

Culture and Communication: Revealing Limits to Literacy-Learning
Communications in Saudi Children's Home and Kindergarten
Communities

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Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed:

Date: 30-5-2016

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Abstract

This study used sociocultural theory as a lens to explore the social interactions between young children and adults, including parents, maids and Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs), during emergent literacy practices at home and in kindergarten environments in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The study examined adults' literacy beliefs, attitudes, roles, and relationships in the home and the kindergarten environment, and how this relationship contributes to young children's literacy learning from middle and below average income families. Mixed Methods Explanatory Sequential design was used to organise the investigation. In the first phase of the study, a sample of 325 parents with children aged three to five and a half years old was obtained from 10 kindergarten centres in Mecca. In the second phase, case studies of two children in their social environments with their two maids and two ECTs were included. Four in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ECTs and maids, along with classroom observations of the social interaction during emergent literacy activities between teachers and the focus children in the kindergarten centres.

Results from the questionnaire revealed that literacy as a social practice was evident through the ways children and adults interacted during literacy-based practices. Nearly one third of parents indicated that their children have shown interest in adults' reading materials in the home, including newspapers, TV guides, magazines, computers, and smartphones. More importantly, fathers in this study were less engaged than mothers in their daily literacy practices at homes. An integrated analysis from the parental questionnaire, teachers' interviews, and classroom observations revealed that reading the Quran to children at home and in the kindergarten occurred frequently in order to develop children's reading skills and to strengthen children's sense of identity in their Muslim culture and heritage. Parents' level of education was found to have an impact on the children's positive attitude and interest in using technological tools as a literacy source of learning and communication with others at home. There was a significant effect of the household income on the child's attitudes in response to print.

The communication between parents and ECTs was found to be influenced by gender segregation law in KSA. This study showed that mothers were the main people who were culturally allowed to communicate with ECTs, but not fathers. The most surprising finding that Saudi fathers were found to be mostly involved in the kindergarten centres in relation to their children's behavioural issues. Interestingly, the kindergarten directors were found to be the only people in charge to communicate with fathers, not the ECTs. This may be due to the fact that

directors in the KSA have the status or position of power to take in charge in communicating with fathers.

This study found that parents and teachers in home and kindergarten setting are disconnected and do not value each others' roles. The analysis revealed that almost all parents agreed that fathers and mothers played a significant role in their children's literacy development. In contrast, the majority of parents disagreed with the important role ECTs have played in fostering children's literacy learning. The study found that ECTs experienced limited opportunities to integrate techno-literacy resources, such as computers, iPads, and the Internet, during teaching literacy experiences, and had a lack of literacy training, which eventually influenced their limited perspective toward teaching literacy.

Further analysis indicated that the role of maids in engaging with young children's literacy practices in KSA was important, under-recognised and under-utilised. The importance of this finding cannot be overstated. Maids in this study were found to have an influence on children's writing and drawing skills and on children's social interaction with others at home, while they had no influence on children's attention to rhyming sounds, using technological tools, response to print, or reading skills. Significant differences were found in terms of children's interactions with others depending on whether there was or was not a maid in the home. ECTs agreed on the influence of maids on Saudi children's literacy learning. However, they had different perspectives toward the level of maids' influence on children. This may be determined by teachers' own perspectives and working experiences with children and parents.

Recommendations from this study are targeted at teachers, who have scope to activate fathers' role in their children's literacy education. There are several ways in which this could be achieved, such as by designing literacy workshops for fathers in order to develop their understanding of the importance of emergent literacy learning, and by involving them effectively in their children's education, including literacy. Parents were scarcely aware of the positive and important role that ECTs play in their children's emergent literacy learning in the kindergarten environment. There is room for change in the relationships between parents and teachers, especially in terms of open communication methods between home and kindergarten settings. This thesis includes a detailed discussion of these findings, as well as recommendations for practical application and future research.

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