations embedded in this understanding of readiness.

While the EPTs primarily address the academic aspects of readiness and what occurs inside their classrooms, the HTs discuss how kindergarten enrolment positively influences a child’s attitude toward the school environment. Fai, an HT states,

As a primary school head teacher, I see a clear difference between children who attended kindergarten and those who did not; a difference in their integration with their peers and their interaction with their teacher, as this would be a new environment for [the child who did not attend kindergarten].

Alia, another HT, also comments on the importance of ECE in preparing young children for the learning environment in primary school:

Through my experience in the field for many years, I have seen that children who attend kindergarten before primary school are more outgoing, more aware, more conscious; they love school and are accustomed to its community, they are more responsive, are more able to memorize, and are ready for education. Contrary to this, their peers who did not attend kindergarten require double the effort, so part of the first semester is wasted on adjusting to the school community.

As seen from the responses above, readiness for school implies more than just 'being exposed to various adult-defined pre-literacy and pre-numeracy activities and knowledges, it also involves learning how to function successfully in the institutional setting of a classroom' (Ailwood, 2003, p. 293). Learning how to adapt to the school environment, how to interact with a child's friends and teachers, how to sit, listen, and speak inside and outside the classroom is also seen, by HTs participated in the current study, as essential to being ready for school as acquiring academic skills.

While it can be understood that both EPTs and HTs, whose experience is mainly in primary schools, see readiness and preparation as the main function of ECE, it is surprising, nevertheless, that even KGTs, whose educational background and prior experience differ vastly from those in primary schools, also perceive school readiness as the primary function of ECE. For instance, Raghad, argues,

[Kindergarten stage] is important for the child since it prepares them to love learning, create wonderful memories, and encourages him to start primary school because kindergarten is mostly about playing and making friends, so the child can start school happy and [having already had] a previous experience [in a similar environment].

Meanwhile, with regards to socio-emotional readiness, Dana, another KGT, states,

there is a big difference between primary school and kindergarten. A child who does not enrol in a kindergarten programme and then starts primary school . . . would find it more difficult than a child who was enrolled in a kindergarten programme with learning centres and a teacher who shares. There is a big difference. There will be no shock for the child. Kindergarten integrates learning with play. Unlike primary stage, [kindergarten] has more flexibility. It is an important stage to prepare the child [to join] primary school.

Thus, the role of early learning settings is becoming more and more restricted to the one of preparation. As such, young children in kindergarten classes are expected to be prepared for the following stage of learning; whether it is emotional preparation as described by KGTs, academic preparation as noted by EPTs, or the preparation of the learning environment as pronounced by HTs. The emphasis placed on ECE as a means to prepare children for primary school was also appreciated by participants with higher educational degrees in ECE. An educator from the GDEC with a PhD in ECE, states,

Of course, as academics, we all believe in the importance of ECE since it prepares the child emotionally for routines, to handle tasks and responsibilities, to appreciate his self-worth, to form relationships, and to acquire knowledge and science. It is, as its name implies,³ a preparatory stage. It prepares the child for education in all aspects: academically, emotionally, and socially. This makes it an important component in

³ In SA, year three of kindergarten is commonly referred to as *Al-Marhala At-Tamhediah*, which can be translated as the preparatory stage.

preparing for school, and I hope it will become a mandatory stage in the future since many studies [prove] that children enrolled in kindergarten have higher cognitive levels than those who did not get opportunities to do so.

While I acknowledge that ECE may facilitate the learning of children throughout their lives, nevertheless, as Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2013) argue, 'early childhood institutions can make important contributions to many other projects of social, cultural and political significance' (p.8). Thus, as the above section highlights the overwhelming dominance of school readiness discourse in the Saudi ECE, perhaps what needs to be addressed is not how to produce school-ready children, but rather how to make ECSs ready for children (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 2013).

7.2.1 A New Form of Relationship

The introduction of early childhood educational system (i.e., the ECS), in which kindergarten and the first three years of primary education are combined into one school, signifies a new relationship between primary and pre-primary education, two stages that had previously operated independently. Given the recent history of ECE in the KSA in comparison with formal education, as well as the role assigned to kindergarten as being a preparation stage for primary education, one may predict which partner within this relationship would have the most influence.

In this relationship, the compulsory school is the clear and unquestioned dominant partner, and the task of the ECEC [early childhood education and care] system is defined as ensuring that the child is readied for the requirements of the school system. The former must align itself with the latter so as to successfully prepare children for the school and its long-established culture. (Moss, 2008, p. 227)

This dilemma was of particular concern when conducting the current study, especially after numerous comments were made emphasising the role of ECE in the preparation for formal education. In the final interview, I directly asked one of the participants, a general administrator at the GDEC, the following question: ‘What effect can [the new model of] early childhood schools have on the kindergarten stage? When I ask about early childhood schools, the answers are often focused on the primary school stage, but how do these schools impact kindergarten?’

The response offered no new insights:

Say: What is the impact of kindergarten on early childhood schools? Turn the tables. We start from the bottom up. When the child is ready, has already been to school, has been prepared emotionally and socially, trained his fine and gross motor muscles, become fully prepared for the educational process, gradually moved to the first grade in the same way as he had learned in kindergarten, but with greater expansion, you will find that the impact won’t be limited to kindergarten but will reach high school. Kindergarten is the one that affects the primary stage. All studies show that the social and cognitive skills of a child who has attended kindergarten are different from those of a child who has not.

Once again, even when asked directly about how the kindergarten stage would benefit from the newly implemented ECS system, the response was overwhelmingly in support of the kindergarten’s role in preparing young children for later education while failing to indicate any positive impact of such a system on the pre-primary education. Therefore, kindergarten, through the ECS, could possibly become ‘locked into a system that expects children to achieve a succession of prescribed standards to serve as a ‘foundation’ that readies children for the stage of education that is to follow’ (Moss, 2012a, p. 10), and thus may prevent the stage from being open to other alternative possibilities.

Furthermore, when considering the objectives of ECSs, the data in this study suggests that decision makers in the MoE are likely to be more concerned with the second objective, bridging the kindergarten and primary educational gap, despite the first objective being to increase kindergarten enrolment. The interview with the former general director of the GDEC supports this conclusion, as Allsmail describes this second objective as the ‘most important reason’ for establishing the new early childhood schooling system (2019). The participating educators from the GDEC also referred to the above objectives in response to questions concerning the rationale behind the new model of ECSs. For example, Lana states, ‘There is a large gap between the two stages, in terms of knowledge and skills, but when they become one stage, there will be a phased sequence to these skills’. Here, to ensure the effectiveness of early years education in meeting its increasingly important role of preparing young children for formal education, the MoE has designed a system that integrates kindergarten with early primary years in a way that would possibly facilitate readiness for compulsory schooling. Another participant from the authoritative voices group, Maisa, also argues,

kindergarten is an extended stage from the primary stage. There is currently a gap between the two stages, and we shouldn’t have that gap, as the developmental characteristics of children in the two stages are similar, so the two stages should have the same learning environment and teaching methods.

As can be seen from the example above, the discourse of school readiness is further validated through the use of what is perceived as scientific truths derived from developmental psychology. Because of this belief in ‘universal child development’ (Cannella, 1997, p.59), a new relationship between ECE and compulsory schooling has been established around these truths without adequate consideration of the local realities of childhood in the Kingdom.

A general administrator working at the GDEC argues, though, that by granting each stage its own autonomy, in terms of teaching personnel as well as learning spaces, the negative effects caused by unequal power relations between the two stages, which will be discussed further in the following subheading, would be avoided. In response to concerns raised regarding the influence of ECSs on the kindergarten stage, Hind states, ‘The two stages do share the same building, but each stage is completely independent’. According to the *Handbook of Early Childhood Schools* (2019), kindergarten and early primary grades share the same educational facilities, except for classrooms, and have the same administrative staff. Thus, this supposed independence cannot be adequately sustained when the two levels of education are merged into one educational stage, without both maintaining equal power. While it has been argued that a more integrated ECE system can add strength to the sector (Bennett, 2012), ‘[a]s long as pre-schools have less legitimation than schools, then the pedagogical encounter will be a hierarchical encounter’ (Dahlberg, 2012, p. 86).

A further explanation of this bias towards primary education within ECSs can be found in the fact that all the participating HTs had previously served as HTs in primary schools only, with no prior experience working in a kindergarten setting. In fact, one of the retired policy makers, Tahani, identified this issue as one of the primary challenges the field faces today. Tahani noted, ‘The head teacher of an early childhood school may not have sufficient knowledge of kindergarten. The head teacher should first be prepared, enrolled in training programmes, and then appointed as the head of an early childhood school’.

7.2.2 Implications on ECE

In recognising the existing imbalance of power between the two stages that are being merged, in conjunction with the assigned function of kindergarten’s role in preparing children for

future learning, it is important to discuss whether the newly implemented ECSs have an impact on the KSA's early childhood educational practices and to what extent. In Allsmail's 2019 interview, the former general director of the GDEC expressed a desire to share some pedagogical practices between primary and kindergarten education. Allsmail's examples involved extending learning through play to early primary grades while pushing practices related to 'learning how to read correctly' down to kindergarten. Thus, within the ECS model, kindergarten is now viewed as the child's first step into formal schooling, and as such, it is more than ever expected to adopt educational practices that are already being used in primary schools. Allsmail's examples indicate a process of 'schoolifying' (or 'schoolification' of) the ECE (OECD, 2006), a process that is 'based on evidence that settings for pre-school children are adopting practices traditionally associated with primary schools' (Bradbury, 2019b, p. 10). Thus, while observations of early childhood settings were not possible in this study due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent school closures, the available data indicates a tendency to place an emphasis on literacy skills in the field. An example of it can be seen in the following discussion with Dana, a KGT:

Interviewer: The goals of our early childhood programmes are many. But what are the main outcomes you expect from KG3 learners by the end of the year?

Dana: By the end of KG3, the child shouldn't leave for primary school until he knows how to write his name. It is the lowest level. Other children, for example, may be able to write a sentence composed of two words.

Interviewer: Can we then say that writing is one of the most important skills?

Dana: Yes. Being able to write their own names. Also, being able to read and spell letters and numbers.

Interviewer: Why do you think these skills are so important?

Dana: So that the child can be ready for first grade and not face difficulties.

Here, once again, the dominance of school readiness discourse facilitates the ongoing process of schoolification taking place in Saudi ECE. The popularity of the notion that young children must finish kindergarten prepared to read and write means literacy skills have become recognised as ‘the main outcome’ of the kindergarten stage, which means, consequently, more emphasis, time, and effort are dedicated to developing these academic skills that would previously have been delayed until entering early primary grades.

Another possible implication of the recently implemented early childhood educational system on educational practices can be derived from the third objective of ECSs—improving the performance of students in national and international tests (MoE, 2019)—on which a great deal of emphasis is placed on the data supplied by local and global assessments of children’s academic performance. Indeed, each of the MoE officials who participated in the present study, both retired and current, referred at some point during their interviews to the results of international tests, mainly the OECD’s PISA, as a driver behind major policies related to ECSs. To give an example, a number of participants indicate that expanding the enrolment in the kindergarten stage, by providing more spaces in ECSs, will help improving test results during the following educational stages. For instance, Maisa, a participant from the GDEC, argues,

studies have shown that any child who enters kindergarten will acquire different skills in the other stages—primary, intermediate, and secondary—and will have totally different

grades in international tests. There is a difference, and these are international studies. It is expected that when the Ministry looks at these studies, it will strive to ensure the Kingdom is number one.

Based on the logic of global competitiveness discussed earlier in the chapter, the field of ECE began to be perceived as ‘as the ‘natural’ starting line for an educational and economic race in which young children are constructed as datafied pieces of human capital to be monitored, measured and compared’ (Roberts-Holmes, 2019, p. 32). Similar reasoning was also found in the response of Fai, an HT:

The creation of early childhood schools, in Saudi Arabia in general, was not without purpose. It was rather based on studies that were conducted following the results of international tests, which showed that the top-performing countries had early childhood programs for a long time. For this reason, the transition to early childhood schools started in Saudi Arabia.

The responses of Maisa and Fai suggest that another factor, along with the increasing influence of the global competitiveness discourse, may have also contributed to the legitimacy of international standardized assessment practices. For many decision makers, and some practitioners too, the fact that these studies and tests were conducted by a group of experts working in a number of the most powerful international organisations in the field, this in itself sets the results of their work in a 'scientific positioning' (Morris, 2016), which in turn helps to portray their work as a truth that cannot be questioned, evaluated or critiqued.

With this in mind, a set of universal tests was employed to serve as a basis for guiding major education reforms in the field (i.e., the establishment of a new schooling system for young

children). Thus, rather than interpreting low test scores as an indication of broader educational problems, the MoE has shown a tendency towards using such international tests to justify the implement of certain educational policies, which could result, in some cases, in overlooking the bigger picture. Consider, for example, how the results of international assessments were used to justify the new assignment of female-only teachers in ECSs to teach boys up to primary three, as discussed in the chapter examining the image of early childhood teachers. In this scenario, rather than taking into account how local circumstances may positively influence the performance of female teachers compared to their male counterparts, such as the difference in status or prestige attached to the teaching profession between men and women in the KSA, the MoE cites data from international assessments which demonstrate that girls in the Kingdom are outperforming boys in mathematics and science as the driving factor behind a need to redefine major practices in the field of ECE. On this issue, Morris (2016) argues

I acknowledge that PISA, TIMSS, et al. have identified genuine weaknesses in school systems, and have often provided governments with a powerful source of legitimacy for rapid educational reform . . . [however,] the reforms introduced were longstanding and did not address the structural problems identified as the sources of the low performance in the tests . . . Further, around the world, and especially in the Middle East, the quest for improved PISA/TIMSS scores has resulted in massive reform programmes that often have had no impact on pupil learning outcomes, and have ensured the dependency of local systems on a cluster of global educational companies. (p. 6)

This logic can be also found in Allsmail abovementioned 2019 interview. When the interviewer asked whether families' positive experiences in private schools where the teaching of boys in early primary years is assigned to female teachers motivated the Ministry to introduce this

practice in its public schools, the GDEC's former General Director responded that the Ministry's decision was driven by international test results, which showed a gender gap in academic performance and, therefore, according to Allsmail, this was one of the main reasons why the teaching of early primary classes was assigned to female teachers.

In light of the above arguments made by the participants from the MoE, it is because of these international assessments that the education of young children is being profoundly reshaped now in a way that could ensure higher performance results in the upcoming national and international tests. Thus, given that these universal quantitative assessments were used to alter the education system of young children as a whole, it should come as no surprise that several educational practices have started to emerge in ECSs as a result of such data. This can be found in the statement of Nora, an HT of an ECS:

Currently, the Ministry is striving for its students to pass international tests... The Ministry's new strategy involves training [students] in reading and writing for an average of two hours per week for upper primary grades, and five minutes of each class for early primary grades.

In 2021, the MoE, on its Twitter account, shared an infographic to illustrate the Ministry's efforts to qualify students for international tests. The tweet shows how students, from primary three to the second year of high school, participate in simulation tests regularly, either monthly or even weekly, for the purpose of improving students' performance in international tests including PIRLS, TIMSS and PISA (December, 29). Morris (2016) writes

If countries do this and improve their scores, we will enter into a closed and self-fulfilling system in which nations teach according to test requirements and better scores create the

illusion of improvement. When teachers do this, it is denounced as ‘teaching to the test’ or ‘gaming the system’. When it is a national endeavour it is recast as ‘global benchmarking’ or ‘learning from best international practice’. (p. 26)

Yet, reforms intended specifically to increase the Kingdom's ranking on international assessments were not hidden or implicitly implied. Rather, it appears from the tweet that the Ministry is pleased with its adopted educational practice which aims directly at students’ scores on a set of international tests, rather than their overall academic performance.

7.3 Towards Greater Marketisation

Data from this study suggest that a third image of ECSs may also be present in the KSA, which is that of privatized institutions. Within this image, schools for young children increasingly appear as 'businesses competing in a market to sell their product(s)' (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 2013, p. 71). The image of primitivized ECSs may be better understood by examining significant local historical moments surrounding ECE in the Kingdom. As outlined in the study's contextual background, ECE in the KSA started as a privately run field. Al-Hariri (2002) writes that private educational institutions in the Kingdom were the first to introduce the idea of nurseries and kindergartens as a means to provide childcare services for the children of working mothers. As such, in 1965, King Faisal’s wife, Iffat Al Thunayan, founded the first Saudi kindergarten as a part of her private educational institution, *Dar Al Hanan*. Meanwhile, it took the GPGE around ten years to open its first kindergarten in Makkah, the KSA (Al-Hariri, 2002). Yet, in light of the absence of sufficient spaces and with priority given to children of GPGE employees (MoK, 2002), the public ECE was inaccessible to the vast majority of Saudi

citizens which made it, according to Aljabreen and Lash (2016), ‘a privilege of the wealthy’ at the time (p. 314).

Later, upon the merger of the GPGE with the Ministry of Knowledge, a royal decree was issued to expand kindergarten programmes throughout the Kingdom. In a periodic report on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Saudi National Committee for Childhood states that due to the importance of this stage, Royal Approval No. 7/B/5388 dated 3/3/1423AH (2002) was issued to include kindergartens within the larger umbrella of general education, as well as to develop a plan and timeline for the expansion of kindergartens throughout the Kingdom, and to *utilise the private sector to achieve these goals* [emphasis added] in addition to constructing kindergarten curricula (2003, pp. 93-94). Here, once ECE was recognised as part of education as a whole, it was seen necessary, according to the Royal Approval mentioned above, to expand the field with the help of the private sector. Reflecting upon those early expansion efforts within the MoE, Tahani, a retired policy maker, states,

Following the establishment of the General Department of Kindergarten, kindergarten enrolment grew, awareness of the importance of the stage increased, investment began, and private education started to be encouraged because of the high cost of kindergarten. *We began to convince investors that by investing in children at this stage, future economic costs can be reduced* [emphasis added].

It is possible that those early days of expanding the field, as primarily privately-owned/for-profit kindergarten apart from a very limited number of public classes, has allowed an already-existing market to simply grow broader, in contrast with other educational stages where public education was already well established. To illustrate, since the push towards greater involvement from the private sector in expanding preschool education was not evident in the expansion of girls’

general education in the 1970s nor boys' education prior to that, this has resulted in a significant difference in the percentage of children enrolled in public kindergarten versus those attending public general schools. Statistics published by the MoE (2021) show that, in 2014 for instance, less than 50 percent of children attending ECE programs were enrolled in public kindergartens⁴, whereas over 85 percent of children studied in a public primary school.

However, this is not to say that the current trend towards greater involvement by the private sector is limited to ECE. With the hope that it 'will create a more efficient incentive structure' (Plantenga, 2012, p. 63), the marketisation is indeed taking a place at all levels of education in the KSA. For example, Strategic Gears, a Saudi management consulting firm, reported that while the number of public schools in Saudi Arabia increased by 1 percent between 2013 and 2018, the number of private schools increased by 13 percent (2018). In addition, in 2020, the MoE held a workshop entitled 'Investing in Private and International Education' which aimed to increase private sector participation in education by 25 percent by promoting an attractive investment climate in public education and addressing the challenges limiting the growth of private education (Saudi Press Agency, 2020). Yet, despite the potential impact on various levels of education that the trend towards privatisation, it may once again be far more problematic for ECE, as it has the least number of established public spaces among all educational levels, thereby limiting young children's access to free ECE setting, as the MoE's (2021) data above shows.

⁴ Up until 2016, the percentage of children enrolled in ECE programmes, whether public or private, in the KSA did not exceed 13 percent (Strategic Gears, 2018), indicating that less than 7 percent of children had access to free public ECE at that time.

Further, as the expansion of pre-primary education becomes ‘an indispensable strategic option for developing the education system’, as described by the former Minister of Education, Hamad Al Al-Sheikh (MoE, 2019), the MoE has taken major steps to achieve its goal. The recent establishment of ECSs is, perhaps, seen by many as the Ministry’s primary effort in terms of expansion, as the first objective of newly established schools is the expansion of kindergartens according to its published handbook (2019). Yet, based on the available data, it is not clear how establishing such a system can result in increased enrolments in the kindergarten stage. It is concerning, indeed, how one of the recently retired decision makers explains how ECSs are expected to influence kindergarten enrolment. Tahani states,

Now in the statistics, we do not say the enrolment rate in kindergarten, but rather we say the enrolment in early childhood [education], and this will completely raise the statistics. Early childhood includes first, second and third grades [of the primary stage], as well as kindergarten, all under one title. We basically already have a 100% enrolment rate in the primary classes, and it will thus increase the statistics.

An additional attempt to increase the enrolment rate of young children in kindergarten classes can be observed in the Ministry’s push toward encouraging the private sector’s participation in the field, an approach that was described by Alharthi and Lebeau (2020) as a political strategy ‘to catch up with neighbouring countries and with international expectations regarding pre-primary enrolments’ (p. 3). The Ministry has been upfront about its chosen approach, which has been treated since then as a ‘self-evident and inevitable’ choice (Moss, 2019). In the interviews conducted as part of the current study, officials working at the GDEC explicitly referred to the vital role that the private sector should play in expanding kindergarten enrolment. For example,

responding to whether she believes in the importance of the private sector's involvement in expanding the ECE, Lana says,

Of course, of course, for sure. The private sector is a key partner of the Ministry. It is the Ministry's other arm. If the private investor does not help us achieve this expansion [to a level of] quality that we can be proud of, then, as it is said, 'one hand does not clap'. We work together since the expansion involves the public and private sectors.

One concern is that this emerging perception of ECSs as private institutions has not been adequately examined or critically questioned prior to their market being regarded as 'the other arm of the ministry'. Here, once the MoE deemed that expanding young children's education was an urgent need, the belief in privatization became 'taken for granted as the only way to go' (Moss, 2012b, p. 200). In a further example, Maisa, a general administrator at the GDEC, discusses one of the Ministry's initiatives to support the private sector, one which falls under her direct supervision:

To expand this stage, the Ministry must support the investor. How does it support the investor? By setting policies that ensure that the child receives high quality [education], but not the quality no one can achieve; the one that is too hard to reach. We desire quality, but we want the quality that everyone can deliver, which is what helps us expand the investment. We are the ones, I mean the Ministry, who support [investors] with policies and procedures. We want investors, we want every neighbourhood to have a place for children, a nursery or a kindergarten that provides a high-quality education based on development standards. We want this, and this is one of the most, most important goals of the Ministry.

According to Maisa, allowing investors to offer a ‘quality that everyone can provide’ will enable us to expand ‘the investment’ in ECE. What can be alarming here is how the Ministry’s strong desire to attract private sector investment in the process of kindergarten expansion may lead to the Ministry overlooking the level of quality that it ‘can be proud of’, as per Lana’s earlier statement. In fact, this potentially resulting attitude was already found in another part of Maisa’s interview, as she argues ‘of course, there are A+ schools that have the best of everything, but this does not mean I should demand the same [level of quality] of everyone’. This could move the debate, thus, from who could provide quality early education to how they might be able to enhance their profits in this market. In another example, a retired educator, warns that the Ministry’s ‘high standards’ can make the field of ECE a less attractive market for investors. Iman adds,

This is a wake-up call for the Ministry because, while schools’ buildings and other formalities are important, it should not discourage people from investing in the field of early childhood. In the long run, this will harm the Ministry of Education, which seeks to privatize this field of education. If the investor does not invest in kindergarten, the Ministry will have to do it, and this has a high cost. In my opinion, as a specialist in the field, these are matters that the Ministry should take into account since they may prevent the [2030] Vision from being achieved as it should be.

One important finding the data of the current study has also suggested is that this market-driven notion is not yet appealing to the majority of the practitioners who participated in the present study. While it is anticipated that this emerging discourse, which enjoys powerful institutional support, may eventually become dominated, its significant rhetoric is not yet commonplace. The language used by participants from the authoritative voices group was not

clear during the interviews with either KGTs or EPTs. On the contrary, practitioners question how various forms of privatised ECSs will operate with minimal Ministry oversight. For example, when asked about the state-funded school, Mona, a KGT, responds,

Without direct supervision from the Ministry, I cannot trust that the work at this school will be done in the way [one] wishes. [Schools] should be under the Ministry's direct supervision. When the Ministry provides supervision, it will guide and monitor the school. There is no guarantee that everyone has self-regulation.

Another concern for many stems from the fact that most of these private ECSs are for-profit institutions. One example of this is the answer given by Alia, an HT, when she was asked for her opinion regarding the Ministry's growing support for the private sector:

Based on my personal experience, I do not agree with that. Because no matter how distinguished these schools are and how good their teaching staff are, their primary goal remains profit. That is why I do not see these schools adding value. Yes, they may reduce the burden on the Ministry, but they will not enrich the field.

The fact that most private ECSs generate financial profits from annual tuition not only threatens to introduce undesirable practices into these schools but may also pose a more critical ethical dilemma when limiting access to preschool education for children from low- and middle-income families. Connell (2013) writes 'to create a market you have to restrict the service in some way. In this case you have to ration education. What you sell, then, is a privilege – something that other people cannot get' (p. 105). In relation to this, Jana, a KGT, questions, '[H]ow can I, as an average-earning [parent], afford to pay 20,000-25,000 [SAR] to enrol my child in kindergarten, especially if I have more than one child?'. The same issue was also

brought up by Mona, another KGT, during a discussion of the role the private sector can play in expanding the field of ECE:

It is possible that these schools will be suitable for a certain group of people. Yet, the fact remains that some people can afford [to attend private kindergartens] and others cannot, which brings us back to the essential point that these schools are accessible to a particular segment of society.

Having been described as a 'very poorly equipped' educational stage (Maha, a KGT), along with participant teachers' various comments regarding the role they are expected to play in helping improve the classroom environment, such as this comment from KGT Raghad: 'We, as teachers, purchase the essentials ourselves . . . there are no materials to help children learn', it can be indicated how many public preschool settings are lacking adequate resources. Therefore, given the current state of public preschool programmes, and particularly when compared to private ones, this again questions the accessibility of decent early learning experiences to young children coming from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds in the Kingdom.

At bottom is the question of whether it is acceptable that young children from rich backgrounds should have good early experiences, with trained staff in well-resourced conditions, while young children from poor backgrounds only have access, if at all, to meagre experiences in bleak settings. (Penn, 2012, p. 185)

With the progressing construction of the image of young children's educational settings in the KSA as 'a business competing to sell a commodity' (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 101), perhaps it is necessary to carefully consider the potential implications that such a perception of ECSs may impose.

7.4 Conclusion

Guided by the data collected in this study, this chapter highlighted three common perceptions of the schools of young children in the KSA. Firstly, while it was not the case in the Kingdom several years ago, it is now increasingly being emphasised that ECE matters. The schooling of young children is no longer seen as an extra/optional stage of learning or '*sunnah*', as cited by Tahani, but rather it is given a particular priority on various political levels including the Kingdom's 2030 Vision (2016). Two main rationales have been used to validate the significance of ECE. The first of these is based on the argument of human capital theory, which, according to Moss (2019), 'provides an explanation for the relationship between early intervention with correct "human technologies" and some of the most profitable later returns' (p. 12). Secondly, the pressure of achieving better results in the increasingly competitive international race also served as a motive to start preparing competitors, in this case, the young learners, at an early age.

In the second image, ECSs appear as 'preparatory' facilities that are primarily designed to impart certain academic skills to young children; such as how to 'hold a pen', 'write their own names', and 'read and spell letters and numbers', according to the current study's participants.

the early childcare centre is further imagined as a factory or processing plant, applying effective 'human technologies' to produce standardised and predetermined outcomes for young children, outcomes expressed in terms of developmental or learning goals and embodying the acquisition of competencies and skills that represent the initial building blocks of human capital and ensure the young child is ready or prepared for the next stage of human capital formation - compulsory primary schooling. (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 102)

Two aspects have been used to give this image of ECSs further ‘value and practical application as scientific discourse’ (Foucault, 1970b, p. xiv): the first was found in the reference to child development studies to emphasise the criticality of early childhood for later learning, and the second was the use of international test results as evidence contributing to the validity of the language of school readiness.

Further, through the third appearing image, greater involvement of the private sector in the running of ECSs is portrayed as desirable. This image implies that everybody can benefit from such an approach. Children will have increased access to kindergarten classes, the entrepreneurs will have a wider range of opportunities to invest their money and the MoE itself will be able to achieve its target enrolment rate at a reduced cost. Nonetheless, this narrative is of particular significance as it seems that it is still in the process of tying up its plot. As opposed to the other two images of the Saudi ECSs, both of which were assumed to be the absolute truth, the image of the ECS as a marketized business, at this stage, is mostly spoken of by those with a higher position in the MoE, which thus indicates that it can still be contested and challenged before it becomes a reality that is harder to escape.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

During the past few years, the landscape of early years education in the Kingdom has moved in the direction of greater ‘scholarization’ (Qvortrup, 2012) and quantitative expansion. These significant reforms have been accompanied by a discursive shift in the ways young children and the purpose and practices related to their education are perceived. As such, through my involvement with the field, primarily as a faculty member in an early childhood department, and the reading of recently published educational policies and documents, the main concern of this study was to provide a thorough understanding of such a transformation in the field of ECE in my own country, KSA, and its possible implications. To do so, the research began with an extensive review of the historical development of the local educational scene (Chapter 2), seeking to highlight ‘our embeddedness within the modes of reasoning of “the modern”’. (Ball, 2013, p. 87). In light of this historical understanding, and in employing two primary sources of data, I attempted to provide an analysis of the contemporary construction of young children (Chapter 5), early childhood teachers (Chapter 6) and early childhood schools (Chapter 7) within this particular context.

Having completed the discussion chapters, I have yet to address the study’s central question: *What are the contemporary dominant narratives surrounding the field of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia?* I recognise that this may not be the most common approach when writing an academic thesis. Nonetheless, as stated earlier (Chapter 1), I left this question until the conclusion in the hope that a deeper exploration of the images surrounding the field would offer insights into the narratives through which the field and its current ‘imaginary’ (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021) are being constructed. While it is clear that I could have rearranged the structure of the thesis at this point, it is valuable to engage the reader in the

journey I took to reach this conclusion and to show that identifying the narratives deemed dominant would not be possible without an in-depth analysis of the normative images founded within the field.

In light of this, Chapter 8 does not merely summarise the earlier discussion, nor does it seek to present additional new findings. Instead, it provides a final reading of the data; an alternative view from a different angle where the attention moves from capturing what the popular images are to examining the stories that allowed them to emerge in the first place and to become so popular within the contemporary local scene of ECE. In short, along with a discussion of the broader implications of the study and the potential it offers for future research, this chapter argues that there are two distinct key narratives that coexist, at times conflict, and are interwoven in complex ways to form how we come to perceive and value young children's education in the Kingdom.

8.1 The Seed and the Becoming Tree Narrative

The title of this section is taken from a poem my teacher used to recite when I was a young child. The poem, written by my teacher, can be translated as follows:

I had a seedling once / I loved it, so I took good care of it / And I watered it with rivers of love / Later, it grew into a tree.

While I first heard the metaphor of a young child as a seed from my teacher in the 1990s, a similar perception regarding early childhood often emerged through the process of developing this thesis. Through such a view, which is particularly prevalent among practitioners in schools and, to a lesser degree, among participants from the authoritative voices group, certain opinions

about young children, their teachers and early childhood settings have been constructed and promoted in the KSA. The young child in this story is the seed, of course; a fragile, dependent, and lacking being awaiting '[progress] towards completeness' (Qvortrup, 2005, p. 5). At various points in the study, young children were referred to in this manner. For example, Mona, an EPT participant, used the exact metaphor, describing the child as 'a large seed in fertile soil'. Others used words that evoked similar qualities of weakness, lack of development and reliance, such as describing children as 'a white sheet of paper' (Maha, an EPT) or 'a clean, clear, white screen' (Nora, an HT).

In this narrative, the teacher is the grower; the caretaker who ingrains certain values and virtues into the young child so they may grow up to become what is considered to be the appropriate adult. She is a loving and caring *murabbiyah* for the next generation, fulfilling a role that is similar to that of a mother. Thus, early childhood education is viewed as the site where a significant part of the *tarbiya* and development of these young seeds takes place. The teacher's role within this narrative is, in general, to serve two key objectives: (i) ensure the child is equipped with values appropriate to his or her society, culture and gender; and (ii) help to bridge the educational and developmental gap from one stage of learning to the next.

The roots of this story are, hopefully, not completely foreign at this point. The previous discussion chapters attempted to revisit the history of childhood in the Kingdom and the early foundation of its educational system, not to show how that past is inevitably related to the present (Ball, 2013) but, rather, to explore the 'rules of formation' that produce and maintain this contemporary popular narrative around the education of young children (Foucault, 1970a). Therefore, to put the earlier analysis differently, as merely 'a path through which children had to pass in order to get to adulthood' (Khalifa, 2001, p. 269), childhood was, for the early Saudi

family, a period of socialisation during which children learned their future appropriate roles as defined by their community (Alsuwaigh, 1984). This construction of children as ‘coming adults’ (Kjørholt & Qvortrup, 2012) may have allowed the contemporary perception of the young child within this narrative as simply being seen as a little seed to thrive. As in the early perception, the contemporary image of young children puts the focus not on the seed itself (or the path) but, mostly, on the tree it is hoped to become (the adult). Further, as caring for young children has traditionally been viewed as a ‘female occupation’ (Alsuwaigh, 1984), Saudi women’s increasing entry into the workforce has created a need to find alternatives to the absence of those caregivers. The substitute caretakers of these children are, therefore, expected to possess ‘natural motherly instincts’ (Ailwood, 2008, p. 159) and to assume responsibilities traditionally assigned to mothers, including care, protection and *tarbiya* or moral guidance.

Yet, the cultural context cannot be the only player involved in the construction of this narrative. The influence of what are perceived as universal truths on the progression of children through ‘predetermined stages of change in various areas of growth (e.g., linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, moral, physical) toward the competent, autonomous adult model’ (Cannella, 1997, p. 58) is also significant in exploring the emergence and popularity of this story. This is particularly relevant given the role that INGOs play in promoting certain truths concerning ECE to the Global South (Penn, 2011), including the KSA. Consider, for example, the comments made by Iman (a study participant) on the role of UNESCO in the development of the first early childhood curriculum in the Kingdom: ‘AGFUND, the organisation that was concerned with childhood in the Gulf countries under the umbrella of UNESCO, brought a group of non-Saudi experts and asked them to develop a curriculum that takes into account self-learning and play’. Therefore, as the field of ECE in the KSA relied on a team of ‘experts’ from abroad to define its

boundaries from its earliest days, the universalised common perceptions around childhood at that time probably, once again, played a part in the narrative that emerged.

Reviewing the available literature may draw attention to two aspects that the narrative shares with what appears as universalised truth around young children's education. First, several scholars have examined the northern construction of young children as 'becomings' that are based on developmentalism's notion of progressing and maturing (e.g., James, et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 1991; Uprichard, 2008; Kjørholt & Qvortrup, 2012). Monaghan (2012) further explores how, as a means of ensuring 'a particular type of childhood for all the world's children', various INGOs work to promote such perspectives worldwide through the use of 'universal patterns of development that are species rather than population-specific' (pp. 58–59). In part, this may have contributed to the prominent place of the notion of the becoming child within the Saudi ECE narrative, particularly, again, given the fact that such international organisations played a key role in establishing the field. However, within the story of the seed and the becoming tree, the futurity of those young children does not particularly concern itself with economic returns, as is the case with what Moss (2019) describes as 'the story of quality and high returns' (p. 10). Rather, from the first two images of young children discussed in Chapter 5, the focus of this futurity appears to be on the 'comprehensive building of children's 'characters' (SELS, 2015, p. v). The data of the present study is saturated with examples that illustrate this concern. In one instance, when Dana, a KGT, was asked how young children differ from older children, she stated that the early childhood period is 'the most important stage in the formation of the child's personality, the most important stage to instil principles and values'. Similar attention to the social and moral aspects in the development of 'becoming tree', or the future generation, was also seen in the interview with Lana, an employee at the GDEC.

In order to ensure that I have youths who can build the country well and carry national and human values, it is very important that I have a foundation on which to build . . . The strength of the building and its foundation lies in the early childhood stage because that is when personality is formed.

The other component that the present narrative seems to have in common with what is hegemonically perceived as universal truth concerns the maternalistic discourse regarding the nature of the role of those working in ECE settings. The influence of maternalistic discourse on the role of ECTs has been thoroughly documented in the literature generated from the Global North (Cannella, 1997; Moss, 2006; Ailwood, 2008; Osgood, 2011). In this discourse, the practitioner in early childhood settings is a ‘substitute mother’ whose work demands ‘qualities and competencies that are either innate to women (“maternal instinct”) or else are acquired through women’s practice of domestic labour (“housework skills”)’ (Moss, 2006, p. 34). A number of these studies conclude that such a construction of early childhood teachers is met with conflicting responses from those within the profession. For example, Ailwood (2007) notes that while some ‘take pride and pleasure in their work and identity as teacher/mother’, others tend to reject this perspective, arguing that ‘the naturalisation of their work undermines their struggle for professional status’ (p. 162). In another example, women participating in Osgood’s (2008) study seem ‘to wrestle with the presence of maternalistic discourses’ when discussing the construction of their identities as early childhood workers (p. 178). Yet, this contradictory attitude was unclear among practitioners in the present research. As discussed in Chapter 6, early childhood teachers appeared to value the similarity of their teaching roles to that of mothers. In an example, Mai, an EPT, states that the early childhood teacher ‘must be like a mother to [her young students].’ Teachers, in this context, seem to believe that the necessity of being like a mother

stems from young children's biological need for female care. For instance, Fai, an HT, argues that 'children at this stage need more motherly feelings', or as Dana, a KGT, puts it, 'a second mother in kindergarten'.

Participants from the 'authoritative voices' group, however, appear to hold a conflicting position towards the conventional maternal discourse in relation to the role of ECTs, along with other logic embedded in the given narrative, as demonstrated by the comments by Hind, an educator working at the GDEC:

The decision to assign teaching to female teachers was built on the basis of the international tests' results for fourth graders, which showed differences between girls and boys, and so [the MoE] concluded that female teachers can establish a stronger foundation . . . [Additionally,] generally speaking, the nature of female teachers is similar to that of mothers. Even though I do not like generalizations, but in the Ministry, this was one of the clear trends when the decision was made to assign female teachers to early primary classes.

Hind's statement has particular significance as it captures how those in a more authoritative position find themselves torn between conventional meanings associated with the story of 'the seed and the becoming tree', and those derived from the more recent emerging narrative gaining increasing attention within the Saudi ECE.

8.2 The Early Efficient Investments Narrative

In Hind's comments above, along with other interviews conducted with senior officials working at the MoE, a few parts of the interviews with practitioners at ECSs, and recently

published documents and statements pertaining to the education of young children in the Kingdom, a more recent story about the field can be found. Within this narrative, the previously discussed emphasis on young children as ‘becomings’ rather than ‘beings’ still exists (see Chapter 5 for further discussion). However, unlike the above discourse, the futurity of those children seems to be less concerned with producing decent adults who would fulfil the traditional roles and responsibilities assigned by their societies. Rather, this future orientation of childhood appears to put greater emphasis on the development of not only the societally appropriate but, also, economically competitive generation.

The image of young children here is, thus, one of future investments who, through their early education, can become competent, productive adults capable of serving the nation through their effective participation in the global economic race. With this growing recognition of the significance of ECE, the early childhood teacher is viewed as the ‘backbone’ of the field (Tahani, a research participant). They are ‘the maker; the one who makes the child’ (Hind, a research participant). Therefore, this narrative produces distinct forms of responsibilities for teachers beyond those traditionally assigned to the *‘murabbiya’*, or the ‘second mother’. They are responsible for ‘equipping [children] with skills suitable for the 21st century’ and, so, are expected to hold specific professional qualifications that enable them to deliver such an outcome (Tahani, a research participant). These teachers are also increasingly encouraged to maintain daily measurable teaching performance, take responsibility for limitations they may face and maintain compliance with shifting requirements and regulations in their field so that they may fulfil the great responsibility assigned to them.

The educational settings of those ‘economic units’ (Gibson et al., 2015) have, then, gained increasing attention for their alleged significance to the nation’s survival, changing the

perception of ECE from being regarded as ‘*sunnah*’ (an additional stage), to use Tahani’s words (a research participant), in which the primary purpose was to provide care and guidance to (a small percentage of) young children (Ministry of Knowledge, 2002, p.1), to being ‘a unique and critical stage of development and learning’ (MoE, 2015, p.3). The preparatory role attached to the schools of young children can still be found within the new narrative’s plot. Yet, while the preparation within the earlier story appears to be concerned with social, *tarbawi* and cultural upbringing, in addition to bridging the educational gap between primarily ECE and first grade of compulsory education, in this alternative story, some meanings attached to the school’s preparation role have been altered. First, the purpose of this preparation is no longer confined to the production of individuals possessing principles and values appropriate to their society but, rather, a generation equipped with ‘foundational life skills that support societal economic development through employment and socially conscious behavior’ (MoE, 2015, p. 2). Second, the academic aspects of this task are concerned not only with readiness for the next learning stage but more with establishing ‘a lifelong foundation for learning’ (MoE, 2015, p. 1). Another emerging image within the narrative of early efficient investments, albeit less appealing to practitioners, is that of young children’s schools being private, for-profit businesses competing to sell education for children to those who can afford it (see 7.3 for further discussion).

Examples in the discussion chapters help to illustrate the existence of this narrative and its related images within the Saudi ECE (See 5.4, 6.2, and 7.3). However, after I scrutinised the data and wrote the discussion chapters, the MoE published an important document worth considering when analysing the contemporary dominant narratives concerning the education of young children in the Kingdom. The document, *Saudi National Curriculum Framework for Children Ages 0–6*, which was not made publicly accessible until early 2022, was developed in

collaboration with the NAEYC in 2018. The relevance of this document to the research at hand is evident from its argument to address ‘both what we know (research) and what we believe (national and global values) about children’s learning and development’ (p. 2). With this in mind, the Saudi National Curriculum Framework asserts the following:

Early learning programs are a fundamental part of a community. The availability of high-quality options for early childhood education and care has extensive benefits, not only for children and families, but also for the local workforce and economy. Additionally, early learning programs benefit the community as a whole by producing better-educated and better-prepared citizens . . . the entire community can benefit from an investment of time and resources into the programs and systems that care for and educate young children.

(MoE, 2021, p. 29)

This document, which is designed to reflect ‘what we know’ and ‘what we believe’ in relation to ECE (MoE, 2021, p. 2), promotes the narrative of the significance of ‘early investments’, that the benefits of which extend beyond the lives of the young students to the broader community. The construction of this story as a legitimate and attractive account was not a mere coincidence.

Various meanings ought to be adopted and appreciated so as to alter the rationale for providing ECE from providing care and *tarbiya* to young children, with ECTs acting as second mothers, to being an essential educational field where higher levels of performance and efficiency are required to generate returns that can compete in the global market.

To trace this change further, as discussed in section 2.3 of this thesis, in the early days of founding the Saudi ECE, which was not more than fifty years ago, those in positions of authority in the field were keen to adopt certain discourses that would enable them to provide both

policymakers and families with what appears as ‘evidence’ of how greater attention to this field would yield valuable outcomes. The first of these, I suggest, can be seen in the arguments offered by the discipline of developmental psychology and its assumed natural/universal perceptions of childhood. Here, with the growing ‘allegiance’ to child development discourses found in the field of ECE (Cannella, 1997), and with its assumptions being constructed as ‘universally applicable’ (Burman, 2017), the first early childhood curriculum in the KSA was developed based on such principles in the 1980s. Through that project, and with the assistance of ‘foreign experts’ (quoting one of the study participants and as cited in MoE, 2021), truths of developmental psychology presented the Saudi ECE with what appears as ‘scientific’ statements on how young children should be taught so they can progress from one stage of development to the other. The importance of discourses around child development for the Saudi ECE can be seen, then, in (a) its role in establishing ‘evidence’ that certain a type of attention must be paid to all children at this ‘critical’ stage of learning, regardless of where they live, and that (b) this attention is an investment for the future as its returns will not be limited to young children’s current states of being but, also, will contribute to their later stages of development and learning.

Even so, the nature of these future returns, until recent years, was largely confined to aspects related to children’s social, behavioural and cognitive development, while the economic benefits remained rather uncertain (see Chapter 7). Nonetheless, with ECE increasingly embracing neoliberalism ideology around the world (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), the Saudi ECE, over the past decade, started to expand its understanding of these ‘early investments’ to incorporate a greater focus on their economic benefits. Thus, together with the development discourses, the neoliberal discourse has contributed to the construction of what the Saudi early learning standards describes as ‘mounting evidence of the economic and social benefits of early

childhood education’ (MoE, 2015, p. 2). Besides promoting a greater appreciation of the economic impact of ECE, the neoliberal discourse has played, and continues to play, a significant role in constructing prevailing images of young children, their teachers and their educational settings in the KSA under the narrative of ‘early efficient investment’. Examples of these images within this work include the image of young children as future investments (see 5.4), the image of early childhood teachers as efficient professionals (see 6.2) and the image of early childhood schools as privatised institutions (see 7.3).

Again, it should be noted that the images above cannot be attributed to the discourse of neoliberalism alone, nor the dominance of any one particular discourse. Rather, I have come to understand, from what I interpret as the dominant narratives in the field and their constructed images in the Saudi ECE, that they have been produced, appreciated and promoted by the interplay of multiple universalised and cultural ‘truths’ that work together to form what seems to be the ‘reality’ of ECE; one that eventually becomes hard to be doubted, resisted or challenged.

8.3 Implications

This thesis has sought to explore critically some of the dominant narratives concerning the education of young children in the KSA and the normative images associated with such discourses. At the heart of my argument is the belief in the existence of some powerful narratives surrounding the field, whose emergence has been influenced by certain historical conditions (Foucault, 1970a), along with the impact of a number of cultural understandings and universalised truths concerning young children’s education (Cannella, 1997). Such dominance constructs a normative ‘imaginary’ of both educational institutions and the subjectivities and roles of individuals within them (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). This work offers insights into

how popular stories about ECE came to be adopted outside the Global North and the role of local conditions in reconstructing and rewriting them. In doing so, I propose that the presence of the above-discussed dominant narratives within the Saudi ECE did not come about through simple replication of a northern model but, rather, a complex process, shaped by historical and contemporary local conditions along with global influences. Further, the analysis offered in this study opens up several additional avenues for consideration.

8.3.1 The Mismatch Between the Views of ‘Authoritative Voices’ and Those of Practitioners

As stated in Chapter 1, an early research concern was to explore the drive towards neoliberalism within the Saudi ECE. This initial focus stemmed from my familiarity with recently published documents and official statements within the field. Naively, I assumed that this trend would also be reflected among practitioners working in early childhood schools, if not completely, then at least to a significant extent. Taking a more inclusive approach to the data, shortly before starting the fieldwork, I decided to shift the focus to the dominant narratives in the field. Having completed the research, I now realise the significance of this decision. As I conducted the study’s interviews, I began to see how the tales being told were more complex and varied than I had anticipated. While my conversation with those who occupy higher positions in the field showed the side of the story of which I was already aware, those who work inside the schools revealed something different. I noticed that traditional perceptions, which date back to the early days of the field, were still deeply embedded in the language of many practitioners, sometimes in ways that challenged neoliberal perspectives.

The discussion chapters provide an array of examples of this mismatch in perspectives between the two groups of participants. In their image of young children, for instance, those from the ‘authoritative voices’ group tended to perceive young children as requiring appropriate

development to enhance the potential academic and economic returns of their early education. Early childhood practitioners, on the other hand, often described young children as innocent, vulnerable and empty individuals needing to be filled with values and knowledge that are in line with the expectations of their communities and their gender roles (see 5.1). Since the choice of the adopted image of children seems to be ‘productive’ in that it often contributes to the emergence and/or dominance of other images in the field (Moss, 2019), a similar pattern of mismatching can also be observed in how the two groups of participants perceive the role of early childhood teachers and the educational settings of young children (see Chapters 6 and 7). Based on this apparent contradiction, it seems that the current image of Saudi ECE is torn between conflicting ideas created by the two distinct narratives described above. While these discourses may, at times, appear complementary and in harmony with each other, it is important to pay close attention to how they conceptualise the purpose of ECE and construct its truths in quite distinct ways.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to determine which of these two narratives is more appropriate or reliable and it is unlikely that there is a definitive answer to be reached here. Rather, I sought to question the existence of them both and highlight the powerful role stories play in constructing popular meanings around ECE. As such, the mismatch described here between the views of practitioners and those with a more authoritative position within the field can have a significant implication in terms of the contradiction between what is written in the policy and what is happening inside schools. This calls for a thorough study of the missing piece, the absence of which may hinder the adoption of any given political vision among teachers. This may be seen, for instance, in the content of teachers’ academic preparation programmes, the level of communication between the MoE and its schools, etc. It is, nevertheless, necessary, before

taking any steps to bridge this gap between the two perspectives, to be upfront about the implications and the risks of the chosen story. It is through meaningful dialogue with children, practitioners and families that an educational vision is built in a way that considers the diverse perspectives of the two narratives (and beyond), while also remaining open to ongoing reflection and critique.

8.3.2 The Process of Decontextualization

In the 1980s, the Saudi ministry responsible for educational affairs at the time collaborated with UNESCO to develop the Kingdom's first ECE curriculum and, then, in 2018, it sought assistance from the American NAEYC to create a framework for a national ECE curriculum (MoE, 2021). This reflects a persistent political attempt to incorporate external universalised perspectives regarding ECE into the local educational system. To further illustrate this trend, another example from the recently published national framework can be used: 'To ensure the highest quality and relevance of the Saudi early learning curriculum, it must be based on a strong foundation of broadly accepted knowledge of child development and learning' (MoE, 2021, p. 11). The statement is followed by a detailed discussion of the work of three theoretical figures, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bandura, none of whose work pertains, in particular, to the region. Yet, the MoE decision makers cannot bear sole responsibility for this significant dependence on globalised discourses and the neglect of funds of local knowledges. While they certainly have their role to play in ensuring that local practices and cultural values are more recognised and celebrated within the field, this thesis has helped to highlight the complex process through which such a stance was taken. First, living in a neoliberal era has contributed to the promotion of 'particular social goals and human qualities' (Ball, 2008, p. 13). As Ball (2016) argues that the neoliberal educational reform is indeed 'at work in countries in all continents' (p. 1046), its

impact on the adoption of globalised knowledge must not be overlooked. Similar to what Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) describe as the process of ‘neoliberalising of education’ in England, it can be observed through the narrative of the ‘Early Efficient Investments’, which this thesis found to be a popular discourse in the field, that such a process has been taking place in the Saudi ECE, as well, particularly during the past decade. The growing adherence to neoliberal ideology may, therefore, have helped facilitate the process of importing knowledge and practices already considered effective on the global market. Furthermore, worrying whether the next generation of Saudi Arabian children could effectively compete against others in the global economic market and realising that the ECE in the country is currently lagging behind in the global race appear to have played a role in pushing those in authority to look for educational reforms and ‘best practices’ from places that are performing better in said race.

The cost of this growing dependency on universalised knowledge concerning young children and their education is evidenced by, as Tobin (2017) points out, ‘local approaches that are well adapted to their local context [being] driven into extinction by ideas and programs that are less context-dependent’ (p. 71). Local knowledges can be ‘valuable resources’ for both social and economic progress as they provide ‘a fundament for reflections and choices to be taken regarding education, care and development for young children connected to [the] renewal of local livelihoods’ (Penn & Kjørholt, 2019, p. 220). Although I do not disagree with globalised discourses’ emphasis on the importance of implementing effective and evidence-based practices in the field, it is equally important to question what ‘kinds of evidence that might be regarded as relevant, and the even wider issue of what “efficacy” is’ within such discourses (Penn & Kjørholt, 2019, p. 220). This creates a need to move beyond a blind acceptance of the narrowly defined universalised knowledge in the field and an attempt to further acknowledge the

contextualised perspectives of local communities. While I understand that this is not a simple task given the complex process I have outlined above that has contributed to us reaching this position, several steps can still be taken toward the development of more context-specific spaces for young children. A good place to start could be by providing opportunities for early childhood educators to develop a more comprehensive understanding of local history, cultural practices and the diverse values and customs in the various local communities in the Kingdom. Such topics need to be explored, not as facts that must be memorized, but as meaningful conversations that can foster both reflexive critique and a greater appreciation of such knowledges. By creating a foundation, it can become possible to engage in dialogue with global discourses in a way that can sustain what Tobin (2022) describes as ‘a balance between being open to learning from outside ideas and a commitment to appreciating and preserving [our] own beliefs and practices’ (p. 309).

8.3.3 The Potential for Other Stories

On many levels, the thesis’s main arguments appear pessimistic. The Saudi ECE seems to be caught between two problematic narratives: the first struggles with narrowly defined, futuristic-oriented and gender-biased perspectives, whereas the second relies heavily on a set of universalised truths and ‘evidence’ to justify its promotion of selected, ‘appropriately-developed’ practices and their developmentally and economically driven objectives. The overwhelming presence of these two stories, both in the talk of educators and in the lines of policies and documents, makes it even more challenging to see beyond them. As such, it may appear to some that ECE in the KSA is currently in a position where a decision must be made between two

troubled narratives, ‘the sweetest of which is still bitter’.⁵ However, it was not the aim of this thesis to determine which story is the most accurate or legitimate. Instead, this exploration of the normative imaginary of the field was meant to raise questions about the dominance of certain narratives over others. By engaging in a critical reading of the existing narratives and through problematising their construction, it becomes possible to open up new, alternative pathways to conceptualise and imagine the field in different ways (Moss, 2019).

A central notion here ‘is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do’ (Foucault, 1983, pp. 231–232). Therefore, by drawing attention to the risks embedded within the stories that dominate the field, the present work proposes that further possibilities may exist and encourages their theorisation and investigation. It can be said that this objective was attained in two different ways. First, by highlighting the historical processes, this thesis provides insight as to how one image appeared rather than another, making it possible to engage in critical reflection on how what is currently considered natural and inevitable is, in fact, a result of the construction of a set of rules and that alternatives remain a possibility. Second, the two narratives I describe in this chapter represent a unique case in which discursive constructions regarding young children’s education are currently being subjected to a fundamental transformation. Through exploring this change, the study shows how a number of conventional perceptions are being depopularized, at least among ‘authoritative voices’, thereby allowing other emerging perspectives to be recognised. This transformation provides an example of how discursive

⁵ A literal translation of the Arabic idiom أمران أحلاهما مر

constructions, once thought of as the only possible path, can be altered and replaced. Meanwhile, what once enabled these new images to emerge in the field and gain traction can always happen again, albeit for different rationales and based on different logic.

8.4 Further Research

The study's central arguments and its related implications provide a number of potential research directions that may foster continued discussion regarding the dominance of particular narratives concerning the education of young children. As stated in the introduction, due to the absence of local research on the dominance of discourses within the Saudi ECE, I decided to take a more comprehensive approach than I had originally intended so as to better grasp what narratives may be dominant within this particular context. As this work provides a necessary insight into the contemporary discourses within the Saudi ECE, this work can serve as a starting point for those with similar research concerns. From the narratives my conclusion revealed and the normative images the discussion chapters explored, several further questions can be posed, including, for instance: What are young children's perceptions of the images pertinent to them of the contemporary popular narratives? How do global discourses on ECE foster or silence localised knowledge within the field? How are the narratives discussed spoken about in early childhood teachers' preparation programmes in Saudi Arabian universities? How do such discourses encourage or hinder particular everyday practices within the educational settings of young children?

In terms of methodology at a time when practices of measurement and calculation have become increasingly valuable (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), it seems necessary to take a step back to reflect on the implications of the current trend of utilising quantitative tools and

neglecting others as a means of generating knowledge and ‘evidence’ within this discipline. Penn and Kjørholt (2019) offer valuable insights:

“Evidence” is very often taken to mean large and rigorous quantitative design, at the cost of qualitative approaches. The local-oriented approach . . . requires understanding of the historical complexity of the specificities of the variety of different local contexts, as well as analyses of the dynamic interplay between global politics and local practices.

Qualitative approaches generate in-depth understanding, as well as generating complementary data for triangulation. Discursive and narrative analyses also have an important role to play. We think rigor is important, but it does not belong exclusively to quantitative methods. (p. 220)

I, therefore, suggest that a wide range of methodologies should be incorporated into educational research so that deeper, richer and more inclusive perspectives can be generated. This suggestion needs to reach beyond researchers and educators in my field to the decision makers at the MoE for whom greater opportunities exist to establish what sorts of images are more appropriate for young children, their teachers and their educational settings.

8.5 Concluding Thoughts

In this study, I sought to explore the dominant stories surrounding young children’s education in the KSA and their associated normative images of both individuals and institutions within this field. The conclusions reached suggest that, in the contemporary local ECE context, two narratives appear to dominate amongst both practitioners and authoritative individuals within the MoE, albeit to varying extents. The former perceives early childhood as a path

through which children need to be developed into socially acceptable characters, whereas the second stresses the necessity of producing an economically competitive generation. It is important to point out that by problematising the dominance of these two stories, I do not necessarily propose to reject all the practices and meanings associated with them but, rather, call for ‘tempering the claims made for them and understanding better which perspectives they privilege and which they exclude’ (Burman, 2008, p. 302).

Although this conclusion may appear to some as quite straightforward, the process of deconstructing the notions that are common and integral to one’s own culture and confronting the values that one has been brought up with, more so due to the lack of local literature in this area, is far from being so. Still, it must be made clear that the discussions presented in this work cannot be viewed as being independent of my prior knowledge and personal experiences. At various points in the development of this thesis, I found myself conscious of how ‘[w]e are always inside the concepts we wish to critique’ (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 29). Because of this, and in adherence to the paradigmatic position I have taken in which the multiplicity of realities is embraced, I once again affirm that what I have presented here is only a partial reading of the field and has been constructed through my personal involvement within this particular context. Nonetheless, it remains my hope that this limited interpretation can provide novel insights into how a local early childhood system is constructing its own narratives and how their plots have been woven not far from historical conditions, local cultural meaning and universal notions surrounding ECE. Furthermore, I wish that this work serves as an invitation for my fellow educators in the Kingdom, and elsewhere in which the stories of how young children’s education has developed are yet to be explored, to look into areas where the construction of new stories of the field might be possible and beneficial.

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Appendix A

Information Sheet

Research project title: The Drive Towards Neoliberalism: A Critical Exploration of Saudi Arabia's Early Childhood Education

Research investigator: Sara Abahussain

Contact details: s.abahussain@sms.ed.ac.uk - +44 7823595281

Host institution: The University of Edinburgh

Funder: Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University

What is the purpose of the project?

This project looks at the historical process that has contributed to the recent rise of neoliberal thoughts, and its possible implications on early childhood educational policies and practices in Saudi Arabia. This research looks at Neoliberalism as a collective of political and economic ideas that encourage acting like a market in every aspect of life, including education. Thus, the research aims to facilitate future discussions among Saudi educators concerning the influence of political discourses on shaping the field of early childhood education.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate in this study because of your experience as an educator in the field of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this Participant Information Sheet to keep and be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw from the study at a later date, without giving a

reason and without any impact on any services you are using. If at any stage you no longer want to be part of the study, you can withdraw from the project by contacting the researcher. If you withdraw from the project all the information and data collected from you, to date, will be destroyed and your name removed from all the project files.

What does taking part involve?

You will be asked a number of questions regarding your everyday experience working in the field of early childhood education. The interview will take place online using Microsoft Teams at a time that it is convenient for you and will last approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded.

What will happen to the data I provide?

The transcript of your interview will be translated from Arabic to English. If you prefer, a copy of the original transcript and/or its translation into English will be sent to you. Any materials that you wish to change or remove will be excluded from the study immediately.

The data from all the interviews will be then combined with data from various official documents related to the field of Early Childhood Education to analyse the role of neoliberal discourse in the field. Finally, all data will be kept anonymously, and for no longer than five years after the date of study submission. During that period, collected data will not be disclosed to any other organizations and will be used for research purposes only.

If you have any further questions about this project, please contact the researcher.

Thank you for your time.

Appendix B

Interview Participation Consent Form

Research title: The Drive Towards Neoliberalism: A Critical Exploration of Saudi Arabia's Early Childhood Education

Research's name: Sara Abahussain

Contact details: - +44 7823595281

Please tick the boxes beside the statements you agree with, and sign and date the bottom of the page.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study.
- I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without my medical care or legal rights being affected.
- I am willing for this interview to be digitally recorded, transcribed and translated to English for use as part of the research project.
- I wish to receive a copy of my interview transcript
 - The original transcript
 - The English translation
 - Both
 - None

- I am willing for anonymised extracts from this interview to be used as part of the research.
- I understand that anonymised extracts from this interview may appear in publications relevant to this area of research.
- I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of person giving consent

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

Appendix C

Information Sheet (Arabic)

معلومات الدراسة

عنوان الدراسة: دراسة نقدية للخطابات الناشئة في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة في المملكة العربية السعودية

الباحثة: سارة أباحسين

معلومات التواصل: (WhatsApp) +966 555 883521 -

المؤسسة التعليمية: جامعة أدنبرة – المملكة المتحدة

الممول (الداعم): جامعة الامام عبد الرحمن بن فيصل

ما نلذي تهدف اليه الدراسة؟

يركز هذا المشروع البحثي على التطور التاريخي الذي ساهم مؤخرًا في ظهور خطابات مختلفة في حقل التعليم، والانعكاسات المحتملة لهذه الخطابات على السياسات والممارسات التعليمية في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة في المملكة العربية السعودية. وعليه، يهدف البحث إلى اثراء المناقشات المستقبلية بين التربويين السعوديين حول تأثير الخطاب التعليمي على بلورة مجال التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة.

لماذا تمت دعوتي للمشاركة؟

أنت مدعوة للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة بسبب خبرتك العملية في مجال الطفولة المبكرة في المملكة العربية السعودية.

هل تجب علي المشاركة؟

لك حرية المشاركة من عدمها. إذا قررت المشاركة، فسيتم تسليمك ورقة المعلومات هذه للاحتفاظ بها وسيطلب منك لطفًا التوقيع على نموذج الموافقة المرفق أدناه. يمكنك الانسحاب من الدراسة في أي وقت لاحق، دون إبداء أسباب، وذلك عن طريق الاتصال بالباحثة. وفي تلك الحالة، سيتم ااتلاف جميع المعلومات التي تم جمعها منك لغرض الدراسة بالإضافة إلى إزالة اسمك من جميع ملفات المشروع.

ما الذي تتضمنه المشاركة؟

سيُطرح عليك عدد من الأسئلة بخصوص تجربتك اليومية في العمل في مجال التعليم في الطفولة المبكرة. ستعقد المقابلة المسجلة صوتياً عبر الإنترنت باستخدام Microsoft Teams في الوقت المناسب لك، وستستغرق حوالي عشرين دقيقة.

ماذا سيحدث للبيانات التي أقدمها؟

سيتم ترجمة نص مقابلتك من العربية إلى الإنجليزية. في حال رغبتك، سيتم موافاتك بنسخة من نص المقابلة و/أو ترجمتها إلى اللغة الإنجليزية. سيتم على الفور استبعاد أي مواد ترغبين في تغييرها أو إزالتها من الدراسة.

في مرحلة لاحقة بإذن الله، ستدمج البيانات من جميع المقابلات مع البيانات التي تم الحصول عليها من مختلف الوثائق الرسمية المتعلقة بمجال التعليم في الطفولة المبكرة لتحليل دور الخطابات الناشئة على هذا الحقل. أخيراً، سيتم حفظ جميع البيانات من المقابلات بدون ذكر مصدرها، ولمدة لا تزيد عن خمس سنوات بعد تاريخ تسليم الدراسة. وخلال تلك الفترة، لن يتم الكشف عن البيانات التي تم جمعها إلى أي جهات أخرى وسيتم استخدامها لأغراض البحث العلمي فقط.

إذا كان لديك أي استفسارات أخرى حول هذا المشروع البحثي، يرجى الاتصال بالباحثة.

شكراً لوقتكم.

Appendix D

Interview Participation Consent Form (Arabic)

نموذج الموافقة على المشاركة في مقابلة شخصية

عنوان الدراسة: دراسة نقدية للخطابات الناشئة في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة في المملكة العربية السعودية

الباحثة: سارة أباحسين

معلومات التواصل: s.abahussain@sms.ed.ac.uk - +966 555 883521 (WhatsApp)

يرجى وضع علامة ✓ بجانب البيانات التي توافق عليها، ثم التكرم بالتوقيع وتدوين التاريخ أسفل الصفحة.

- أؤكد أنني قد قرأت وفهمت ورقة معلومات الدراسة المرفقة أعلاه.
- لقد أتيت لي الفرصة للنظر في المعلومات المقدمة، وفرصة طرح الأسئلة مع تلقي الرد على هذه الأسئلة بما يرضي.
- أفهم أن مشاركتي طوعية، وأنه يمكنني طلب الانسحاب في أي وقت دون إبداء سبب ودون أن تتأثر حقوقي القانونية.
- أمانح الباحثة الإذن لتسجيل هذه المقابلة صوتياً، وتدوينها كتابياً، وترجمتها إلى اللغة الإنجليزية لاستخدامها كجزء من مشروعها البحثي.
- أرغب في الحصول على نسخة من نص المقابلة:
 - النسخة الأصلية
 - الترجمة الإنجليزية
 - كلاهما
 - لا أرغب
- أوافق على استخدام مقتطفات من مقابلي، بدون ذكر المصدر، كجزء من البحث.
- أفهم أن مقتطفات من هذه المقابلة، بدون الإشارة إلى المصدر، قد تظهر في الإنتاج العلمي المنشور المتصل بهذا البحث.

□ أوافق على المشاركة في الدراسة أعلاه.

اسم الباحث	التاريخ	التوقيع
_____	_____	_____
اسم المشاركة	التاريخ	التوقيع
_____	_____	_____

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Interviewer:

Position:

Date:

Start time:

End time:

Core Questions:

1. How do you view children during their early childhood years?
2. What are the primary roles of early childhood teachers?
3. How would you describe a good early childhood school?
4. What are the fundamental values children should be taught from an early age?
5. What is the purpose of enrolling children in early childhood programmes?
6. What are the current challenges facing the early childhood education field in Saudi Arabia?
7. In what ways has early childhood education changed in Saudi Arabia in recent years?
8. What are the possible benefits of expanding early childhood education programmes?

Appendix F

Interview Guide (Arabic)

اسم المشاركة:	الوظيفة
التاريخ:	بداية المقابلة:
	انتهاء المقابلة:

الأسئلة الأساسية:

1. ماهي رؤيتك للأطفال خلال سنوات طفولتهم المبكرة؟
2. ما هي الأدوار الأساسية لمعلمات مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة؟
3. كيف يمكن وصف مدرسة طفولة مبكرة جيدة؟
4. ما هي القيم الأساسية التي يجب تعليمها للأطفال في سن مبكرة؟
5. ما الهدف من إلحاق الأطفال ببرامج الطفولة المبكرة؟
6. ما هي التحديات الحالية التي تواجه مجال التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة في المملكة العربية السعودية؟
7. كيف تصفين اتجاه التغيير الحالي في التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة في المملكة العربية السعودية؟
8. ما هي الفوائد المحتملة لتوسيع القبول في برامج التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة؟