

**COMPOSING JOURNEYS:
UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
SAUDI ARABIA'S FEMALE EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATORS**

by

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Abstract

Within the country of Saudi Arabia, all early childhood education (ECE) teachers in both public and private schools are female. Despite this demographic fact, there has been little academic study into their professional journeys, challenges, and ambitions. This study brings the voices of these women forward. Through the methodological technique of “portrait” based narrative inquiry inspired by cultural anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson, and building on the framework of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study explores how six female educators working in Saudi Arabia's ECE have entered the field and negotiated their professional journeys throughout the years.

In this study I argue that the narratives composed from the six women I interviewed illustrate the complexities and contradictions that underpin Saudi Arabian ECE. The study reveals the overwhelming influence of patriarchal norms, policies, and practices in Saudi Arabia and how they intersect to shape the capacity of women educators to bring about social change, as well as a restating of what it means to be a Saudi Arabian citizen, as daughters, siblings, wives, mothers, and educators. These narratives challenge the perception of Saudi Arabian ECE as an environment filled with apathetic teachers who are completely dominated by patriarchal systems and unable or unwilling to engage productively in discussions of reform. At the same time, these narratives offer a window into the world of subordinated women and the marginalization of their pedagogical thought, particularly in an educational system that is frequently trapped in centralized policies and where professional opportunity and upward mobility for women are often limited. The implications of these findings for our understanding of the prospects and contributions of ECE in Saudi Arabia are subsequently examined.

Lay Summary

The goal of this work is to advance academic understanding of female educators working in Saudi Arabia's Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector. A gap exists in the current literature with respect to the ways in which women within Saudi Arabia choose ECE as a career and navigate through the profession. This work analyzes the lives of six women in an effort to embrace the complexity of their lived experience in the ECE profession and in terms of their larger social and political interactions in Saudi Arabia. It is the author's hope that by listening to the women who make up the backbone of Saudi Arabia's ECE system, their insights and experiences will emerge as valuable; this in turn may shed light on ways in which the nation can continue to improve the quality of its ECE by offering women an opportunity for greater participation across civic and social spheres.

Preface

This dissertation is the original, unpublished, and independent work conducted by the author, Balsam Alrasheed.

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Dedication

This work would not have been possible without the passion and support of so many others who helped me to find my path. I want to thank my husband, Mohammed; my children, Bader and Yaser; my parents; my siblings, Maysoon, Abdullrahman, Basma, Abdalmjeed, Abdulaziz, and Omar; and all of my nieces and nephews for surrounding me with love and support.

Prologue

I wanted to share with the reader a small moment that held a huge amount of significance for me. I was recently talking to my nine-year-old son about the importance of being prepared, on time, and having your homework finished. “If you're not ready to learn,” I told him, “It could affect you for the whole day. If you're taking out your materials when your teacher is talking, you might miss something important. Or, if your homework isn't done, it might be hard to understand what the class is doing that day.”

As I was talking to him, however, I realized how privileged my son was to grow up in such a different educational environment than the one I experienced when I was his age.

As a child, I feared being late to school. In Saudi Arabia at that time, if a student was late it was treated as something of a small crime. Before we set foot in class, those of us who were late to school that day were forced to line up and wait for punishment by the vice principal. She was a terrifying figure. I remember listening with dread as she descended the stairs in front of her office. When we finally reached our turn to stand in front of her, we would be disciplined in a variety of different ways. Sometimes she would command us to hold our hand out and she would strike our palm with a ruler. Other times, she would pull our ears and slap us in the face. If she saw that we had any personal items that were not in compliance with the school dress code, like earrings or headbands, she would destroy them in front of us.

However, it wasn't just the vice principal who would verbally or physically abuse us. If our homework wasn't done, we would be called stupid and lazy in front of the class by our teacher. We could be slapped or struck with objects for not paying attention, or for failing to memorize a lesson. If we gave a wrong answer to a question, we could be made to stand on one foot until we were exhausted. We were asked to recite answers suddenly and without warning.

However, what I hated the most were the days when my teacher would switch my name. If I answered too many questions incorrectly, my teacher would ask me in front of my classmates, “Are you Balsam, or are you *Algam*?” In Arabic, the term refers to the colocynth, a plant that is so bitter that few can stand its taste. Even in first grade, I found that being depersonalized was more traumatic than being slapped or hit.

As a child, I did my homework and came to class prepared, but it was done completely out of fear. At the end of the day, I would immediately forget what I had memorized the night before, since it would no longer protect me. It took me years before I was able to see the beauty in different forms of the Arabic language. Only as an adult did I begin to understand that human beings learn best when they enjoy the *process* of learning, and not when lessons are learned only to keep oneself safe from harm.

My sons react with surprise when I tell them about the way things were in Saudi Arabia when I was their age. It is almost too horrible for them to even imagine that children would be physically harmed for situations that were often entirely beyond their control, such as being late to school.

It is true that Saudi Arabia is changing in how it views what kinds of discipline are acceptable or forbidden in early childhood education (hereafter, ECE). On one hand, the country is moving away from forms of punishment that, in a North American context, many would consider physically abusive. However, just a few weeks ago I read an article which originated from inside Saudi Arabia that argued that teachers should have the ability to physically strike children, so long as it is done in a way that is fatherly or paternal.

I mention my stories of being frightened and unsure as a child simply to reiterate why ECE is tremendously important to me. I had to work for many years to restore my personality and sense of self worth as a result of the abuses I suffered in school. For that reason, I chose to dedicate my life to making sure that other children would be spared from the same kinds of experiences that characterized my education. As a teacher, I wanted to change the thinking behind ECE in my home country. I hoped that I would one day become part of a larger dialogue about how children are to be treated in Saudi Arabia's classrooms.

Initially, I set out in the process of this dissertation to explore the degree to which Saudi Arabia's systems of ECE were different today than they were when I was a child. Specifically, I wanted to engage with the country's ECE educators to see if they thought that child-centeredness was important, and if they felt it was a valuable direction for Saudi Arabia's educational systems.

Through this research, I got to know six different female educators who have worked or are currently working in Saudi Arabian ECE. Their stories, visions, and passion moved me. Through

the course of my research it became clear that I was not alone in holding progressive, child-centered visions of what my country's ECE could be. Furthermore, not only were these women working to improve the quality of ECE within our home country, they often did so under significant patriarchal and organizational constraints. Often, these constraints served as obstacles requiring significant negotiation and navigation, and had profound ramifications on the women's multifaceted roles as wives, daughters, mothers, and professional educators.

Collectively, the narratives of these six women reveal a complex and contradictory set of lived experiences within Saudi Arabia's ECE. By critically examining their lives and beliefs, I emerged with a more nuanced understanding of the Saudi Arabian educational system as a whole. I also believe that these understandings help to explain, in part, why certain efforts to reform or modernize Saudi Arabia's educational system have encountered difficulty, as well as illuminate where future possibilities for change exist.

1 Introduction

One of the beautiful aspects of receiving an international education is that it allows you to critically and self-consciously reflect about who you are, how your experience has shaped the person you've become, and with what values you most closely identify. As a Saudi Arabian woman, there were many aspects of my upbringing, society, and system of beliefs that I don't think I would have questioned had it not been for my education in Canada, a society very different from my own. The research that I have conducted therefore represents another bold step in defining the course of my life and work.

During my program of study, it became clear to me that research and progress do not happen for their own sake. They are the work of individuals who are inspired to action and motivated to make a difference. Research and the pursuit of knowledge is shaped by the concerns of people all around the world who are bold enough to ask themselves how they can make a particular aspect of life better, either immediately or at some point in the future. With this in mind, I feel it is necessary to explain how I became interested in my present object of research: that is, exploring the field of Early Childhood Education (hereafter, ECE) within Saudi Arabia.

While a more detailed description of the Saudi Arabian ECE workforce is provided in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, a few details can be sketched in brief. Recent figures place the official size of the ECE workforce in Saudi Arabia at 22,819 teachers practicing in 942 private sector schools and 1,617 schools operating in the public sector; virtually all of these teachers are female due to gender segregation laws within the country (Alquassem, Dashash, & Alzahrani, 2016; "Education Statistics," 2014). Within Saudi Arabia, ECE is divided into voluntary pre-primary education, which caters to students aged between three and five years, and the initial years of mandatory primary education, which encompasses the schooling provided to students between 6 and 12 years of age (Alquassem, Dashash, & Alzahrani, 2016). UNESCO notes that across many of the Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, it is difficult to arrive at a consistent definition of what constitutes "early childhood" education. The organization reports that:

In discussing the status of educational programmes for young children in a number of Arab countries, it must be noted here that most of these programmes focus on children from 0 to 6 years due to lack of sufficient information on children 6-8 years. This age category is part of formal

education, which makes it difficult to monitor the coverage of these services for this age group and the extent of coverage of health, nutrition and social needs in addition to academic education. (Faour & Suwaigh, 2010, p. 27)

For this reason, the definition of ECE used within this paper is slightly more expansive, which is to say the education, teaching, and caregiving provided to children eight years and younger in facilities and contexts outside of the child's family unit (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Furthermore, ECE for the purposes of this work encompasses not only pre-school programs and kindergartens, but also includes afterschool centres designed to improve a child's language and literacy skills.

As an educator, I have come to appreciate how much my own journey through ECE has been shaped by my formative experiences in various educational systems. Looking back, my experience as a young student in Saudi Arabia can only be described as traumatic. I remember feeling afraid every morning to go to school. I remember what it was like to be in an environment of constant judgment and to see the fear in the students around me. I remember very strongly that there was always the threat of physical violence, and certainly verbal abuse was always present. Every day that I went to school in the Saudi system, I was told only about what was disappointing about who I was—that it was wrong that I was interested in music and sports, because that was not a woman's role. And in the moments when I was not filled with anxiety or dread, I remember feeling the boredom that came with what seemed like endless rote memorization.

Very early in my youth, I faced something of a moral crisis: my best friend confided in me that she was a Christian. She told me that I was the only person she could trust with this information. It was an essential part of her identity, and this spiritual flame had burned brightly (if secretly) even though the system and society around us had attempted to extinguish it. I admired her bravery, but I felt as though I was betraying everything I had been forced to memorize and repeat: that the aims of Muslims and non-Muslims were incompatible; that no lasting friendship nor peaceful understanding could ever be reached between a believer and someone outside of the faith. At that time, I chose what I believed was the right path: I never betrayed my friend's secret, and I allowed her to be defined by more than her religion.

I believe some part of me entered the field of caregiving and early childhood education (hereafter, ECE) as an attempt to spare just one child from having to undergo the same kind of schooling I went through. As I progressed through my own professional education in my adult life, my collective experiences reinforced a belief that what we teach children will continue to affect the world—hopefully for the better—long after we pass away. There is a saying in Arabic that I am fond of: “what a child learns is set in stone.” As a teacher and caretaker, I realize that the learning environments I shape are tremendously important to a growing mind. I have always felt that the world we build for our youngest students, even if they inhabit it for only a few hours out of the day, is to them a model of how the world itself works. This space can be a positive arena where children can learn that they are respected by those around them. It can be an environment where they have opportunities to contribute positively to the classroom community, and thus, to the other communities in which they participate.

Given the degree to which I believe learning environments shape a child's life, I found it necessary as I grew into a better scholar and critical thinker to subject my own beliefs about education and human rights to careful analysis. Doing so has allowed them to become stronger and more relevant to my life. Learning outside of my home country allowed me to study the benefits of my approaches and taught me the value of reading whatever literature I could to help me become a better educator. This research is therefore a step in my own journey as a critical thinker—a role that is far too often marginalized in my home country, for reasons I hope to make clear in my review of literature.

I also position myself in relation to the topic as a mother. While I have always admired the innocence, beauty, and honesty of children, having children of my own has given me a deeper perspective on what it means to improve our lives and the lives of others. Each person who nurtures a child is making a direct contribution to the world. The fairness and tolerance we pass down to our children will benefit an untold number of lives. One can gain a strong sense of self-worth and justify one's actions and efforts by asking what another person needs in order to develop as healthy and as strong as possible, and doing whatever one can to meet that person's needs.

However, what I began to notice was that although these different experiences were tremendously important in explaining who I was, they were also equally useful in helping me

understand the points of view and choices made by my friends and colleagues both in Saudi Arabia and in Canada. Our complicated lives as women often intersect and impact our classroom roles. As I began thinking about directions for my dissertation I realized that I wanted to further explore this complexity and tell a story that speaks of how women in Saudi Arabia are shaping the country's educational system and how their lives have shaped them into the teachers they are today.

While I will look critically at the Saudi Arabian educational system, I must emphasize that I feel an immense sense of pride for my country, its people, and our faith—not just in Islam, but in our willingness to succeed and redefine ourselves even in conditions that have attempted to marginalize emerging voices. And, as a student myself, this academic work is an earnest effort to create positive change in my country. Like many citizens of Saudi Arabia, I feel that King Salman speaks for me. I think he is a strong leader with a vision for the future of the country, and the money spent on my education represents a direct investment in the country to make for a better future. I don't want to turn my back on that opportunity. I'm inspired by the chance to contribute, I am ready to rise to the call, and I'm honoured to be able to share my insights with my peers.

1.1 The Links between Women and Saudi Arabian ECE Policy

As I will later support in greater detail through my review of literature, I believe that Saudi Arabia is a country that is in pressing need of educational reform at the early childhood level. As a product of the system, I join with a number of scholars and political analysts in concluding that Saudi Arabia's system of education is often characterized by teacher-centred curriculum and by an active mistrust of anything new, foreign, or different. While education cannot be wholly blamed for every one of Saudi Arabia's social issues, and educational reform is not a magic bullet, I believe that there is a “push-pull” relationship between Saudi Arabian culture and its educational system. That is, the Saudi Arabian educational system has traditionally “pushed” students towards religious fundamentalism, though changes in international education and the country's society at large hold the potential to “pull” the focus of Saudi education in more liberal directions (Alhargan, 2012; Doumato, 2003; Lacroix, 2004).

To this end, the current marginalization of creativity in Saudi Arabia's educational system has created a generation of young people ill-equipped to handle the problem-solving and innovation needs of a first-world workforce (Iqbal, 2011; Madhi & Barrientos, 2003). The nation's overemphasis on a single type of religious education has been criticized for discouraging tolerance and de-emphasizing critical thinking (Batterjee, 2011; Doumato, 2003; Elyas & Picard, 2010). As educators, my colleagues and I hypothesize the failure to create a sense of community at the level of the Saudi Arabian public school classroom has larger ramifications on citizenship; children who transition to adulthood without learning how to feel responsibility and compassion for those outside of their immediate family often struggle to meaningfully contribute to and engage with a society's political systems (Al-Zuaibir, 2011; Murphy, 2012).

Several of my colleagues have asked me why I feel that ECE is the most efficacious means of targeting issues of Saudi Arabian citizenship. To this I would answer that my experiences as a student, teacher, and mother have shown me that many of the lessons and ethics taught in the ECE classroom are deeply formative of the way that young people conceptualize the world around them. It is my personal belief that the best way to create social change is to begin with a new generation. Documents from Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Economy and Planning (2017a, 2017b) suggest that this idea has also found favour with the nation's leaders.

However, when I talk to educators within my home country, the very subject of educational or pedagogical change frequently seems to be a taboo subject to raise at the classroom or teacher level, even when it has been publicly embraced by the country's top levels of leadership. The Ministry of Education has urged us to reform and has recognized the value of raising Saudi Arabia's quality of early childhood education (Al Shaer, 2007; "Vision 2030," 2017). And yet Saudi Arabia has historically struggled in its goal of creating flexible, independent thinkers ready to succeed in a future global economy (Kaufman & McDonald, 1995; Khan, 2011; Lane, Lacefield-Parachini, & Isken, 2003). Prior to beginning my work on this dissertation, I suspected that at least some of these difficulties could be explained by a disconnect between policy and teachers, as well as by the frustration many Saudi Arabian ECE teachers felt about being left out of important decisions about what happens (or should happen) in the classroom. Those in the best position to answer the question of how to institute reform did not seem to have a seat at the table.

I reasoned that if any policy or macro-level pedagogical changes that target Saudi Arabia's youngest citizens were going to be successful, they would be relying on the hard work of the country's female ECE workforce to see them through. As such, I therefore believe that for Saudi Arabia to meet its stated educational goals, it would be beneficial to better understand what a classroom looks like through the eyes of the women who operate them and who the teachers are that would be making desired educational changes possible.

As I attempted to narrow the focus of my research, I knew I wanted to explore several questions that I found myself struggling with about the contradiction between stated policy goals and the reality that seemed to surround us: Why did I and so many of my fellow teachers feel that the climate in Saudi Arabia was so discouraging to us? Why did I encounter so many teachers who seemed apathetic or disinterested in speaking out for what they believed in? Were there others in my home country who shared my concerns about ECE, or was I alone? And, if I was not alone, what were the ties that connected me to my fellow ECE colleagues working within Saudi Arabia?

For that reason, it made sense to critically examine the lives and beliefs of my colleagues at an individual level to become more fully become aware of who we are as educators, what value we can bring to educational policy discussions, and how we came to enter this sector in the first place. As I explored such questions, I found that there was a lack of literature that specifically looked at Saudi Arabian ECE from a female perspective. Moreover, the entry of Saudi Arabian women of different backgrounds into the field of ECE has not been attended by a discussion of their stories and unique career paths. Policy studies have been primarily concerned with the structure of organizational aspects of ECE, leaving the voices of women, their aspirations, and their negotiation of roles as educators, professionals, and citizens largely unexamined. This study is an attempt to fill this perceived gap.

1.2 Embracing, Not Marginalizing, the Complexity of an ECE Teacher's Life

The chapters that follow in this study are intended to support a female-centred view of Saudi Arabian ECE. As I will explain in further detail in my review of literature, the lives of the individual women who make up the Saudi Arabian ECE system are fascinating, complex, and

warrant serious academic study. These teachers are bombarded by the real and perceived expectations placed on them from various spheres of influence. These influences could include the teacher's own cultural background, the real or anticipated responses from the families of their students, feedback from their administrators, the opinions of political figures, and various other forms of communication that originate from any stakeholder in the education of Saudi Arabia's youngest citizens.

To better explain and interpret this complexity, the works of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) provide a theoretical framework for much of my research. Bronfenbrenner refers specifically to “roles” and “ecological systems.” These terms serve as useful interpretive lenses for the discussion of how women navigate their lives as professionals in the ECE system. In short, “roles” consist of the activities that are expected of people in a particular position or segment of society. “Ecological systems,” which I will also explain in greater depth as the paper continues, comprise the different environments that a teacher inhabits that may dictate role—for example, a teacher is simultaneously the head of a classroom, the guardian of a student, and the employee of an administrator. In addition, a teacher may also be a spouse, parent, sibling, child, citizen, and have a number of additional affiliations. His or her roles change based on the ideological “places” that he or she simultaneously inhabits.

With respect to roles, Bronfenbrenner has three insights that I find fascinating with respect to this study and its relevance to Saudi Arabia. First, roles are constructed as a response to the various ecological systems in which that teacher resides. Second, role expectations can be either internal (for example, a teacher being dismissive of a pedagogical approach because it conflicts with her religious upbringing) or external (for example, a teacher failing to make a change in the classroom because she has been discouraged from doing so by an administrator). Third, personal and professional development is profoundly shaped by role.

It is important for me to explore the notion of role in my research not only because it is so central to understanding how many ECE systems operate within Saudi Arabia, but also because it is extremely useful in helping us critically explore the lives and full context of the women who work in that system. As mentioned previously, Saudi Arabia's ECE workforce is predominately female, and the lives of women—even more so than men, and as a defining aspect of Saudi Arabian culture—are marked by an expectation of having to manage multiple and conflicting

roles: for example, that of a mother, teacher, wife, daughter, leader, citizen, etc. (Bateson, 2007). Each of these dimensions can and does influence what happens in the nation's ECE classrooms.

In the process of my revision of this dissertation, it dawned on me that while I wanted to explore the construction of a teacher role among my colleagues working in Saudi Arabia, my early proposals explored the idea of survey-based inquiry and quantitative data. As I considered the matter further in the wake of reading Mary Catherine Bateson's (2007) highly influential *Composing a Life*, I realized that behind my own conceptualization of the teacher role lay a rich context of personal experiences and deliberate negotiations between myself and the world around me. This did not happen by accident, and yet I was not allowing for the same "voice" of my participants to come through that informed my own life as an educator. Suddenly, the thought of trying to distill their opinions and beliefs into a numerical or multiple-choice format seemed reductive. For that reason, my research involves documenting the lives of six female ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia. Through in-depth interviews, I wanted to explore how women working in my home country's ECE field managed to construct unique and informed teacher roles, and additionally, how they have negotiated their career paths and aspirations. Drawing out and giving voice to these fascinating narratives became the primary focus of this work.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research yields tremendous insights into how teachers came to enter the field of ECE in Saudi Arabia and how their experiences have shaped their conceptions of professional and personal identity. Every day, ECE teachers working in my home country struggle with intellectual and moral dilemmas, and the choices they have made (and feel they will make) inform their pedagogical outlook, including their view of the children in their classroom. Many avenues of ECE currently being proposed by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education, including the shift to child-centred learning, would place the teacher in a very different role and state of mind than she may be used to. When dealing with aspects of new approaches that may vary from traditional forms of education in the Arab world, such as the image of the child and what an effective classroom looks like, one can ask how teachers approach these concepts and whether their lived experiences have made them more or less receptive to change.

However, without taking the time to understand the background and professional context of the Saudi Arabian teachers who populate this study, I felt that my full understanding of their values and decisions would have been limited. I reasoned that motifs and themes that were present across the lives of my interviewees would help to better explain the larger educational landscape in which they lived and worked, which may in turn help to narrow the gap between Saudi Arabian policy-makers and ECE teachers.

I would also like to point out again that, thus far, scholarship of this nature into the lives of Saudi Arabian ECE professionals has been extraordinarily limited. First, there is little research literature written from a Saudi Arabian perspective that analyzes how culture and conflicting sets of roles may shape a teacher's behaviour and her pathway through the ECE system. However, what is more puzzling is that—as the literature will describe in greater detail—Saudi Arabia is a country whose ECE workforce is composed almost entirely of women. The current body of literature assumes that this workforce has come to exist arbitrarily or by accident, and that the invisible constraints and expectations placed on this workforce either don't exist or aren't worthy of academic analysis. That virtually no Saudi Arabian-originated studies have placed the primary focus on the narratives of the teachers themselves seems an oversight at the very least. I would argue that this phenomenon is a symptom of a larger issue: when it comes to the formulation of ECE policy within Saudi Arabia, the voices of current and former teachers are not being heard. My work is therefore intended to lead by example, and I hope that it will one day join a larger body of work that allows us to understand and learn from the rich streams of data that can be found in every ECE classroom.

Additionally, this research attempts to dig past the surface layer of the day-to-day experiences of my interviewees; I want to help ECE teachers realize, as I have, that their professional lives are far from accidental. However, as the saying goes, “The fish are often unaware of the water.” At the time that this study was first conceptualized, I would not have been surprised if one or more of my participants felt as though they did not have much agency in finding themselves at the present moment and at their unique practice site, or that their lives were ordinary—for years, this was how I myself felt. I also believe that Saudi Arabian culture, which is often collectivist, diminishes the importance of individual choice and ambition, and particularly so for the women who reside inside its borders. With these factors considered, my study is very much rooted in documenting and exploring the process of self-inquiry and self-discovery that unfolded as I

became more fully aware of the contexts in which my participants teach, the view they have of their students, and how these notions come to further affect a sense of professionalism and greater belonging as an educator.

I would additionally propose that this research is important because it will allow my colleagues and peers both inside and outside of Saudi Arabia a fuller understanding of many of the cultural and psychological dimensions that complicate reform in the kingdom's educational system. My professional experience suggests that Saudi Arabian society can be very insular, and that most educators in the country do not voluntarily reveal their hopes, concerns, and fears when it comes to educational change. As an "insider" to the system and fellow "comrade in arms," I am positioned to solicit these rich sources of data. By better understanding where many ECE educators position themselves in their roles as teachers and how they have arrived at their present positions, I feel that my observations will help to encourage vibrant debates on topics that are currently punctuated by silence. If stakeholders wish to better understand why ECE policy reform flourishes or flounders in Saudi Arabia, and as a key to shaping future efforts, I believe that it is highly important to look for common narratives and patterns in the lives of the women who populate the country's ECE workforce.

Secondarily, this research may help to illuminate areas of difficulty that may attend Saudi Arabia's desire to move towards child-centred ECE policy. Whenever a new role is introduced or expected, there is always a distinct possibility of conflict. Additionally, several of the teachers included in this study have expressed a personal desire to incorporate child-centred approaches and pedagogies in ways that may not have been shared by other stakeholders or inhabitants of their ecological systems. Many child-centred roles must necessarily be constructed and adapted when they are transported to a new country (Hewitt, 2001; Malaguzzi, 1998). Thus, including a discussion of certain child-centred approaches in ECE allows for a more concrete understanding of a concept as complex and multifaceted as "role." It also provides insight as to what Saudi Arabian strains of these methods could look like through the eyes of the women who may one day put them into practice.

The research proposed in this study is very much born of a desire to become an educational leader in my home country: I wish to be a strong voice and unafraid to fight for the change that I know in my heart is right for our country's children. I realized that, if I wanted to change the

quality of citizenship in my country, I would need to lead by example. With that in mind, the focus of my study and the evolution to my research question and topic has been an attempt to better understand the deeper nuances and unspoken qualities of the system that I will work in once I return home. It is a step towards understanding how practice context influences the actions of the female participants working in the ECE field and how these same women in turn shape their surrounding environments.

As a result of undertaking this work, I now have a much better understanding of the commonalities and shared experiences that connect Saudi Arabia's female ECE educators to one another. I believe that only once we understand and empathize can we begin to make progress towards any secondary goals related to modifying our existing system. Involving women in the process of formulating strategies for the professional development of ECE teachers, better conceptualizing and re-framing common concerns about differing approaches, and listening to the richness of the voices in Saudi Arabia's ECE environments should be viewed as vital first steps if we one day wish to improve the well-being of our current and future citizens. For this reason, the research I performed as part of this project was part of a larger process to make me a more capable and thoughtful educator and an advocate for revised approaches within my home country.

2 Review of Literature

This chapter has several aims. To begin, I first wish to lay a foundation for the social, political, and cultural background of Saudi Arabia such that readers may understand the uniqueness of its ECE practice context. I wrote previously of concerns for the country's educational system; I wish to ground these discussions more securely in terms of additional testimony and expert opinion. I will show how many aspects of ECE, including curriculum, funding, and pedagogy, are closely linked to issues of politics and culture. At times, there is a degree of incoherence present in the country's educational direction. It is frequently being pushed in one direction by conservative fundamentalism and pulled in another by the country's educational leaders—often with the intent of becoming more modernized, efficient, or international.

While I can only show a small amount of the complexity present in Saudi Arabia's ECE system, through this discussion I hope to better ground the reader in the kinds of observations I see as a female educator operating within the system. This, I hope, will allow readers to see some of the major shifts that have arisen over the last several decades of Saudi Arabia's history and what those changes have brought to the area of educational policy.

With this foundation serving as a basis of discussion, I want to next illustrate how this social, cultural, and political background comes to affect the working experiences of the women who make the implementation of the country's ECE policy possible. Through the review of literature, I want to explore the scholarship that exists with respect to examining Saudi Arabian ECE teachers as both women and teachers working in a unique environmental context. I wish to show the complexity of the role ECE teachers hold in Saudi Arabia and some of the various forces that inhibit and promote the full expression of their voices. This is particularly vital when it comes to understanding where areas of professional interest that are important to many female ECE educators—such as incorporating more child-centred pedagogy and curriculum in the classroom—intersect with different sets of cultural norms and institutional realities. Equally important is how those intersections may create further personal and professional challenges.

Last, once the reader has a partial awareness of Saudi Arabia and how its culture and ECE policy attend the actions and perceptions of stakeholders within the system, I will segue to the

work of Urie Bronfenbrenner and his theory of ecological systems, detailed further in chapter 3. In so doing, I will provide a more concrete and grounded discussion of what a “role” actually is, and how it comes to be formed as a result of the relations and interactions a teacher experiences within the environments that surround her.

2.1 The Mixed Objectives of Saudi Arabian ECE

I begin with the demographics of Saudi Arabia. It is a young nation in more ways than one, as an astonishing 44% of the country is age 25 or below, according to current figures (“World Factbook,” 2017). It is generally accepted that nations use education as a means of producing goals that are in their state's interest. Where young people are concerned, the shared hope is that the country's public school system will eventually produce internationally skilled and valuable workers who can serve the nation as they grow older (Desjardins, 2009; Levin, 2009). Since the 1990s, Saudi Arabia has regularly spent 23% of its national budget and 7.5% of its GDP on education at all levels, exceeding education expenditures of both Canada and the US (Rugh, 2002). As Prince Turki Al-Faisal (2006) explained in a speech given in a Los Angeles town hall meeting,

It goes without saying that Saudi Arabia is blessed with oil, but we recognize that it is a finite resource. We know our best and infinite resource is our people, and in order to diversify our economy and improve the quality of life of our citizens, we need to educate and train our youth in new areas where they can develop, grow and innovate. (p. 414)

Further realizing the importance of ensuring that the nation's young citizens will be able to compete in the world economy of the future, the then king Abdullah announced in 2010 that an additional USD\$2.4 billion would be set aside to improve education (Alsharif, 2010).

On the surface, it would seem that Saudi Arabia, an oil-rich nation willing to invest in the education of the next generations of leaders and businesspeople, should be turning out some of the world's brightest minds. However, all is not as it seems. The harshest criticisms describe Saudi Arabia's young people as some of the least prepared for the realities of adulthood, and many inside and outside of the country have considered the kind of public education students receive in Saudi Arabia to be severely deficient in developing skills valued by a world economy (Albahussain, 2006; Madhi & Barrientos, 2003; Rugh, 2002).

Government-published figures that track those just recently coming out of the Saudi educational system and into the workforce hint at the depth of the problem: the unemployment rate is a staggering 30% for citizens between the ages of 15 and 25 actively looking for employment, and some estimate that nearly 40% of the nation's young workforce could be unemployed or under-employed (Murphy, 2012). And, while Saudi Arabia's former king Abdullah was committed to improving its systems and investing in its people during his lifetime, he was frequently met with resistance by Islamic fundamentalists, causing some to characterize the nation's political system as, "an ideological power vacuum in which the state allows liberals and conservatives to slug it out" (Meijer, 2010).

Recently, the Ministry of Education reflected the wishes of the late King Abdullah to modernize after stating, "The [current] objectives of Saudi educational policy are to ensure that education becomes more efficient, to meet the religious, economic and social needs of the country" (Ministry of Education, 2011). However, a wide variety of scholars have criticized Saudi Arabia's educational system on two primary grounds: an overemphasis on a narrow interpretation of the Quran in its religious instruction, and an overreliance on rote memorization (Lindsey, 2010; Niblock & Malik, 2007).

Such authors are not incorrect in their characterization of many Saudi Arabian classrooms as places where students uncritically recite religious teachings. Indeed, such findings have a historical and political foundation. For decades, the Saudi school system was a tool used to ensure that all future citizens would be raised with a particular set of values based on fundamentalist branches of Sunni Islam, though other branches were respected and recognized (Al-Rasheed & Al-Rasheed, 1996). Al-Rasheed and Al-Rasheed further add that the king of Saudi Arabia exists as not only the commander-in-chief and ruler of the nation, but also, "the leader of all tribal chiefs and the supreme religious leader" (p. 96). For years, Saudi Arabia has been a theocracy with the primary goal of promoting a fundamentalist vision of Islam. Prior to the Ministry of Education's revision under the leadership of the late King Abdullah, the Basic Foundational Principles of Education of the Education Policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stated that the country's educational goal was first and foremost to spread the Islamic faith and teach that Muhammad is God's prophet and messenger, with all other non-religious goals being secondary aims (Doumato, 2003). One scholar of Saudi Arabia has noted that in many ways, religious education within the nation is intended to homogenize the society by ensuring that only

a single version of Islam is taught in public schools (Doumato, 2003). Other sources note that the Saudi system reflects the influence of conservative clerics and religious conservatives who used the school system in the 1980s and 1990s as a political tool to enforce a particular “us versus them” world view—especially with respect to foreign ideas and world views and as a means of enforcing conservative cultural norms, such as the separation of the sexes (Meijer, 2010).

It is important to note that culturally, Saudi Arabia has an established tradition of marrying religion with political institutions. Moaddel and Karabenick (2008) note that Islam itself, being a more recent religion in comparison to Judaism and Christianity, has its origins in dialogue and solving the problems that faced Arabs during the time of the prophet Muhammad, such as uniting the several tribes of Medina into a larger political entity. Lacroix (2004) adds that Saudi Arabians often view the notion of “secular” politics as a trait of the Arab regimes that they had fought against in the past, such as Turkey during the Arab Revolt of 1916. Therefore, religion is seen as a way to solve political problems within Saudi Arabia rather than create them.

In service to this idea, Saudi Arabia has always tightly integrated religion with education, including ECE, and countless other aspects of its national politics. As Baskan and Wright (2011) state, “Saudi Arabia has a religious office to secure religious support for its policies, which institutionalizes the active involvement of religious scholars in political decision-making” (p. 99). This agency, called the Board of Senior Ulama (legal scholars), or BSU, provides Islamic analysis of cultural and legal issues in order to assist policy-making. Alhargan (2012) notes that this is a mutually beneficial arrangement: the ruling family gains political legitimacy from the religious clerics, and the clerics gain the ability to meaningfully shape the country's policy. Therefore, in talking about all levels of Saudi Arabian education, it is important to realize that religion and political decision making are inseparable, sometimes to the point where Islamic leaders have attempted to use the curriculum as a vehicle to reinforce social conservatism.

I have spent some time discussing the “bird's-eye” view of Saudi education so that the reader may appreciate the degree to which education at all levels, including ECE, may involve an uncritical memorization of an extremely small set of religious facts, the underscoring of differences rather than similarities between people, a suspicion towards change or anything foreign, and a disesteem for critical thinking. In particular, female professionals working at all

levels of Saudi education, including those who work with the very young, are operating within this larger social context. They may be expected to navigate between attempting to please those judging the educational system based on conservative values and those judging it based on growth or performance in relation to other nations. Additionally, they are often themselves a product of this same educational system and therefore exposed to the country's heavy and uncritical religious education.

I cannot stress the point enough that, within this wider context, a teacher's self-identification as a devout Muslim may impact the material she presents to students, how she presents it, and to what degree she encourages discussion about the material in the classroom. Elyas and Picard (2010) posit that the predominant teaching style in Saudi Arabia is modelled on many educators' cultural and religious backgrounds. They explain,

Since teachers and lecturers possess such a high status in society and absolute power in the classroom, it is not surprising that they are reluctant to relinquish this power in favour of more “student-centred” pedagogy. This is especially pertinent since their power is not construed negatively in this context, but rather as a form of generous giving known as “ata” which flows from the teacher to the student. (p. 139)

Therefore, the one-directional flow of information from teacher to student that is characteristic of traditional public school education in Saudi Arabia, even at the ECE level, is often seen as a virtue consistent with Islamic religious ceremony, where an audience listens silently and unquestioningly to an imam's sermon.

Rugh (2002) further elaborates that if a taboo exists within Saudi Arabian society, it will also be felt within the classroom setting. As such, ECE teachers may feel a tangible pressure to operate within a relatively narrow set of professional boundaries. In many cases, teachers may actually be fearful of being overly enthusiastic about reform or insisting that educational approaches should be modified from the status quo, especially if the status quo has political or religious support. Rugh explains that “[q]uestioning of the basic tenets of Islam or of the wisdom of the monarch and his policies, for example, is understood by Saudis to be beyond the limits of public or classroom discussion” (p. 52). In the Saudi Arabian educational and political contexts, I have heard many colleagues in the kingdom express concern that vigorous support of reform will

cross a line and be interpreted as criticism or dissent. Religious boundaries may therefore constrain discussions that govern classroom behaviour.

Additionally restricting the debate regarding educational reform in Saudi Arabia is one current of what Hofstadter (1963) originally termed “anti-intellectualism.” The phrase characterized concerns that Hofstadter had towards American colleges at the time of his writing: namely, that they were moving away from education or enlightenment for its own sake or as a form of truthseeking. Instead, larger numbers of Americans were beginning to look towards higher education—and at schooling in general—as an institution that should teach the kind of morality valued by society. Further, Hofstadter noticed that a component of anti-intellectualism was a suspicion of the motives of the intellectual elite as being different from those that valued by the common man.

I would argue that strains of anti-intellectualism most definitely exist in the context of Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabian society, there often exists a vague mistrust of alternative viewpoints and critical analyses that run contrary to established mechanisms of socialization (Alhargan, 2012; Doumato, 2003). As products of this larger socio-political climate, it is possible that many ECE teachers within the country feel that learning more about non-traditional pedagogical methods presents them with a dilemma: namely, that incorporating new research and scholarship into the classroom could be promising for students, but may run contrary to common practices of behaviour and professional performance. Given the pervasiveness of religious and political discourse in Saudi Arabia, citizens are urged to resist corrupting influences and remain skeptical about outsiders' intentions. Under those circumstances, it is not difficult to see how certain modifications or negotiations of the ECE curriculum could have larger ramifications for one's sense of belonging or identity.

Indeed, my own experience has shown me that there are a number of professionals working in the field of education who have been told over their lifetimes that the role of a good citizen is not to question authority figures, but to accept direction as part of one's civic responsibilities. As products of the Saudi Arabian school system, many of us have been explicitly told to mistrust anything that did not originate from within our religion or community, and that open-mindedness can be a sign of weakness. Additionally, ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia operate in environments where there is a risk of scorn or punishment for individuals who self-identify as opponents of the

status quo. In short, I believe the insularity present in Saudi Arabian society is a highly significant factor in discussions of ECE and avenues of change.

Many ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia are indeed interested with engaging in non-traditional learning approaches and roles. Here, however, I would urge readers to bear in mind that the female educators wishing to implement (or at least experiment with) a “Saudi Arabian” strain of such approaches could face external pressure to abandon the effort in favour of maintaining the status quo. Though it could be argued that nearly every educational system suffers from institutional inertia and bureaucratic realities that oppose reform, the Saudi Arabian context is significant in that the models of ECE considered “traditional” are often legitimated on cultural or religious grounds.

2.2 The Demographics and Size of Saudi Arabia's ECE Workforce

In chapter 1, I made the claim that Saudi Arabian ECE teachers were almost entirely female. For readers unfamiliar with the Saudi Arabian practice context, I want to provide some elaboration on this statement and quantify it with available data. First, it is important to note that while women make up approximately half of Saudi Arabia's population, they make up only 22% of the total Saudi Arabian workforce (Beiter, 2016). Part of the reason for the lack of equal representation in the labour market comes from a legally enforced separation between the sexes; men are typically not permitted to interact side-by-side with female co-workers (and vice versa). Under state law, women have historically been required to be accompanied by a male chaperone when outside of the house, thus restricting the career opportunities open to them (Chew, 2015). Consequently, because of the logistical challenges of providing jobs to women in male-dominated industries, areas of study such as law, biology, architecture, or finance have traditionally been denied to women, though in the last two years the country has seen reform in these areas (Beiter, 2016).

For this reason, the employment avenues that have been widened to females within the country have been compressed into a relatively narrow set of occupations, with the educational sector being the largest single employer of the nation's working women, followed by social services, administrative work, and healthcare. Figures from the 2011 Ministry of Planning report that of approximately 1.1 million women in the Saudi Arabian labour market, approximately 387,000

worked in education, which represents about 35% of the country's total female workforce (Gahwaji, 2013). For this reason, just as there are avenues where females have been denied opportunity and education in order to separate them from economic sectors that are viewed as traditionally male, so too are males in the country explicitly denied opportunities to become early childhood educational teachers, roles where the traditional female qualities of being nurturing and patient with children are seen to be unique assets. As a result, World Bank educational statistics for every year between 2005 to 2014 (the most recent available) reported that 100% of pre-primary school teachers in Saudi Arabia were female ("Education Statistics," 2014).

Alquassem, Dashash, and Alzahrani (2016) report Saudi Arabia's early childhood education workforce consists of 22,819 teachers working in 2,559 distinct kindergarten and pre-kindergarten (pre-K) schools, both public and private, serving the educational needs of 182,556 students. However, the authors note that these figures are derived from 2014 data, and current figures for the 2015 and 2016 academic years are unavailable, so these numbers are now likely to be higher. These numbers also do not account for the number of women working in secondary-education sectors such as afterschool programs or literacy centres, those who are employed in areas that focus on the education of ECE teachers, or those who are employed in administrative sectors of Saudi Arabia's ECE. However, it is important to recognize that the 22,819 teachers referenced by Alquassem et al. are most likely to be women.

To say that the Saudi Arabian ECE classroom is a locus of *female* activity would be a tremendous understatement. Within the country, ECE is of academic interest because it is one of the few sectors in Saudi Arabia where one may locate female professionals operating with degrees of autonomy, often with the end goal of implementing national policy. Furthermore, in this environment women must often make difficult choices, and such decisions often end up shaping the nature of their lives, identities, and dreams.

With this in mind, I hope the reader is able to see why this thesis places such a heavy emphasis on documenting the experiences of these working women. Through analysis of only a handful of these compelling, multifaceted narratives, we are nevertheless able to bring important voices forward. In so doing, I believe we are presented with an invaluable opportunity to understand aspects of ECE professionals that have previously remained invisible, but which connect

strongly to larger notions of educational policy and reform as well as the way that women in this field engage in civic, social, and cultural activism.

2.3 Complications Faced by Females as Part of the Saudi Arabian Workforce

The concept of a Saudi Arabian ECE educator is multifaceted. Each woman working within the system is at the same time a female Saudi Arabian worker and a female teacher. Both associations are worth exploring separately and warrant academic interest. The women in this study share profound commonalities with other working women in their country and with female teachers all over the world. I will begin in this section with the way that being a female citizen of Saudi Arabia intersects with being a worker in general.

Above all, I wish the reader to consider the degree to which the professional education and occupation of women is constrained by socio-political factors. As Almunajjed (2010) describes it:

As a nation that deeply values family and tradition, the Kingdom has been hesitant to fully embrace any development that appears to threaten the traditional family unit. Because women's role in Saudi society has traditionally been the domestic one of wife and mother, the move toward greater female participation in the labor force has been met with skepticism, debate, and even hostility. Although many Saudi men welcome the opportunity for women to contribute economically, others fear change. There is a growing awareness that women have an important role to play in the labor market, but pervasive social customs continue to limit the scope and extent of that participation. (p.10)

For the duration of this section, I intend to underscore the degree to which both social norms and state-level policy limit the scope of females currently working within Saudi Arabia. These limitations are especially significant given how, as Joseph (1996) describes, patriarchal social structures are "woven throughout Arab society partly because of the fluidity between civil society and state, public and private domains, family and government" (p. 16). Under such a system, explicit governmental restrictions, implicit judgments about a woman's work, and the segregation of men and women in multiple aspects of Saudi Arabian life have clear and severe ramifications when it comes to a woman's ability to become a valuable component of the Saudi Arabian labour market.

It is important to begin by noting that the entry of Saudi women into the workforce was a function of increased educational opportunities and educational policy that has been continually expanded over the last sixty years. Before 1956, it was forbidden by law to educate women within the kingdom, and the first school explicitly catering to women was only established in 1960 after petitions surfaced from well-educated men who wanted their wives to be better conversational partners (Alsuwaida, 2016; Baki, 2004). The decision to teach women to read and write sparked controversy. Some argued that educating females was simply a form of Western colonialism that would lead to a compromise of the traditional family structure and Islamic values (Arebi, 1994). Others, including the former king Faisal (1964–1975), argued that there was nothing in the Quran that specifically discouraged female education and that the prophet Muhammad had once stated, “The search of knowledge is a duty for every Muslim male and female” (Hamdan, 2009, p.20). King Faisal and his supporters eventually won the battle for female education—under the condition that girls were to be completely segregated from male students. In less than two decades since the initial opening of Saudi Arabia's first women's school, public school enrollment was equal between boys and girls (Hamdan, 2005).

However, the quality and aims of education provided to women have been fundamentally different than those provided to men. Hamdan (2005) writes:

Women’s schooling at all levels – elementary, secondary, high school and university – remained under the Department of Religious Guidance until 2002, while the education of boys was overseen by the Ministry of Education. This was to ensure that women’s education did not deviate from the original purpose of female education, which was to make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for “acceptable” jobs such as teaching and nursing that were believed to suit their nature. (p. 44)

Hamdan also adds that in addition to narrowing the scope and freedom of female education, the governing agency of the Department of Religious Guidance, the General Presidency for Girls' Education, “has not enjoyed the same prestige as the Ministry of Education” (p. 44). As a result, there is concern that the educational system open to Saudi Arabian females is chiefly concerned with legitimating long-standing gender relations and power structures (El-Sanabary, 1994; Hamdan, 2005). Forster (2017) adds that the resistance on the part of conservative religious groups is often based on long-standing biases and strains of sexism. As he explains, “Saudi clerics have often decreed that women are not eligible to be religious, political, or legal leaders

because they are, by nature, weak, hesitant, emotional, and lacking full control of their bodies and minds” (p. 285). Proponents of this mindset therefore argue that expansion of educational opportunity to women opens the door for women to occupy positions where they will inevitably fail, bringing harm to the reputation of Saudi Arabia and its workforce. From this perspective, opening the door to women also denies opportunities to the country's males who, religious conservatives assume, would perform better simply by virtue of their sex. Because of these factors, Mazawi (2007) describes the expansion of educational opportunities to women as “topographies of struggle” (p. 86), since they invariably require a renegotiation of a woman's role within Saudi Arabian society and stated policy. As Rugh (2002) describes, academic degrees are not only about the certification of a knowledge base or skill set; they invariably create new social classes. Restricting access to education within Saudi Arabia therefore restricts challenges to the current status quo of gender relations.

However, even when opportunities to educate oneself are provided to women, they are done in such a way that cements a woman's status as a second-class citizen. Sabour (1996) describes women in Saudi Arabia as a “double-marginalized” group (p. 82), since they are both dependent on scholarships dispensed by the state and on approval of male guardians—including fathers, husbands, or even older brothers—who might allow them to choose a course of study. Where the state is concerned, Baki (2004) explains that at any given time, the options presented to women in terms of an occupation

are an extension of women's domestic roles, and utilize the stereotypical women's qualities of caring, nurturing, and service to others. They are also deemed culturally and religiously appropriate because they help maintain gender-segregation through women's work with other women in segregated work environments. (p. 6)

While the Saudi Arabian state is often generous in terms of the financial support given to its female students, it simultaneously constrains their career options.

Beyond the approval of a male guardian to begin participation in a program of study, females in Saudi Arabia are also inhibited by the time and energy invested by these male guardians to ensure they can travel to and from their schooling (Hamdan, 2005; Mazawi, 2007). Within the country, females are generally forbidden to travel by foot unaccompanied, and public transportation options are severely limited when they exist at all (Altorki, 2000). Additionally,

women attempting to travel by themselves have regularly faced various forms of harassment and discrimination by the country's religious police, or *mutawwi'in* (Hamdan, 2005; Hasso & Salime, 2016). Mazawi (2007) notes that because of factors related to access to travel and geographic proximity to colleges, educational attainment and opportunity for women in Saudi Arabia lags significantly in rural areas compared to urban locales; in cities like Riyadh, Jeddah, and Burayda, for example, women are likely to be closer to Western universities that offer them pathways into science and medicine.

Critics argue that, primarily because of the socio-political factors that surround the education of women in Saudi Arabia, the inherent quality of the education provided to them has always been a secondary concern. Problematically, and as a direct consequence of segregation within Saudi Arabia, when degree programs are offered to both male and female students simultaneously, both female professors and female students are often judged to be inferior to their male counterparts (Alsuwaida, 2016; Mills, 2009). Part of this inferiority stems from the inadequacy of women's facilities, classrooms, and other educational resources in comparison to those provided to their male peers (Al-Mohsen, 2000). As such, a vicious cycle results: female students are denied the full opportunity to succeed in any particular program, which in turn provides evidence of their inferiority, which in turn reduces the esteem and resources provided to their education. As long as the direction and focus of the education provided to women in Saudi Arabia continues to be led by religious conservatives seeking to retain existing control mechanisms, it is likely that the quality of education provided to females will continue to lag, and the value of their scholarship and hard work will continue to be marginalized.

With respect to the status of women as second-class teachers and thinkers, Hamdan (2005) notes,

Cultural customs that deny women equality have become entrenched in the Muslim culture to the point where they are often accepted as Islamic rules. Yet, many of the customs or rules adhered to today cannot be found in Islamic texts (for example, the belief that women should not drive cars or that women should not pursue Law or Engineering). (p. 54)

Thus, there is a presumed religious basis for the treatment or status, and troublingly, it is found widely throughout Saudi Arabian culture. Ironically, the very presence of inequality is often seen as justification enough for its existence.

Supposing, however, that a woman successfully navigates the difficult waters of educating herself within Saudi Arabia, including challenges relating to her choice of vocation, her mobility, and the financial costs of such education, her ability to succeed in the labour market is limited long after she leaves the classroom. As with her education, a woman must first obtain the permission of a male guardian to work in Saudi Arabia (Chamlou, 2008; Hamdan, 2005). Here, disagreement between a woman's idea of where she would like to work and, for example, her husband's views on the topic, could result in an avenue of human progress and achievement being completely denied. However, even with the assent of a male family member, the presence of unequal, segregated education and cultural bias would have tremendous consequences for a woman entering the labour market. On one hand, it is true that women have been provided with the ability to enter the Saudi Arabian workforce and earn a living, and the promotion of female education has produced a demand for female instructors (El-Sanabary, 1994; Fakhro, 1996). Unfortunately, Al-Ahmadi (2011) found that when females wished to reach positions of higher influence or leadership—for example, in the fields of medicine, finance, or education—they often entered into direct competition with their male peers. In these areas, because of a combination of inferior education and social prejudice, these women were often passed over for promotions or other forms of advancement. Of the cases where women were promoted, Forster (2017) adds additional context to their upward mobility. He writes,

Although a few high-profile women have appeared at international economic forums and conferences and a few have become senior public sector officials and business leaders, they have only been granted a presence in areas that do not challenge the authority of the Saudi state or entrenched male business interests. (p. 270)

Thus, a woman's advancement into senior levels of policy formulation and decision-making is decided by male gatekeepers who will likely deny the opportunity for a her to further her career if they suspect it will challenge existing socio-political conventions. Forster's (2017) description indicates that many administrators adopt a “better safe than sorry” approach, denying opportunity to all women as the most effective safeguard of patriarchy.

Several additional factors underscore the prevalence of treating women as second-class citizens in the labour market. Elamin and Omair (2010) found that older males—those most likely, for example, to be employed in senior levels of responsibility and policy-making—were most likely to hold patriarchal views and negative perspectives on women entering the workplace. Thus,

women attempting to elevate their careers are particularly beholden to those who are most pessimistic about their ability to succeed. Chamlou (2008) describes how promotions favour men based on cultural conceptions of the roles of men and women in Saudi Arabia. He writes,

Despite the Shari'a's strong support for women's economic rights, it also makes an important distinction between equality and equity—a subtle difference that affects the treatment of men and women. Equality normally refers to absolute equal claims, regardless of any other considerations. Equity is based on the notion of different roles and needs affecting rights... [Under conservative perspectives] Men are responsible for providing for the family. Women are not. This means that men should be given resources in accordance with their responsibilities. (p. 53)

Chamlou (2008) explains that a cultural stigma also exists in Saudi Arabia of the unemployed male, further increasing perception of males as more deserving of any particular job than females. Together with the prevalence of *wasta* (loosely translated as “influence” or “clout”), an open position is often treated as a way to gain additional favours and status; here, men often have more to gain by offering the position to a man than they would to a woman. Unfortunately, Chamlou explains that when more-qualified female applicants are passed over in favour of their male peers, they often have little legal recourse, since most labour disputes are settled by local judges who in turn are likely biased against the interests of female professionals.

These cultural biases against women are certainly reflected in the country's labour statistics. For example, while rates of unemployment in Saudi Arabia were 12% for working males, 33% of Saudi Arabian working women were registered as unemployed (Forster, 2017, p. 275). Forster additionally notes that while half of all current Saudi Arabian university graduates are female, only one in seven will become employed full time. Furthermore, Foster presents a bleak picture of women's advancement in the country, noting that less than 0.1% of women make up members of the boards of the companies that are publicly listed in Saudi Arabia (p. 275).

Because of entrenched gender expectations and cultural inequality, routes of entrepreneurship have become more popular for women in the country, and as of 2005 more than 16,000 women in the country owned their own businesses (Hamdan, 2005). As such, there has been a movement of female labour away from the public sector and into the private sector. However, studies of these women have noted that while government regulation easing male guardianship with respect to labour and financial decisions have made the business climate more favourable

to female entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia, training and mentorship programs for women are still in short supply, and male representation is still a factor in many aspects of establishing and financing a female-owned business (Danish & Smith, 2012).

2.4 Complications Faced by Female Teachers

It is hard enough to be a woman simply attempting to work in Saudi Arabia due to the numerous cultural and institutional systems that seek to silence, discourage, and marginalize. However, it is hard to be a female teacher anywhere in the world. In this segment of the review of literature, I wish to move the discussion to a global one of females in the profession of teaching, who face several challenges that stand apart from those of practising in a Saudi Arabian cultural and political context.

Immediately, it bears noting that teaching at any level is not an easy job. In exploring a population of teachers in the UK, Ho (1996) found it to be a high-stress occupation in comparison to the stress levels of other jobs in the general population, with 67% of teachers reporting the occupation was their main source of stress in comparison to only 35% of the non-teachers surveyed. However, studies suggest that female teachers experience these stressors more profoundly and across a multiplicity of additional dimensions.

Cinamon and Rich (2005) note that there is a strong irony related to the teaching profession: it is often proposed to women as a career path that would be ideal due to self-described low levels of career commitment and an ample amount of free time left at the end of the work day to spend with family. However, the researchers found that women felt that being a teacher and mother at the same time was neither easy nor enjoyable, and the high importance attributed to both of these roles caused high levels of stress. The researchers noted that the conflict was intensified for younger teachers. Nurmayanti, Thoyib, Irawanto, and Irawanto (2014) explain in their review of female teacher experiences in Indonesia that female teachers often felt as though they were balancing three jobs at the same time: that of a mother, teacher, and housewife. Wafula (2010) adds that the demands of the teaching profession were often complicated by a lack of ability to control the work itself, heightening the potential for fatigue and burnout.

In a study of female and male teachers at the university level, Blix, Cruise, Michell, and Blix (1994) found that female teachers were more likely to experience high levels of stress, with more than 66% of the participants noting that they felt stress at work more than half of the time. The researchers also found that female teachers were more likely than male teachers to change jobs as a result of the experienced stress and were less likely than their male counterparts to feel adequately motivated and rewarded for their efforts.

In a study of female workers, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) differentiated workplace stress as arising from three varieties of conflict: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behaviour-based conflict. Time-based conflicts were those in which additional time requirements pulled teachers away from spending time with their families or created situations where a teacher would be forced to choose between participating in a work or a family activity. Strain-based conflicts occurred in cases when stress in one dimension of professional life—such as insecurity, lack of autonomy, role ambiguity, a lack of support, or work overload—spilled over into the domestic sphere in the forms of negative emotions such as fatigue, irritability, depression, or anxiety. Behaviour-based conflicts occurred when female workers expected to exhibit one set of desirable behaviours—such as being firm and authoritative in front of a class of children—found it difficult to switch back to a much different role at the end of the work day.

In a longitudinal study of teacher burnout, Burke and Greenglass (1995) found that female teachers were more likely than their male counterparts to experience negative effects to their emotional and physical health as a result of their occupation. These maladies included psychosomatic symptoms, such as headaches, anxiety, and loss of appetite, but also included higher propensities for drug and alcohol use, a lack of exercise, a lack of marital satisfaction, and reduced enjoyment of leisure activities. With respect to this stress and anxiety, Anderson, Levinson, Barker, and Kiewra (1999) found that a vicious cycle can result: as teachers experience negative psychological outcomes as a result of the profession, they become less empathetic, caring, and engaged with their students, which in turn heightens the degree of negativity experienced throughout the school day and in their own lives after-hours.

Additionally, Ranck (1999) contends that widespread cultural and gender norms contribute to ECE's status as a field with low pay, low advancement opportunity, low training requirements, and high turnover. As the author explains,

Society's "conventional wisdom" links a series of pervasive assumptions to the image of mother and child: That women naturally love and are able to care for not only their own, but everyone's children and that caring for children is not difficult and can be done for little or no remuneration at a minimum cost to parents and society. Such assumptions reinforce the belief that little, if any, professional preparation or experience is necessary to educate or sustain teachers and caregivers to do what comes "naturally." (p. 60)

Thus, while the literature is consistent in presenting any manner of teaching as a stressful occupation with no shortage of role strain, such realities are not reflected in how the general public may view the occupation in societies with particularly strong notions of a women's primary role as a child-rearer.

This has unfortunate consequences within the field. Studies show that ECE teachers with advanced training are more involved with and empathetic to the children in their classrooms when compared to their peers who lacked a college degree (Gahwaji, 2013). However, because the desire to excel through professional training does not result in higher pay or greater recognition often enough within the field, ECE teachers frequently lack any external incentive to self-improve (Ranck, 1999; Sylva et al., 2003). Sylva et al. (2003) further add that with the low pay distributed to ECE teachers, ongoing education and professional training may also be a financial goal beyond the reach of any ECE teacher solely dependent on her salary.

For this reason, one author's exploration of ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia concluded that where private centres were concerned, parents were receiving an essential service at the expense of the teachers themselves; rather than address fundamental issues related to pay, education, or job satisfaction, it was in many cases easier for private centres to allow a generation of teachers to burn out and then to replace them (Mahdly, 2001). Gahwaji (2013), writing specifically about the Saudi Arabian practice context, suggests that the retention of teachers in ECE is highly dependent on internal passion and the financial support of each teacher's family.

2.5 Additional Obstacles to Quality Education and Curriculum Modification

In this section, I wish my reader to understand a significant component that complicates organizational and institutional change: the fact that jobs in the educational sector are prized for

reasons entirely unrelated to teaching or education itself. As part of the process of “Saudization,” the government has had to entice Saudi nationals through extremely competitive salaries—Saudis can earn up to 100% more in the public sector than they would in the private sector, and on average earn salaries three times more than foreign workers who possess the same skill set (“How to address,” 2012). However, these salaries are fueled by the nation's oil wealth. Al-Rasheed and Al-Rasheed (1996) point out the danger of such a practice:

Saudi Arabia's wealth is not generated by the development of the country's internal forces of production, but from the sale abroad of a raw material ... This is an economic-based model of the state whose governing body resembles a landlord dependent entirely on rents from private property and land, rather than living on the returns of a diversity of productive investment.
(p. 98)

With this in mind, the educational sector (along with much of the Saudi economy) has long been affected by “rent seeking” behaviour on the part of Saudi Arabian citizens. Tullock (1993) defines “rent seeking” as the process of using the political arena as a means of securing special privileges that would ordinarily not be available. Indeed, through “Saudization,” several sectors of the economy have been created where Saudi citizens—despite being less trained, less motivated, and less proficient—demand and obtain higher salaries than foreign workers simply because they are Saudi Arabian (Albahussain, 2006; Allam, 2009; “How to Address,” 2012). Concessions made in the name of rent seeking have the potential to cause long-term damages as, over time, the sectors affected by rent seeking become characterized by less competition and more inertia, which in turn cause them to become less effective relative to neighbouring countries that have a lower degree of influence from special interests (Olson, 1982).

Over the last two decades, Saudi leaders have realized that the policy of creating easy jobs in the government sector as a form of providing a form of social welfare to its citizens is unsustainable (Madhi & Barrientos, 2003). In support of this point, Bowers (2004) notes that the per capita income of Saudis was approximately USD \$28,000 in 1981 due to the privileges awarded to Saudi citizens, though according to figures provided by the kingdom, that figure dropped to \$8,000 by 2004. As such, educational reform has become a more pressing issue over the last twenty years as the country attempted to shift its focus on wealth creation away from the sale of raw material and towards the intellectual and professional development of its people (Al-Faisal, 2006).

Many scholars have attempted to document the damage that rent seeking has caused to the educational sector. Zakari (2012) notes that, as a whole, those who work in education are more commonly motivated by obligation rather than passion. As Zakari explains, “employees who feel an obligation to maintain their employment and cannot afford to lose their jobs have little incentive to perform beyond what their job description states” (p. 72). Additionally, Saudi teachers and administrators, taken as a collective, are often unmotivated to meet performance goals and lack formalized lesson plans (Khan, 2011). Aljhani, Mawdh, Hassan, and Amzat (2011) conducted a study of school administrators in the Tabuk region of Saudi Arabia and found that more than 60% of administrators chose to avoid potential sources of conflict as long as possible, until the situation became so urgent that it couldn't possibly be ignored any longer. One study of bureaucracy on all levels of Saudi government found that an overwhelming 88% of all bureaucrats reported dislike of innovation due to the potential complications it could introduce in their day-to-day lives (Iqbal, 2011). In short, academia is filled with many administrators who are looking for the path of least resistance when it comes to their careers and professional duties. I include these statistics only to illustrate that it is extremely likely that many, if not the majority of, female ECE teachers who wish to institute changes to their approach or pedagogy will encounter resistance from above, especially if classroom changes are significant or require administrative approval. As such, these organizational and institutional factors function as another form of repression to the full extension of their voices and ambitions.

Additionally, just as the intersection of religion and politics informs the actions of teachers, it may also inform and shape the actions of administrators. Doumato (2003) finds that administrators can and do use religious reasoning to define the concept of professional role and expected behaviour. At times, these highly conservative teacher roles may conflict with those prescribed by scientifically grounded pedagogical methods—including those that would reasonably align with objectives stated by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education. Although social psychologists such as Lev Vygotsky (1967, 1978), Jean Piaget (1962), and Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) have each linked childhood play, the creation of artwork, and non-traditional forms of assessment with a number of benefits to learning and language acquisition, these traits could easily be criticized by fundamentalist Islamic clerics as being “unserious” and not aligned with the state's religious objectives (Doumato, 2003). With this in mind, an ECE teacher wishing to more heavily incorporate art or play into her classroom may feel that such modifications may subject her to clerical or administrative criticism. Additionally, just as

educators may be bound in their decisions by considerations of Islamic conservatism, administrators who approve significant pedagogical shifts may often operate under similar constraints.

Often, administrative conflicts and incoherence contribute to unclear teacher roles within Saudi Arabia. In an examination of the Saudi Arabian ECE landscape, Algarni and Male (2014) found that the Ministry of Education sets a clear expectation that head teachers should be capable managers and organizers, but also should exceed expectations of their basic duties in order to establish rapport with families and create creative lessons. However, considering that educational policy is often centralized around the Ministry of Education, the bureaucratic requirements of maintaining an orderly classroom (and the necessary paperwork these efforts generate) leave teachers with little time to go above and beyond their explicit instructions. Furthermore, the authors note that generating creativity within the classroom is made difficult when a teacher cannot modify the classroom itself, either because the space is rented and cannot accommodate additional facilities (such as a garden or library), or because classroom layout and desk arrangement is dictated by official policy. The authors conclude that while the Ministry of Education wants teachers to take a more active role in achieving classroom excellence, many of its stipulations and requirements come to work against this larger, long-term goal of improvement.

Further exploring the idea of role in Saudi Arabia, Ben-Bakr, Jefri, and Al-Shammari (1995) found that among a sample of Saudi Arabian teachers, unclear and conflicting classroom and administrative roles were strongly correlated with the degree of job stress experienced. As job stress increases, Freudenberger (1977) warns, “burnout” is a likely outcome; the author defines the term as an irreconcilable and pervasive sense of fatigue or disappointment that arises when workers feel that their devotion, beliefs, or responsibilities have failed to produce the reward they expected. Numerous studies have shown that role stress and role conflict are major predictors of burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Idris, 2011; Lee & Ashforth, 1996).

Burnout is troubling for any employment sector, as it removes skilled and experienced labour from an organization (Freudenberger, 1977). My own experience has suggested that when educators wish to implement the exciting educational findings they discover through their education—either within Saudi Arabia or outside of it—and find the site of practice opposed to

change, they either move elsewhere (often outside of the country) or burn out in their current position. In my opinion, “bottom-up” organizational change requires enthusiastic leaders who are familiar with the larger contexts and compromises that define their workplace. In Saudi Arabia, it also requires granting teachers trust and autonomy in order to reduce role strain and produce positive outcomes. Teachers experience no small degree of frustration when their options are severely limited (Algarni & Male, 2014). When ECE teachers burn out or leave the country, change becomes even more sluggish, and the loss of this experience and expertise is difficult if not impossible to replace.

Once again, I wish to point out that there are few studies that focus on how the unique experiences of women working in Saudi Arabia shape professional practice. For example, there is a notable gap in the literature that addresses the experiences of ECE teachers who have experienced role strain so great that it caused them to exit the field entirely. This study seeks to fill in this gap and others like it by attempting to seriously document the negotiations and adaptations women must undertake if they wish to remain in a field they are passionate about.

Based upon my own experience, I would add that that role strain is inherent within the ECE system from the level of professional education and onward into their future careers. ECE teachers are taught about the theories of men like Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner within Saudi Arabia as part of their professional education; this is curious for a few reasons. First, because many of their theories and insights run contrary to established educational practice within Saudi Arabian ECE and, second, because as white, Western authors, there is little serious discussion as to whether their theories can be successfully adapted and applied to an educational context of profound political and cultural differences. I was interested to further explore such disconnects between professional theory and practice in Saudi Arabian ECE from a woman's point of view. While this work will engage with Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner, it will often be to critique them and perhaps move beyond them as a basis for new, more context-sensitive theories of native educational practice.

2.6 An Emergence of Dissenting Voices and Expansion of Women's Rights

The previous subsections have attempted to illustrate the difficulties that face a female ECE teacher wishing to voice her opinion, modify her curriculum, interact with the larger public, balance her work and family life, and/or further her career. Here, I wish to introduce some positivity into this section of the chapter. The good news is that there are a variety of cultural factors that are operating to make the Saudi Arabia inherently more accustomed to open discussion and to modification of the country's cultural and political institutions, and more avenues are open that will allow current and future generations of women to lead and excel.

Though religious justification has long been used as a way to control women and resist institutional change, Baskan and Wright (2011) note that even the idea of “Islamic fundamentalism” isn't necessarily a monolithic concept: Saudi Arabia's neighbouring state, Qatar, also features state-sponsored Islam, and its components of a secular approach to education are more akin to Turkey's. The authors also speculate that the reason for these differences come from Saudi Arabia's unique nature of having a “religious class” of almost solely male, often older Islamic thinkers who hold legitimacy. However, living in an age of rapid communication and exposure to international media has brought Saudi Arabian citizens of all backgrounds in closer contact to a differing view of women, where women's success as leaders, entrepreneurs, and scholars has been made much more visible on the world stage (Alsuwaida, 2016; Hamdan, 2005). Female agency and accomplishment in neighbouring countries such as the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait challenge the notion that revised gender roles and greater participation by women in public spheres and policy-making compromises Islamic values. Indeed, more women are challenging which interpretations of their roles and behaviour are valid based upon their own justification and interpretation of the Quran (Hamdan, 2005).

As a result of greater legitimacy being granted to alternate viewpoints, Lacroix (2004) notes the relatively recent rise of what she terms Islamo-Liberals; that is,

[those who] have managed to create [among Saudi Arabians] a common democratic, nationalist, and anti-Wahhabi political platform, thereby giving birth to a new trend within the Saudi political-intellectual field. This trend thus stands out both because of the novelty of its religio-political discourse and

because of the extreme diversity of its proponents, who come from very different generational, regional, and intellectual backgrounds, reflecting in a way the Kingdom's own diversity. (p. 345)

In short, Lacroix notes that a new breed of thinkers, clerics, and citizens have begun to work within the system, and as fellow Muslims, they are being granted both media attention and political legitimacy. Alhargan (2012) adds additional commentary to the rise of Islamo-Liberals, stating that

[t]he space for citizens to pressure the government from below and to contest government policies has become larger ... The voices and activities promoting constitutional reform and advocating for civil society have increased significantly, and they have been joined by a wide swath of society. (p. 137)

Hamdan (2005) adds that

[w]omen are learning to use the so-called, "legitimate language," religious language, a language that cannot be challenged by their male peers to attain their goals. Saudi women are also directed towards studying Islamic law and Shar'ia so they can speak in the name of Islam. This is a powerful way to confront the status quo. (p. 46)

Thus, even under the shared banner of Islam, Saudi Arabia is slowly awakening to new forms of being and knowing and recognizing a growing plurality of voices.

Here, one cannot discount the sincerity of the late king Abdullah's (2005-2015) attempts to reform and to defend new changes to even his most critical and conservative Islamic clerics during his lifetime. In this, his leadership strikes me as having direct parallels to the rule of King Faisal (1964-1975), who faced similar opposition in leading women to education (Hamdan, 2005). Notably, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, established in 2009, features a student body consisting of both men and women working side by side and, by this, represents a measure of good faith to move away from segregation in higher education (Wrampelmeier, 2012). In short, Abdullah was not afraid to disagree with clerics and used the Islamic principle of "obey the ruler" to his advantage (Alhargan, 2012). His death raises questions of whether his successor, King Salman, will continue in his footsteps, though my colleagues and I are hopeful that he will continue the trend of gradual social change.

A more open and honest climate of discussion and disagreement is a wonderful gift to ECE in Saudi Arabia. Now more than ever before, citizens and leaders alike are establishing that it is possible to be both spiritual and critical simultaneously and that not all differing ideas are subversive in and of themselves. Therefore, while the path forward for female teachers to have equal participation with their male counterparts is not an easy one, there has never been a better time in the country's history for allowing women to help shape the field of ECE from within. I believe that every day, as a society we become more willing to invite women to participate in discussions of pedagogy, training, and assessment in ECE, even if we may have a long way to go. Every day, we do become more willing to listen.

2.7 Approaching the Notion of Child-Centredness in Saudi Arabian ECE

Given the above background of what the ECE landscape in Saudi Arabia looks like to a teacher working within its framework, I wanted to focus on a particular point of tension. It is tremendously good news that the nation's leaders have explicitly stated their wishes to move towards child-centredness in ECE policy (MEP 2017a, 2017b). This is all the more wonderful given that bringing more child-centredness to ECE has been a lifelong goal of many of the country's female educators—including myself.

The issue is that these modifications and proposals often conflict with internal and external conceptions of an ECE teacher's role in Saudi Arabia, her agency in the classroom, and the administrative and institutional conditions that often discourage or repress women in their goal of creating the environments they wish to teach in. Additionally, we must recognize that many Saudi Arabian teachers, even those who would describe themselves as advocates of child-centred learning in ECE, may nevertheless reproduce long-standing cultural attitudes. Further, these attitudes may run contrary to the spirit and meaning of the approaches the Ministry of Education wishes to incorporate.

For this reason, it is necessary to first arrive at a working conception of what a child-centred pedagogy looks like in the classroom. While a lengthy comparative analysis among a multiplicity of ECE approaches is beyond the scope of this research, a comparison matrix of Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, and HighScope across several dimensions of pedagogy may be found

in Appendix A of this document. In this chapter, sketching several commonalities growing in international ECE will allow me to present where current trends present additional challenges to Saudi Arabia's ECE system and for the women working within it.

At its very core, child-centred learning adopts a view of each child as a capable, competent participant in his or her own learning, and worth listening to (Rinaldi, 1993). Modern philosophies of child-centredness in ECE, such as Reggio Emilia, borrow heavily from the ideas of Russian sociologist Lev Vygotsky (1967, 1978) who posits that children create meaning and learn through social interactions. Additionally, they have been strongly informed by the ideas of John Dewey (1997, 2008), who theorizes that worthwhile education should make the child an essential component of his or her own learning. Furthermore, Dewey noted as early as the 1930s that lessons that were validated by the child's own experience and perception were more powerful than those that were simply told to a child by an adult. Interestingly, democracy, as Dewey perceived it to be, was defined as the ability of people to make the decisions that affect their lives (Ross, 2011).

This notion stands in stark contrast to what Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) refer to as the idea of “tabula rasa,” an idea introduced by the philosopher, John Locke (1690). As Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence explain, this casts the child in the role of

[a] knowledge and culture reproducer... an empty vessel needing to be filled with knowledge and to be “made ready” to learn and for school; as nature, following biologically determined and universal stages of development; as an innocent, enjoying a golden age of life, uncorrupted by the world; or as a supply factor in determining the labour force. What these ideas or constructions have in common is that they produce a “poor child”, passive, individualized and incapable. (p. 7)

In short, where many systems of education saw the child as deficient and in dire need of expertise, child-centred approaches often view children as unique and worthy participants in the concept of not just learning knowledge, but creating knowledge.

As such, teachers in child-centred ECE programs are often compelled to look for ways that children can express the full depth of their passion and understanding even when limited by vocabulary, locomotion, or other developmental criteria that differentiate them from adults. One of Reggio Emilia's founders, Loris Malaguzzi (1998), proposed the concept of “the hundred

languages of children.” Many modern ECE approaches were developed around the understanding that children are still developing their language skills, and multicultural societies may have a classroom full of children who each speak different primary languages (Caldwell, 2002). As such, art and play allow for all children to speak a “universal” language to communicate what they know both to themselves and to teachers, and therefore serves as a bridge between different cultures (Fraser, 2000).

In expanding on this point, Dahlberg, et al. (1999) state that, because all children are respected and valued for their unique gifts, a multiplicity of right answers and valid approaches exist in child-centred learning. All students are accommodated in terms of their perspectives and constructed meaning, and so there may be several “right answers.” Consequently, truth is built and created on a basis of mutual agreement and sincere understandings of another student's viewpoints or discoveries (Rankin, 1992). Often, the teacher in such ECE classrooms is not a person who intends to deliver known information. Instead, the teacher's role more closely approximates a guide or shepherd; rather than espousing a single “correct” answer to any task or inquiry, the teacher's role is to interpret, understand, and to help children construct their own viewpoints (Rinaldi, 2005).

Naturally, this causes a shift in the pedagogical viewpoint and fundamental processes of ECE in comparison to the traditional, instructor-oriented methods that have been historically common in countries like Saudi Arabia. Pratt (1998) terms this the “transmission” perspective of education. Pratt adds that in transmission-based models of education, the curriculum is often described in such terms as “well-defined” or “stable.” When children are able to contribute to the learning process by adding knowledge, when they have the possibility to modify the curriculum, and when they have the power to dictate when and how they prefer to learn, the role of the teacher must necessarily be modified.

Of course, modification has always been part of ECE pedagogy. Even a philosophy like Reggio Emilia, with its roots in Italy, is larger than an “Italian” concept, and no single “correct” method of application exists (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Rinaldi, 2005). Therefore, employing a child-centred approach involves a give-and-take relationship between the core values and components of the pedagogy and the cultural, administrative, social, political, and personal boundaries of each individual educator (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Thus, when I talk about the idea of

child-centredness in Saudi Arabia, the importance of the teachers themselves cannot be marginalized.

However, considering that current roles and teacher-centred learning are strongly legitimated by Saudi Arabia's marriage of religion, culture, and educational policy, it may not be a given that every ECE teacher will welcome the values of student-centred learning on their own merits, accept children as capable classroom actors, nor embrace the concept of Dewey-inspired classroom democracy. Collectively, we don't know the extent to which ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia believe in child-centred learning because we haven't taken the time to ask them. Thus, if we as a nation wish to change any aspect of our current educational context, we must first begin by engaging in conversation with these teachers and bringing their voices forward. This study is intended to be a part of such a necessary effort.

2.8 A Framework for Understanding Saudi Arabian ECE Teachers and Their Lives

As I hope to prove through the remainder of this work, female ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia have much to tell us about their purposes, goals, philosophies, and personal lives that have profound ramifications on whether the country as a whole will be successful in moving in new, child-centred directions. So far, the literature has painted a picture of Saudi Arabian ECE in broad strokes, allowing us to see a portrait of the teachers and their working environment at a macro level. What hasn't yet been accurately represented are the stories and insights of the teachers themselves: how each of these women have found (and continue to find) a pathway to and through the country's ECE system. Suffice it to say that in this research I am greatly interested in documenting and analyzing these narratives, as I believe they hold a key to understanding the strengths and weaknesses in our educational system that will attend any discussion of modification.

Here, however, a theoretical framework is needed that can be responsive to the complex life of each individual ECE teacher. After all, the field is composed of diverse women with stories that are uniquely their own; to consider all of them as a single group in order to generalize broadly would marginalize the sum of their negotiations and lived experiences. Once again, it bears pointing out that, as social scientists, we have a poor understanding of how women come to

enter or exit the field, and what shapes their very identities as teachers in the field. To become a teacher of the country's youngest citizens is a powerful choice, but yet we have not taken the time to ask ourselves, "How did they get here?" or "What motivates them to keep going?"

In the chapter that follows, I will introduce the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) and his ecological systems theory as a means of furthering these useful questions and gaining insight at the individual level, as well as to determine how the complexities of the Saudi Arabian ECE practice context as described in the literature inform the day-to-day lives of real women. I believe that ecological systems theory is an excellent way to better understand the sets of decisions these teachers are making in their classrooms and how they are influenced by, and how they may be best supported in, their own personal journeys towards personal and professional growth.

3 Theoretical Framework

As I have noted, this is very much a study of the constructed role that current ECE teachers within Saudi Arabia hold within the context of their unique and particular environment and based on the sum of formative life experiences. For this reason, the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) provides an interpretive lens that I feel is useful for shaping the direction of this research and helping to compare and contrast the various narratives I have collected. While I provide a more thorough discussion of the ecological systems theory as the chapter progresses, to distill Bronfenbrenner's theory to its simplest components is to look at any particular environment or setting as the sum of several different and interconnected systems.

Every day, each Saudi Arabian ECE teacher makes decisions to retain or modify her pedagogical practices based on how she constructs and conceptualizes her role as an educator. Additionally, this role shapes her movement into, through, and often out of the ECE system as a whole. Because the notion of a role is so central to my research, Bronfenbrenner (1979) is useful in more carefully determining what the “expectations” of a role are and from what systems they originate. Additionally, when I speak of observable changes in an educator's role, ecological systems theory provides a way of more closely examining where the effects of such changes would be felt.

In the following sections, I provide a larger and more detailed summary of each of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, as well as how these concepts usefully serve in more fully understanding an female ECE educator's role in the context of Saudi Arabia.

3.1 Approaching ECE as an Ecological System

Since I have spent much time speaking of “role,” I feel it is most appropriate to begin with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) own definition. According to the author, “a role is a set of activities and relations expected of a person occupying a particular position in society, and of others in relation to that person” (p. 85). I wish to draw the reader's attention to one word in particular here: “expected.” It is important to note that Bronfenbrenner drew heavily on sociologist Kurt Lewin's

(2007, 2008) notions of systems theory and Gestalt psychology. According to Bronfenbrenner, any environment is shaped by the “phenomenological,” to borrow Lewin's term, as much as the real. That is, perceived notions of a setting or an ecological realm are as valid as those that can be verified. For example, if a father perceives that he will be fired at work, these beliefs will likely cause negative, but real, ramifications in his child's development if he is anxious or fearful about his ability to provide.

Because expectations are often formulated on the idea of what is probable or likely, it is reasonable to conclude that a teacher's role is complicated just as much by the way that she perceives the various systems and stakeholder actions as they are by the direct and real influence of stakeholders in those systems. In our case, an administrator in Saudi Arabia may not actually say to a teacher, “Do not teach in ways that are different from what we have now,” but if an ECE teacher perceives this to be the case or has had some experience that would suggest this is an unspoken rule, the teacher's role will nevertheless be defined in some part by that perception.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of ecological systems begins with what he terms the “microsystem.” The author defines this as “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (p. 22). Certainly, a thorough understanding of the microsystem is important to my research. Each Saudi Arabian ECE teacher is part of a particular classroom or care centre, and constructs roles based on both the spoken and unspoken directions provided by the people within the school system that they interact with. Codes of conduct and direct verbal and non-verbal communication from administrators may limit the kinds of practices and behaviours that teachers engage in, as well as how they choose to view their own development as people and professionals within that climate. The needs of a student or the administrative demands of a staff member will often delineate what an educator in Saudi Arabian ECE does or should do in day-to-day situations. As such, the concept of role is very intimately linked to Saudi Arabian ECE.

The worth of ecological systems theory, however, is that it provides us with a much richer way to contextualize roles, especially in practice sites as rich and complex as Saudi Arabia's ECE system and as they arise from the lived experiences of the teachers who populate that system.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), and at the time *The Ecology of Human Development* was first being written, it was typically only the microsystem that was studied by scientific research when any “environment” was examined. On the basis of this insight, Bronfenbrenner decided that human (and professional) development was not only influenced by the microsystems themselves, but was “affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded” (p. 21). Indeed, when teachers enter the classroom, they bring the sum of their experiences along with them and negotiate their responsibilities as individual members of several different groups—groups that may in turn have competing interests.

For that reason, one of the critical elements of Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological systems was the discussion of the “mesosystem,” or “a set of interrelations between two or more settings in which the developing person becomes an active participant” (p. 209). The interactions of a microsystem could be affected by another microsystem, such as a worker at home communicating to his workplace that he is going to stay home because he has a fever. Bronfenbrenner's focus on mesosystems examined the formal and informal dialogue that would take place when one microsystem reached out to communicate to another.

Such dimensions undoubtedly accompany an educator's experiences when teaching ECE in Saudi Arabia. Even in this practice context, where parent-teacher interaction can be more limited than the relationships found in North American educational systems, educators still must often interface with the student's parents and home life. This is to say nothing of the teacher's own home life, which undoubtedly forces additional negotiations with respect to the time away from the classroom that can be dedicated to reform or improvement. Female ECE teachers are often mothers themselves, which creates a frequent dilemma of how to divide care between one's students and one's own children. As Mary Catherine Bateson says, “In our society, it's usually the mother who has to be the mommy, whatever other responsibilities she may have ... Individually, we underestimate this need, and as a society we make inadequate provision for it” (2007, p. 140). To consider the influence of these and other mesosystems that compete for a teacher's attention enhances an analysis of how she begins to construct a classroom role.

Additionally, Saudi Arabian teachers performing field research are often enmeshed in a separate microsystem that places them in the role of a researcher, which imposes its own particular set of

demands with respect to observation, documentation, and reporting one's findings. In essence, any type of direct or indirect feedback that comes to a teacher from outside of the classroom will represent a mesosystem's forcing additional negotiations and limitations on a constructed classroom role.

Like many of us, the professionals who inhabit the ECE system of Saudi Arabia lead active, diverse lives; as such, there are a number of interrelations that will arise between microsystems to form a unique mesosystem for each teacher included in my study. Teachers may themselves also be part of professional organizations, Islamic congregations, parent/teacher associations, and academic committees located at their practice site. All of these different groups carry with them their own sets of implicit and explicit role expectations, and as such, create even more unique mesosystems that influence a teacher's idea of who they are and who they should aspire to be.

In short, the Saudi Arabian ECE classroom is always linked with homes (either literal or figurative) away from the practice site. When we talk about ideas of reform or different images of the child in a Saudi Arabian educational setting, our understandings are incomplete without examining the effects of the mesosystem. Indeed, even the smallest change could seem like a threat to what could be a teacher's very careful and deliberate balancing act between a professional and a private life—one that has been perhaps several years in the making.

Beyond the mesosystem lies Bronfenbrenner's "exosystem," which the author characterizes as "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (p. 25). For example, the laws of a particular society or rules of an organization set limits on the agency of citizens or employees, respectively. In turn, individual interpretation of those laws and rules may vary widely, and lived experiences will also come to bear on how absolute an educator interprets the rules to be. For example, the experience of seeing a colleague admonished for taking liberties with a set curriculum would be an example of factors from an ECE teacher's exosystem that make particular demands on the role of the instructor.

In explaining the effect of an exosystem upon a particular microsystem, Bronfenbrenner (1979) also hypothesizes the following:

The developmental potential of a setting is enhanced to the extent that there exist direct and indirect links to power settings through which participants in the original setting can influence allocation of resources and the making of decisions that are responsive to the needs of the developing person and the efforts of those who act in his behalf. (p. 256)

Or, in other words, those who feel that they have some degree of input into the rules and regulations that bind them to a particular microsystem will achieve higher degrees of personal and professional development. Conversely, those who have had some experience that suggests they lack agency and authority will be stymied in their ability to grow. Further, Bronfenbrenner (1979) hypothesizes that the more intermediate links and middlemen that exist between an individual and a setting of power, the more difficult development becomes. Additionally, the exosystem may be observed within a given microsystem when only certain members participate in a second microsystem. For example, even though a child cannot observe how a parent behaves or interacts with his or her peers in the workplace, those interactions undoubtedly affect the way the parent behaves towards the child in the home (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989).

Examining the exosystem present in various Saudi Arabian ECE programs may be tremendously helpful in understanding the constructed role and decision-making processes of its individual teachers. In particular, the structure of academic and political power in Saudi Arabia may hold a particular set of clues to partially explain why many of the country's teachers have been slow to become agents of change. How much investment do they feel they have in their ability to shape their workplace? Do they feel as though discussion is valued or that their feedback is encouraged? What lived experiences have validated or discouraged them in such efforts? I feel that exploring an ECE teacher's agency as a professional is important in understanding how she has come to build her present educational role.

Further, and to apply Bronfenbrenner's phenomenological perspective, it is helpful to think in terms of how a teacher assumes she may be judged by upper-level administrators—or possibly, how a Board of Senior Ulama member they have little or no contact with may interpret her actions. Similarly, the reasons behind the codified policies and communications between a school administrator and a classroom teacher may be shaped by the administrator's interaction

with community leaders, members of the Ministry of Education, or other political figures. An ECE teacher's role in Saudi Arabia may be shaped through her exosystem and without the teacher's full awareness, but the influence exists nevertheless.

The final element of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (as it was originally published) was the “macrosystem.” Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines this system as

consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies. (pp. 25–26)

He notes, however, that even at the system's outer level, neither culture nor subculture is monolithic. That is to say, they are changeable and develop in tandem along with all of the participants within them. In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) words,

the macrosystem also undergoes a process of development and in doing so lends movement to all its composite systems down to the level of the person. Thus the members of a changing society necessarily experience developmental change at every psychological level—intellectual, emotional, and social. (p. 265)

That is, actors within the macrosystem shape the macrosystem itself, and this ever-changing system in turn influences others.

Most important here is that both religion—including the affiliation with certain religious orders or denominations—and culture fall under the umbrella of Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem. In the case of my research, both personally practised religions and the conservative forms of state-sponsored Islam within Saudi Arabia influence the behaviour of ECE teachers and their conceptualization of education. As such, the macrosystem profoundly influences the kinds of role expectations that are placed on a female ECE educator. In turn, past interactions with colleagues, friends, and family who share a particular religious view will additionally contribute to the teacher's own view of how she should behave in front of students and the power structure that should be kept in the educational environment.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) himself notes that

[t]he tendency to evoke perceptions, activities, and patterns of interpersonal relation consistent with role expectations is enhanced when

the role is well established in the institutional structure of the society and there exists a broad consensus in the culture or subculture about these expectations as they pertain to the behavior both of the person occupying the role and of others with respect to that person. (p. 92)

Thus, roles are often adopted when they have strong cultural or historical traditions. My own experience has suggested that Saudi Arabia is a country where tradition is prized and consensus with the majority is culturally valued. Therefore, I suspect it would be harder for educators to picture themselves in roles that run contrary to those that are currently favoured and modelled within their macrosystem, but this warrants additional exploration and I was curious to see to what degree this held true from teacher to teacher.

Speaking further on roles, Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that a role “functions as an element of the microsystem,” but he clarifies that it “actually has its roots in the higher-order macrosystem and its associated ideology and institutional structures” (p. 86). For this reason, understanding the complexity of a teacher's role—for example, whether she feels it is within her capabilities to institute pedagogical changes in her classroom—is incomplete when seen through the lens of ecological systems theory without also considering the broad effects of culture, political power, and educational policy.

Once again, it is important to keep in mind that the phenomenological aspect of the macrosystem is significant here. It would be idealistic, to say the least, to ever determine what the macrosystem is within Saudi Arabia. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) wisely concludes, this would be impossible to ever determine with confidence, both because culture itself is so complicated and because it is constantly changing. Being able to pinpoint what each Saudi Arabian ECE teacher sees as her own macrosystem in the course of my research is impossible. Rather, I am more interested in exploring what an ECE teacher *perceives* to be the cultural or institutional messages that come to define who she is as a teacher and in determining if patterns and relationships exist from instructor to instructor. In my opinion, this cannot be done without a rich and full understanding of a teacher's past—especially her upbringing and childhood, as parents often transmit a definition or understanding of religion to their children that persists throughout their lives. Here I feel that narrative inquiry will be especially useful in comparing and contrasting how culture and religion within Saudi Arabia come to bear in shaping a female ECE educator's role.

Lastly, as Bronfenbrenner's theory was refined and reconsidered over the years, another ecological system was added known as the "chronosystem," or the way that the external systems—that is, the exosystem and macrosystem—develop over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). While this seemed to have been implied by the Bronfenbrenner's (1979) references to "a changing society" and "a process of development" (p. 265) at the time that his seminal work was published, it would appear that he wished to make it explicitly clear in later works that changes to external systems could become more pronounced given the additional passage of time (Darling, 2007).

Bronfenbrenner's (1989) description of the chronosystem is considerably more abstract than his description of other systems, but I nevertheless find it helpful to some extent in conceptualizing what some might call the "right time" for change. With respect to ECE in Saudi Arabia, we live in an era of international communication, shared educational metrics, a greater degree of social liberalism within the country, and greater exposure to different ways of teaching. As was mentioned previously in my review of literature, a number of additional forces have come together to make educational reform at all levels even more possible in Saudi Arabia; these have included a king more interested in modernizing the educational system, a larger number of citizens willing to question and engage the country's leaders and clerics in debate, and a growing number of Saudi Arabians returning to the country with ideas shaped by international schooling. An ECE teacher in Saudi Arabia who wishes to change some aspect of her classroom would arguably be more successful in this climate than at any prior point in the nation's history. Moreover, it is an unprecedented time of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, which provides a level of positive reinforcement for female ECE educators that has been absent in prior years. Thus, Bronfenbrenner would most probably argue that the chronosystem of Saudi Arabian ECE teachers, along with their micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, is unique in comparison to what it was a decade ago.

For the reader's benefit, a table follows immediately to provide an overview of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) five ecological systems.

Table 1: A summary of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems

Ecological system	Description	Examples
Microsystem	Any pattern of activities, roles, and/or interpersonal relations a developing person experiences in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics	The ECE classroom; a teacher's household
Mesosystem	The interrelations that exist between two or more ecological settings in which the developing person is an active participant	The interaction between the classroom and a teacher's household
Exosystem	Ecological settings in which the developing person is not an active participant, but which nevertheless affect particular microsystems or mesosystems of that developing person	The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education
Macrosystem	Consistencies found in meso, micro, and exosystems that reflect aspects of a larger culture or subculture in which these lower-order systems appear	Islamic conservatism; patriarchal systems in Saudi Arabia
Chronosystem	Larger patterns of sociocultural similarities that can be attributed to a particular place at a particular time	Saudi Arabian ECE in the 1980s

(Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989)

When the systems are looked at together, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is extremely helpful in examining the various “patchworks” that come together to create a unique life and a narrative with a singular point of view (Bateson, 2007). Since any professional role entails a give-and-take relationship between these various ecological systems, I was interested to see what systems have been strongest to my interviewees in terms of forcing negotiations and shaping the concept of the ECE educator herself.

3.2 Critiques of Ecological Systems Theory and Suitability to Saudi Arabian ECE

While Bronfenbrenner's body of work has largely been praised for its usefulness and richness in helping many gain insight into the social sciences, it should be noted that several critical responses have emerged since the publication of his theories. Coady and Lehmann (2007) express a concern that, because Bronfenbrenner places such a high focus on an individual's adaptation in a microsystem in the face of changing conditions in external systems, the issue of social justice tends to be minimized. That is, ecological systems theory is better equipped to

answering *how* individuals adapt to injustice or adversity rather than to answer *if* they should be expected to adapt at all. Coady and Lehmann assert that the framework tends to devalue the individual and his or her problems and, within the realm of social work, the framework struggles to bridge theory and practice.

Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, and Karnik (2007) state a concern that, because of Bronfenbrenner's popularity and accessibility, there is a danger that ecological systems theory can be seen as monolithic and not open to revision or interpretation by anyone other than Bronfenbrenner. The authors studied a number of papers authored which used Bronfenbrenner's 1979 publication as a foundation, but were unaware of later refinements to the social scientist's work which explained the importance of a chronosystem, the greater agency of the individual, and the amount of interpersonal development that occurred at the microsystem level.

Darling (2007) echoes the concerns of Tudge et al. (2007) in terms of highlighting a lack of academic awareness concerning Bronfenbrenner's later developments and refinements to ecological systems theory (1989, 2005), but further adds that most social scientists misunderstand the importance of phenomenological systems—that is, that events are real within a particular ecological system if the individual at the centre of the metaphorical circles perceives them to be real. The implication here is an interesting one for my research: many might think for example that two different ECE teachers practising in the same school or care centre, who are both Saudi citizens, and who both practise a common religion would “share” a culture, and thus inhabit the same macrosystem. The reality is that we are all influenced by our microsystem in different ways. Certainly, I'm sure my young Christian friend mentioned in chapter 1 of this dissertation would have had a profoundly different idea than I would of how the macrosystem around her shaped her role as a student and forced a series of negotiations between the expression of her faith and her relative comfort in daily life. It is important to bear in mind that we can only make inferences as to the qualities of a macrosystem through our own lived experiences and by talking to others who live and work in a similar social context to our own.

In speaking to colleagues about Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) theory, I have been asked if I feel that it can be used to explain phenomena that occur in my home country. Indeed, Bronfenbrenner was working within a primarily secular American context, and his findings may not be generalized to an environment where culture and religion often affect numerous aspects

of organizational policy. To begin, I will cede the point that most of Bronfenbrenner's examples are drawn from a part of the world that is very different from my home country, and he does little from a feminist perspective to address the gender inequality that exists between men and women in Western society—such inequalities are amplified even further when bringing Bronfenbrenner to an Arab context.

I would, however, argue that while these concerns focus on differences in location and culture, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model does not need a common culture to prove useful as a framework. If anything, the differences between my site of research and the world Bronfenbrenner knows is an invitation to pay closer attention to the differences in macrosystems as an additional series of data points to explain the differences in teacher's perceptions of their roles. Bronfenbrenner himself notes that macrosystems may be extremely different between two microsystems, and as such, the roles of the participants therein may be very different as well. To me, Bronfenbrenner's model is not invalidated by the differences in culture between, for example, Canada and Saudi Arabia. Much to the contrary, the theory becomes more relevant because such massive differences in the macrosystems and exosystems of both nations' ECE programs may help explain the reasons why researchers have observed lower degrees of educational reform than what might be expected, especially in consideration of the political desire in Saudi Arabia to reform the country's education and the amount of money earmarked by the king for the undertaking. In short, I believe that the framework of ecological systems theory is useful in its application to Saudi Arabia.

To take this point further, it is my personal belief that Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) ecological systems theory may in fact be more applicable in Saudi Arabian ECE practice than it is to many European or North American educational systems in which his work has commonly been extended. The most prevalent criticism of ecological systems theory is that it doesn't provide enough agency to the individual and at its most reductive tends to view the man or woman “at the centre of the circles” as the sum of all influences around him or her. When using ecological systems theory as an interpretive lens, it is important to note within Saudi Arabia that the agency of an individual is often framed by messages that originate with one's elders, clerics, or figures of direct authority. Considering the collectivist culture of Saudi Arabian society, individuals are very likely to view their actions as reflections of the various systems they inhabit. It is my

experience that men and women who live in Saudi Arabia define themselves quite profoundly by their shared environment and culture rather than despite it.

Regardless, I think most criticism of Bronfenbrenner (1979) does a disservice to the author's respect for the individuals at play and the complexity of how they are shaped by the environment around them. As Bronfenbrenner himself (1979) explains,

established models [of theory] typically employ a scientific lens that restricts, darkens, and even blinds the researcher's vision of environmental obstacles and opportunities and of the remarkable potential of human beings to respond constructively to an ecologically compatible milieu once it is made available. As a result, human capacities and strengths tend to be underestimated. (p. 7)

Even as early as his 1979 theory, it seems clear to me that Bronfenbrenner respected the agency of the individual and never made the claim that anyone's behaviour can be wholly explained by their environment. I too, wish to understand the idea of a constructed role and how it is shaped by ecological systems more than I wish to predict how an individual can be expected to behave in a particular environment or set of circumstances.

Another key point of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) theory as it pertains to this research is that it is not possible to link observed or recalled events with the influence of only one system, nor is it possible to suggest that a person can exist or has existed as part of any particular ecological system without the possibility altering it. As Coady and Lehmann (2007) explain of ecological systems theory:

[It] is above all a *relational* perspective ... The person and the environment are unceasingly, intricately, thoroughly and reciprocally sustaining and shaping one another. When we try to understand ourselves, our clients, or our work by focusing on one at the expense of the other we become reductionistic and prone to mistakes. (p. 91)

As such, my study takes this dual view of the Saudi ECE teacher as one who is influenced by her environment and as one who affects it through her thought and participation. My study is designed to more deeply observe how ECE teachers have come to define their current roles through the various social, cultural, and professional influences that currently exist and have been important factors in their life. However, I am also hopeful that exploring the lives of my

interviewees and co-constructing our understanding of possible ECE reform would be motivational to my participants.

If my research creates a change in the way that a Saudi Arabian ECE teacher constructs her idea of a classroom role, I would hypothesize that this would likely have ramifications in the mesosystems which she inhabits. For example, how might a Saudi Arabian parent react to news of a new unit based on a different system of pedagogical values? How would the ECE educators in my study respond to those conversations if they occur, and might they modify their role in response? Have such episodes occurred in the past? Will conversations be triggered among the families of my participants that affect or modify their conceptualization of an ECE teacher? I was also interested to explore and document, where possible, effects in the exosystems of my participants. For example, how might my participants theorize how a new classroom role would create opportunities or challenges at an administrative level? In short, I was extremely eager to document any sort of dialogue that occurred between the Saudi Arabian ECE teachers in my study and the participants in the various ecological “circles” that these teachers were a part of. I cannot say to what degree change will occur or has occurred in various ecological systems as a result of participating in the research, but I felt it was important to create space for the possibility.

Because this research does not lend itself to establishing cause-and-effect relationships, traditional notions of validity common to the hard sciences are impossible to satisfy. Instead, a study inspired by Bronfenbrenner (1979) would urge researchers to embrace the complex and varied spheres of influence that a person may simultaneously affect and in turn be affected by. Bronfenbrenner offers that,

[I]ike frictionless motion, ecological validity is a goal to be pursued, approached, but never achieved. The more closely it is approximated, however, the clearer will be the scientific understanding of the complex interplay between the developing human organism and the functionally relevant aspects of its physical and social environment. (p. 33)

Additionally, and as part of his idea of a new set of criteria for ecological validity, Bronfenbrenner rejects the idea that it is possible in the social sciences to create a site of observation that is “ideal” and free of any lurking variables. Not only is the goal unobtainable, in the author's

opinion, but because human beings are social creatures, they will rebel against the artificial constructions social scientists may wish to place them in. In the author's own words,

[one cannot] place a person in a social vacuum for the simple reason that the human being cannot function effectively under such conditions. It is like taking a fish out of water; the organism simply cannot survive for very long. And since human beings, like all living creatures, have strong survival mechanisms, the first thing a person does in such circumstances is to fill the vacuum with social meaning. (p. 127)

Indeed, I have no intention of making my study a “view from nowhere,” to borrow philosopher Thomas Nagel's (1986) phrase, and I hope very much that the research itself is personally meaningful to the ECE educators who populate my study.

Rather than have interviewees complete a series of perfunctory questions, my goal was to document how each came to construct and negotiate her role as an educator over the course of a professional lifetime. I hoped to capture the moments where my research participants filled our dialogues with social meaning. I also wanted to document their initial resistances or appreciations of the core values of child-centred approaches and philosophies and their attendant roles, to document how their current role shapes the events and operations of their classrooms, and to understand the nature of conversations that are generated within their ecological systems. Each case in this study is a story all on its own, with the participant playing the central part. There is no one ECE teacher in Saudi Arabia, nor is there one classroom, nor even one culture. By extension, there is no one “role.”

Because the roles of Saudi Arabian ECE teachers are constructed within various ecological systems, they are tremendously multifaceted and cannot be interpreted apart from the contexts in which they are constructed. Furthermore, while the sum of all of our various negotiations and formative moments shapes who we become as a professional, it is unlikely that we understand the full significance of those moments and all of the surrounding factors that lead us to make choices at the exact moment we face options. This recognition and understanding is often available only in retrospect, and often follows only after close analysis of one's memories and personal narratives. Such data are not only complex, but also present additional difficulty in that they must be constructed before they are to be collected.

For these reasons, I believe that Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) is the best match for approaching this challenge of studying ECE in Saudi Arabia: his work provides an excellent theoretical grounding because of his sensitivity to the ways context shapes thought and action, and vice versa. I believe that in order to best understand the current role of a Saudi Arabian educator, and the set of actions each has chosen to take in an ECE classroom, and the values each feels are central to her character, we must critically examine the various worlds—especially those beyond the classroom—in which these educators are inextricably linked. By filtering my collected data through Bronfenbrenner's interpretive lens, I hope to present a more nuanced picture of how many women involved in Saudi Arabian ECE come to navigate their personal lives and careers.

3.3 Formulation of Research Questions

As has been iterated previously, the purpose of my study is to more fully understand the concept of how female ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia have come to construct a classroom role based on the events of their lives. In order to best place myself in a position to gain new insights into the phenomenon of role construction in the Saudi Arabian ECE landscape, and using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a foundation for the study, I arrived at the following broad research questions:

- What are the experiences that underpin a women's entry into, pathway through, and journey in the field of ECE in Saudi Arabia?
- How have female ECE educators in Saudi Arabia come to make sense of who they are and what they do?
- What commonalities and differences are reflected in the narratives of the interviewed female ECE teachers, and what do they tell us about the larger field of Saudi Arabian ECE?

In short, the study is a first step towards determining from where and when a “professional self” arises, and how the commonalities of several seemingly disparate lives may be able to point the way towards what child-centred learning could look like in Saudi Arabia's ECE. I felt that the aforementioned research questions would be most useful in leading me to the details and stories that will result in an extremely rich portrait of the women who make up the Saudi Arabian ECE landscape. The next chapter more specifically deals with the methodology I feel has put

me in a good position to answer those questions and address the concerns that attend applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) work to a different educational, cultural, and political landscape.

4 Methodology

As described through the review of literature, the landscape of Saudi Arabian ECE is in a constant state of change and has required practitioners in the field to constantly renegotiate their professional roles and personal lives. Additionally, and following from the theories of Vygotsky (1967, 1978), Piaget (1936, 1962), and Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) that provide a foundation to this paper, I believe that knowledge is constructed within a shared reality. Taking a constructivist viewpoint, I believe it is impossible to ever arrive at an absolute truth (Brinkmann, 2013; Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006). Since the majority of quantitative data collection seeks to discover known quantities and sets of rigid rules in the physical world, I felt that such methods made little provision for the free will and individual agency I know exists in the Saudi Arabian ECE landscape. As such, the data I have chosen to collect and analyze are qualitative rather than quantitative.

Bodgen and Biklen (1998) have stated that qualitative streams of data are useful for thick descriptions and rich documentation, allowing an understanding of human nature to move beyond a superficial or reductive cause-and-effect relationship. Additionally, Walsh, Tobin, and Graue (1993) note that qualitative research has the benefit of allowing the work's reader to both see the work through the author's eyes, and vicariously observe and understand the experiences of the subjects themselves. Spradley (1979) states that "immersing" oneself in the data often allows for clearer patterns and relationships to emerge between what may seem like separate and unrelated points of data.

The aim of my interviews, therefore, was to create a process that would allow me to become familiar with each interviewee and allow them an open, comfortable space in which they could narrate their own lives and experiences. Through the interview process, I felt I would be placed in the best possible position to find shared connections and commonalities across these distinct and unique narratives that could be instrumental in better understanding Saudi Arabian ECE as a whole. As a researcher, my intent was not to conduct research for its own sake, but to learn more about a practice site I call home; I wanted to learn how to be a better leader and inspire my future colleagues by fully listening to what Saudi Arabia's ECE teachers had to say about their lives and their work. The way I have approached these interviews draws on the work of

Mary Catherine Bateson (2007) and her methodology of narrative inquiry, of which a more thorough analysis follows below.

4.1 An Overview of Narrative Inquiry and Its Suitability to the Research

At the beginning of my work towards this project, I made an error in wanting to learn from my subjects by examining them at a certain point in time, looking at them solely as ECE teachers rather than as the complex women they are: that is, as mothers, as Saudis, as employees, as wives, as former children, and so forth. Where we find ourselves now is a product of the decisions we have made in negotiating the terms and relationships of our lives. This may include navigating uncertainties, disjunctions between appearance and reality, restricted options, competing expectations, and so forth. In discussing our country and its ECE policy with friends and colleagues, there is no shortage of fascinating personal narratives that emerge.

As such, when it comes to the study of any role or constructed professional identity, Bateson (2007) urges us to treat these stories as having value, since they provide explanation of not only how one's professional role currently presents itself in Saudi Arabia, but how it has been revised and renegotiated as a result of past lived experiences, to the point where it stands as a compromise to certain aspects of the subject's personal and professional life. Bateson poetically describes life itself as “an improvisatory art,” and describes the process of constructing narratives as a method through which people “combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations, following an underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic” (p. 3). With this in mind, any personal narrative can be viewed as a complex, reciprocal, and fascinating relationship between the past, present, and future. As Bateson (2007) explains of narratives,

there is no way to know which fragments of the past will prove to be relevant in the future. Composing a life involves a continual reimagining of the future and reinterpretation of the past to give meaning to the present. (pp. 29–30)

That is, past experiences allow for greater clarity and understanding of the present; the present moment allows narrators to better understand or contextualize moments that occurred in the past; and the very process of constructing this narrative can allow new insight into the future.

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that narratives and conversations do not exist in a vacuum: they are usually prompted by a particular contexts and agents, and so the narratives themselves are a product of a particular time and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). From this standpoint, we can say that narratives are almost always co-constructed, as the storyteller modifies (consciously or unconsciously) her narrative based on the questions, expectations, and attitudes of her audience. In this sense, the process of constructing a narrative can be profound, as it has the potential to change the life of both the storyteller and listener.

Given the complexity of narratives themselves, Bateson (2007) proposed that they are more than idle chatter or lighthearted stories—truly, they are worthy of academic scrutiny and can potentially illuminate future directions and opportunities. “A composite life poses the recurring riddle of what the parts have in common,” she writes (p. 15). While Bateson notes that every life—and therefore every narrative—is unique, the process of documenting and conversing about narratives offers social scientists the benefit of discovering “the balances and harmonies that must inform all such compositions” (p. 232), to which Bateson adds, “Often, continuity is visible only in retrospect” (p. 223). On the basis of these and other insights, Bateson became the most prominent voice of a new strain of cultural anthropology known as “narrative inquiry,” or the serious academic study of personal narratives and their inherent value.

With respect to ECE, narrative inquiry allows researchers to gain a rich understanding of a subject's past, which more fully explains and articulates how currently adopted pedagogy or beliefs are informed by the multiple ecological systems the subject inhabits, has inhabited, and may inhabit in the future. Where other research tools seek to marginalize or eliminate personal context in the collection of data, narrative inquiry embraces such context. However, narrative inquiry as a methodology (and as it is used in this research) is more than just uncritical storytelling or the documentation of free-form, unstructured conversation. Within the last twenty years especially, it has emerged as a viable research methodology that offers a compelling and organic way to understand complex social phenomena. As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explain,

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful.

Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience ... To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 375)

In defining narrative inquiry as a methodology, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) state that a narrative itself has three core elements that must be considered: temporality, sociality, and place. In other words, they take place at a specific time, have personal significance to the teller of the story, and occur in a distinct historical and environmental context. Further, to use these narratives as the basis of scientific research, Connelly and Clandinin argue that three justifications must be met. First, there must be a personal stake for the author to involve himself or herself in the co-construction and retelling of stories. Second, there must be a clear and practical research aim kept in mind that aids in focusing and editing the narratives. Third, there must be some social justification such that the findings and insights inherent in those narratives are beneficial to a larger population beyond the storytellers and their immediate audience at the time the stories were told.

In choosing narrative inquiry as a methodology for research into the ways in which roles are constructed in the Saudi Arabian ECE context, I believe that all of Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) selection criteria were met. First, I intended to use the study of narratives as a basis for generating change and deepening my understanding of a system in which I will be living and practising. One of the primary benefits of narrative inquiry as a reciprocal and co-constructed process is that it offers the benefit of being able to better understand and know oneself by exploring the lives of others (Richardson, 1997).

To this point, Bateson (2007) adds, "Women today read and write biographies to gain perspective on their own lives. Each reading provokes a dialogue of comparison and recognition, a process of memory and articulation that makes one's own experience valuable as a lens of empathy" (p. 5). That is, narrative inquiry is not simply a technique to learn about one's subject, but also to learn about oneself and identify future opportunities and areas of growth, and this is certainly true in my example. As mentioned in chapter 1 of this paper, my first objective was to engage myself in research that I would personally find inspiring, fulfilling, and illuminating. I positioned myself in this study as a Saudi Arabian citizen and woman as much

interested in sharing my findings as I am with finding a pathway to further modernizing and improving ECE in a way that draws upon my own unique range of strengths and interests.

Second, the narratives collected and analyzed were structured around the topic of ECE and the educational context particular to Saudi Arabia over the last several decades. The research questions identified in part one of this paper were used as a guide that, while not rigid and tightly defined from narrator to narrator, nevertheless tended to steer each session towards several shared themes and motifs. The narratives were later coded by these motifs and themes, which will be described in further detail later in this chapter. This research is undeniably focused around a central objective of understanding the complexities of how professional attitudes and roles in Saudi Arabian ECE develop as a result of lived experiences and constant negotiation.

Third, this research is intended to be more than a novel personal exercise. Narrative inquiry was chosen particularly because narratives can create community and togetherness (Creswell, 2008). Because there is no formal separation between the researcher and research subject, or between the author and reader, narrative studies embrace the development of interpersonal bonds. Narrative inquiry attempts to swim against a current of research that divides the subjects themselves from the scientific objectives of the research (Richardson, 1997). Indeed, a great volume of scientific research often has a “colonizing” influence that attempts to tell an out-group what is true or correct. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) have stated that a troubling amount of scientific research is written from the point of view of “a disembodied omniscient narrator claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge” (p. 961). Much to the contrary, narrative inquiry seeks to reduce the gap between “theory” and “practice” and between “researcher” and “subject.” The goal with this research is to know, empathize, and understand rather than to prescribe to and lecture fellow educators.

As an additional response to Connelly and Clandenin's (2006) third criteria, Richardson (1997) states that just as the subjects and participants of narrative inquiries often find themselves empowered and valued, readers of the narrative studies may also see that their experiences are similar to those that have been documented. In turn, this may encourage them to come forward and share their experiences as well; the non-confrontational and non-colonizing aspects of the methodology greatly assist in this outcome. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) add that narrative

inquiry has the benefit of placing the researcher in a position of greater authenticity, where she may claim “to know 'something' without claiming to know everything” (p. 961).

This level of equality among authors, readers, and participants in narrative inquiry allows, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe, for a reader's understanding to be built upon empathy with the author and subjects as approachable characters in the narratives. Just as a reader of a good fiction story will attempt to put him- or herself “in the character's shoes,” narrative inquiry places readers in the same situations and challenges as those who present their narratives. Insights on the part of the reader are developed as a result of an invitation to explore what may be very different worlds and emotions. I believe such an invitation is especially important in this practice context: Saudi Arabia is a country where many early childhood educators feel their voices are stifled and marginalized, and I would be very happy and humbled if this work allowed anyone to find a sense of empowerment or direction for self-development.

There are further compelling reasons that recommended narrative inquiry as the most sensible and comprehensible choice of methodologies for this research that lie beyond Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) criteria. It is worth keeping in mind that the methodology of narrative inquiry as developed by Bateson (2007) is extremely sensitive to the needs and lives of women, and therefore particularly applicable to studying Saudi Arabian ECE teachers, a group whose population is almost entirely female. Bateson states, “Women's lives offer valuable models because of the very pressures that make them seem more difficult. Women have not been permitted to focus on single goals but have tended to live with ambiguity and multiplicity” (p. 184). One traditional role for women throughout history has been caregiver, and this is indeed a role placed on a majority of women in Saudi Arabia, but the central dilemma comes from deciding how much care to give, to whom it should given, and when. According to Bateson, “the problems of giving and receiving needed care force everyone into improvisation and patchwork” (p. 143). Narrative inquiry is a powerful tool by which we can come to better understand the circumstances and contexts that come to attend women as they make decisions about their pedagogy, careers within Saudi Arabian ECE, and their ongoing professional development.

With this in mind, narrative inquiry is also a methodology that struck me as being highly complementary with the ecological systems theory that provides a theoretical foundation for this research (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While Bateson (2007) never refers to Bronfenbrenner's

theories directly, the degree of overlap is fascinating. For example, when Bateson refers to the idea of a “home,” she defines this as “joint compositions, frameworks of complementarity composed by difference within which growth is possible. This concept can be expanded to include schools and neighborhoods, the workplace and the biosphere” (p. 118–119). To me, this is a strong echo of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) claim that it is only through overcoming changes and stresses in one’s ecological systems that human beings can ever exhibit personal or professional growth. Furthermore, Bateson (2007) argues repeatedly that women in the professional world are more highly affected than their male counterparts by the demands of the various ecosystems they inhabit. Indeed, in Saudi Arabia the lives of women are automatically expected by society to be more flexible, discontinuous, and accommodating than the lives of their male counterparts. As such, narrative inquiry gives us a rich way to understand and classify the variety and kinds of demands of caring across the various microsystems of the home, school, marriage, as well as the demands for the necessary psychological care of oneself. As such, Bateson’s work allows me to situate the women in this study in particular ecologies theorized by Bronfenbrenner without it becoming reductive or deterministic.

Bateson’s (2007) *Composing a Life* also explored several balances and harmonies among her female participants that I hoped would be repeated in the stories of my own interviewees. In closely examining the threads that ran through all five of her collected narratives, Bateson noted that it is in the nature of women to place trust into systems that are often undeserving of their efforts, and explained that the fear of changing an established system is often mistaken for commitment to it. As such, Bateson’s process of narrative inquiry also has worth in helping women achieve the goal of “commitment without dependency” as a result of the self-analysis and discovery that arises through dialogue (p. 197). Bateson also found that through her narratives, women were more likely than men to internalize rather than externalize failure, making them less likely to push onward after a professional setback or disappointment. Additionally, she found that the process of opening avenues to women is different in word than in deed, and as she states poignantly, “Many institutions celebrate the transition to integration by a series of human sacrifices, so that only the second or third woman in a given role has a chance of survival” (p. 207). That is, that while women may be allowed to hold a position, it may not be possible for them to be successful in that position. As Saudi Arabia continues to modernize and involve women in expanded roles and capacities, narrative inquiry is a flexible tool that helps us to determine where women will have the opportunity to succeed.

In short, narrative inquiry became an extraordinarily compelling methodology for me for its synergy with the ecological systems theories of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989), for its relevance to my personal growth as a leader in the field of ECE, for its ability to describe and attend to the complexities of the Saudi Arabian practice environment, for its potential to inspire others and build communities, and because of its focus on the unique needs and experiences of professional women.

4.2 Limitations of Narrative Inquiry as a Methodology

Additional explanation is in order so as to better explain the use and consideration of narrative inquiry in this research. I have written at some length about what narrative inquiry is, but here I wish to state what it is *not*. First, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that any narrative inquiry “characteristically begins with the researcher’s autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the research puzzle” (p. 40). It is considered a virtue that the researcher becomes a part of the landscape and culture they are wishing to understand in order to do good work and arrive at justified and useful conclusions. Therefore, I have made no effort to detach myself from the narratives of my participants, and I wish the reader to keep in mind that each narrative represents a moment and conversation that was “co-constructed” (Brinkmann, 2013; Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006). As with any conversation, moments may have arisen only because of my input and personal participation in the research. Likewise, it is almost entirely certain that if the same process were conducted by a different interviewer, an altogether different set of narratives may have resulted. For this reason, I want to reiterate that the data collected through this methodology are not “pure,” as the term is often used in the “hard” sciences (Brinkmann, 2013). To this, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that in the process of collecting stories through interviews, the record of the conversation itself is no more or less important as the interviewer’s own record and analysis of their own feelings, environmental conditions, emotions, body language, and other intangible qualities. The data presented may also include my own personal observations and feelings if I believe they add additional clarity and context. In short, narrative inquiry is not a methodology that aims to separate the interviewer from the interviewees.

I also wish to state emphatically that the narratives themselves are not objective. Bochner (2007) states that when we construct narratives, the stories we tell are “knowledge from the past

and not necessarily knowledge about the past” (p. 203). In other words, in the retelling of a story, we may retroactively edit events from the way they were, omit details, and describe past actions and viewpoints that are perhaps contradictory to the way that we think and act now. From this vantage point, the goal of narrative inquiry is not to obtain a factual record or a perfect snapshot of a participant at a certain point of time. Rather, narrative inquiry renders the experience of the women who lived through past events in an attempt to add context to particular viewpoints and understandings in the present.

In consideration of the preceding paragraphs in this section, I also wish the reader to understand that the narratives presented in this research are not intended to supply a cause-and-effect relationship between one's beliefs and one's actions. That is, my objective is not to say in the research that participant X behaved in a particular way because of Y, or that one can expect that goal A will be reached in the Saudi Arabian ECE landscape because a shared moment B was experienced by the participants. Rather to the contrary, the narratives described herein often embrace the contradiction and uncertainty that is a part of the lives of those who participated in the research. Subjectivity (and at times, imprecision) is key aspect of narrative inquiry as a methodological process (Bateson, 2007; Creswell, 2008). While I hope to provide insight and explanation, I absolutely do not mean to be predictive about human beings and the complicated systems in which we live and work. Rather, I wish to capture the emerging meanings that social actors intuit from their past experiences.

4.3 Phases of Research and Selection Criteria

An open invitation to participate was sent to eleven ECE schools and to the departments of two large universities known for their ECE programs in the city of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in November 2015. Inclusion in the study was purely voluntary. My goal was to interview ECE educators who were relatively new to the field to capture the degree of idealism and hope that is best represented by “new blood,” and I also wanted to hear from experienced voices who had spent a lifetime negotiating and constructing a professional role. I wanted to capture voices working in both the public and private sectors of education. I wanted to hear from those who had a good degree of exposure to alternative educational methods and approaches, as well as those who had spent most of their lives working within a single educational context or facility.

I decided that the interviews would be conducted across two separate sessions with each of my participants in order to construct each woman's narrative. This break between one session and the next allowed me to explore what Brinkmann (2013) refers to as the process of “abduction.” As Brinkmann says,

Abduction in the analytic phase works from breakdowns in the understanding of the analyst. The researcher will look for breaks and contradictions and other matters that somehow “disturb” the common understanding or convention ... Roulston (2011) has argued that there is much to learn from “failed” interviews, i.e., from interviews where things “go wrong” according to textbooks on interviewing and conventional wisdom ... Aspects that stand out as strange may prove to be valuable to understanding how talking about the subject matter in specific ways constructs what we may know about it. (pp. 65–66)

To my way of thinking, a second interview embraced the idea that there would be some degree of miscommunication or misunderstanding, which is in many ways an unavoidable possibility of any kind of human conversation. However, a second interview also allowed for follow-up questions to be created once the initial interview had been absorbed and interpreted, and abduction offered the benefit of my being able to paint a more accurate portrait of my Saudi Arabian ECE teachers. If there were discontinuities in their descriptions or interpretations from the first interview, the second interview would give me an excellent way to further explore these issues.

After sending invitations, nine women of varying ECE backgrounds responded that they wished to take part in the study after being briefed about my research objectives. Six participants came from different schools located in various regions of Riyadh, while three participants joined the study based on an invitation sent to one of the universities. Based on the distribution of the invitations sent, I had expected higher rates of participation from ECE teachers in the public sector. That fewer public school ECE teachers responded to the invitation may have implications in terms of the lack of free time these women might have to participate in academic studies, though it may also simply be explained by the presence of professional networks that exist at the larger universities that provided more exposure for my invitation.

Following Spradley's (1979) advice, interviews were prefaced by short “ethnographic explanations,” which clarified my intent with the study, the confidentiality of their information and

participation, and my role as a researcher. This was accompanied by a document of informed consent, which gave the interviewee the ability to withdraw from the study and question me if they were not fully comfortable with my research goals or intent. As a group, I felt they were diverse in their ages, backgrounds, and professional contexts.

However, once the interviews began, three of the women were surprised by the nature of the interview questions and voiced their discomfort in providing details about their personal lives, professional opinions, or past family and career histories. For these reasons, they chose to opt out of the study. Of these women, two were public school ECE teachers and the third was an ECE university professor. I suspected that these educators were made uncomfortable by the possibility that, despite my promise that they would not be identifiable in my study, their answers might nevertheless cause them professional difficulty if their administrators were to become aware of their candid remarks. However, as the women did not tell me this directly, I reiterate that this was only my opinion based on my knowledge of local culture and their body language.

All interviews with the remaining six participants took place within a time frame of approximately eight months. This consideration best allowed me to ensure that what Bronfenbrenner (1989) refers to as the “chronosystem” was similar from interviewee to interviewee; that is, that the social and political context present within Saudi Arabia did not change significantly from the time of the first interview to the last. Additionally, the time between each woman's first and second interviews was no more than two months apart in order to ensure that the content of our first meeting was still fresh in my mind. Additional details concerning the dates and duration of these interviews may be found in Appendix B.

During the interviews, I relied on the instruments of field notes and observations in the form of audio recordings and photographs. Bodgen and Bilken (1998) explain that field notes may consist of written accounts of the researcher's experience, kept in real time and as thoughts and reflections arise spontaneously. Additionally, field notes also document events that occur within the research site at particular times and as they occur. As such, my field notes were at times descriptive and at other times reflective. I also used field notes to capture physical characteristics, gesticulations, mannerisms, and reactions in quick shorthand, as Brinkmann (2013) warns that these aspects of a face-to-face interview are highly valuable but are often forgotten afterwards if not recorded by the researcher.

Second, and distinct from my field notes, were observations. Here, I rely on Stake's (1995) description of observations being slightly more objective than other forms of qualitative research in that they function almost as an “official record” of what occurred, setting aside analysis or interpretation for a later day. Examples of observations I collected were audio recordings and photographs of classrooms. Spradley (1979) notes that the purpose of observation is not to understand or interpret, but simply to document; the researcher should not be seeking to place the observations into a particular theory or interpretive model at the time the observations are being made. As such, I used a tape recorder during the interviews to allow me to focus on being present and engaged in the discussion itself rather than worried about having to keep an official record with pen and paper as to what happened.

I also wish to make a short note on the cross-cultural aspects of this research. Four of the women communicated with me entirely in Arabic; two others chose to speak primarily in English, reverting to Arabic for clarification when needed. As Ajami (2016) notes, Arabic is considered a “high context” language, in that “each word in the Arab-Islamic culture has high significance and diverse connotations, such that only the context of speech is capable of determining the precise meaning of a given word or proposition” (p. 120). Given the complexity of the Arabic language and the importance of context to understanding, in this work, all Arabic has been translated into English based on what Birbili (2004) refers to as a *free* as opposed to a *literal* translation. In other words, I have translated the statements made in Arabic into English in such a way that maximizes accessibility and comprehensibility to the reader. As such, the translation itself can be considered very much a part of “co-construction” process (Bateson, 2007). Additionally, and despite the tremendous difference between English and Arabic as languages, I did not find that English fluency was a predictive factor in the degree that the women were aware of (or committed to) child-centredness as reflected through their narratives about their lives and their experiences with ECE.

4.4 The Process of Composing Narratives through Interviews

For each interview, I used techniques advocated by Brinkmann (2013) as a practical method of moving Bateson's (2007) abstract notion of composition to a tangible means of generating rich streams of data. Brinkmann recommends that each question in itself contain five separate elements. First, each question should begin with something concrete that can be described in

detail. Second, there should be an opportunity for the researcher and interviewee to negotiate the meaning of the question; if the interviewee needs clarification, this is where it may be presented. Third is the concrete answer by the interviewee, which fully and richly describes an experience or outlook. Fourth, the interviewer offers his or her interpretation of that answer, repackaging and re-framing the concept as the interviewer has come to understand it. Finally, the question is complete during the coda, in which the interviewee has an opportunity to challenge the interviewer's interpretation or validate it. Brinkmann (2013) refers to this as a "conversational flow" (p. 16) intended to provide the most meaning and context for each question asked.

Brinkmann (2013) often refers to the concept of "structure" in the interview, which concerns the degree to which the interview itself is rigid or free-form. For example, a formally structured interview may contain thirteen "yes or no" questions that are the same for all participants. An unstructured interview may consist of a prompt such as "Tell me about your life story," in which the interviewee's goal is to draw forth a narrative, mainly listening, suppressing most desires for clarification. As such, Brinkmann (2013) argues that most successful approaches in the realm of qualitative data collection are semi-structured, which "make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials for dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee" (p. 21). Brinkmann also notes that this technique also allows for the greatest role for the interviewer to participate in the process and contribute to the creation of new knowledge. Following Brinkmann's advice, the interviews were semi-structured in the sense that I arrived at each of my interviews with a list of questions covering my own agenda, but modified, added, and deleted questions such that interviews would not be repetitious and so that topics about which my interviewees were passionate would have greater prominence. In this way, I felt I was in the best possible position to "compose" my own understanding of Saudi Arabian ECE and the roles these women created through their own unique involvement in our field.

As an interviewer, I felt I was more receptive during the first interview and slightly more assertive during the second in terms of asking follow-up questions, asking for clarification, and in steering the topics of conversation. In discussing the categories of "receptive" and "assertive," Brinkmann (2013) says,

For sensitive and personal topics, a supportive, receptive, or responsive approach is often helpful (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In their introduction to responsive interviewing, Rubin and Rubin emphasize flexibility of design and highlight the interviewer's acceptance of what interviewees say ... On the other hand, if the goal is to study how people justify their beliefs, deliberate about difficult matters, or give accounts of their opinions, a more confrontational style may be required, which demands particular ethical sensitivity in order to ensure that the conversation is conducted respectfully. (p. 60)

On the basis of this practical advice, I was very deliberate in my attempts to create an extremely supportive, nurturing tone to demonstrate to my interviewees that I wished to respect their stories and document their lives. However, in the time between the first and second interview, I changed my approach slightly and focused on more concretely discussing responses and opinions expressed during the previous interview. This included bringing up contradictory responses, asking for further clarification on points, or discussing ethical dilemmas that arose from a Saudi Arabian female ECE educator's particular system of values. In that sense, the questions I asked in the second interview often built on what I had previously mentioned as moments of "abduction" that were an outgrowth of previous analysis (Brinkmann, 2013). Thus, the free-form composition of interview 1 allowed for a starting point for interview 2.

I additionally analyzed the data collected based on the grounded theory approach of Giorgi and Giorgi (2003): this is a four-part process in which an interview is first collected in order to document a phenomenon. Next, the interviewer carefully reads through the transcripts in order to gain a greater understanding of the interview and the context in which it took place. During this part of the analysis, "meaning units" are created that allow the researcher to better categorize and understand central themes and motifs within the interviews. Thereafter, those meaning units are then used to help the researcher and the researcher's audience to understand the relationships present in the data as well as the general nature of the phenomenon discussed through the meaning units (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 170). This I also felt was keeping in the spirit of Bateson's (2007) idea of composition, as it allowed me to create larger motifs and themes by arranging the smaller "notes" of smaller conversations and shared moments.

4.5 Interview Questions

Brinkmann's (2013) recommendation to qualitative researchers intending to generate constructivist narratives in the style of Bateson (2007) and others is that the questions raised during the interview should be concrete and directed towards recreating a meaningful story. Therefore, my goal through questioning was to introduce a general topic, in which the interviewee was free to deliver her initial thoughts, observations, and explorations; from there, the question narrowed to a more concrete prompt of a lived experience that would support the interviewee's viewpoint and contextualize their answer.

I should note that because these interviews were semi-structured, it is not possible for me to list everything that was asked of an interviewee or every topic of conversation that was discussed (Brinkmann, 2013). Such a list would be of little benefit to the reader and would be exhausting in its length. Nevertheless, I have included several research questions that reoccurred and were listed on my printed question agenda. These are explained and cataloged in greater detail in Appendix C of this document.

Again, I would urge the reader to view the questions in that appendix as more of my working plan for a conversation than a rigid structure that was applied the same way every time. For example, a few of these questions directly engage with components of the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy. If the interviewee had some understanding and experience with these topics, then the question often moved into a follow-up; if not, I often explained the component (for example, emergent curriculum) before asking the interviewee's opinion and moving forward. Those questions were additionally intended to provoke thought and forge connections that might not have been present on a conscious level. When there were hypothetical questions about classroom activities or educational policies, I tried to connect any abstractions back to the ECE teacher's own site of learning in order for her to present me with a concrete visual of what the future might look like.

I should further clarify that my goal in interviewing my participants was to not only explore the relation of their ecological systems in coming to bear on their roles as educators and construction of their professional selves, but to link present and past together in such a way that I might be able to understand where a teacher is now as a partial response to what she has

experienced prior. It is the concrete component of each question that moves from the theoretical to a moment that can make up a portrait. While not all questions were likely interesting or relevant to my participants, I at all times attempted to allow for maximum flexibility in their responses while I simultaneously narrowed in on specific avenues of inquiry that informed my own life and my conception of who I am as a professional.

As a researcher, this process was often a balancing act, but one that I believe resulted in authentic responses. As such, the semi-structured and flexible nature of the interviews was highly instrumental in allowing the richness and complexity of each educator's unique narrative to emerge through our dialogue. And, as a co-composer, allowing the women the flexibility to explore their passions according to their own preferences was essential: it gave me more confidence that the relationships and understandings I built would allow me to better tell the stories of the women who sat in front of me.

4.6 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. The first is the issue of how the findings of the study can be generalized to a larger population. This limitation is common to much of social science in that, when choosing to study human beings with free will, there can never be an archetypal teacher, nor can there be a standard practice site, and any attempt to predict the behaviour of free-thinking individuals becomes unavoidably reductionist (Bodgen & Biklen, 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hatch & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006). While I intend to find patterns of evidence that I hope will allow others (and myself) to better understand the construction of an ECE teacher's role across various ecological systems and how that role influences the way that teachers engage with new ideas, I wish to be very clear that the Saudi Arabian ECE teachers I include in my study do not speak for all of their colleagues, nor are their viewpoints archetypes for other ECE teachers practising in the country.

Because I worked with a small sample of six Saudi Arabian ECE teachers, the study has a limitation of sample size. While I would like to survey more ECE practice sites, I made the choice with my study to more fully paint a portrait of each Saudi Arabian ECE teacher and the classroom in which she teaches. As such, my ability to find patterns in the data among teachers and classrooms may have been hindered with only a handful of participants (Brutus, 2013).

Methodologically speaking, self-reporting on the part of interviewees has been a primary means of data collection. However, Brutus (2013) raises the issue that self-reported data, especially with regards to subjective questions measuring attitudes or intention, are highly flawed. According to Brutus, self-reported data often are hindered by the selective memory of the respondent, cannot be independently verified, suffer from attribution bias (in that positive outcomes are associated with one's own actions and negative outcomes are explained by external forces), and are often embellished and exaggerated.

I also wish to acknowledge another limitation of my proposed methodology in its attempt to position the attitudes and values of the ECE instructors in my study. Each interview at best results in a portrait of a teacher at a particular moment in time. More specifically, I recognize that there is a logical flaw in attempting to “pin down” a teacher's attitudes or construction of classroom role at any particular moment, as these are very much reflections of identity, and identity is in constant flux with no particular end point (Bateson, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Clarke, 2010; Connolly, 2002). However, while individuals can change their minds and may find previous iterations of their beliefs no longer valid or representative of where they are now, I hoped that themes and motifs would emerge among each narrative that would lead to a better understanding of my interviewees. Bateson (2007) reminds us that although the future is uncertain, “continuity is visible only in retrospect” (p. 223). For this reason, I feel that constructing a rich portrait of these women's pasts is of higher value than attempting to position them as accurately as possible in the present.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

This research has been completed with my best effort to maximize the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and social justice (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000). As such, this study obtained informed consent from the Saudi Arabian ECE teachers who chose to participate; the goal of the research was made expressly clear to the best of my ability. Since participation in the study required a partnership between myself as the researcher and each educator based on trust and mutual respect, there were few plausible cases that I could imagine where a participant could be coerced into revealing information or performing an activity that would subject them to physical harm.

Nevertheless, the review of literature suggested that the educational and political landscape can at times be unfavourable to reformers, those who are perceived as aggravating culturally valued traditions, or those who introduce a level of additional complexity or complication to bureaucrats (Aljhani et al., 2011; Doumato, 2003; Iqbal, 2011). For this reason, I was forced to consider the risk that publication of my document, and indeed active participation in research into educational approaches different from the status quo, could have negative professional consequences for my participants. Following the recommendations of Orb et al. (2000), data collected were kept anonymous; teachers included in the study were given pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. Features that might indicate a teacher's practice site, such as geographic location, are removed from the text so that readers will not be able to reasonably deduce where the participant lived or worked. Cities were identified only as "a major urban area" or "a rural area," and so forth.

The dialogues that occurred as a result of my interviews may very likely be a catalyst for pedagogical changes among my interviewees, which would in turn cause ripples of influence within their respective ecological systems. For example, if an interviewee was inspired to explore aspects of the emergent curriculum in a Saudi Arabian pre-school class, those changes may create a source of tension between the ECE teacher and her direct administrator. If participation in the study raised these tensions to a point where the teacher's professional status or employment were jeopardized, I felt it would be most ethical to exclude such teachers from future study and observation.

I have also made clear that a participant was free to withdraw from the study at any time. I also gave my participants the option to access any recording I collected about them at any time. Although I wish to stress again that they are not identified, it was important for me to grant them the ability to restrict their responses or particular segments of video from "the official record" of our time together entirely at their option. If they were not comfortable with any aspect of the interview process, I also allowed them to withdraw completely at their discretion. As previously stated in section 4.3, three women of the original nine participants chose to exit the study.

Additionally, qualitative research often carries the possibility of raising difficult questions about one's experiences, purpose, and deeply held beliefs, since it is often problematic (if not impossible) to determine where such complex discussions will lead (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Indeed, I asked teachers to explore issues of professionalism, politics, and religion. As such, there was the potential for uneasiness, hurt feelings, moral uncertainty, and the angst that often accompanies one's quest to build and construct an identity (Connolly, 2002). Here, I acknowledged the fact that I was asking the ECE teachers in my study to travel with me on an emotional journey about which I could not say precisely where it began or ended. Considering the powerful emotional component of narrative-based research, I as an interviewer also needed to have an incredibly high degree of empathy and understanding when conducting my research. I therefore took as much care as I could to ensure that my questions and responses were as open-minded and welcoming as possible. In order to ensure comfort and intimacy, all interviews took place one-on-one at a site of the participant's own choosing.

Lastly, although the study is a reflection of my own quest for knowledge and understanding of the Saudi Arabian ECE context, I was aware of the warning that Brinkmann (2013) states of research of this type. He writes,

Researchers aiming for construction need a particular ethical sensitivity about the way that they expect the world to change in response to their research endeavors. Not all interviewees have an interest in changing when taking part in a study, and not all communities have asked for social change. (p. 80)

To me, this was a very clear articulation that I should not force others to share my opinion, and that it is easy to cross a line from passionate to overzealous. While I hoped that the colleagues I interviewed were as enthusiastic about the work as I was, I nevertheless prepared myself for the very possible reality that the change I desired and envisioned might not be desired or envisioned by those around me.

With regard to data, I stored all video transcriptions, audio recordings, and written notes in a locked container in my own home, which I believe is a secure environment. All electronic records and drafts of my dissertations do not use any data that could identify the participant if stolen or accessed in an unauthorized manner. After a period of two years, I will destroy all copies of any personal data or identifying information. Further, any information collected will not be used in any manner beyond the research intent that was made known to my participants during the period of informed consent.

4.8 Description of the Participants

As was previously stated, six participants decided to participate in this study. These participants comprise a group of female professionals who arrive from several different areas of the Saudi Arabian ECE landscape, and together they represent a tremendous degree of diversity in terms of the ages, backgrounds, philosophies, education levels, and hopes of the women who choose to enter (and remain in) the field. All of the following women are not identifiable and are referred to by aliases.

I begin first with Alia, a woman in her late twenties whose youth misrepresents her tremendous ambition and maturity. My first impression of Alia was that she was always thinking, and she speaks quite softly. Taught from an early age that hard work is its own reward, Alia is used to shouldering responsibility. Rather than burden others, Alia always tries to solve her problems independently and share her insights and pathways to success with others. Perhaps as a result of this work ethic, Alia has already established her own private school in a large metropolitan area of Saudi Arabia: quite an accomplishment for one so young. Alia represents a new generation of Saudi Arabia's teaching professionals, and her narratives bring a fresh set of eyes to long-standing educational practices and the bureaucratic requirements that shape Saudi Arabian ECE.

Deena, like Alia, is also one of the younger participants in this study. Currently in her mid-twenties, Deena projects a patient and welcoming aura to those around her. Although initially shy and reserved in her opinions, Deena soon opened up to me, and I discovered a lovely, deeply faithful young woman with a passion for volunteering. However, where Alia found herself able to push boundaries and challenge convention, Deena was more apt to follow the rules and stay the course of action provided to her, which I found surprising for a woman so young. When interviewed, Deena was in her first year of teaching in the public ECE sector. I learned much from Deena, as she was particularly vocal with respect to how her professional instruction and practicum intersected with the practical realities of classroom teaching.

Ebtesam, now in her early sixties, is a retired Saudi Arabian university professor who continues to involve herself in various ECE settings. I never saw her without a smile on her face, and her calming demeanour instantly put me at ease. Ebtesam has a strong background in childhood

literacy and teacher education, and also was a regular volunteer at one of Saudi Arabia's largest childhood book fairs for several years. A lifelong reader, Ebtessam delights in helping children discover the joy of a book that speaks to them. She had much to say about the emotional needs of children and of the role of women as leaders. I would feel entirely comfortable and confident in soliciting care or educational advice from Ebtessam; her former students are fortunate to have learned under her and to have her as a resource and mentor.

Sana, like Ebtessam, represents a studied view of the Saudi Arabian educational landscape based on decades of experience. Fluent in both English and Arabic, Sana began her career first as a classroom teacher. Now in her mid-fifties, as a professor she currently helps to educate the next generation of ECE teachers entering the field. Sana's personality is "large": she is constantly engaged in public speaking, projects her voice even in casual conversations, and radiates constant energy. This level of activity, I believe, is an extension of her sincerest desire to help in any way she can: her office phone is always ringing, and I have never seen her turn down any commitment that helps to advance the field of ECE.

Nour, now in her mid-thirties, is a teacher who entered the field of ECE somewhat accidentally after having a great initial experience as a summer camp instructor. She became a public school teacher not long afterward, but left the position as a result of ideological conflicts with the administration. Not willing to completely exit the field, Nour obtained a master's degree and is currently working on her PhD in the field of ECE. She one day hopes to shape the educational environment as an informed leader. Nour's narrative is an especially powerful reminder of the complexities that shape the direction of women's lives in this arena. Nour is always open to new ideas and vary rarely critical of others; I could tell that her path was one of near-constant self-improvement, and she was always listening for points of view she might not have previously considered. In Nour burns a fierce independence that makes me very optimistic for the future of our field.

The final participant in the study, Walaa, is in her mid-fifties. Walaa holds two master's degrees and one PhD in the field of ECE, making her extremely well educated. She is also an author of Saudi Arabian children's books. In addition to her numerous responsibilities, Walaa also writes and distributes an online magazine related to teacher education. The resource is currently in its tenth year of publication. During our time together, I felt that despite Walaa's intense passion,

she often felt unsure of herself and her mission. While she was very busy, I often got the sense that Walaa would hurry in a particular direction (in conversation and in her own life) only to question later if where she arrived was truly where she had in mind when she began. However, this degree of non-linearity present in Walaa's narratives and personality made itself known in surprising ways. For example, I was constantly amazed by her ability to remember even the slightest details throughout her life, and these moments allowed her to easily bring every story to life.

A short summary of the six participants is provided below.

Table 2: Description of the study participants

Pseudonym	Age	ECE Background
Deena	Mid-Twenties	Public school ECE teacher
Alia	Late Twenties	Owner and principal of private ECE school
Nour	Mid-Thirties	Former public school ECE teacher, current ECE PhD candidate
Walaa	Mid-Fifties	Former public school ECE teacher, current ECE author and publisher
Sana	Mid-Fifties	Former public school ECE teacher, current ECE university professor
Ebtesam	Early Sixties	Retired ECE university professor

4.9 Emergence of Themes and Composing Roles

From the interviews and from the process of coding and analysis described by Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) and Bateson (2007), I constructed a list of several ground-level themes. Priority was given to themes that were present across the narratives of several women or themes I felt contained a profound level of significance for even one woman in terms of her pathway through ECE in Saudi Arabia or her insight into the educational landscape as a whole. Throughout this process, I was inspired in particular by Bateson's (2007) invitation to ask what seemingly disparate pieces of a patchwork and improvised narrative have in common—both within the context of how moments informed other moments in each woman's narrative and in terms of how elements of one personal narrative echoed aspects of another woman's journey. These themes were additionally coded by my personal thoughts and observations on each ground-

level theme as well as my initial thoughts on which ecological systems would have come to inform the narratives described (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Based on building up the recurring elements of the narratives from the ground level, six major themes emerged, which will provide the structure for the subsequent chapter on my findings. The first theme to emerge is titled “Early Childhood and the First Steps into Early Childhood Education.” Through the narratives, it became clear that, like me, the participants were keenly aware of how their childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood informed several aspects of their personal journey. In this section, I focus specifically on my participants' home lives and their experiences as young people absorbing the various cultural messages around them. I found that the attitudes of their family units and the educational learning environment in which my participants grew up were powerful influences on the overall direction of the participants' lives. Additionally, when my participants shared their experiences as students, the examination of the field from the perspective of “future teachers in training” was enlightening.

The next section I have titled “Classroom Challenges and Successes as Educators.” This collection of narrative data points focuses in on the particular negotiations that arose once my participants moved from being students or young people preparing to enter a career and a role where they had professional responsibility and capacity. Many of my participants were quite vocal and insightful in terms of describing where the reality of day-to-day classroom practice conflicted with the theory of their own professional education or with their own conceptions of what ECE was or should be. These moments allow us to see the Saudi Arabian ECE classroom from the vantage point of the women who are most intimately involved with their operation and where points of role strain and tension arrive organically as a result of daily tasks and set curriculum. However, I also wanted to capture the moments where teachers felt liberated and fulfilled through their work and where they managed to overcome particular obstacles or limitations in their career paths.

The third section I have titled “Interactions with Educational Stakeholders.” This section is particularly important in terms of understanding how a variety of external constraints, expectations, and roles—both perceived and explicitly articulated—come to inform the decisions that female Saudi Arabian ECE educators make about their classrooms, careers, and lives. Here, I place a particularly strong focus on examining the narrative components that detail

interactions between Bronfenbrenner's (1979) mesosystems and exosystems. Throughout the narratives, it became increasingly clear that all six of my participants were in constant conversation with forces and actors beyond their immediate site of practice. Many had personal dealings with stakeholders in the Ministry of Education, which is—to say the very least—a profoundly influential organization in terms of shaping the day-to-day experiences and overarching career paths of several of the women in my study, even those who operated outside of the domain of public ECE classrooms.

In the fourth section, titled “Personal Philosophy and Pedagogy,” I collected the moments of the narratives where my participants painted a vision of themselves as an educator in the field of ECE. I was particularly interested in exploring the root causes of behaviour and role development here. What was the “big picture” of ECE in general, according to these women? What did they see as the qualities and criteria that defined them—those that separated them from their colleagues or allowed them to find common ground? This subsection is structured to provide a snapshot of each woman as a capable and opinionated teacher. The narratives were beautifully effective in showing that there is no “ideal” teacher in Saudi Arabia's ECE classrooms, and the personal philosophy and mission that drives each of these women is strikingly different.

Fifth is a section titled “Links to Womanhood, Motherhood, and Gender, in Saudi Arabian ECE.” In this section, it was particularly important to explore how my participants feel like their lives as daughters, wives, and mothers implicitly or explicitly came to inform their professional practice and career path. Once again, considering that the Saudi Arabian ECE workforce is overwhelmingly female, these dimensions are particularly important to explore in order to understand the negotiations that take place within the educational landscape as a whole. Women in Saudi Arabian society are bombarded with a number of cultural, social, and religious messages that set expectations for how they should behave, and the narratives show clear moments in the history of Saudi Arabian ECE where opportunities have been explicitly denied to women. The narratives provide an extremely powerful examination of how gender and social constructions of womanhood are constant factors that have shaped (and will continue to shape) the professional experiences of Saudi Arabia's ECE educators.

Finally, the sixth broad theme that emerged is titled “Personal Aspirations and Thoughts on the Future of ECE.” This final chapter assembles components of the narratives where my participants have speculated on where they imagine they—and the Saudi Arabian ECE landscape in general—will end up. Here, participants have forecast the next phases of their personal journeys and are speculating on what changes may lie in store for their micro- and macro-level practice environments. It was important to collect these narratives together and draw a thread through both the optimism and anxiety felt by various early childhood educators of varying generations and at so many different points in their careers. Chapter 6 is very much an exploration of the Bronfenbrenner (1979) chronosystems that ECE in Saudi Arabia inhabits and may likely inhabit in the years to come.

It is important to note that there is a broad division between the first three themes and the final three. The first three themes generally account for the chronological journey taken by the six women who participated in this study. That is, it moves first through their early lives as young people and teachers-in-training, then through their experiences in the classroom, and thirdly as they come to engage with national institutions and community stakeholders as representatives of the ECE field as a whole. These three chapters together allow us to see the relationships that exist between otherwise disparate women in multiple generations in terms of how they have put one foot in front of the other to arrive at their present states.

By contrast, the final three chapters are more outward-facing as opposed to being self-consciously biographical, as they collect the broad perspectives and insights of the participants as they look at the ECE field (and Saudi Arabia's culture and society) as a whole. Thus, the final three chapters are more macro- rather than micro-focused in their descriptions and perspectives. Taken together, these final three chapters explore similarities among thoughts, attitudes, and pedagogical positions that may have possibly been informed by the similarities among the individual journeys of the women themselves.

5 Findings

This study seeks to better understand how female educators come to enter the field of ECE in Saudi Arabia and how their experiences have shaped their conceptions of professional and personal identity. The narratives shared by the women who chose to participate in this study are a rich source of data that help us to clarify how the country's workforce in the realm of ECE come to be. Furthermore, they help us to understand what drives and motivates this fascinating group of individuals and to see the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for Saudi Arabia in its quest to improve the education it provides to its youngest citizens.

This chapter has two aims: the first is to narrate the multifaceted and highly interesting stories of female ECE educators in Saudi Arabia, composing their lives along Bateson's (2007) approach, as explained in the previous chapter. Secondly, the aim is to position women's stories as interwoven into the larger context of Saudi Arabian educational policy and socio-political culture. I wish to transmit the stories of these women factually, but I also wish to draw upon my own vantage point as a colleague familiar with the system in order to address deeper patterns of being and meaning.

There is a difficult line to walk in terms of presenting the results obtained through narrative inquiry. On one hand, the research goal is not to produce a verbatim transcript at the expense of everything else. However, I don't want to overanalyze or "speak for" the women I spent so much time with. As such, I would therefore ask the reader to bear in mind that this chapter provides insight into and analysis of a rich source of data while still being respectful of the lives and experiences that were shared with me.

As mentioned previously, this chapter follows a loose chronology: I begin first with the formative years of the participants, looking at some of the moments that shaped their pathways to ECE as children and young adults. I then proceed to looking at the classroom and administration through their eyes in sections two and three, before proceeding to a discussion of their personal philosophies and broad outlook towards the profession and its future in the final sections.

5.1 Early Childhood and the First Steps into Early Childhood Education

Much of my work in this research came about as a realization of the tremendous influence that my own childhood and my lived experiences as a woman in Saudi Arabia had upon me as an educator. Many of the memories I have of my first home and first schools have remained an inseparable part of who I am, and I feel that growing up in Saudi Arabian culture, as a woman, imparts particular views of family and society that may greatly affect our perception of the world without us being fully aware of it.

Here, I wanted to capture as much of the six women as children themselves as a “square one” for deeper investigations of how a professional self is constructed and navigated. Many of these stories involve many significant obstacles that needed to be negotiated, and I found that the insights that the women had—often at the time the moments were experienced—were often startlingly mature. For this reason, I found that the childhood narratives of the women provided a rich source of data to start with, attending their decisions to enter the field and informing the formation of professional role and pedagogy.

5.1.1 Memories of the Early Childhood Home

One of the major themes that emerged in the narratives was an early role of caregiver: five of the six participants recalled being placed into roles as caregivers at a very early age as part of the family dynamic. In most cases, this was simply an expected role of being a daughter and sister in a Saudi Arabian family. In particular, the majority of the narratives across several generations reflected a patriarchal household culture where economic and financial achievement was delegated to the men in the family and child-rearing was delegated to women.

This was particularly strong in Ebtesam's case. The middle child of three boys and four girls, Ebtesam mentioned that she and her sisters were responsible for the day-to-day care of the children. Similarly, Nour reported being the eldest of six siblings, and Sana reported that she was the third-eldest of a total of eight children in the family. This large family size (more than four siblings per family) reflects a common pattern for four of the six participants. Ebtesam said that in her family, the age gaps were so large that “we called ourselves the first and the second

generations” when referring to the sibling groups. I found it significant that for five of the six participants, there was explicit discussion of having to function as a surrogate parent, and that it was already settled within the house that teenage girls were expected to contribute in this manner. Ebtasam's story made this particularly explicit in that age gaps created a middle “generation” on which childcare duties were imposed.

Sana shed additional light on the socio-economic aspects that underpinned her childcaring role in her family. As maids were a relatively uncommon part of the Saudi Arabian family prior to the mid- to late 1970s, “everyone had to contribute then,” she said, “Just like a mother.” Interestingly enough, Sana was the only one of my participants who explicitly denied that the early care of her siblings could have added to her interest in ECE when I raised this point. “Oh, no,” Sana replied. She never liked her mother explicitly ordering her to take care of her siblings, so for her, the entry into ECE had to be for other reasons. In contrast, Nour, Ebtasam, Deena, and Alia all associated their memories of sibling caretaking with either positive feelings or as simply a “necessity” of family life. Excluding Alia, each told me they had not given much thought to being placed into the role; they seemed unaware or unconcerned that the role was created for them without their assent. I sensed that this was simply an aspect of Saudi Arabian family life and patriarchal organization that was assumed to be in their best interest, or at least something that was not open for analysis or negotiation.

For the younger women I spoke with, caretaking seemed to be a more voluntary exercise. Alia noted that her first experience with helping children occurred when she was five years old: when her mother came back from the hospital with her little brother, Alia wanted to do everything she could to care for him. Later, that same care and enthusiasm was extended to the three siblings born after him. Alia mentioned specifically that their family had a maid, but even so she wished to be hands-on in the care of her younger brothers and sisters. Alia also said that she had another sister who had no desire to participate in the care of her siblings, which was fine according to her mother and father. Alia said that she saw the care of her siblings as an extremely high and genuine form of trust.

Deena echoed Alia's experience, stating with no small amount of pride that she felt like a second mother to her younger brother, who entered her life when she was in the seventh grade. This choice of wording was especially powerful and linked back to Sana's description of “being

like a mother,” in the completion of domestic tasks and responsibilities, bridging two very different generations. While these domestic chores are regularly imposed upon women growing up in Saudi Arabian culture, Deena and Alia's narratives showed that young women, even if given the choice not to participate in the domestic sphere of child-rearing, may nevertheless choose to engage in this aspect of the household on their own and find deep meaning in the activity.

Overall, what emerged from the women's narratives was a very strong link for half the participants between conceptions of nurturing children and the time spent taking care of their siblings in their own childhood. All six of these women had prior familiarity with child-rearing in some way, and none of them came from a household where they were the only child. In my opinion, the strength of these patterns suggests that the gendered division of labour within the family may provide a cultural foundation for the entry of women into the field of ECE. To a great degree, I feel this provides an additional reason for the gender gap between men and women. That is, many Saudi Arabian boys are unlikely to spend time in their youth attending to the needs of young children. As they progress through their schooling and pick a career, they may be unlikely to choose any profession that may be centred around children simply because of a lack of familiarity and lack of exposure. While it is true that ECE is not an educational track open to men in the country, taking any child-rearing expectations out of the hands of young males may be a factor in explaining a lack of demand for ECE courses where males are admitted.

At the same time, these gendered antecedents may also attend the lack of prestige ECE receives within Saudi Arabia. A prevailing cultural view of ECE within the country is that it is simply a form of childcare. While many of the women in the study expressed the joy of learning from children and forming deep (sometimes nearly maternal) connections to a young human being, culturally I believe that more men are likely to view work with children as a chore—as something they were spared from in their youth in order to focus on endeavours with more socio-cultural importance. As such, ECE may contend with a popular perception of the field—especially among males—as unserious “women's work”; as a job so easy that children are regularly entrusted to perform its most essential duties. The irony here is strong. ECE's harshest critics may be those with no frame of reference at all as to what it is like to interact with a child.

What is additionally troubling within the narratives is the degree to which ECE may come to be seen as an *expected* profession for women to enter into as a career, based on their experience in many families as surrogate parents. Just as how the female children in many Saudi Arabian family units are *expected* to tend to their younger siblings, ECE exists in the larger culture as a career track in which women are largely *expected* to enter. While none of the women articulated this particular conclusion, I found myself troubled by the lack of agency many women have in Saudi Arabia. They are unwillingly given the responsibility of childcare, often before their own childhoods are complete, leaving them with less time to pursue their own interests and develop their own talents as they become young women. With a restricted set of skills, ECE may become what seems like *the only* option for professional education, which may in turn be a factor in career burnout and teacher apathy. Were child-rearing by female siblings less an ingrained part of Saudi Arabian culture, it is my opinion that the country's women would encounter a wider set of choices when it came to their education. I look with great interest to Alia and Deena's generation to see if the reduced expectations on young girls as primary caretakers will result in a higher demand for additional professional educational options.

5.1.2 Early Childhood Education through the Eyes of the Women as Children

The women I interviewed spoke vividly of their formative school experiences, recalling their emotions and surroundings as though they were still very fresh in their minds. Four of the six women included a moment of profound emotional trauma in their personal narratives about their childhood. The only narratives that lacked this dimension were Walaa's, which lacked any discussion of early school experiences, and Ebtesam's, whose childhood was spent in the Iraqi system before age nine.

As I suspected, and as was certainly true for my own life too, several of the women were able to vividly connect to the negative emotions they had experienced as schoolchildren. Nour mentioned the jarring transition from kindergarten to primary school. She said that she remembered her kindergarten teacher very positively, and had fond memories of her constantly smiling and bringing the students together to sing in a circle. However, even from her first day in grade one, she knew it was going to be a very different and uncomfortable experience: "It was a very big shock to me," said Nour,

I was so scared and not sure about what was going on ... I remember thinking, "Why was the classroom the way it was? Where did the couch go? Why couldn't we sit where we wanted to? Where did the toys go?"

However, Nour said that the most unpleasant aspect of the transition from kindergarten to first grade was the introduction of physical violence, and her once-nurturing teacher became suddenly more strict and volatile. To add blow to injury, one day Nour saw her teacher pull her cousin's ear: "That was shocking to me," she said. "It was a big shift that affected my feelings for school." As a result, Nour concluded that the Saudi Arabian ECE system was "not a suitable environment" for learning, and added, "I wasn't born to go to school." Nour also mentioned as an aside that all of her nightmares took place at school.

By her volunteering this information, I gained a better sense of Nour as a professional educator. I saw that many of her own views of children were informed by how vivid these moments were in her own mind, several decades after they happened. This awareness challenges the image of the child as passive in the classroom: Nour was profoundly affected by a lack of consistency in the educational environment and felt the immediate effects of ECE policy in the transition from kindergarten to grade one. Additionally, the violence inflicted on a family member would forever be etched into her memory as a sign that the school environment could be adversarial to her own physical and emotional health. These moments had a silver lining for her as an educator, in that they helped Nour define effective education and effective classroom design by showing her where a school or teacher could fail a student.

Sana also spoke of extremely demoralizing experiences at school. What was interesting about Sana's childhood was that she moved to the US at the age of five and returned to Saudi Arabia at age ten. During the time her father was completing his doctoral studies in the US, Sana remembers a childhood of trees, parks, riding bikes, and being an enthusiastic reader, sometimes reading an entire novel in one day. When the family moved back to Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, Sana mentioned that she was highly aware of the shift in the environment, noting the lack of trees, bikes, and English-language books to read. She was placed in the fifth grade with no knowledge of spoken Arabic. Here, Sana described a period of her life marked by emotional and physical abuse over several years.

“The teachers would ask me words that they *knew* I couldn't pronounce,” Sana said. “And then when I couldn't, they would laugh.” Sana was struck in class countless times by her teachers and called names like “failure.” She was bullied and taunted by classmates. She said that the administration turned a blind eye on these incidents. At the time, Sana thought, “I'm the worst person ever. I cannot succeed. I'm just a failure.” However, Sana said that her life changed when she met the person whom she called, the “angel teacher.” She explains,

This person chose to see the other side of my story. While she could have said “I don't have time for this dumb student who's just a waste of time,” she took the time to learn about what had happened to me and analyze my situation. She chose to help me instead ... she said, “I know that she will be something. Just give her time and a chance.”

The “angel teacher” gave Sana a place to stay during lunch and recess to shield her from abuse, and helped her and supported her day after day. “She made me feel that I was strong and that I could do something,” Sana said. “I felt the value of me. I felt, 'I am something.' She said, 'You can do it,' and I believed her.”

In the second semester, Sana still failed all of her courses. But the big change was that she now had self-worth. She was able to collect “all of the pieces of me” and started to build her strengths. Sana returned to a different school the following year. She never saw that teacher again, but “this little sprout that she planted in me was what stayed inside me.” After that, she became a high-achieving student, earning As in all her courses. Sana said that because of that experience, she knew she was going to enter the field of teaching to help other students find confidence and self-worth. I felt that Sana carried an awareness as an educator that a teacher might not have all of the pieces of a child's background when a child struggles. Her story was evidence enough that only when children are nurtured will they achieve their full potential. To me, it was a reminder that the larger Saudi ECE system should continually strive to consider every child's social and emotional needs.

While the narratives of two youngest women did not describe moments of physical violence, they did articulately voice feelings of confusion and dissatisfaction experienced in their early education. Deena explained that in her classroom, the space was organized into four activity corners. Her favourite of the four was the dress-up corner where she could play “pretend” in a different role. However, there was a maximum number of children who could play in the corner,

and one day it filled up before she had a chance to get to it. Deena began to cry when she couldn't participate. Deena remembers being blamed for crying, "You're not supposed to be crying," her teacher said. As a result, Deena recalls being forced into making a choice and having her autonomy taken away from her. From that moment forward, "I hated that corner," she said. "I never went back to it."

This narrative, like Nour's, reflected a child who was profoundly aware of the context of her own learning. Deena's choice of where and how to play was artificially constricted, and the shock of being singled out and receiving no validation for her emotions was significant enough for her to share with me. Although to many the incident may seem small or inconsequential, I felt that Deena, like Nour, used it to define a poor academic environment. Even for Deena's generation, the story additionally reflects a vision of ECE as being unwilling (or uninterested) to examine the classroom through the eyes of a child, and for Deena, entering the field would give her the ability to prevent moments like this from happening to others.

Like Nour, Alia shared complaints of a lack of classroom freedom and echoed Sana's memories of obvious classroom favouritism. As a bright child, Alia said she loved to learn with her mother, who was also a teacher, but in school Alia was very quiet. As a more passive and introverted child, Alia hoped that teachers would approach her with clear expectations of what they wanted her to do, but her shyness was looked at as a negative trait. As a result, Alia said that she began to emotionally disconnect as she learned that classroom performance was part of a system of judgment. "I wanted teachers to choose me on my own merits," Alia said. "Not because I was smarter or a favourite." For this reason, Alia said that she became exhausted by the idea of having to prove to seven different teachers and aides that she was smart. As such, Alia projected a sense of self that was larger than the immediate educational environment or context. She knew she was fine, she said. She didn't care if they discovered that or not.

Similar to what I felt with Deena, I sensed that Alia's disappointment of being judged against a set of performance metrics set her own compass for what constituted effective ECE teaching. Alia was deeply troubled by the favouritism and the expectation placed on her to perform in a classroom setting. Now a teacher herself, Alia was still carrying around those memories of being disregarded or dismissed as a result for being herself rather than striving to fit a particular model of obedience. I felt that the experience had lit a fire somewhere within Alia to allow children to

reveal themselves to her as complex, emotionally sensitive individuals. I sensed that Alia's classroom would be an environment in which she would observe and listen to understand (and appreciate) the differences between one child and another, rather than tell children who they were expected to be—perhaps giving them the attention and dignity Alia felt was lacking in her own early education.

Of course, not all of the childhood emotions the women shared with me were negative. In fact, many of the participants told charming stories of moments where they felt triumphant. Here, I felt that while the negative emotions gave the women obstacles to avoid in their paths as teachers, their childhood achievements gave them something equally tangible that they would strive to replicate as teachers themselves.

Alia said that although she was critical of the form and structure of her early education, she had a passion for learning that wouldn't be ruined. In her house, Alia turned an unused attic into a classroom for herself, where she would update posters and educational materials from year to year. Alia also mentioned the tremendous faith and confidence her mother placed in her. As a lecturer at an Islamic university, Alia's mother would often make her a secretary. Alia would answer the phone and take notes, such as the caller's name, occupation, and when they wanted to be called back. According to Alia, the role gave her a giant boost of confidence and helped her to form an image of herself as smart and capable at a very early age.

Walaa noted that she remembered family influence very strongly at this stage of her life. Her mother left a strong impression on her as a model of how to mediate conflict: as the family consultant, Walaa's mother was the person who would hear family complaints and choose how to raise them with other members in appropriate ways. Walaa also said that she was greatly inspired in her path by her grandfather, who she described as a “man of books.” As the head of a publishing company, she remembers that her grandfather's library was tremendous. This family head took great pleasure in hosting his grandchildren in his library, and he always read to them. Walaa remembers this huge room as a place where her grandfather hosted lectures and workshops in the library: this was not a normal occurrence in Saudi Arabia, Walaa mentioned. She added that her grandfather received an honorary doctorate and “left his thumbprint on everyone.”

Ebtesam's narrative also had strong thematic connections to Walaa and Alia's in terms of literacy and positive modelling by family members. Ebtesam remembered an early reading class where the class read a passage about a grandmother who wanted to read stories to her grandchildren, but couldn't because she didn't have her glasses. However, it turned out they were on her head. "It was the most fascinating story I had ever come across." The teacher then asked them to role play the story. "A little play in grade one or two made a big difference," she said, "And I've been reading ever since then!" Ebtesam also remembered moments of leadership, such as showing the class how to pray, and kindness. One of her most cherished memories was when she lost a shoe, but the teacher encouraged all the children to help participate in the search. "I felt like a queen," she said.

Ebtesam also shared a very profound moment of her personal journey that occurred in her early childhood education. One day, her mother had to teach one of her daughter's classes as a substitute. However, Ebtesam said that after that day, her sibling listened to her mother more carefully and showed her more respect. Ebtesam said that the family saw that her mother was actually someone who was doing an important job, and that recognition was powerful. Ebtesam said it was the first moment when she realized that teachers could definitely leave an impression on young children and influence their relationships.

In each of these moments—and in each of their own ways—the women in my study articulated to me formative childhood experiences that were deeply tied to the classroom setting, communal learning among peers, early literacy, a child's natural desire to explore the world around them, and the power a caring teacher had to inspire others. While these moments may simply be coincidental, I found the recurrence of these themes in the narrative to be deeply insightful. Among all of the participants, there was a very mature awareness of ECE that I felt served as a calling. To me, the negative experiences illustrated how necessary it was for sensitive, capable women to enter the field, and the positive experiences framed ECE early into life as a profession where women had the capacity to do good.

5.1.3 Steps into Saudi Arabian ECE as Young Professionals

As the women moved from their early lives into their early adulthood, it was fascinating to hear about how they came to enter the ECE field. Half of the participants indicated that their initial

steps into studying ECE were very purposeful. Sana, following from her experiences with her “angel teacher,” was driven to be a teacher. “There wasn't a second thought about being anything else,” she said. She rose to the top of the class in university, and at every step of the way thanked God and was grateful that this teacher had believed in her. Similarly, Alia's childhood passion of creating her own classroom space matured into a professional desire to be an educational leader. Before her time at university was finished, Alia already had a goal of opening her own private school and teaching through the Montessori approach. Deena said simply that ECE was always her first choice.

For the others, the first steps into ECE happened largely fortuitously. Ebtesam's mother approached her one day and said simply, “Your old elementary school needs a math teacher.” While Ebtesam didn't mention specifically why this information was presented to her, my interpretation was that her mother (a former teacher herself) heard news of the opening through a personal network. Sensing her daughter had the right temperament for the position, Ebtesam's mother did what she could to help out a fellow colleague. At the time, the school was short-staffed, and even though Ebtesam had plans to study abroad in the near future, she thought she would give it a chance. In the role, Ebtesam saw that she could help quite a bit. “It was exciting to enter the staff room and enter as a teacher, not a student,” she said, adding that it was “very beautiful” to sit next to a past elementary school teacher that she remembered fondly. Nevertheless, Ebtesam had a strong thirst to explore the world and a love of Western literature, and traveled to America to obtain a degree in English. When Ebtesam returned to Saudi Arabia later in life, she wanted to continue her education. Ebtesam said that at that time, she wanted to explore the world of architecture and obtain a master's degree. However, in the educational realm of Saudi Arabia, the career choice was not available to her—every architecture program in the country only admitted males as a matter of policy. For Ebtesam, relocation did not seem to be a viable option: as a married woman with a husband and family in Saudi Arabia, she was forced to find a suitable “plan B” among a more limited set of choices. While Ebtesam wasn't able to pursue the career path she wanted at that time, education had always remained a fond theme in her life, and so she entered into the field of ECE.

To me, this element of Ebtesam's narrative illustrates a pattern that would appear again in my work: especially for the older generations of women I interviewed, there was little internal resistance to walking a path they were expected to take, nor was there much outward

resentment of the fact that her choices were miniscule compared to those that would be enjoyed by a Western-educated male in that time and location. Ebtesam showed me an interesting duality experienced by many female ECE professionals within Saudi Arabia—often, they exhibit a profound level of strength to move forward and achieve greatness within their own lives in spite of the numerous setbacks they face. However, they are often unaware of how ingrained Saudi Arabian culture is within them, as they don't often directly challenge or question the inequality that surrounds them. In Saudi Arabia, women are imposed upon and restricted in their choices often enough that it becomes normalized, both for the males who hold socio-political control and for the women operating within the country's numerous professional and educational settings. Sadly, the lack of challenge that originates from women allows highly patriarchal systems to perpetuate themselves. Through the narratives, I became aware to the degree to which this “blind spot” hampered the effectiveness of the country's ECE. With the Saudi Arabian women in this study largely unsure of their role or capability in drafting senior-level educational policy, I felt that my country was being deprived of the valuable insights of countless agents of positive change.

Quite differently from Ebtesam, Nour found her entry into ECE by taking a job as a counsellor at a local summer camp during her university coursework. A college friend had explained that she found the experience enlightening and fun work, and Nour needed a summer job. As such, the entry into ECE for Nour was primarily financial and opportunistic, rather than what seemed to her, at that time, to be the development of a purposeful journey towards becoming a teacher. Nevertheless, the experience was fortuitous. Nour found that she loved working with children, and the camp connected her with the experience of seeing children succeed on their own terms. Compared to her early childhood narratives, Nour's stories of working at the camp revealed a different avenue to how ECE could be approached and how a differing image of the child could lead to surprising results. “It wasn't a traditional summer camp,” Nour explained. “At traditional summer camps, kids are forced to do certain activities. They're forced to listen to instructions.” In contrast, Nour said that, in the camp she worked at, she was excited by how the children at the camp embraced the freedom they were given and how readily they incorporated found materials like cardboard boxes in their projects. As a result of two consecutive summer camps she participated in, Nour came back to school and changed her major to ECE. While ECE served as Ebtesam's safety net when faced with a lack of professional options, for Nour—

previously on the track to pursue a financial career—ECE was in and of itself a more fascinating field that she felt was worthy of serious academic study.

Like Nour, Walaa's initial steps into ECE were also something of a happy accident. However, like Ebtesam, Walaa's entry into the field was marked by having to negotiate a set of options limited by expectations that attended Saudi Arabian culture and the female gender. "I wanted to be an artist," Walaa said. "Specifically, I wanted to illustrate for children, since I didn't see many who were doing that." Walaa married at a young age, but her husband discouraged her from finishing school and pursuing her dream of being an author of children's books. "Just be a housewife and raise kids," he urged. However, two years later, the couple had not been able to conceive a child. "My husband saw that I wasn't happy and said, 'Well: you can go, I suppose. It's best to spend your time in a meaningful way rather than sitting at home.'" At that time, there were no seats available at any department except for ECE, but Walaa didn't want to hesitate, lest her husband change his mind.

Two insights emerged for me on the basis of Walaa's description. The first was that, as it was for Ebtesam, ECE became something of a "substitute dream"; that is, it was an avenue that became interesting or desirable as a career path only once alternate paths were eliminated as a byproduct of mechanisms operating within the realms of family dynamics or educational politics in Saudi Arabia. Secondly, I found that Walaa's story also reflected Deena's and Nour's in that the three women heard explicit (and predominately male) voices that discouraged them from being a part of ECE. A recurring theme in many of these narratives is the presence of a male gatekeeper who must agree to the direction of focus and professional study these women are considering. Without the blessing of this male guardian, women are severely limited in their ability to travel to attend classes, finance their education, and—even if they succeed in these first two obstacles—to obtain transportation to their workplace (Mazawi, 2007). I wish the reader to pause to consider the degree to which a Saudi Arabian woman's autonomy, mobility, and access to the labour market are often held at arm's length until a male family member acquiesces to the woman's aspirations.

Nour was initially persuaded by her father to become an accountant, but she didn't find it compelling. During the time that she volunteered at the summer camp, Nour was majoring in financial law, but again found it boring. Nour said that her father was disappointed by her choice

to move away from what he saw as her gift for numbers. Deena also said that her family explicitly warned her against ECE, even despite her passion for the field. “People thought I would be wasting my talents,” she said. As a result, Deena said that she “caved to the pressure” and took a semester of business, though she knew it was not for her. Deena mentioned that she was used to being a child who did not get negative feedback and did not cause any trouble, but eventually she decided to follow what her heart was telling her. Although Ebtesam did not mention it specifically, her choice to turn away from architecture seemed to have been made in light of the expectations (either externally imposed or self-imposed) of her as a wife and mother holding greater priority.

In short, I wish the reader to consider the evidence of a deeply entrenched Saudi Arabian strain of patriarchy intervening in the early lives of all six women, in many ways. Beginning in early childhood, there exists a gender-based division of labour that often assigns the raising of younger siblings to the girls of a Saudi Arabian family unit. While this was especially pronounced for all participants over the age of forty, even Deena, one of my youngest participants, noted that she was placed into the role of a surrogate mother. While the women had varying reactions to being placed in this role without being consulted, it nevertheless bears repeating that across a span of more than fifty years there has existed an unchallenged, taken-for-granted expectation that Saudi Arabian girls—and not Saudi Arabian boys—must tend to their younger siblings. I am thankful that participants like Deena and Ebtesam felt a sense of pride in being able to nurture their younger brothers and sisters, but it bears some consideration that in a sample of six women, only Alia had the ability to volunteer for the position of a caregiver.

Additionally, the presence of male gatekeepers reflects a broader cultural (and legal) context of women being second-class citizens whose ambitions and dreams must be reconciled with the whims of a husband and/or father. These moments, unfortunately, reinforce a narrative that women are too untrustworthy or foolish to choose their own career paths. Secondly, I believe that this subsequently results in a further lack of prestige for these women—considering that ECE is populated almost exclusively by women, a job in ECE must therefore be inferior to any occupation held by a man.

As a final thought, I wish the reader to examine the early years of these six lives as the narratives of women being moulded to a cultural and socio-political system where the needs of

males come first. From women's girlhoods to the moment in which they apply to collegiate-level education, men are in control of how women spend their time, where they reside, and what programs they may apply to. Additionally, these factors often serve as a "blind spot" in the narratives: none of the six women made explicit mention to the difference in treatment between them and their male siblings or, in certain cases, the assumed superiority of their husbands' desires over their own. I believe that the strain of patriarchy that is present in Saudi Arabia is difficult to critically examine for many women because it has been an aspect taken for granted in daily life. Implicit in many of the narratives of early life, and as will be further revealed in later conversations, is an internalization of social inferiority as simply "the way things are." Again, I found each of these women to be eloquent, powerful, and driven agents of ECE, but it remains my belief that such qualities have developed in spite of the country's cultural and socio-political systems rather than because of them.

In the coming section, I examine how these women moved from children and young women ingrained in the Saudi Arabian cultural and educational contexts to working professionals in the world of ECE.

5.2 Classroom Challenges and Successes as Educators

One of the most enlightening aspects of co-composing the women's rich narratives was being able to see what goes on in the classroom through a variety of new perspectives. Each of the women mentioned specific moments where they were tested and, just as importantly, moments when they felt they were able to thrive. In this section, I present the narratives in the hope of showing the reader the ups and downs of the various professional practices of these women as ECE educators. I thought I would learn quite a lot by attempting to imagine myself as a fly on the wall in the various classes they have experienced and would have a rich source of data simply from the stories that the women chose to prioritize when it came to providing illustrations of who they are and what they do.

5.2.1 Saudi Arabian ECE: From Theory to Practice

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the conversations, and present in three of the six narratives, was the challenge of bridging professional education with classroom practice. In

many cases, the women spoke of a disconnection between what was taught to them as part of college training and the realities that awaited them upon graduation and admission to the field of ECE.

Alia's professional journey began with a clear mission: become an expert in Montessori in order to have the real-world experience in the philosophy that would give her the confidence to open her own school. However, Alia noted that while she became interested in Montessori during her coursework, Arabic-language resources were virtually non-existent. "My ECE program didn't give me any background in Montessori," Alia explained, "so I wanted to work in schools using the curriculum. At that time, three different schools in Riyadh were using the approach."

Interestingly enough, the first school denied Alia the ability to even observe a classroom in practice, an answer that struck Alia as unusual. The school did not explicitly mention why the request was denied, but knowing the educational landscape of the country, Alia and I both surmised that having a classroom observer would create more work, and may have been denied simply because no one in the school wished to concern themselves with the uncompensated professional development. That said, I had an additional supposition for why a school would turn away a student like Alia. Existing literature notes that ECE approaches like Montessori and Reggio Emilia are often transported and modified to contexts that are geographically and culturally distant from their originating practice sites, and that such modification is indeed true to the spirit and authenticity of such approaches (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Rinaldi, 2005). However, educational experts have noticed that at times these approaches can be implemented at the site of destination in such a way that comes across as inconsistent, often lacking a coherent translation of the ethical or social components that provide a foundation for those methods or philosophies (Hui, Wang, & Sin Wong, 2011; Nyland & Nyland, 2005). As also previously noted, Saudi Arabia's educational policy and school-level administration often trend towards avoiding potential sources of conflict and showing deference to the status quo, which often challenges the adoption and implementation of more progressive educational policy (Aljhani et al., 2011; Iqbal, 2011; Khan, 2011). With this literature in mind, my instinctive impression was that the school may have been using Montessori in name only, hoping to entice new enrollments by the reference of a recognizable international educational technique. If so, they wouldn't want someone in the classroom who might possibly raise concerns over whether

the approach were being meaningfully integrated by the teaching staff. This, again, was only my instinctive impression and indeed may not fully reflect the reality of the decision.

However, despite this refusal by the school, Alia was undeterred and contacted a second school, waiting a full year for a position to open. I wish to take a small moment to explore this fact on its own, as it has larger cultural and economic ramifications. In reality, even if Alia had not chosen to work at a pre-school with a focus on the Montessori approach to ECE, wait times of a year or more are common practice before ECE teachers find employment. I find that comparatively, men are often placed into careers with greater urgency and expediency post-graduation. Again, the unchallenged expectation that women can (and should) patiently wait for several months illustrates to me that different expectations exist when it comes to the value of a man and a woman's idleness, which in turn may come to bear on the perceived seriousness of their chosen occupations. Economically, this down time is a period where women aren't able to earn an income. On one hand, this provides a source of stress for the women and their families; but on the other, serves to limit a woman's financial independence. Alia's wait certainly reflects a labour market where the work of women is often viewed as "nonstrategic," (Hamdan, 2005, p. 12), and by extension, non-urgent. It also may be symptomatic of a labour market where males are hired for jobs with far greater expediency than are females (Chamlou, 2008; Forster 2017).

In Alia's case, she was fortunate that the second school proved to be worth the wait. Here, the information of how to run a classroom in the style of Montessori was made open and transparent, and for the next two years the school helped Alia reach her goals through workshops and support. These experiences, to me, underscored that a significant amount of difference exists among women entering the field in terms of their ability to maneuver, negotiate, and open new pathways in relation to their educational opportunities. Drawing contrasts to her previous conversations with ECE administrators, Alia said that the second school understood the importance of nurturing new generations of ECE teachers and helping them to establish good practices early on in their careers. While Alia knew that the Montessori approach to ECE was child-centred, these early moments of classroom teaching and observing showed her the difference between her vague notions of Montessori and how it actually differed from standard approaches when put into practice.

For Alia, there was a marked contrast between her previous educational experiences as a student-teacher working towards her ECE degree and what she saw in the school that welcomed her. “I was in shock when I saw how much information was actually available and by how different it was in a Montessori classroom,” she said. “I realized that when I was in the university, I was teaching kids how to be dumb.” Alia explained that rather than a primary focus on classroom management and learning by rote, the Montessori approach was a whole-child approach to education, and celebrated the uniqueness of how students in ECE process their worlds and demonstrate their knowledge. By observing, Alia learned most of all that children flourished when there wasn’t a standardized, one-size-fits-all approach to their education. That realization, Alia said, was profound. Entering into her professional education with the ultimate goal of opening her own private school as an entrepreneur, her observation granted her a clear vision of what her own future school could aspire to be.

Walaa's narrative also contained similar themes of how important and promising the overall field of ECE was, and the ramifications a good education had on a student's future. She spoke first of the tremendous happiness she felt upon earning her degree in ECE. “They gave me a badge that I could put on my clothing. It said, 'Teacher Walaa.' I took a picture of myself with the badge and sent it to my grandparents, and there was a big celebration.” However, within the first few months of teaching, Walaa felt tremendously disheartened. “All of what I believed in wasn't there [in the classroom],” she said. She felt that all of the knowledge she absorbed in four years was of little use to the practical application of running the classroom. To her, the difference between theory and practice was initially demoralizing. While Alia spent the first years as a credentialed teacher applying her recent lessons, Walaa spent them adapting to the reality that there was not a time or place for her to draw meaningfully from her teacher education.

Walaa elaborated that the practical experience of being an ECE teacher was like “being under a millstone,” as she felt constant pressure by parents and the administration to excel without the ability to modify the curriculum itself. During this time, Walaa mentioned the personal strain of having to balance both performance expectations with economic realities: on a meager salary, Walaa often paid for school supplies out of her own pocket in order to provide her students with what she felt they needed to be successful. To me, this was a good indicator of the lack of structural support that can often play a strong hand in whether a Saudi Arabian ECE teacher is successful in achieving her goals. This aspect of Walaa's narrative again paints the Saudi

Arabian ECE teacher as a figure working in isolation without proper tools, but who is nevertheless judged on her overall performance. This experience resonates well with the story of women in the field of Saudi Arabian ECE who are *expected* to find solutions to classroom problems by whatever means necessary. I felt it was another sign of the lack of value placed on a woman's personal time, efforts, and financial means within this particular educational context. For Walaa's tenure as a classroom teacher, results were visible, but her numerous struggles as a teacher were not; they were rather taken for granted by the administration and not valued. Although Walaa was working in the 1990s, her struggles were similar to those of Deena, who entered the classroom in the early 2010s. To me, this illustrated that Walaa's concerns were still an unfortunate part of the country's current ECE system.

I also wish to take a brief moment to explore what Alia and Walaa's stories tell us about the state of Saudi Arabian professional education where it relates to ECE. Alia, having entered the field of ECE during the 2010s, was dismissive of the quality of her professional education. I sensed that, for her, it felt like the ECE programs were taught to a lowest common denominator: a one-size-fits-all approach designed to teach only the rudiments of classroom management and ECE curriculum with the purpose of creating teachers who could perform an merely adequate job. Alia's narrative reflected a philosophy of the child-as-deficient that stood in stark contrast to the reality that unfolded in front of her through her Montessori observations. This reinforced the characterization of Saudi Arabia's ECE programs as being unchallenging and uncritical. It is troubling that these attributes persist, suggesting that child-centredness is a concept that still has difficulty gaining traction even within Saudi Arabia's collegiate-level ECE training. Alquassem et al. (2016) described a pronounced lack of research into the state of ECE programs in Saudi Arabia and a shortage of documents that would clarify at the state or collegiate level how the country was planning to bring its visions for ECE to fruition. As the literature has described, the country's higher educational programs directed towards women suffer from institutional inertia, inferiority compared to college programs directed at males, and are often still ingrained in a culture that values a one-way transmission of information from student to teacher (Aljhani et al., 2011; Elyas & Picard, 2010; Hamdan, 2005; Khan, 2011).

Furthermore, Alia's narrative seemed to carry an implicit value judgment that quality ECE education was defined in part by the presence and use of Western-authored sources (a concern Sana will echo in a later chapter). Reading between the lines, it seemed to me that some of the

women would have doubted that successful and effective professional ECE training could originate entirely within Saudi Arabia's borders. The country is certainly populated by several highly educated men and women whose efforts as intellectuals seem to end upon receipt of their advanced degrees. As Lippman (2012) explains, "Many Saudis seem to value education as a credential rather than as an end in itself or as a gateway to new ideas and new norms of social organization" (p. 129). And indeed, as much of the literature has indicated, Saudi Arabian higher education—including ECE programs—are often filled with the kinds of administrators interested in their own career advancement and quality of life rather than those driven to advance the knowledge base of the field (Aljhani et al., 2011; Iqbal, 2011; Khan, 2011). I sensed that for the women who participated in the study and shared their narratives, the presence of Western-authored sources (and the willingness to interpret and share them) was an indicator of excellence.

However, Alia's description cannot be said to speak for Saudi Arabia's educational landscape as a whole. Walaa's narrative shows that she had no complaints at all with the quality of her own ECE education. Indeed, to hear Walaa describe her education, college seemed like a time of positive mentorship—an arena where women were able to take charge and motivate new generations of teachers by showing them the importance of ECE. Walaa's narrative and professional journey showed that when ECE became a "substitute dream" for a career as an artist, her grit and progress came out of a sense of obligation to make her teaching and mentorship work—in whatever way she could institute—amidst the realities of the Saudi Arabian public school system of the 1990s. There was a real sense in Walaa's narrative of a woman striving to do her best, not only for the young minds in her classrooms, but for the women who preceded her that believed so strongly in the possibility of quality ECE for the country's citizens.

5.2.2 Negotiating ECE Curriculum: Strategies, Challenges, and Successes

It was interesting that many of Walaa's complaints about working with the ECE curriculum in the classroom were a critical component of the daily negotiations these women faced. I wanted the women who had a working day-to-day knowledge of the Ministry of Education's ECE programs to weigh in with their thoughts and let me know what they thought. Here, they were more than happy to share.

Despite an approximate thirty-year age difference between Deena and Walaa, Deena also said that her biggest classroom challenge came from the stress associated with curriculum. I asked her to clarify. Deena said that the stress wasn't associated with classroom management, but in administering curriculum handed down from the Ministry of Education that is so stringent and mandatory that it makes no allowance for adaptation when children encounter difficulty. "I'm forced to teach in ways that I cannot modify," she said plainly. Her words articulated what became a perennial theme among all of the narratives: the complex and multifaceted rift between the women at the front of Saudi Arabian ECE classrooms and the policy that is presumably intended to help them succeed.

Interestingly enough, Deena was the only woman among the women I spoke with who recorded a moment of clear success that occurred within a public school ECE classroom. This came in the form of a food storage unit, where children added sugar to foods to make jam, dried fruits, and pickled vegetables with vinegar. Deena said that the children were extremely involved in the activity and loved the ability to taste so many different foods. This led naturally to an educational goal of writing descriptions of the items and why they were nutritious. However, the bigger change for Deena was that it created a change in classroom culture and even the students' home lives. Children brought home many of the foods for their parents to try, and the parents then saw the nutritional benefit of having fruit or nuts in place of junk food and sweets. Soon, the children arrived to class with snacks that mirrored their former project.

Alia, being in a slightly different situation as the owner of her own private school, reported more curriculum flexibility overall, but her moment of triumph was similar to Deena's in that it bridged the immediate lesson to create a larger social or cultural consciousness. Alia cited two moments in particular that she saw as profound to her. The first was a lesson about different types of balls used in sports. This allowed students to become engaged in soccer balls and soccer teams, which then led to a discussion of geography in Asia, Europe, and South America. To me, it was an interesting moment that caused me to reconsider the wisdom of ECE policy that excludes young women from sports and physical education (Hamdan, 2005). Alia's narrative didn't account for the lesson being received any better for boys than it was for girls. In fact, and much to the contrary, Alia seemed to have pride in how sports allowed her to present a multifaceted and socially complex concept in concrete terms. Soccer gave Alia the ability to explain how,

although many children were the same in that they all loved to play soccer all around the world, there was immense inequality in terms of their poverty levels and educational opportunities.

The second articulation of Alia's professional success was a day when art served as a vehicle to connect the students to one another. The day began, innocently enough, with Alia drawing a picture for another student. The children were surprised that a drawing could be a gift, and one student asked, "Do you love him more than us?" Alia asked, "What do you think?" The children explored this concept and realized that this was not the case, but it created an environment where students began to draw for one another as a way to strengthen friendships and show empathy to one another.

I considered the link between the two moments and why Alia would choose to share them with me. What I arrived at was that both moments of success involved communicating with the students as human beings and seeing tangible results in the form of changed behaviour. These moments of personal growth or societal change are profound for ECE teachers like Alia. They are clear indicators that their jobs have meaning and that ECE can be an effective tool to develop informed, compassionate, and thoughtful Saudi Arabian citizens. However, these moments seem to float outside of the Saudi Arabian ECE context. They seem to be invisible to those who create policy—to those who will judge the women working in the field based on a set of quantitative metrics related to scores and curriculum progression. Thus, I would urge the reader to consider that many of the most profound moments that occur in the country's ECE classrooms go unrecognized and unrewarded by those who hold political control, a theme that will become even more explicit in the sections to come.

5.2.3 Finding Success beyond the Walls of the ECE Classroom

For four of the six women—and especially for Nour and Walaa, who felt deeply unsatisfied teaching within the public ECE system—their proudest moments of personal success occurred outside of the classroom—not just metaphorically, as was Deena's case, but physically as well. The narratives challenged me to think about where I look to find examples of ECE and the kinds of people and environments I am able to learn from. While the classroom is a highly important locus of activity, it is just one of many.

Nour said that she felt most fulfilled in her old summer camp, of all places. There, she noticed that the children as young as six and seven were sharing when given choice and freedom, and responded very well when asked their opinion about events and educational topics. Most educational objectives took the form of two- to three-week projects. “We didn't have names for things like 'social skills' or 'emotional intelligence' or 'problem solving,’” Nour said, “But I saw it unfolding and it was very tangible.” Nour said that the success of those projects left on her a clear impression of what effective ECE should aspire to be. My take-away was this: even though the educational systems themselves would fail Nour, the vision of effective ECE education in general would continue to inspire her and shape her steps forward.

Like Nour and Ebtessam, Walaa also followed a strong internal compass that often pointed towards avenues where their spark for education would be nurtured and rewarded rather than marginalized. Her narratives were filled with a repeated phrase that I found particularly important: “I felt the need.” Walaa said that she was most proud of her work as a writer specializing in ECE. For example, Walaa's books often targeted what she saw as gaps in the curriculum unique to Saudi Arabia. One title was written in order to provide Saudi Arabian children with the gardening and planting opportunities that Walaa found so engaging about the Reggio Emilia approach to ECE, so Walaa created a how-to guide that would allow students to grow desert-friendly plants.

In another title, Walaa chose to look more critically at how baking and cooking was used in educational units. “I saw that a lot of curriculum involved cooking or baking,” Walaa said, “and that the kitchen was always a central part. I asked, how can the kitchen be made a complete educational curriculum? How does it involve adult and child roles, and what should they be?” On the basis of these questions, Walaa wrote a book about how to cook with children, including how to work with special needs children. This didn't include just recipes, but also included corresponding activities that touched on social issues, language development, logical skills, and scientific principles. However, Walaa's largest triumph was in the founding of a print (and later online) magazine dedicated to ECE teachers. This started mainly as a way for teachers to form similar groups to the kind that Walaa appreciated in her classroom teaching days, allowing teachers to share strategies and stories in a supportive and like-minded group. However, as readership grew, Walaa soon found herself in a new role as both an editor and professional instructor.

While Ebtesam's background was as a university lecturer in ECE, she nevertheless did have direct, hands-on experience with children. Like Walaa, Ebtesam also saw tremendous value in the world of books, and for a long period of time was a volunteer with the Ministry of Culture in order to administer Saudi Arabia's annual book fair. Ebtesam said that she saw again and again a similar pattern of behaviour emerge when children were brought to the fair. Ebtesam shared an example of this interaction with me between two students at the book fair.

Ebtesam: Why did you come here?

Student 1: I don't know ... So we can see books.

Ebtesam (*to another student*): Why did your school bring you here?

Student 2: I don't know.

Ebtesam: What kind of books would you like to read?

Student 2: I don't like to read.

Considering the story, Ebtesam said, "Now, I ask them simple questions that lead to certain points." She explained how she takes her first steps into helping children see the value of books and overcoming their initial resistance. She spoke of a young boy named Khaled:

Ebtesam: Are there any foods that you don't like to eat?

Khaled: Fish.

Ebtesam: Did you guys hear that? Khaled says he doesn't like to eat.

Other student: No, no, that's not what he said.

Ebtesam: Oh, then I misspoke. So that must mean that when someone says "you don't like to read," it means that they are making the same mistake. With all of the books that are here today, I want you to make a discovery about the kinds of books that you like to read.

On the basis of her volunteer experience with the Ministry of Culture, Ebtesam founded a learning centre dedicated to exactly the goal of helping children build their literacy skills and love of reading in an afterschool centre. Here again, Ebtesam encountered resistance from children.

“They would say, 'I don't want to read.' I'd say, 'You don't have to read. Just come in and have fun.’” Ebtesam said again and again that “fun creates the need to look further.” My impression was that true learning took place in a mental space where children forgot the immediate goal or larger purpose of the institution that surrounded them. In a profound moment, Ebtesam mentioned a science exhibit about light where children shone coloured flashlights at the same part of the wall and observed with fascination that the light turned white. “It was like a magic trick,” she said, and I felt through her smile that this was true for both the children as well as it was for her.

Ebtesam, like Walaa, eventually “saw a need” (to borrow Walaa's term), to help her fellow teachers. At the university, Ebtesam pushed to start open enrollment in the university's ECE courses, viewing the move as a larger service for the community as a whole. Ebtesam said that other universities had attempted to lure her away from her position with the promise of a higher salary. Ebtesam says that one of them came from a former student who became an HR director at another college. She was stunned when Ebtesam decided not to move.

She said, “How can you turn something like this down? Think about it, take a couple of days.” I said, “Why? I love the students, I know the problems, and I know I can help to make things right.” I'm not looking for the money or a position.

Ebtesam's story was inspiring to me, but after some thought and analysis I found it bittersweet. While it is a story of a woman following her heart in terms of negotiating a career path, the shock of the recruiter illustrates the pervasiveness of experts in the country's ECE field—even at the highest levels of instruction—who are motivated primarily by financial gain. From Ebtesam's telling of the story, the recruiter thought it was a sure bet that more pay would counteract intangible qualities like professional respect, a strong academic community, and/or a sense of duty or obligation to one's fellow teachers. It illustrates too often that Saudi Arabia is a culture where the value of one's work and position is defined by one's salary.

Sana, the other ECE university professor included in my study, also spoke of moments of professional success in helping her fellow teachers, all of which were byproducts of her journey to become like the “angel teacher.” “She saved me,” Sana said, explaining just as quickly that her influence continues to spread today. “She left hundreds and thousands of fingerprints on all of the kids that I was teaching.” As a result, when Sana teaches her ECE university students,

she says, “This is an invitation to think about the echoes you could leave on the lives of others. Meditate on this.” Realizing the value of spreading one's influence, Sana mentioned that she was driven to host a voluntary “mother meeting”: that is, a parenting seminar for local mothers. Despite her busy schedule, Sana meets regularly with teachers, mothers, and any other interested party to talk about a particular issue of concern to ECE. In my opinion, Sana seemed most proud of this aspect of her professional life, and happiest in front of a group of fellow teachers to share what she knows. “A good deed will reproduce itself,” she said.

Among the narratives, an especially strong insight emerged for me: the degree of professional satisfaction and happiness these women experienced was directly proportional to their perceived levels of respect and autonomy. Women who had control over their labour and who were entrusted to lead and inspire others reported high satisfaction. Those who felt micromanaged or educated to perform a task only as well as anyone else felt stress and a lack of purpose. It is equally important to note how heavily entrepreneurship is implicated here as a path to personal and professional success. It was interesting that half of the women who chose to participate in this study—that is, Alia, Walaa, and Ebtessam—had eventually gravitated to fields outside of the school system where they were able to operate with greatly reduced governmental and bureaucratic oversight. From this, I conclude that these women joined a growing contingent of women in Saudi Arabia who are increasingly creating their own positions and occupations, even when it means shouldering the substantial financial risk and anxieties that accompany starting a business (Danish & Smith, 2012; Hamdan, 2005). A greater acceptance of free-market economics and a cultural shift towards making one's own way in the economy (as opposed to striving to obtain a stable government job) has resulted in opportunities for women to lead on their own terms. In the same breath, I should mention that entrepreneurship is not a clear path away from the patriarchy that surrounds ECE within the country, as even female entrepreneurs often depend on male financiers, who in turn function as another set of gatekeepers to women's dreams and professional ambitions (Forster, 2017). Nevertheless, I feel the narratives reveal positive steps towards a changing cultural and economic context in which ECE is situated, and show a present day in which women have expanded opportunities to further the field within Saudi Arabia by drawing on their unique talents and insights.

For Sana and Ebtesam, the two women with the most years of teaching experience in my study, it is interesting to note that job satisfaction generally correlated to the degree of autonomy the women held within their respective positions and institutions. Sana and Ebtesam's narratives positioned them as respected leaders within the field of ECE. The roles these two women inhabited are contextually very different from the other women in the sense that they were employed at the university level and were educating adult students instead of teachers. However, it provides an interesting juxtaposition. Nour, Walaa, and Deena each expressed the most uniformly negative experiences navigating the professional challenges of ECE, and not surprisingly each of them experienced these moments while employed at the lowest levels of the country's public educational sector.

This I do not believe is mere coincidence, and the differences among the women's educational contexts and professional expectations vary widely. In attempting to understand the degree to which these factors can prove to be an oppressive force into the lives of the women working in Saudi Arabian ECE—especially for those women working under the direct oversight of the Ministry of Education—I wish to devote the next section entirely to the topic of these pressures.

5.3 Interactions with Educational Stakeholders

Perhaps the single strongest element of overlap in the narratives concerned interactions of the study's participants with three major groups of stakeholders: fellow ECE teachers, administrators (either at the local or Ministry of Education level), and parents. What surprised me was how negative the tone was of these segments of the stories, and here I felt the women most clearly communicated the frustration they had with being marginalized in many forms.

For four of the six women, I could tell that they were eager to vent—perhaps because of a combination of having so much to say and having so few acceptable conversational partners who would understand the degree of their experiences. Even more significantly, for two of the women, these points of tension were so significant that they saw them as irreconcilable with their personal and professional goals, causing them to resign from their positions as classroom teachers for good.

5.3.1 Thoughts on Fellow Teachers

Having talked to my participants about their professional experiences, it seemed to me that a bystander would come away with the impression that while great teachers stand out in Saudi Arabian's ECE environment, they are fewer in number than most of us would like.

When we began talking about professional challenges, Sana mentioned her fellow teachers very early in the discussion. She explained that when she was most active as a classroom teacher in her early career, her colleagues were extremely discouraging. She told me, "If you saw a child in need of help or wanted to work with a child as a case study in an ECE program, they'd ask, 'Seriously? You're going to do that? You just have to do your job. That's not your work.'" Sana said that these moments often drained her of her sense of enthusiasm and confidence in her direction, she said that each of these interactions "burst her bubble" as a developing ECE teacher. Sana articulated a vision to me of Saudi Arabian ECE as being predominately defined in the 1980s and 1990s as narrow in scope and populated by careerists looking to earn a paycheck rather than craft a professional identity or hone a set of valuable skills. According to Sana's story, Saudi Arabia was a lonely place for any public ECE teacher with a talent for critical thinking and an urge to self-improve. Without the drive to carry in the footsteps of the angel teacher, I felt that Sana would have failed to keep her passion for ECE alive. In her voice was still a sense of sadness and lived adversity, and the gravity of her words made me think there were several times where she might have felt it would have been easier to simply give up and check out.

I wondered if Sana's narrative was simply reflective of the most uncritical and early stages of Saudi Arabia's ECE programs. Perhaps these narratives were simply confined to a time when the country collectively viewed ECE, both at a cultural and political level, as simply a form of glorified babysitting. Sadly, such stories were consistent across my participants' lives and were not limited to Sana's particular practice context. In particular, I found similar narratives across multiple timelines, and tellingly all women expressed similar dissatisfaction with one's fellow educators. Walaa, who taught in the 1990s, said, "When I was in the field I saw horrible examples of teachers who would scream at kids. They didn't do their jobs well, and they just wanted to end the day and go home." I asked if they were only there for the pay. "Clearly," Walaa said. However, she added that in a way, the lack of care and drive in many of her

colleagues had a different lesson: it showed her how necessary and important it was for her to be an agent of positive change.

I was eager to collectively explore some of the underlying social, economic, cultural, and political conditions the women felt had contributed to such an environment. Deena explained that the field of ECE in Saudi Arabia has struggled with having a positive social reputation because of connections to the realities of higher education. “ECE is a department that accepts a lot of people who get rejected from other departments,” she offered. “It’s looked at as an easy department to get a degree in ... Maybe that’s why some teachers are not passionate.” Deena said that in her opinion, if it’s a profession that was chosen *for* them because they had no other options, every day at the job could perhaps feel like some kind of personal failure.

For me, Deena’s comments reinforced the idea that patriarchy extended into the job market of Saudi Arabia, and was not confined only to the private sphere of the household. Beyond the areas of business or medicine, the two most popular university degrees among Saudi Arabia’s women have historically been ECE and the human sciences (Almunajjed, 2009; Baki, 2004). Given that the human science degrees—such as Islamic Studies—have relatively low job placement rates, and because women with degrees outside of these fields are often discriminated against in favour of their male peers, ECE often becomes an unattractive, “default” option that is open only because all other paths are eliminated (Almunajjed, 2010; Budhwar & Yaw, 2001; Chamlou, 2008; Forster, 2017; Hamdan, 2005). I thought of Ebtesam as a young woman hoping for the chance to be an architect, or for those countless women wishing to specialize in law, political science, communication, computer science, or a host of other disciplines. Such women are ill-served by the small fraction of avenues open to them in comparison to their male peers. If their interests do not neatly intersect with finance or medicine, the reality is that Saudi Arabia has few mechanisms at the university level that can recognize what talents they may have. I have spoken before of ECE being positioned within the larger socio-cultural context of Saudi Arabia as a “substitute dream,” but it bears repeating that a substitution rarely ever seems as valued or as desired as one’s primary choice. While the narratives were filled with cases of “happy accidents,” such as Ebtesam’s entry into ECE, in many cases the distance can be quite large between a woman’s dreams and the dream that is later *provided* for them through the external mechanisms of the country’s educational policy.

It struck me that much of the dissatisfaction and poor performance observed across the Saudi Arabian ECE landscape could be attributed to an internalized and self-fulfilling prophecy. The lived realities and experiences, as women like Nour and Deena shared with me, were that it was a field often chosen by women smart and talented enough to succeed in other areas, such as accounting and business. However, this wasn't the dominant narrative. As Deena said, the cultural narrative was that women working in the field were failures. If so, perhaps they were simply acting like it, tailoring their engagement and ability to the lowest common denominator of what others expected of them. Given Sana's and Walaa's stories of the constant battle to excel in one's work as a schoolteacher, perhaps those other women represented those who eventually gave up the fight. In turn, their consistently mediocre performance continues to reinforce the stereotype of ECE being menial labour and, over time, a greater target for educational policy that views teachers as deficient rather than powerful and agentic.

Nour reinforced this notion to me. On the subject of educational training, she stated flatly and emphatically: "It's designed so that *anyone* can do this job." She cited the numerous checklists and pre-constructed materials that would become a common and frustrating motif throughout her narrative. It seemed to me that her experiences with under-performing teachers were due to a set of expectations that set the bar low in terms of what to do in an ECE classroom. Alia also mirrored Nour's language, agreeing that "anyone could do it. Just follow the checklist." Alia said that when she thought about what the field required of her fellow teachers, there was no knowledge a teacher was expected to have, and no expectation that they needed to do anything beyond what the job description stated explicitly. For many women within the country, ECE is positioned even at the university level as a profession that is technical above all else, requiring little critical thinking or autonomy. Even as the country's leaders seek to institute a top-down vision of ECE as being child-centred, the reality is that professional educators are continuing to position the field as a by-the-numbers approach—as a field where careful analysis of the needs that make one child different from another is not valued nor expected.

It was Sana who helped me find what I felt to be a powerful psychological motivator for this larger landscape: "There's a feeling that if you work hard, you're going to be better than them, and it's going to reveal their weaknesses." Sana felt that going above and beyond had the potential to create "a contrast of ability." What she seemed to have learned over so many years of teaching was to read the discouragement from her co-workers as coming from a place of fear

or insecurity. I considered this for some time. Rather than be inspired by moments of exceptional ECE, teachers who raised the bar were often viewed as a threat to job security. Moments of one teacher's personal success could be interpreted by another co-worker as forces that would create another set of regulations or otherwise impose additional sets of requirements and demands in the hopes of equalizing performance. Sana said that this remains a challenge that continues to face other teachers.

Alia had a slightly different diagnosis I felt was equally worthy of consideration. "Most teachers lack a sense of belonging," she said. She told me times that she was hurt when she wasn't welcomed by her fellow teachers or administrators. Even asking something as simple as "How is your day going?" can make a big difference, she said. In her opinion, most ECE schools in Saudi Arabia didn't feel like a community or a larger unit. From Alia's narrative, it was clear she had a strong sense of camaraderie with teachers like her mother and her Montessori mentors, just as Walaa had felt among her fellow teachers and similar to the personal stake Ebtesam and Sana took in regards to the success of their adult students. I wondered how much of Saudi Arabian ECE might suffer from a sense of disconnection some teachers may feel. In cases where a teacher is surrounded by colleagues who are not working to the best of their ability, and in situations where administrators are not recognizing and rewarding personal effort, what reason would such a woman have to excel?

Nour, Deena, Alia, and Walaa each told stories in which they were positioned in isolation against larger collective forces of apathy and disdain. I felt the emotional weight of what being in such a position was like. I came away from this aspect of the narratives with a new awareness: a sense of community and the vision of fellow teachers as partners in education are major factors in whether or not a woman will be successful in Saudi Arabia's ECE system.

5.3.2 Encounters with the Ministry of Education and Its Curriculum

Beginning with Alia's narrative, I was surprised by the degree to which the Ministry of Education was perceived as an obstacle rather than an asset in a teacher's professional growth. Readers might remember that Alia's objective after college was to start her own private ECE school. Armed with the knowledge of how to successfully integrate Montessori into the ECE classroom in a way she found cohesive and satisfactory, Alia began the process of applying for a licence.

Here, Alia detailed her experience with attempting to navigate the bureaucracy present in the Saudi Arabian ECE system. Alia mentioned that, even with a private school, she was still bound by certain standards set by the Ministry of Education as well as local ordinances. Alia described to me a litany of regulations pertaining to gate requirements, the presence of a guard, signage, work contracts, benefits dispensed to teachers, and other details. Alia mentioned that often she was given contradictory information from her contacts at the Ministry of Education compared to her contacts at city hall. However, when it came to the curriculum, Alia found that the Ministry was completely unqualified to assess her operations as a Montessori school. “They sent someone by with a clipboard,” Alia said. “Without any background in Montessori, it basically becomes a safety check. Most administrators working in government are not aware and are not taught about any alternate educational approaches.” Alia's words revealed a frustration inherent in the irony of being judged by those she felt least equipped to judge her. Exasperated, she said it fell on her to explain to government agents at higher levels of political and educational influence what Montessori was and how it functioned in ECE.

That said, my sense was that Alia was somewhat appreciative that the Ministry of Education's administrators deferred to her expertise—Alia shared a moment where she had to convince a compliance officer that art was a critical and inseparable part of the Montessori classroom. From her retelling, the issue was dropped not because the agent was legitimately convinced, but because she didn't want to continue the discussion. I asked her how that conversation ended. “Do what you want, so long as it benefits the kids,” Alia said. She was thankful for the flexibility, but with respect to the vagueness, she added, “It's not exactly helpful.”

For this reason, I was eager to hear how Deena had to navigate Ministry of Education requirements, as she lacked both Alia's authority as a school administrator and she was working in the public rather than the private sector as an ECE teacher. She explained that the curriculum she receives is fixed, having already been drafted ahead of time by the Ministry of Education and distributed to the country's various classroom teachers. As an advocate of the “emergent curriculum” aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach, in which topics are pulled from the students' lives and experiences, Deena was frustrated by this rigidity. She explained that she felt her classroom role pulled her away from truly teaching. “The ministry sets times to deliver content regardless of the situation,” Deena explained. “I'm not even allowed to take a break, or even to shift the order of the units.” Deena told me that this was especially challenging for her when

children were bored or disinterested. Her role as an instructor was to make sure that all lessons were running on schedule and on topic, and everything was applied as the Ministry of Education intended it to be.

I asked her if she believed that the rigidity of the curriculum was damaging educational outcomes. “Absolutely,” she said. She mentioned that the curriculum is so strict at the public ECE level that she cannot add anything to the lessons. Deena mentioned wanting to try to incorporate more visual and physical props for the children to assist in their learning with several units, and often asked her administration for the ability to take her class on no-cost field trips to see many of the learning concepts in the real world. I was interested in this.

Balsam: Did you have any luck being able to push for these changes?

Deena: No.

Balsam: What did they tell you was the reason?

Deena: They said, “You have everything you need. Stick with that.”

It was here that I was again struck by the degree to which Saudi Arabian ECE was often conceived by males in positions of power and then “handed down” to the women heading the country's classrooms. I have previously spoken of ECE existing as a career avenue heavily promoted by the country's higher education policies as an acceptable place for women wishing to enter the workforce—a means to create a “suitable environment” for female labour in accordance with Shari’a law and to “protect” women from workplaces that can be framed as hostile, aggressive, or simply un-feminine. Just as women are inherently expected to be obedient and choose from the career options presented to them through the country's patriarchy, they are also be expected to be obedient to the policies and step-by-step curriculum that remains a troubling aspect of the field. In light of my conversation with Deena, it struck me that the rigidity of the curriculum seemed design to protect women from themselves; from introducing conflict or complication to what was previously determined to be a viable and workable system—often, in absence of, or in direct contradiction to available scientific evidence. A value judgment exists within curriculum this rigid: any modification a woman is likely to suggest to the pedagogy of Saudi Arabian ECE will probably be unsuccessful. There exists no consideration in the country's current ECE policy for the following possibility: that the women

who spend their day with the country's children could possibly know better than the men currently in control. This made Walaa's previous comment about feeling like being “under a millstone” all the more salient. The curriculum as presented to teachers like Walaa and Deena could not be separated from top-down societal oppression. By explicitly preventing female ECE teachers from modifying the curriculum, it struck me that the current policy-makers in the country's educational system were explicitly blocking off an avenue for how power relations might be loosened and modified. As such, the status of the curriculum was part and parcel of the roles Saudi Arabian society ascribed to women, and no less rigid.

In a follow-up interview, I asked Deena to clarify why the modifications to the curriculum she suggested would be beneficial. “Nobody knows how important it is to gain control of the classroom,” Deena said, “And teachers are the ones who know best.” From Deena's perspective, being able to adapt the curriculum would allow for a more active and engaged class, and could better give children an incentive to work and learn. If the issue of curriculum modification was such an important issue—especially since it could lead to a body of politics where women could lead rather than be led—I asked Deena if there was anything she could do to shape the delivery or content in a way that would be acceptable. Here, Deena added that economic issues were limiting her ability to speak out comfortably: as a first-year teacher, it was extremely important to “do everything by the book” in order to secure a permanent teaching contract. Here again, I found that the parameters of ECE classroom success were dictated by the patriarchal foundations of Saudi Arabian culture. For Deena, professional practice was ingrained in a system where obedience was rewarded financially and where critical thinking was not. Like many women before her, and as described in the literature (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Forster, 2017; Hamdan, 2005), Deena was faced with the choice of speaking her mind or securing a potential pathway forward for her career.

As mentioned in the last section, Deena shared with me that her difficulty with the externally imposed educational objectives and prescribed pedagogy was taking a physical toll on her health. “I come home at the end of the day exhausted,” Deena said. “I get migraines now when I never used to. I think it's because of the stress.” As Deena shared this information, I again felt the weight of her frustration and sadness, and I feared that despite her passion and intellect, her time as an ECE teacher might be very limited. I asked Deena how much control she had as a pre-school teacher. “Zero,” she said,

Everything was given to me just to supply to the children. They even went so far as to explain how to display lessons or what activities would be done with a lesson. It was like following an instruction manual. Everything had to be approved by the Ministry of Education.

I could tell that Nour was equally troubled by the power the Ministry of Education held over the day-to-day functioning of the classroom while rarely—if ever— taking the time to be physically present and observe the effects of its mandates. “It was as if nobody understood that kids were different and had different abilities,” she said. “Kids could be bored, or they could have problems at home, and none of those factors were reflected in the curriculum or given consideration.” I felt her voice was filled with not just professional frustration, but an awareness of social injustice. Nour shared a story of facing an uphill battle in her time as a teacher that was similar to Deena's: she wanted to incorporate papier mâché into the classroom. Initially, the principal told her bluntly, “The kids can't do this. This will be too hard.” However, Nour persisted, and the school made it clear that they weren't going to provide the funds to purchase newspapers. Nour gathered the papers herself, and was happy that the children flourished with the group work. Art, she said, was the one area where she felt that she had flexibility, since it wasn't explicitly written down as part of the Ministry of Education's curriculum.

Nour mentioned that when she was teaching pre-school, if the administration faced a shortage of teachers, they recruited teachers who were just out of high school. While this may have been a matter of expediency in filling positions in the area in light of unexpected local demand, I read this aspect of Nour's story as another sign of the lack of professionalism within the field of Saudi Arabian ECE. Even today, Nour said, she felt the level of professional training required to be a teacher was relatively low. When it comes to Saudi Arabia's ECE programs—both currently and during Nour's practice context—it seems that anyone will do. For this reason, much of the ECE curriculum may be intentionally constructed to account for the inadequacies of teachers who lack any collegiate or vocational training as they struggle to maintain control over a classroom full of students. When state-level curriculum is built around this low standard of teacher ability, obtaining a degree in ECE seems a waste of a woman's time and money. In the best cases, higher education in the field presents women with a set of professional skills and academic insights that have already been judged by policy-makers to be unnecessary. At worst, it becomes highly demoralizing, and women encounter situations very much like what Walaa

experienced: knowing much about child psychology and effective pedagogy, but unable to implement any of it into the classroom around them.

However, what caused Nour to leave classroom teaching at the ECE level wasn't a struggle with her administrator over curriculum-related issues, but a personal conflict, too. The Ministry of Education official who was stationed at the school at the time insisted that all teachers needed to be fully covering their faces when they were walking outside of the classroom. "I couldn't find any mention of this in any of the official documents," Nour said. She saw the mandate as an overreach of authority and refused, to which the school responded that if she didn't resign or conform to the regulation, she would be fired. As a result, Nour left three months before the end of her first full school year as an ECE teacher. According to her narrative, Nour's exit from the ECE classroom was a result of direct overreach by the Ministry of Education. In one sense, it serves to illustrate the frustrating duality of a political entity that can be extremely demanding in the nuances of its curriculum—going so far as to dictate the amount of time a lesson should take for all students—but yet continues to lack coherent, standardized policy that protects the teachers themselves. However, I was more troubled the more I explored how this issue was grounded. I have spoken previously of issues of expected obedience that cannot be separated from educational policy. This moment of Nour's story illustrates a blurring of the lines between professional and personal commentary: that even outside of the classroom, there may be no aspect of a female ECE teacher's behaviour or identity that is beyond judgment.

Not least, Nour's story helped me to see a surprising commonality. Ebtesam and Sana's descriptions of higher education at the country's ECE programs painted a picture of environments where women helped and coached one another to achieve greatness. It may surprise the reader to know that even at the level of the Ministry of Education's administrators sent to ensure compliance with state-level policy, these positions are staffed by women. Among the narratives, I found that in environments tied more closely to the direct oversight of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education, there was a higher chance one would encounter women actively working to discourage one another. Within each woman's story, the female representatives tasked as compliance officers for ECE policy functioned as antagonists. However, upon reflection, this may not be a fair characterization. As is common with many women in positions of leadership, their performance is often judged under a more critical light and with a greater attention to the results they achieve, as though to justify the good sense of putting women in the

position in the first place. The literature revealed the presence of many women promoted to higher levels of achievement only under the implicit knowledge that they wouldn't seek to introduce changes to existing systems (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Forster, 2017). For that reason, they may feel a remarkably similar set of pressures such as Deena experienced; that is, to maintain the status quo or risk financial or professional instability.

Returning to Walaa's narrative, I wish to mention that she also echoed Nour's and Deena's struggles with having to negotiate demands for curriculum. "You can't delete the Ministry's curriculum," Walaa explained. "You have to follow it, and as a result, the schools suffer for it." Walaa articulated a slightly different experience than Deena's as an ECE teacher at a private school, but one that was no less challenging. As mentioned in the previous section, Walaa's had described her work as "like being under a millstone," as there was constant pressure of pleasing the Ministry of Education and the wealthy families who had enrolled their children in the classes. "They wanted me to make illustrations, write stories, produce materials, and teach. I had to design and organize the classroom itself," Walaa said. "To be generally an all-in-one kind of person." The problem, she said, was that it was becoming a 24-7 job that didn't pay well enough to justify the work involved. I asked, then, why she persisted for so many years. "It wasn't about the money," she said. "I saw the value of the role I was doing," Walaa said proudly. Despite those efforts, Walaa saw that the administrators were scaling back on any educational dimension that didn't produce an immediate outcome. Soon, playtime was cut down to half an hour a day in favour of teaching French or computers. "There was no break," Walaa said. "It was just direct instruction the whole time. From the start of school until about 2:30 P.M., we had just one recess, and the kids became extremely hungry during the day."

That Walaa persisted in such a challenging environment, for the benefit of her children and fellow educators, was a testament to her strength and dedication. Despite the vividness of her trials as a classroom teacher in the country's ECE system, I was surprised to learn that she didn't consider these issues to be the primary reasons for her exit from the profession. For Walaa, the greatest conflicts came not from her dealings with fellow teachers or administrators, but from an altogether different group of stakeholders.

5.3.3 Interactions with Parents

The two moments in particular that I felt best explained why Walaa left classroom teaching for good related to her difficulty interacting with the parents of her students. The first moment was her attempt to go above and beyond in responding to a student's emotional needs. "I had a student with selective mutism," Walaa explained. She added:

I did a little research into the problem and wrote to the mom. This made her mad, and she came to the school and started causing problems. She said to me, "Are you saying that my child has a problem? He's fine!" Then it turned into personal attacks. I think this is why teachers stay silent: they're hesitant to share these thoughts with parents because they're afraid of the consequences.

The above excerpt is indicative of a wider social context that surrounds special-needs education in Saudi Arabia, and a body of literature suggests that Walaa's experience is not unique. Al-Jadid (2013) found that mental illness is understudied and underreported within Saudi Arabia, often because of the stigma that surrounds it, and Al-Gain and Al-Abdulwahab (2002) noted that studies on disabilities were difficult in the kingdom often because the shame of admitting a family member has an issue keeps many families from participating in the research. Al-Aoufi, Al-Zyoud, and Shahminan (2012) explained that in a number of Islamic cultures, "parents aim to avoid social embarrassment, stigma, protecting themselves and their children, especially females, by denying the disabilities, or hiding the child from society when the signs are obvious" (p. 215). Some aspects of this behaviour may be attributed to interpretations of Islam where an ailing child is perceived as either a test of faith, or a punishment from Allah for past wrongdoing (Bazna & Hatab, 2005). Additionally, Alquraini (2011) found that 96% of the students in Saudi Arabia with multiple or severe disabilities were segregated from their classmates and received their education in separate facilities where they lacked interaction with normally developing classmates, in turn hampering the development of their academic and social skills.

Walaa's tale illustrated to me that our own notions of child-centredness as ECE teachers may unexpectedly conflict with a parent's own conception of their child's needs. From the parent's perspective, Walaa's attempts to go above and beyond to solve an academic and socio-emotional problem were threatening, hinting at a possibility where the child would be isolated from classroom peers. Perhaps Walaa's efforts would lead to a situation where family's status or

reputation within the community would be damaged. Bringing effort to the child's selective mutism challenged the parent's ability to deny that a problem exists. In essence, Walaa had opened a door and had invited the mother to walk through it before she was ready. Rather than be rewarded for her attention to caring for the child's unique needs, Walaa faced the backlash of a defensive parent. Should Saudi Arabia wish to incorporate a greater sensitivity to the learning disabilities that may exist in any given ECE classroom, Walaa's lived experiences illustrate that some toes may be stepped on in spite of a teacher's best intentions.

I asked Walaa how the administration responded to her experience with the child's mother. She replied that administrators wanted to save face rather than address the issue. Walaa said the administration told her, "Just deal with the children. Don't care about them." As a result, she told me, "I couldn't help but think: Why am I an ECE teacher, then?" I felt that the administrator's reported use of the phrase "don't care" held a surprising amount of depth. To me, it once again represented the vast amount of work it would take within Saudi Arabia for the country's ECE as a whole to embrace the care and individualized attention that cannot be separated from whole-student centred approaches. What I found noteworthy about this part of the narrative was the figure of someone at a more senior, administrative level of ECE who was not only comfortable with depersonalizing each student, but comfortable in instructing others to turn away from their needs as a matter of "best school practice." The story illustrates, sadly, the worst aspects of Saudi Arabia's historical ECE context: that too often, it codifies and rewards insensitivity.

The second painful moment of Walaa's narrative came from another interaction with a parent in which she suggested to the parents a way they could better support their child's learning. In a conversation with the child's mother, Walaa confided that the parent suddenly became enraged, telling her, "You're *nothing*. You're just an educational babysitter. The only reason you have a job is because our children can't stay home."

Walaa frowned during this retelling. "I thought, after all of this education, you call me a nanny?" Then, in a moment I thought was particularly powerful, Walaa added, "I'm not *just* a teacher. I wanted to go to a place where I can educate all of these people. And they would *listen* to me." As a result, Walaa returned to university teaching on contract and shifted the focus of her career to writing.

I wish to pause here to underscore the significance of this aspect of Walaa's narrative. What is explicitly articulated in this moment is a cultural belief within Saudi Arabia that an ECE teacher holds no more value or prestige than that of a babysitter. Several partial explanations exist for the lack of esteem. Mahdly (2001) has suggested that the low pay given to ECE teachers carries implications of a low importance and social worth of the job being performed. Additionally, the common practice within Saudi Arabia of replacing credentialed instructors with younger, non-degree-holding teachers has the effect of lowering the perceived professionalism inherent to the job (Gahwaji, 2006; Otaibi, 1997; Swigh, 2000). Part of the lack of respect given to ECE among the general public may be due to ECE's status for several years as being an optional aspect of Saudi Arabia's educational system (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016). If it was not a component of their own education, parents may perhaps conclude that ECE is not as essential as primary and secondary education in providing for a student's future success. Additionally, existing literature suggests that economic and social factors have caused an increase in ECE investment in Saudi Arabia that is unrelated to the quality of education. As more women enter the workforce, as the size of households have decreased, and as the cost of in-home, foreign-born nannies has increased as a result of various migration patterns and economic fluctuations, ECE programs have expanded to meet a mother's need for a daytime caregiver (Alquassem et al., 2016; Vlieger, 2013). Thus, for many parents, the primary value of ECE may be as a surrogate or direct substitute for a non-credentialed nanny.

A larger push to renegotiate these relationships, unfortunately, runs against another long-standing cultural trait within Saudi Arabia: the division of the home from the school. As Khan (2011) describes, "most parents are found indifferent towards education of their children, probably due to the idea that perhaps it is [solely the] responsibility of the government to promote education" (p. 242). Khan notes that this belief is especially prevalent among Saudi Arabian fathers, who tend to have a startling degree of apathy towards the content and quality of their children's education. I found Khan's use of the word "indifferent" to be highly meaningful and reflective of my own experience. It is hard to educate a person about the worth of ECE and the training that provides a foundation for classroom learning when such a person has no interest in participating in this kind of dialogue.

Placed in this larger context, Walaa's story is very much a tale of a self-constructed professional identity—proud, capable, and highly skilled—coming into conflict with long-held social and

political constructions of the ECE teacher as replaceable, uncritical, and unimportant. I found her narrative to be a chilling reminder that in many parts of the country, a woman driven to excel at her job and who wishes to take it upon herself to truly care for each child in her classroom is not seen as an asset. Rather, a teacher like this may often be seen as a *liability*. Indeed, the kind of excellence that Walaa exhibited challenged not only conceptions of family and normalcy, but of the agency and professionalism of a woman in such a position.

Deena's narrative suggested that such views weren't simply limited to the historical context of the time period when Walaa was teaching. Much to the contrary, these negative conceptions of ECE persist well into the present and attend the perceptions and conceptions of Saudi Arabia's classroom teachers to this very day. Deena confirmed to me that even in this moment in Saudi Arabia's history, social acceptance of the ECE profession as legitimate and respectable still has far to go:

I hear, "She's done with her work early in the day. It must be an easy job." Sometimes people ask me, "So what do you do? Just watch the kids and send them back to their parents?" I wish people understood what a huge demand it is and how much work it is when you spend time in a classroom with twenty kids. Many parents don't see the connection of how classroom lessons can be carried on for the rest of their lives.

Deena's response reveals a symptom of the Saudi Arabia's ECE system: parents are often unaware of what teachers do or what defines quality education. I believe that the underlying problem rests, at least partially, with the disconnected nature of the Saudi Arabian classroom in the lives of the majority of the nation's families. Shaw (2010) noted that in Saudi Arabia, parental involvement is often limited to finding resources for test preparation, and Alhabeeb (2016) reported that the practice of parents reading to their children was rare within Saudi Arabia. A study by Abdulkarim and Ramisetty-Mikler (2015) reported low parental involvement in the school activities of their children, stating that a full third of Saudi Arabian parents never attended the school functions for their children. Abdulkarim and Ramisetty-Mikler (2015) also posited that the division that exists between the classroom and the home can partially be explained by a widespread cultural belief within Saudi Arabia that a school would be imposing on a parent's free time if they were to ask for additional involvement or participation.

Whatever the combination of latent causes from family to family, there is a troubling number of parents within Saudi Arabia who are often uninterested or unwilling to learn about what goes on in the classroom. As such, there exist precious few opportunities for such parents to observe the organic moments that lead to growth in their children's lives—and by extension, the moments that most motivate the teachers in their children's classes. I would also wish for the reader to consider the fairly large cultural irony here: despite the lack of prestige and professionalism attributed to ECE teachers, Saudi Arabian parents seem to place a great deal of trust in the ECE system to educate their children without any oversight or communication required on their part (Alhabeeb, 2016).

Thankfully, this disconnected aspect of the ECE classroom from Saudi Arabian family life seems to be changing, based on what I have heard through the interviews. The two younger participants, Alia and Deena, reported the most generally positive interactions with parents. Speaking of her school, Alia said, “Parents ask the teachers all the time: ‘What should we do?’ About all kinds of topics, like behavioural issues and ways to succeed. I'm happy to share those insights.” Deena also mentioned that, despite the parents who are dismissive of ECE, she gets quite a few parents who ask her, “Will you try this with my child: maybe he will listen to you rather than me.”

Deena also shared many moments where children were able to affect the dynamic of the home by carrying forward classroom lessons. In one especially interesting moment, Deena said that she encouraged a child to ask her parents to read to her more at home. When the child came back and said that she was happy they were reading more books in the house, it encouraged other children to go home and ask to be read to more often as well. This, I felt was the most positive aspect of Deena's narrative: whereas Walaa's stories painted the picture of a woman clashing with a culture unwilling to acknowledge her perspective as a classroom teacher, Deena showed that an invitation for parents to become a larger part of the ECE classroom and its functions found increasing success.

5.3.4 Moments of Successful Negotiations with Policy-makers

The two eldest women in the study, Ebtesam and Sana—both veteran university ECE department heads—had markedly different stories of their interactions of external stakeholders

and policy-makers. To be frank, I found that their narratives differed significantly from the other (and generally younger) women I talked to. When these two women shared with me their stories of their professional lives and directions, their voices were free of much of the stress and frustration that I had heard in the other four narratives.

Ebtesam chose to share stories of professional challenge in her role as a department chair where she found a way to overcome obstacles. One story involved trying to solve problems between the English-language and Arabic-language departments at her university where student enrollment was concerned. Ebtesam approached each department individually, stating “I like to listen first to see where the problems are.” In so doing, she was able to find compromises and solutions. In another story, Ebtesam spoke of the pride she felt in designing and implementing a student intake form at the beginning of the year to answer common questions and streamline the process. She noted that after the form was introduced, “It doesn’t feel like the beginning of the semester.” I asked her if this was typical for her professional experience. She smiled and said, “It’s not easy, but it’s doable. You can always do it if you’re willing to listen and willing to change your point of view.”

Of starkest contrast to the teacher’s role in the classroom ECE system was Ebtesam’s role in making ECE classes at the university open enrollment as a community service to local teachers and mothers. Ebtesam explained that the committee saw a need for it, and within a single semester the program was made a reality. I was personally fascinated by the lack of red tape or bureaucracy here. When the teachers had a clear vision and could articulate a need, little stood in the way of the goal being met.

Sana’s narratives were also filled with positive experiences when it came to direct interactions with other educational stakeholders. In fact, Sana said that it was the Ministry of Education itself that gave her a “boost” to become a trainer of teachers in that it commissioned her to construct educational-training packages. Sana mentioned that with a PhD from the United States, she had a level of credibility and prestige that was respected, and she was given a lot of room and trust to put her ideas into practice. Later, Sana designed a program to improve literacy in ECE, and here again she mentioned the school minister was extremely accommodating, and even gave her the freedom to apply her suggested changes school-wide.

I asked Sana what became of the program, and if it was ever adopted on any larger scale. Sana indicated that the Ministry didn't formally promote the program, but said that any teachers who wish to apply it in the future are welcome—it wasn't anything formal, she said. However, Sana noted that, "If it was done through them, it would be very complicated." She added, "Lots of paperwork."

Considering that Sana was the only one of the six female educators with any direct contact with the Ministry of Education, I was eager to hear more about her experiences communicating with educational policy-makers. Sana explained that where the committees at the Ministry of Education were concerned, it struck her that the members were randomly chosen and made decisions based on opinions. Clarifying this idea further, she explained that discussion of the curriculum didn't seem to be based on scientific principles. This was not surprising to me, as it once again implicated the well-publicized state of Saudi Arabia's job market where hires are selected not base on their talents or merit, but based on their influence or *wasta*—"Vitamin W" as we say in the country. Here, even the most senior levels of ECE that can directly influence state-level policy are not exempt from cultural and economic traditions endemic to Saudi Arabia. Still, in spite of these criticisms, I felt that Sana was grateful to the ministers she had worked with for the chance to try new approaches.

Taken together, these stories on the part of Ebtesam and Sana are almost shocking in their contrast to the initial tales shared in this sub-chapter. Here, I observed a picture of agentic women who are able to achieve quick, often decisive change, without having to fight tooth and nail against what seem to be arbitrary and context-insensitive rules of practice. When the women interact with other outside agents and educational policy-makers, either public or private, they find many deferring to their expertise. This may simply be attributable to the difference of Sana and Ebtesam's work taking place at the university level as opposed to the level of the ECE classroom, but Sana's lack of stress or adversity in her interactions with the Ministry of Education itself allowed me to consider that high levels of education (perhaps Western education, specifically) allowed these women a way to avoid feeling "crushed," as Walaa was, by a downpour of regulations and unrealistic expectations. At this level of education, the narratives suggest that both Ebtesam and Sana eventually reached a level where they were recognized not as women in need of direction or protection, but as thought leaders and capable professionals in their own right.

Additionally, the absence of this dimension of respect from Nour's and Walaa's stories does much to explain why some of the best and brightest women in the field leave classroom teaching. At the level of the public or private ECE classroom dealing directly with the Saudi Arabian public, the narratives strongly suggest that the quality of communication and support received from external stakeholders can be extremely powerful predictors of career longevity.

5.4 Personal Philosophy and Pedagogy

What was tremendously interesting to me as I began talking to each woman was the degree of passion and enthusiasm they had as educators, and without exception or regard to age, the complex negotiation present in all of their lives had allowed them to develop tremendously rich and personally meaningful conceptions of ECE, pedagogy, and conceptions of childhood itself.

The narrative fragments in this section are intended to examine how the numerous memories, interactions, and negotiations mentioned by the women in the first three sections of this chapter have combined together in their minds to form particular world views or philosophies about children and what should be provided to them by ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia. Of particular interest to me here are the articulations of relationships between the teachers and their students. How do teachers want to interact with their young students, and what do they hold as the foundation for these beliefs? While I would never claim the women in this study and their approaches to be representative of all Saudi Arabian ECE teachers and the kinds of pedagogies one would expect to find in a random survey of the country's classrooms, I found their responses illuminating.

5.4.1 Children's Needs

In an attempt to understand the unique points of view of my participants, I was careful to ask one question as a shared part of all of the interviews: "What do children need?" It was a question that was intentionally broad, but one that ended up opening a door to many beautiful and insightful moments.

Nour answered the question as a case of environment and emotion, which I thought was interesting. "A teacher should replicate a home environment in the classroom," she said. "Kids

don't benefit from the idea that they're going to a formal institution that is very different than home." I sensed that Nour was drawing from earlier memories in reaching this conclusion. Perhaps, she remembered her own shock and confusion of watching the classroom environment transform between kindergarten and first grade from a place of play and exploration to a place of highly structured, rote learning. Nour told me that in her classroom, she doesn't want too many papers around. Instead, she felt that children should feel that the classroom is an extension of their neighbourhood, and she took pains to make sure that the classroom was filled with books, cardboard, tissue paper, and other environmental materials. "The separation anxiety from their dad and mom is enough," she said.

Alia chose to answer this line of inquiry more directly. "They need love, they need comfort, they need truth, they need a reliable relationship," Alia mentioned, "... and the school needs to go all in." Alia's words in describing "truth" touched on a commonality in several of the other narratives, in that when I asked broadly, "What do children need?" I began to discover that my participants may have interpreted the question as, "What do students need from me?" The conversations that followed for many of the teachers were therefore centred around the idea of an ideal teacher role in reference to the latent capacities of children.

Later, Alia circled back to thoughts about the educational environment. I sensed that her professional goal, like Nour's, was to modify the environment to match her students' home life. "In every single Saudi Arabian [public] school, there are fences, gates, and guards," she said. "This is cultural, but I think the message can be wrong." For that reason, Alia told me that at her school there is no gate between the playground and the school. I sensed it was important for her to communicate the symbolism of that gesture—that I would associate the removal of a physical barrier with a conceptual barrier between the school and the larger neighbourhood. In this aspect of her school design, Alia was tremendously proud.

When I asked Deena what children need, she spoke of what she had learned from her professional education. She noted that the most transformative aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach to her was the notion of the teacher as a facilitator. "It's important for a teacher to be not an instructor, but a guide," Deena said. "When we give them an opportunity to think, they will learn more. We should encourage them to ask questions and be there to support them," she told me. "We're not here to give children right or wrong answers."

Ebtesam offered a view that very much aligned with Deena's: "I think teaching is all about answering questions," she said, stating that any question a child asks is probably shared by dozens of children who don't have the same courage to ask it. Ebtesam continued, saying that one of the functions of ECE is that it should not break a child's self-esteem. Much to the contrary, it should build character that is full of enthusiasm, and should teach children how to find information. In Ebtesam's opinion, the ideal ECE class was one in which a teacher can present ideas, and then have the children explore. "It should be like a workshop," she said. "Teamwork is important," Ebtesam explained. Because of this viewpoint, Ebtesam said that at any point along her educational path—from ECE to her college classes—she was uncomfortable with systems of categorization and ranking. In her opinion, academic environments should more closely reflect workplace environments where everyone is useful and can learn to draw on their unique strengths.

Ebtesam mentioned that, for her, the ideal classroom is one where students are fascinated, are comfortable, where they trust each other, where they work together as a team. Teaching, she said, was about how much you empower children with knowledge and teach them where to search for knowledge.

At the heart of Ebtesam's educational philosophy was an emotional awareness that I found similar to Nour's: that education or achievement of an objective was not the primary function of her role. Again and again, Ebtesam focused on the necessity of getting children to laugh and have fun in the ECE setting. She spoke of moments where she would read with children, and after a few minutes would say, "I'm going to leave you here." Ebtesam smiled and said, "And the children will go back to the books." To her, children needed a guide that would not only empower them but keep them optimistic and positive about their academic journey. In a touching moment, Ebtesam shared with me a book that was tremendously influential to her. "How to speak so children will listen," Ebtesam explained, "and how to listen so children will speak." She said this was a great encapsulation of the role of the ECE teacher: as someone constantly engaged with the dynamic between teacher and student, and as someone uniquely equipped to allow children to communicate.

Walaa's response echoed elements of Deena and Ebtessam's assessments. "It's really important to show kids how critical thinking is done," she said. She then shared a story with me she found fascinating:

Did you know that in Germany it's illegal to teach kids reading and writing if they are below a certain age? It's against the law to force them to hold a pen and pencil and write. If they want to, fine, but you can't force them. The government will shut down any school that disobeys this rule.

I could tell in her tone of voice that she greatly admired this sense of agency and democracy present in Germany's ECE system—that they had used law to place the emotional needs of children over the practical realities of having them learn a skill.

Sana, typically the woman I found most conservative in her pedagogy, also agreed that children need education that encourages them to grow. "Children are very capable learners," she said. "Extremely capable. It's just a question of how much teachers believe the children are capable. When a teacher believes that a child isn't capable, all of the education in the classroom will be below that child's level of learning." I thought that description was simple, direct, and served as a powerful argument against the notion of education that is primarily intended to be remedial.

Certain commonalities emerge in relation to the personal pedagogy held by the six ECE women educators I talked with. Each spoke, in her own way, about the capacity of children to self-direct, the essential inseparability of how children feel and how well they learn, and the importance of developing a sensibility to the relationship between teacher and student that transcends a simple dynamic of "instructor and replicator." Admittedly, I was surprised to discover that an initial hypothesis I held was disproved. As previously noted in the review of literature, much of Saudi Arabian education is built on Locke's (1690) notion of "tabula rasa," which is to say that the child is perceived as a blank slate onto which teachers imprint their knowledge, often by the practice of rote memorization (Doumato, 2003; Elyas & Picard, 2010; Rugh, 2002). As such, I imagined that at least some of the teachers I talked with would exhibit a greater sensitivity to the role of a teacher as a one-way transmitter of existing knowledge. However, that was not actually the case: only two of the participants specifically mentioned either Montessori approaches (Alia) or Reggio Emilia (Deena) philosophies where ECE was concerned. Perplexed, I felt that all women—including Sana—believed in the core concepts that provide a foundation for child-centred ECE approaches. I will admit that this may be a sampling error on my part and subject

to hidden variables. I talked with six women who chose to voluntarily participate in my study and donate several hours of their free time. An apathetic ECE teacher motivated purely by a monthly salary would likely not have taken the time to share her thoughts on the subject at all. My own experience with the Saudi Arabian educational system is that women like Deena, Alia, Walaa, Sana, Ebtesam, and Nour are significantly rare.

That said, the narratives offer a great deal of hope for the country's ability to move towards the concept of child-centredness the most senior-level policy-makers have stated they wish to see in Saudi Arabia's ECE. The narratives are a direct challenge to those who might say that Saudi Arabian culture, primarily considered to be collectivist, is incompatible with approaches that view children as capable individuals. Additionally, the child-centredness so central to the pedagogy (or at least, the preferred pedagogy) of these women can be melded with Islamic education—an inseparable component of all public education within Saudi Arabia (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016; Doumato, 2003; Hamdan, 2005). It is possible to conceive of Islam as not a barrier to child-centredness, and child-centredness as not compromising the tenets of Islam. The women I interviewed were Muslims, proud of their faith and culture.

As such, I feel that allowing them to teach in the manner they felt was most effective would in turn strengthen the faith and religious understanding of the children in the ECE classroom, allowing them to see how the Quran is relevant for their young lives. Some have feared that the kind of Islamic education favoured by Saudi Arabians can lead to a lack of critical thinking and a disesteem for the individual in the classroom (Doumato, 2003; Rugh, 2002). The narratives of these women, however, showed that the needs of children were defined individually, not collectively, and grew naturally and organically from each woman's perspective understanding of their work in the ECE classroom as helping a new generation of Saudi Arabians become happy and successful people.

5.4.2 The Image of the Child

In considering the discussion of something so broad as “needs” in the classroom, all six women I spoke with were united in articulating a notion of the “agentic” child: as a student who could be trusted to flexibly navigate his or her own learning and could be trusted to raise and explore questions. In most narratives, this led us quite naturally into discussions of being aware of

unequal structures of power, as well as what constituted the responsible use of power for effective classroom management. In other words, while the narratives established each of my participants as being generally in support of child-centred pedagogy, I wanted to know how they negotiated the balance of power that accompanied the role of a teacher-as-facilitator rather than that of teacher-as-taskmaster.

Reflecting upon generational differences among the women in this study, the two youngest participants, Deena and Alia, were extremely vocal on these topics. Deena mentioned that one of her largest professional challenges was balancing flexibility with firmness. Deena talked about circle time:

There's a hard rule that there's no talking without raising your hand. Any child that doesn't raise their hand before talking won't be listened to. It's difficult, because certain kids won't listen, but if you let it happen once or twice you will lose control.

In this response, I felt that Deena was highly concerned with the idea of the ECE teacher's role as being a classroom manager and the one who maintains order. I felt that this focus on classroom management definitely was rooted in traditional Saudi Arabian cultural conceptions as teachers and elders as figures who need to be respected and obeyed.

However, Deena also quite often looked at herself through the eyes of her children. "Everything we teach children, we need to be a good example," she said, adding, "For example, if we praise being truthful and never lying, it's important to apply that to oneself. Children notice and are aware of what you are doing ... always more than what you realize you might be doing yourself." Deena mentioned she is very conscious of apologizing whenever she is wrong: "Other teachers think they're going to lose stature or their position, but the problem is that it doesn't teach kids to say 'sorry' themselves." Here, Deena said something very interesting: in the ECE classroom, she believes that children had the "right to an apology" from the teacher. I felt this was a dynamic that was important, since I never felt I encountered it in my own childhood—to know that there are mechanisms in place that provide some form of justice or correction if a mistake had been made. The ability for a teacher to say "sorry" is, to me, is a direct admission that a student's feelings matter and that the power of a teacher in relation to her students is not absolute. These components stood in contrast to the kinds of relationships that the women told me existed between themselves and their own childhood teachers.

Alia's narrative contained similar elements to Deena's on this subject. "When you introduce a new value, you need to be really aware of what you're doing," Alia told me. "Children don't forget. They're there to remind you of what you teach them or what they've been taught." Alia mentioned that children always take a strong interest in how adults behave and present themselves, and tend to mirror what they see. For that reason, teachers needed to explicitly consider whether or not their personal values are reflected in their actions at the head of the classroom. On this subject, Alia mentioned that one of her greatest influences in this respect was Maria Montessori for her "values and self-control." I thought self-control was a particularly interesting value to tie into the role of an effective teacher. Though Alia didn't mention it explicitly, it was clear to me that she carried in her mind a strong image of the child—as a foundation for her work—provided constant opportunities for self-examination and daily reflection. In my opinion, this image of the child led to a level of professional growth and development that would not be expected in a classroom where children were thought to be uncritical or deficient.

Nour was also extremely interested in the dynamics of power and inequality in the ECE classroom. "I want to be aware of the power I have as a teacher," she told me. "It is impossible to ignore that there is a difference in power, and we need to be aware of the voice that we have. I want to reflect on that. I want to be aware of how it influences the effectiveness and closeness of the relationship I have with the children I teach." Nour then told me that power has the ability to shut down children and create a passive classroom. This was an interesting observation: often, an obedient, passive ECE classroom within the country is framed as a virtue in Saudi Arabia—even in the present day (Doumato, 2003; Elyas & Picard, 2010; Rugh, 2002). In this aspect of Nour's narrative, I heard echoes of Alia's description of her own professional education in the 2010s as a process of "teaching children how to be stupid." It was striking to me that in these women's pathways through ECE, many shared moments where they had to personally unpack and unlearn what they were taught about classroom management in order to become the kinds of teachers they wished to be.

I asked Nour how she practised classroom mindfulness or worked to build an awareness of the teacher-student relationship. Nour mentioned that when she taught ECE in the classroom, she kept a diary in order to revisit the effectiveness of different moments where she used her authority to create a particular outcome. This was fascinating to me: Nour, a woman who hadn't

articulated her awareness of the Reggio Emilia approach to ECE had nevertheless integrated its approach to “documentation” independently in her own practice as a classroom teacher. If one were to, for example, ask whether a Saudi Arabian strain of the Reggio Emilia approach to ECE were possible, one would need only to look towards Nour's note-taking in order to see how teachers on opposite sides of the world often develop nearly identical practices when they are concerned about tending to the emotional and academic needs of their students while simultaneously developing their own sense of expertise. Through the narratives, I was particularly struck by how the documentation and analysis of one's own thinking, underlying ethics, and pedagogical decision making often pointed each woman towards a path of professional growth and development. This insight reminded me that whatever our differences in nationalities or culture, we are united as teachers more frequently than we may think.

5.4.3 Learning from Students

Perhaps not surprisingly, given this frequency of teacher roles that challenged the “top-down,” education-as-transmission style of pedagogy, there was a common theme among four of the six teachers in that they explicitly mentioned reciprocal learning as one of the core elements of becoming a better ECE teacher.

“I learn every day,” Alia said simply. She described a moment where she was working with a child through his fear of the mouse that was a classroom pet. “I asked him: why would you be afraid of him? He's so tiny.” To her surprise, the child said, “You wouldn't think that a mosquito could harm a lion, but it can.” Alia smiled. “He showed me where my logic was faulty, and I had to find a counter-example to prove my point.” Alia mentioned that these were the most challenging—but gratifying—moments in the learning process: listening to children in order to establish where to begin. “Knowledge needs to be adapted and adjusted,” she said. “It needs to draw from the knowledge that children already have. You can't introduce something they have no entry point to: it has to relate to their life.” I could tell that Alia's path forward was always shaped by the children in her classroom; the day's events were a constant give-and-take, and she was always analyzing the feedback her children were giving her, explicitly and implicitly.

Deena articulated a similar thought. She said, “Children show the variables that teachers haven't considered.” In our conversation, Deena told me that every day in class, she was

learning as well as teaching simultaneously. Deena often used variations of the word “surprising” during this point of her narrative. “I never give the children direct statements,” she said. “I’m always asking them questions. And I’m surprised by how big their answers are.” Deena said that her classroom experiences always challenge her ideas of what children are expected to know at a certain age.

Nour mentioned that during her time teaching, she was always analyzing responses as a way to determine her own educational effectiveness. “Too many questions might bore the kids,” she said. “They’ll just supply any answer.” In talking about her written reflections, Nour gave me an example of where the children helped her professional growth. “Did I say something that made a talkative kid go quiet?” she asked aloud. “I found that my written reflections helped me find the answers to those questions.”

Ebtesam told me that you make mistakes through teaching, but clarified that this was always “a positive experience” for her. She shared with me the joy she had in teaching a student who “asked really good questions.” She said that she cherished the times she spent preparing material and anticipating the questions this student would ask, and attributed this student to helping her deepen her love and understanding of the material.

However, this is not to assume that all teachers shared the same views of power sharing or had an equal image of the child. Nour surprised me when she said that letting children shape the curriculum through their feedback and interests was “impossible.” It could be that I misinterpreted her response, considering her discussion of how rigidly the curriculum is set. However, based on our conversation I came away with the impression that she felt even if given the chance, her role as a teacher was to transmit information and use her power as an ECE classroom teacher efficiently and sensitively.

Sana also seemed to question the effectiveness of moving pedagogy towards a place where children had more control. In a very interesting moment, I asked Sana to define childhood for me. She seemed confused by why I would ask the question. “Zero to eighteen,” she said, but added that her personal definition was “From zero to puberty.” That’s the moment she explained where children get into other interests and put aside toys and games. “Once they lose their innocence, they lose a lot of their childhood,” she said.

I thought this was a particularly interesting viewpoint, perhaps because it stood in such direct contrast with Alia's point of view. "Everyone has a child inside of them," said Alia. "Some choose to hide it, but it's always there. Even the simple act of laughing proves it's there. The child never disappears." In her perspective, and one I would tend to agree with, childhood is viewed as more of an abstract concept than a rigidly defined span of age. This perspective holds that childhood isn't something that can be "lost." The difference between these two perspectives may be due largely to the very different upbringings both women experienced: Alia, who was supported and often treated as a near equal by her mother throughout her upbringing, and Sana, whose education was filled with sadness and abuse. Perhaps Sana felt as though her childhood had been lost and was trying to protect others from experiencing the same moments in their lives through her path in ECE.

Taken as a whole, the complexity of the narratives examined in this section illustrates the challenge of the ECE environment as being at times a second home to the children within it, and the rarity that a value-driven classroom will reflect the same values taught within the student's family. The concept of childhood as valuable and permanent may conflict with the pragmatic desires of parents for their children to "grow up" and assume traditional responsibilities. Placing a value on reciprocal learning and allowing children to voice their frustrations challenges traditional social conceptions of obedience within Saudi Arabia, that the function of a child is to "be seen and not heard," according to the popular phrase. Teaching children that all individuals have inherent worth and should be treated with dignity, sadly, may go against the deeply held principles of highly sectarian families. In the worst scenarios, it is the children themselves who may be disciplined through physical violence if their own developing values conflict with those of their elders. In such a case, these children will be torn between two competing communities. This test of loyalty is bound to be traumatic, to say the very least, as children attempt to navigate the painful situation with a very limited awareness of the socio-political context in which it occurs.

Additionally, Walaa's previous narrative about being punished for attempting to assist a child with a learning disability may illustrate the vulnerability of other ECE teachers within Saudi Arabia. For an administration looking to minimize conflict between the school and the family unit (which, in the case of private schools, represent customers), the path of least resistance may be to discipline the teacher herself. Further, the historical lack of prestige associated with being an

ECE teacher within Saudi Arabia may make these women acceptable targets and unworthy of respect or consideration when parents feel teachers have overstepped their boundaries. Simply put, Walaa's narrative raises the point that child-centred pedagogies may increase administrative conflict in certain situations. In Walaa's case, I found it admirable that she was willing to put herself at a significant degree of professional risk in order to follow her moral compass.

Simply put, while child-centredness and agency may be close to the hearts of the women who spoke with me, recognition of these concepts are rarer among Saudi Arabia's general public and at the level of local administration. If Saudi Arabia employs the kinds of teachers who are driven enough to make child-centred educational policies a success, it seems to me that policy-makers and stakeholders at all levels of ECE should be prepared to talk through inevitable conflicts that will arise between so many different sets of implicit values. If the end goals of ECE never become a matter of public discussion or debate, teachers will always be inhibited in their ability to implement policy if changes to pedagogy or curriculum run contrary to the interests of parents or administrators.

5.5 Links to Womanhood, Motherhood, and Gender in Saudi Arabian ECE

One of the common themes that emerged from several of the narratives was a point where a major negotiation occurred that revolved around being a woman. I was reminded at least once in each session with my participants that the stories I was hearing were the stories of women—that these lives were shaped and challenged by a different set of expectations and opportunities than a man would have faced given a similar culture and upbringing. While I consider this section to be the most diverse in terms of my thoughts and observations, I felt it was too important not to include, and especially so given the lack of attention this subject receives in scholarship related to Saudi Arabia's ECE system.

5.5.1 Exploring the Notion of Males in Saudi Arabian ECE

I positioned myself in this topic familiar with the Western ECE landscape, where men are beginning to become more interested in childcare as a topic and as a career. While a stigma

surrounds the childcare profession characterizing it as far more suited for feminine qualities rather than masculine ones, males entering ECE are willing to overcome negative stereotypes and recognize a father's role as a nurturer (Cooney & Bittner, 2001; Sanders, 2002). Recognizing the positive qualities and diversity that men can bring to the field of ECE, many governments and organizations have in the last twenty years devoted more time to studying the ways that male staff can be recruited and maintained (Cunningham, 1999). The country of Norway, for example, recognized that a male perspective was valuable to the progression of its own ECE systems, and set an internal target that a full 20% of its workers in the area of all early childhood services (Moss, 2000). While males remain a distinct minority group in ECE internationally, the presence of equally capable and driven males in the Canadian ECE system allowed me to see firsthand how valuable their contributions have been to quality education. As noted in the review of literature (Alquassem et al., 2016; Gahwaji, 2013), Saudi Arabia's ECE labour market is one in which females exclusively are tasked with the daily care and education of the country's youngest students. I had occasion in a few interviews to ask what the women in my study what they felt about an ECE system in which no males were present.

Deena thought that men could work in the position perfectly well. However, she explained that in Saudi Arabian culture, women are seen as having a closer bond with children, as I have already discussed. People believe females have more empathy than males, she told me, and that empathy is valued by society. She spoke of an innate expectation to treat children delicately and that women were more naturally suited for the role. "They're closer and calmer. They know how to be with kids," she said. Deena felt that women were naturally better at acts like hugging, calming children down, and listening. After this, Deena told me she felt sad that lots of kids do not have a good relationship with their parents. They miss this source of comfort. I felt from the way she led me through this conversation, though she did not explicitly say it, that for at least a few of the children in her classroom she was hoping to add the love and support she felt was absent or in short supply at home. Deena also cited that in Saudi Arabia, women tend to teach grades 1 to 3. While these positions are open to male teachers, men don't choose to specialize there. "It's definitely better to be a woman," Deena concluded.

I found it interesting that if Deena did indeed believe that some of the children in her classroom were lacking emotion and engagement from their parents—particularly from their fathers—that it was still difficult for her to conceptualize a male in the classroom that could serve as a positive

figure capable of dispensing care and skilled in creating the kinds of positive, warm connections between teacher and student that both she and I valued. To me, this spoke of a particularly deep-rooted concept of masculinity within Saudi Arabian culture that frowns upon the expression of emotion by males (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Throughout my research, I have been particularly fond of the phrase, “the fish are unaware of the water.” In the case of Deena, it was thought-provoking that a young woman with such progressive views on education and the future of Saudi Arabian society had such a fixed notion of male gender roles. However, the reality of the country's ECE demographics deprives women like Deena from seeing men engaging skillfully, compassionately, and confidently with children in an ECE setting. Never seeing such men makes it easier to believe that they cannot exist because they have not existed in the current practice context.

Sana also reinforced the idea that while men aren't offered the choice of specializing in ECE, it's a natural occupation for women and should be populated by them. Sana considered that certain traits were naturally given to us women by a higher power. “For example, being more nurturing, being more emotional,” she said. “It helps and serves us well when we're working with children.” She also referenced the trends in the first three primary school grades and noted that she would prefer female teachers in this area.

Across the narratives, the issue of male ECE teachers and gender associations only arose in a few instances and was not a dominant part of any single woman's overall narrative. I thought this was interesting and seemed like a “blind spot” in the topics that we covered. I was personally hoping that I might have been able to steer a conversation towards the idea of how the *expectation* that women should provide care might possibly be limiting in certain situations, and that perhaps an inflow of males to the profession could change the larger social view of ECE. However, I didn't want to force the direction in the narratives; yet I found that this was an area where my own views were not articulated or reflected in my conversational partners.

Overall, with respect to men in ECE, the narratives revealed the degree to which the patriarchy in Saudi Arabian society had rendered itself invisible. Most of the women agreed that ECE was not the domain of men. I felt some of this pervasive viewpoint could be explained by their desire to be protective of the field of ECE in general, especially since it is one of the few aspects of the Saudi Arabian labour market in which women have the ability to form and negotiate a career of

their own. However, it seemed like I was the only one who was aware of the antecedents that had produced a self-perpetuating cycle. True, few men wanted to enter ECE. Why would they, when the dominant cultural narrative told boys that raising children was exclusive to women, and that their time was better spent on more important pursuits? In this respect, I felt that each of the six women had internalized Saudi Arabian gender norms to such a degree that a different, gender-neutral ECE landscape seemed almost impossible to them. But perhaps of greater significance, I believe supporting the exclusion of males from ECE makes the uniformly female cohort group of Saudi Arabian ECE teachers themselves complicit in the segregation between the sexes, and therefore reinforces the normalcy of sex segregation across all of the country's occupations.

Indeed, the absence of males from ECE in general—at all levels and manners of relationships—is a curious phenomenon in Saudi Arabia. The rigorous gender segregation that exists within the country has historically been so significant that fathers and grandfathers are prohibited from attending school plays and musicals alongside members of their families. This remains an issue even at the school my own children attend. My personal take-away was that at least part of the emotional and physical distance between the home and the classroom could be explained by what I had learned through the women's stories. By reinforcing a cultural message that men *shouldn't* have involvement in the ECE classroom, we educators may be losing a source of what could potentially be highly valuable partners in the learning process.

5.5.2 The Importance of Solidarity among Women

In the previous sections of this chapter, I spoke of women challenging and impeding other women in the field of ECE. Those narratives spoke of a struggle that women face in patriarchies all across the world, where their career advancement and occupational progress often hinges upon being a complicit part of the patriarchy that surrounds them (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Bateson, 2007; Forster, 2017). However, this does not present a complete picture of the narratives that described women interacting with other women. Much to the contrary, it was amazing for me to hear stories of women inspiring one another, often providing leadership and mentorship that formed the foundation of valuable life lessons. For the two younger participants, I felt the presence of strong female role models in their lives. Alia told me how progressive her mother was at one point in her life. A long time ago before the country's current traffic laws were put into

place, Alia's mother was one of the first and only females in the country to regularly drive a car, and she opened her own ballet studio during a more conservative time when any kind of adult dancing was viewed with some suspicion.

Deena told me after her praise of female teachers in the Saudi Arabian ECE system that she felt that women could be unique and successful in a huge variety of other fields. Speaking of a news story she had once read, Deena said, "It was eye-opening to see a female scientist get a prize and a lot of praise." She felt that the opening of the medical field to more women was showing that females could excel in new areas, and she said that the world at large was recognizing their accomplishments, which she thought would translate to Saudi Arabia over time. The story challenges the great degree of insularity many people assume exists in Saudi Arabia. As parts of the world become more interconnected, it becomes increasingly easy for Saudi Arabia's women to see examples of confident, successful female leaders beyond our country's borders.

I also thought back to Sana's narrative and her relationship with the "angel teacher," who had inspired her to become a teacher herself. In her doctoral thesis, Sana said it had been thirty-eight years since they last had contact and she had no idea where the teacher was, but she dedicated the work to her. Sana wrote, "Thank you for teaching me how to be a real teacher." I found myself very inspired and touched when Sana said that, as a result of that dedication, the two met again. Sana said that it was such a beautiful moment that they were both crying when they met, both overjoyed to see what a difference they were able to make on each other's lives.

Considering this, I thought of something Walaa told me in her narrative: "When you get a message, you want to spread the message." Connection with her fellow ECE teachers was inspiration for Walaa's career path, and even after she left classroom teaching she continued to work for students' and teachers' benefits by providing free professional education that could be quickly read and absorbed. There was a strong sense in Walaa that she was constantly placing the needs of others above herself, and was acutely familiar with the challenges of being a female ECE teacher.

I wish to call the reader's attention to the fact that three of the six narratives—Walaa's, Alia's and Sana's—involve stories of personal success that can be directly attributed to women explicitly

seeing the need to support their fellow women, or to make a previous female mentor proud. The stories reveal an undercurrent of female strength and identity that has transcended generations. I found myself wondering how many women, when placed in similar situations to those my participants experienced, would have simply given up in the absence of another woman to keep them moving forward. It is not easy to be a female in Saudi Arabia. The stories show a decades-long awareness among working women in Saudi Arabia that they must support one another in order to help prove that women are valuable and capable, and that, furthermore, their professional struggles have not been for nothing. This undercurrent of solidarity is a growing challenge to the patriarchy endemic to Saudi Arabian society and illustrated to me the importance of one's associating with a greater identification as a female professional in order to walk the path of personal and career success. The narratives I collected helped me to see that vocational support, mentorship, educational material, and hands-on training are often gifts that women have had to give themselves.

5.5.3 The Saudi Arabian ECE Teacher as a Wife and Mother

In the narratives, I began to become very aware of the tensions that Bateson (2007) spoke of in the lives of women as daughters, wives, sisters, and mothers. As I imagined would be the case, and was certainly true of my own life, there were several moments where the narratives mentioned explicit role strain. This was especially prevalent for the older participants, two of whom said that some of their hardest challenges came from balancing their home and work lives.

Sana explained that for her, pursuing higher education was a challenge. The time requirements of schooling and the research and writing that went into her dissertation introduced strain at home in her relationship with her husband and her children. My impression was that there was still a great deal of emotional pain associated with this, and the normally vocal and communicative Sana was far more reserved on this topic than was usual. Ebtessam said something very interesting to me in that regard. When she was talking about the sacrifices required to obtain a degree and the pressure she felt, she said that her children always came first. "This was their time," she told me. "It would be mean of me to take from their time for my sake." Ebtessam said that while there was stress associated with this time in her life, it was overall a very positive experience, and she was amazed at how much she was able to get done

with child-rearing and studying. My impression was that earning such tremendous professional and academic accomplishments alongside raising her children was one of the highlights of her life.

Nevertheless, the narratives pointed at the strong sense of guilt that many of the women I spoke with feel by pursuing higher education. As Walaa shared through her narrative in the first section of this chapter, her husband allowed her to obtain an education in ECE only once it was medically determined that she could not bear children. Within Saudi Arabia, a woman's choices are always weighed within the context of the family unit, and the pressure to consider all members of one's family in professional decisions becomes internalized for women. Especially pervasive is the idea that, if a woman is a scholar, her ability as a mother is compromised. Ebtesam's description of her early motherhood as being "their time" in reference to her children speaks to a culture where a woman's time spent with children or with her husband is more highly valued than time spent on self-improvement or professional advancement. Women like Sana and Ebtesam were willing to make things work and balance familial expectations with career development. However, in comparison to one another, it seemed that Ebtesam was satisfied with how things ultimately transpired, whereas it seemed like Sana spent several years weathering the consequences of her choice in the form of marital strife. While these two women navigated careers in ECE in spite of the difficulty it introduced into their family units, it is worth considering how many women in the country succumb to this external pressure and/or internal guilt.

Speaking personally, my involvement in ECE had extraordinarily strong connections with motherhood. I saw that being both a mother and being a teacher were part of caring for other human beings and helping them develop into happy, productive, confident, compassionate, and talented individuals. After having children, I began looking at the profession and my approach to it from the perspective of "the golden rule": if I were going to pursue education as a career myself, I should never be satisfied with anything less than the kind of education I would hope for my own children. Having read much literature at UBC that described the way that children bonded with those around them and the importance of ECE in creating caring, supportive communities where children thrive, I began to look at the role of a good teacher as being highly maternal.

However, I found this linkage reflected explicitly in only one of the narratives. Of the six participants, I knew for sure that three women—Deena, Alia, and Walaa—were not mothers themselves. Of those remaining, Sana mentioned very little about her children or marriage, choosing to focus on her professional self and sense of accomplishments. Nour, if she was married or did have children, did not choose to bring them up as a topic of conversation during our time together.

It was only Ebtesam and I that shared mutual experiences of how our lives and expectations as mothers shaped our view of ECE, and vice versa. Ebtesam told me an interesting moment from her childhood: she remembered watching *The Sound of Music* over and over. As a girl, she told herself, “When I grow up, I want to have a family exactly like that. A family that has fun together.” Ebtesam smiled broadly as she often did through her stories, “The fun part was the thing that fascinated me, and I said, I’m going to have fun with my kids.” However, Ebtesam said that she found that the realities of motherhood often involved moments that were not always fun, such as experiencing her children fighting with one another. Parenting, she said, “Was something that you don’t learn from your parents ... It was something you need to explore for yourself.” That exploration was what initially started Ebtesam’s path to the world of books, children’s literature, and parental resources. The lack of quality in what Ebtesam discovered largely informed her of the value of what she could provide as an author and educator. She told me that she was encouraged by the way that her children responded to stories, which deepened her commitment as a writer. To date, Ebtesam has published multiple dozens of books.

I did have one additional conversation about motherhood with Deena, as I asked her if she saw children as part of her future. She reflected on the question and told me that at this point in her life, she wasn’t sure. However, she said that having a child would definitely give her more points of data about child behaviour and development, and she felt that “being a teacher would probably make me a good mother.” Through the conversation, I could sense that Deena was considering the issue from my perspective, but I could tell it was the first time she had given it much thought.

As a last point of interest, Walaa, one of the women who did not have children herself, told me one of her goals with her educational magazine was to provide women with insights that would allow them to more successfully navigate the challenges of being a wife, mother, and

professional. Although Walaa did not have children of her own, I could tell that she was very aware of the stresses mothers encountered in our field and of the value that the world of ECE can provide to all mothers. One of the magazine's constant mottos translates roughly to “Happy mom, happy kids.”

In considering the lack of expected overlap between identity as a teacher and identity as a mother, it struck me once again that pursuing an occupation or raising children may often be thought of as an either/or proposition within Saudi Arabia. As I have discussed, girls are heavily socialized within the country to be caretakers, and there are cultural values that view women as being more predisposed to understand the needs of children. I still contend that these are social factors that strongly impact a woman's desire to enter the field. However, the narratives lead me to the conclusion that choosing to work in ECE is culturally regarded as a “second best” to using a presumably natural set of skills in the service of motherhood itself. Once again, I feel this reinforces ECE's status as a marginalized career field. From this vantage point, ECE is not just subconsciously regarded as a place for female academics who could not succeed in the areas of medicine or business, but may also be regarded as a place for women who could not be effective mothers themselves.

5.6 Personal Aspirations and Thoughts on the Future of ECE

This chapter ends with an analysis of the narratives intended to play a “what if” game regarding how the women ECE educators perceived the future of their lives and of ECE in general in Saudi Arabia. I felt that a more nuanced understanding of where we are presently would be greatly complemented—and complicated—by an exploration of where these educators would like to be (or expect to be) at some point in the future, both as individuals navigating a career path and as citizens working for the benefit of Saudi Arabian society.

As described in section five, which dealt with the links between the ECE teaching profession and womanhood, I admit that when it came to having a discussion about the future of ECE, the conversations went in many different directions. However, in determining the commonality of these branching paths, I nevertheless hope that this final part paints a realistic picture of what the immediate and long-term future may have in store for Saudi Arabia's ECE system.

5.6.1 Short to Medium-Term Personal Aspirations

After all of our discussions and after my participants had revealed their missions, triumphs, philosophies, and insights gained over several years (for some women, a lifetime), I wanted to know what the next year or two had in store for them. They had spent so much time telling me where they came from, and I was eager to hear where they planned on going.

From Alia I felt a sense of responsibility to make her school the best it could be through mindfulness of her own path. Here was a woman who had waited several years to build a better vision of education, and now that it was in front of her, I felt she wasn't about to squander it. As a result, Alia was eager to discuss many of the ways she was focusing on professional development and personal growth. "Every week, I try to make sure there are some changes to the classroom," she said. Additionally, Alia wanted to put her dissatisfaction with low standards and a lack of support into direct practice. I asked her how she followed up with teachers. She said that being personally involved in circle time throughout her six or seven classes every week was extremely important to her. "I go in for at least forty-five minutes. It allows me to see if there are any issues from week to week. I can instantly tell how things are going from the energy of the class." Alia mentioned that, when possible, she tries to deliver the weekly story as a way to collect data about the relationship between her students and teachers.

However, Alia also said that her current goal as an administrator was to do whatever she could to keep her staff's morale high, including rewarding personal growth and reminding them that they belong to a larger academic community. "All teachers should know they are capable and be able to develop self confidence," she told me. Smiling, she added, "As long as they have the desire ... if they lack the tools, they will *invent* the tools." I hoped Alia would be able to retain this closeness and quality as she continued to expand the size of her school and the number of lives she and her instructors were able to touch. Key to her daily goals as an administrator was the intention to see situations and environments through the eyes of both teachers and students, and she worked on improving this ability. I thought this was a supremely important skill that would distinguish a successful pre-K school from an unsuccessful one. For Alia, good teaching came from an internal spark and motivation to do well. Her goal, it seemed, was to do whatever she could to keep that spark alive, figuring that the other components to quality education would fall into place.

In contrast, as a young person, Deena had a goal that seemed to me much more provincial. As I mentioned in previous chapters, she confided that she was not yet full time, and in order to achieve that status in the public system, she felt her current role was to keep her head down, obey the rules, and keep her proposed changes to herself. This would be the case even if she were already aware that these role expectations were taking a toll on her physical and emotional health. I worried the most for Deena. I still saw a young woman who wanted to keep everyone happy and not make trouble. I wondered, even if she didn't state it explicitly, if walking away from ECE at this point in her life wasn't a choice simply motivated by finances, but also by having to admit a personal failure—that the career path she was warned against by her family was indeed the wrong path for her. I didn't ask this explicitly, however: I could sense Deena's growing resignation and disappointment in her short-term future and didn't want to push the conversation farther into the realm of the negative.

Thinking about our conversation several weeks later, I couldn't help but feel that Deena would surprise herself if she made a promise to never accept second best or to look for creative solutions to professional worries. The more I got to know Deena, the more I was struck by the complexity of who she was. On one hand, I was dealing with a very bright and articulate young woman who had the bravery to enter ECE in Saudi Arabia in order to follow her heart. However, I was also struck by the degree to which Deena internalized many of the traditional expectations placed on women as part of Saudi Arabian culture. Here was a woman willing to push, but not push too much, and whose perspective often seemed to stop within the walls of her own school and family. Some of this may simply be due to youth, but in many instances Deena's choices seemed constrained by the obedience expected of her, and at times she was uncritical in her thinking, as if it was hard for her to place herself more than a few months into the future. It reminded me that while I place quite a lot of hope in Deena's generation to be civic-minded and politically active, many of the country's youngest citizens may simply replicate existing systems if they cannot visualize other alternatives. While I hoped that eventually achieving full-time status would allow her the confidence to make changes and push her classroom in more student-centred directions (despite the strict curriculum), I worried that Deena's time as a classroom teacher was limited. If I am correct in such an assumption, I can only hope that her path mirrors that of Nour or Walaa, who left the classroom but not, ultimately, Saudi Arabian ECE. Deena's passion for children and good education is too valuable to eventually be crushed under the metaphorical millstone of Walaa's earlier narratives.

For Nour and Walaa, I saw their next steps to be found in the world of science and research. Nour is continuing her doctoral path forward, and in research she has finally found the sense of purpose she was looking for. Nour shared with me a moment from her professional research that filled her with joy, and I thought it was wonderful in its simplicity. She handed each student a camera and had them take pictures of what they liked or didn't like. Then, once the photographs were printed, she had the students talk about them. Not only did Nour's style of research push forth the wonderful amount of information we learn by looking through the eyes of children (here, quite literally), but it made me think of how powerful and important those children must have felt to take part in an adult's project and to be trusted with such objects. Here again, I was struck by the similarity of how many women included in this study had arrived independently at such similar pedagogies and epistemologies. Nour's ongoing research shows that the perception of Saudi Arabian education as collectivist and authoritarian across all levels is not monolithic. Here was a woman choosing to explore the value of children as individuals; her work illustrated the value of art and play as opportunities for each child in the classroom to develop his or her own valuable perspective on the environments that surround him or her. As such, I appreciated moments like these as cracks in the overall facade in Saudi Arabia that dictates the worth and role of women and children.

Walaa and I spent a lot more time discussing clearer directions for her research. At the time, she was an ardent participant in understanding the unique context in Saudi Arabia that can help a new generation of teachers better build literacy skills. The two of us took a trip to a university's language centre where Walaa is currently participating in a project intended to improve the way that phonemes and phonics are taught in Saudi Arabian ECE. Walaa mentioned that there are many good strategies available, especially through Reggio Emilia's philosophies of pedagogy, but the problem is that often English-language strategies aren't sensitive to the contexts of Saudi Arabia and other Arabic-speaking countries. In this trip, I learned several interesting facts, thanks entirely to Walaa. "Rarely do people speak *proper* Arabic," Walaa explained, "so it's difficult to gauge a concept like literacy or fluency." She gave me an example to consider. "Before entering school at age six, Western students have a vocabulary of about sixteen thousand words and are ready to read. However, in Saudi Arabia, students might know only about three thousand words of 'proper' Arabic."

Walaa said that differences in dialect, even differences in teachers who teach in a regional dialect, complicate the educational process. Walaa looked at me thoughtfully. "This is almost a disability," she said. She explained it was her opinion that when it came to the difficulties she and I encountered in teaching children to read in our home country, "We've brought the problems on ourselves." For Walaa, her literacy work and advocacy connected back to the centre's Reggio-based approach, allowing her to test new culturally sensitive and language-appropriate strategies in the hopes of improving ECE and being able to share her findings in the future. For the next several years, I imagine, this process of learning, applying, and revising is an important mission that will keep Walaa very busy. For her, the immediate steps into the future connected her with a goal of bridging the world of Western academia and its insights to the world of ECE in Saudi Arabian cultural and environmental contexts. I hoped that Walaa's and Nour's stories were ultimately reflective of the majority of women who leave ECE classroom teaching in Saudi Arabia because of ideological or personal conflicts. Namely, that they explore avenues that ultimately allow them to speak with the voice they knew they had all along. Looking at their narratives from moment to moment, they were filled with stories that reinforced a vision of the Saudi Arabian ECE teacher as a being whose ideas and time were of low value. However, looking at their narratives from a macro-level view, Nour and Walaa both represented women whose country had invested in them to learn and eventually lead others, and whose work could directly influence far more of the country's students than they would have been able to reach as the head of the classroom. In these women's lives, I saw educational policy and cultural liberalization in action.

With Ebtesam retired and Sana nearing close to the age of retirement (from what I was able to infer), it was interesting to look back on the fullness of lives navigated within the ECE landscape of Saudi Arabia. Like Walaa and Alia, Ebtesam's reading and language centre provides her with a physical embodiment of her views of best ECE practice and pedagogy, allowing her to bridge theory with practice and make a positive impact in the lives of young people. In talking to Ebtesam, I felt she projected a degree of confidence and serenity I found inspiring. From my perspective, her words are free of worry or regret. Her voice is always full of love and confidence that the path she has followed (and continues to follow) is the right one. For Sana, it is hard for me to ever imagine her "done" with her commitment to educating teachers. While we never explicitly discussed what her plans were once she was finished with her current position (again, the constant phone calls and emails that drifted throughout our time together was proof

of her tremendous influence and importance at the university), I imagined her in a similar role to Walaa's: as some type of mentor, writer, or instructor with a hand in shaping the next generation of the country's educators.

5.6.2 Visions of Saudi Arabia's Future ECE

As Sana mentioned in one of our conversations: "I don't think anyone in any country can say, 'We're the best and we're staying the best.' It needs a lot of work and it needs continuous work. The question is how much reform. Is it a complete overhaul? Is it just development?" In the conversations that Sana and I shared, along with the rest of the women who participated, I was surprised by the clarity and depth with which this question was explored. In general, I found that my participants were extremely vocal when it came to the areas in which they hoped ECE would improve in the near future.

It was amazing to me how many of the women mentioned the explicit importance of ECE pedagogy that made the necessity of art and play explicit and important. Alia, Deena, and Walaa all mentioned that they would like to see the Ministry make greater accommodations in this area as part of any upcoming efforts of reform or modification. Deena said that role play allows children to demonstrate their capacities and discover their true character. "Children have a lack of language when it comes to fully explaining their wants and needs," she said, "But play allows them to communicate something very sincerely so that you know exactly who they are." She mentioned that it was her hope that future ECE systems would look more at play as a valuable form of learning and communication and more than just a way of burning off energy. Alia stated, like Deena, that she was surprised by the absence of art in the Ministry of Education's time allocations and curriculum. She said that even in the so-called "Montessori" schools in Saudi Arabia, art is usually marginalized. An additional believer in these components as an inseparable part of ECE, Walaa mentioned that the Ministry of Education should take a higher degree of interest in bringing experts on art and play to their own educational panels. Until experts in these areas are given a voice and the space to explain their contribution to an ECE classroom, Walaa felt that policy would continue to marginalize art and play in the classroom.

Several women spoke of the importance of ongoing professional development. I felt Deena drawing from her own life when she mentioned the need for ongoing guidance and mentorship

whenever they feel “stuck.” Deena articulated that she felt many teachers in Saudi Arabia were stranded on their own with few people, if anyone, to listen to their needs or serve as advocates for what they wanted. Here, Deena reiterated the importance of retaining good teachers, stating that “failure in the classroom at this time can affect a child’s entire life.” Alia agreed that additional teacher education should be mandatory outside of the ECE curriculum taught in Saudi Arabia’s college programs. I inferred that both women had mentioned this aspect not simply because it would be in service to the children, but because it could be a way to address the mischaracterization of ECE as a non-professional career path. Sana also agreed that professional development was never-ending, though I suppose this would not be surprising from a woman who has devoted so much of her life to be in the service of other educators. Sana said that there is always a more effective way that can be learned to manage a classroom. “Focus on that, and everything else will fall into place,” she said, noting that teachers can never get to anything else if they always struggle with behavioural issues.

Three women, Sana, Alia, and Walaa, all mentioned the need to include specialists to inform ECE policy. Readers may recall that Alia had mentioned specifically that the administrators from the Ministry of Education were unfamiliar with the Montessori approach to ECE. Walaa felt that positive change could be aided immensely by culturally sensitive and context-sensitive research performed in Saudi Arabia, especially in terms of where translation occurred. Specifically, Walaa articulated a clear vision of translation teams at the Ministry of Education composed of translators, subject area experts, and ECE teachers working together to ensure a cohesive and sensible curriculum. Walaa also said that while she was aware that the Ministry of Education had an advisory committee to ensure the consistency and logic of the policy decisions being made, she said she “doesn’t know exactly what they are doing,” based on the quality of their results. Walaa said that the Ministry of Education would also greatly benefit from a department that was solely responsible for evaluating and contextualizing fieldwork. These teams, Walaa said, needed to have “careful and skillful” members to be successful. In regards to scholarship, Sana mentioned something interesting that connected directly to Walaa’s point of view: “I don’t rely on any Arabic references at all.” Sana mentioned that the research is often not strong, and what exists is mostly translated from English references with perhaps some addition on the part of the author’s opinions. I hoped that I, along with women like Nour and Walaa, would be able to help correct that problem through our future bodies of work.

The hopes for curriculum reform were implicitly expressed by all of the women, but Deena and Ebtesam most clearly articulated their hopes for flexibility. Deena offered that perhaps one day it could be called “the creative curriculum”: the school could prescribe the objectives, but how to accomplish them would be up to her. In other words, while the units that need to be taught could be set in stone, the timeline and pedagogy could be up in the air. “Of course, some teachers won't be creative or will just be of a mind to get the lesson over with,” Deena said, “But at least a choice would be nice.” Ebtesam thought about ECE through her own perspective, which included that of a mother. In agreement with Deena, Ebtesam said that curriculum should not be something dictated. “Especially in elementary school, teaching should be fun.” Ebtesam considered her position a bit longer. “I'm not sending my children to school to learn two or three specific things. I'm sending them to school to learn for life.” She told me that learning how to find information and think critically was more important than the coverage of the information itself, and hoped that ECE would move away from the goal of trying to simply teach more content. “Schools can never cover everything,” she said. Finally, Ebtesam added, “School is not life. It's part of life.”

Examining the interconnections and similarities between the women's narratives about ECE's future in Saudi Arabia, what was most striking to me was an overall call for state-level policy and improvement efforts to address additional communication and coherency across a greater number of educational environments. Walaa, Alia, and Deena each articulated a need for the school to more closely resemble the “natural” learning environments of the home. Policy, they claimed, should allow students to perceive the classroom as a natural extension of their homes, and indeed their community. Several women hinted at their wish for additional mentorship and professional association, linking communication and a sense of belonging to a larger cause with better educational outcomes, including higher teacher ability and increased mental health among Saudi Arabian ECE practitioners. Additionally, the majority of women agreed that the ECE curriculum set by the Ministry of Education should allow teachers to adapt the curriculum to be responsive to the unique needs of each classroom. My analysis of these suggestions was that each was intended, at least in part, to call attention to the barriers that separate one environment or set of stakeholders from another, and where need be, to erase these barriers.

5.6.3 Is It a Good Time to Be an ECE Teacher?

Opinions differed with respect to attitudes towards Saudi Arabia's ECE climate and future opportunities. I asked Alia if she felt it was a good time to be a teacher. "Absolutely," she replied. She mentioned that back when her mother was her own age, people would often choose to enter the field of education simply because there was no other choice for women who wanted an occupation. "There's been a lot more opportunity created since the '70s and '80s," Alia explained. "There are more women in the workforce. Just about every household has a woman who works." She mentioned that as a result of this generational shift, women are becoming more particular about where they place their children for education and daycare since they know there is less parent-child interaction in a modern family. Next to Alia, Ebtesam was also uniformly positive about the opportunities before any Saudi Arabian who chooses to engage with ECE in a professional capacity. When I asked her if this present era represented a good time to enter the field, she said, "Any time is a good time to be a teacher anywhere in the world." However, Ebtesam added, "Not everybody can become a teacher, just as not everyone can become a doctor. You really need to like what you're doing in order to become good at it."

For the remainder of the four women, attitudes were mixed on whether the current era represented a high point of ECE as a profession within the country. Although Nour and Walaa did not address this line of inquiry directly, I felt that they would have likely cited the administrative and curriculum challenges that forced certain negotiations to be made in terms of the paths their lives and careers took. For example, I felt Nour's comment of researching and educating herself to be a leader so that stakeholders "would finally listen to her" hinted at cultural and institutional undertones within Saudi Arabia that complicated her position as a classroom teacher. And, for Walaa, I intuited that her publication was a way of trying to provide current teachers with the resources she felt she lacked when she worked in the public ECE sector. Deena and Sana chose to make explicit mention of these factors. Deena said that while passion will always draw teachers to the field regardless of cultural or historical contexts, ECE in Saudi Arabia suffers from a lack of professional prestige and understanding among the general public. While Deena said that "it's easy to give directions," it was often a challenging and thankless job for teachers like her that wanted to excel.

Sana helped me to see the link between the larger societal culture and its ramifications on the overall field of ECE. She mentioned that the way Saudi Arabian citizens view ECE in their country is “problematic,” as it reflects how parents often see their children as deficient and in need of being improved through the school environment. Sana said something interesting to me: “If parents spoiled their children, we would have a different school system.” According to Sana, the profession will be taken more seriously when a majority of parents see the time their children spend during the day as important and when they begin to view their children as being capable. I couldn't help but think that as parenting trends continue to favour building supportive and loving home environments, this change would be inevitable. Sana mentioned that she was appreciative that the Ministry of Education was looking to change and attempting to be more flexible in terms of curriculum and pedagogy, especially “when it was so hard for them to do it before.” Sana also said,

All around the world, educators are realizing that this [ECE] is a really important stage. If only for preventing future problems, like counselling and psychological treatment for adults. It's very sad that it took us until now to realize all of this.

I could sense from Sana's words that she was seeing a shift in the country's direction.

However, she mentioned something very surprising to me that set her narrative apart from the others: “In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia had some of the best ECE curriculum in the world,” she said. “But we stopped improving.” Our conversation shifted away from specific examples of the difference between the current landscape of ECE in Saudi Arabia and that of several decades prior, but my interpretation was that a lack of standardization at that time was a double-edged sword. On one hand, there was less direct oversight by administrators and imposed curriculum that originated from the Ministry of Education. However, I couldn't help but feel that, had teachers like Deena, Walaa, and Nour been working in a less restrictive climate, they would have had a higher degree of flexibility to explore and adapt existing curriculum to their or their classroom's needs. The narratives showed the women felt that Saudi Arabia's future ECE policy should be sensitive towards a balance of the high professional qualifications needed to ensure quality outcomes, but allow for the autonomy necessary for child-centredness and relevancy within a number of communities.

5.6.4 Shaping Saudi Arabian Citizenry and Culture through ECE

I felt it appropriate to end this chapter with a focus on what the women I spoke to felt is most important: ECE's ability to shape Saudi Arabia's future by developing the minds of future adults. Indeed, all six women felt that ECE was critical because of its ability to influence the lives, perspectives, and morals of the students in every classroom, and they were eager to share their thoughts of how ECE served as a bridge to a new, brighter tomorrow.

I had an interesting exchange with Sana about this concept.

Balsam: What is citizenship?

Sana: Good citizenship is knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs. For knowledge, it's "What do you know about your country?" For skills, it's "What are the actions that serve your country?" Like smiling, or conservation.

Balsam: Can ECE effectively teach citizenship?

Sana: It's the best time. Anything you teach a child sticks forever.

Sana mentioned creating opportunities for children to learn lessons and giving them the responsibility needed to shine. She mentioned that even placing a light switch at a reachable level in the classroom allows children to turn off the lights, helping them connect their actions to a better country. I felt that her use of the phrase, "sticks forever," was interesting. I feel that internationally and across all levels of education, teachers worry about retention of lessons. Much of this also reflects Saudi Arabia's emphasis on rote memorization and repetition. However, even as the country's primary and secondary education may hold a very different focus and set of objectives than its ECE programs, Sana's words suggest that lessons taught here that may be in conflict with existing systems—such as individuality, critical thinking, empathy for others, and reciprocal learning—may continue to persist in a child's mind even after they leave the ECE classroom. If true, ECE bodes well for social change in Saudi Arabia, as children taught the importance of these values will grow into young men and women who will likely be more apt to challenge the country's existing patriarchal systems.

Alia, despite her age difference from Sana, seemed to have a similar attitude towards the school's role in creating the kinds of men and women we would like as neighbours. "If ECE

doesn't produce good citizens, then what's the point?" she asked. Alia mentioned that in her opinion, Saudi Arabia's ECE system could go a lot farther. "For example," she said, "when they are talking about citizenship or nationality, they talk about lots of music or flags or parades ... Not about loyalty or helping others. Everyone is serving somehow." Her goal was to challenge some of the youngest students in her classes by asking, "How are you going to serve?" In Alia's mind, the citizenship that ECE was uniquely equipped to provide was a love of country and a pride in where they are from. "A good citizen is someone who defends their country even if they don't have a good experience," she said. "A person who loves their country through the worst. Someone willing to protecting their environment and their classroom." I was fascinated by the explicit linking of the classroom as being a part of the country, but as nevertheless distinct and worthy of examination and contemplation. Alia's students were already being conditioned to consider citizenship as internally defined and fueled, rather than as obedience to a set of prescribed values or directives.

That said, it is very important for me to clarify that many of the women held widely varying ideas on this topic. Ebtessam saw developing critical thinking as a way to build happy, motivated adults. She was troubled by the difference between a modern and traditional childhood, noting that children didn't seem to have the same sense of satisfaction with themselves and their world. For her, it was important to teach children how to enjoy life and how to learn how to improve life. "Value is not price," she said, noting the desires of many children for toys and games, made even more visible through a world more interconnected (at least superficially) than ever before. "Value is what you add through your ideas that *you* bring to the table." Children can realize that they can be very special, Ebtessam said. All that is needed is simply for them to think about where their unique gifts lie and what they can do to apply their special talents and abilities. I sensed that, to her, one's true potential as an adult was built on a foundation of an inner peace and confidence built during one's childhood. However, for Ebtessam, it seemed as though these values of independence and self-analysis were coming into direct conflict with the modern world and its proliferation of games and distractions. I sensed that Ebtessam was concerned for a Saudi Arabia where individualism would be manifested in the rise of materialism and selfishness.

While I think Walaa's sensibilities were very much in line with Ebtessam's point of view, she ardently placed herself *against* the idea of promoting citizenship through ECE in general, since we tend to apply our own interpretations and biases. I had a great exchange with her.

Balsam: What does it mean to be a good citizen?

Walaa: We cannot define who or what is a good citizen. It's a very wide concept, very hard to be defined. Too often, we describe citizenship in terms of obedience rather than altruism. In fact, it's a mixture of everything ... If a child has a strong, stable personality, and if their main needs—Virtual, Emotional, Physical, Social, Intellectual—if all of those needs are met, the child will charm people with his personality and be ready to face his life and successfully deal with relationships and problems.

I thought this articulation was a very powerful statement about the capability of the child, and how trusting the child to have agency with his or her education is a starting point to trusting the whole person to live a life of responsibility and service to others. I also read Walaa's response as an additional testimonial to the agency of a child as being worthy of developing his or her own world view rather than simply being indoctrinated into someone else's opinions.

Nour said that she didn't believe there was an ideal role for teacher or student in such matters of citizenship. As an aside, she mentioned, "Kids become aware of the expectation that they need to be perfect." I interpreted that, from her standpoint, projecting our expectations onto them for their behaviour seemed like an overreach of a teacher's essential functions. However, Nour shared with me the amazement she felt when she saw that the children in her master's research study were happy to be a part of the research in their own ways. "They were aware they had the potential to change the learning process," she said. "They saw it had the potential to change lives." From this vantage point, I intuited that Nour felt that children had the capacity to become wonderful adults if we only trust them to follow their hearts and present opportunities to show compassion.

Taken together as a whole, the six different narratives were very much in agreement in an understanding of ECE reaching beyond its immediate time and place in Saudi Arabia. While a great deal of pessimism existed that challenged the possibility of social change in the short-term, all the women seemed confident with the notion that a childhood extolling the virtues of harmony, togetherness, and social equality would lead to a better stronger nation internationally

and expanded opportunities for citizens who have traditionally existed in the margins of Saudi Arabia's patriarchy.

6 Discussion

I wish the reader to know what an understatement it is to call the writing of this thesis a journey, not only in terms of time or the effort necessary to span two different continents, but also in terms of putting myself in a position to learn from so many different women. The opening chapters of this dissertation posited that it would be a worthwhile effort to listen closely to a sample of motivated Saudi Arabian ECE teachers. Here, I wish to share some of the most significant lessons that revealed themselves to me over the course of designing this study and carrying it through to my conclusions.

Broadly, this chapter is organized into a six sub-sections that capture the study's lead questions:

- What are the experiences that underpin a women's entry into, pathway through, and journey in the field of ECE in Saudi Arabia?
- How have female ECE educators in Saudi Arabia come to make sense of who they are and what they do?
- What commonalities and differences are reflected in the narratives of the interviewed female ECE teachers, and what do they tell us about the larger field of Saudi Arabian ECE?

This chapter revisits these lead questions following a close study of the narratives explored in the previous chapter. First, common themes and noteworthy differences among the women's stories are analyzed to explain where they contribute additional insights or contradict existing literature. These themes show how the notion of ECE as “women's work”—a gendered division of labour, that is to say—is rooted in strong patriarchal constructions of power and culturally reinforced throughout multiple levels and contexts of Saudi Arabian state and social arrangements. Nevertheless, these themes also reveal the patterns of resistance that emerged as women's response to being forced to navigate patriarchal systems, and what the women had in common when they talked about what kept them pushing forward in the field of ECE.

Thereafter, this chapter will conclude with a discussion of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) ecological systems theory and discuss it in terms of its applicability to the world of Saudi Arabian

ECE, as seen retrospectively through the context of this research. The chapter ends with a discussion of the significance of this study now that it has been concluded.

6.1 The Concept of ECE and “Women's Work” in Saudi Arabia

One of the most salient insights to emerge from this study is the degree to which Saudi Arabian culture maintains the notion of ECE as women's work, and women's work exclusively. For both policy-makers within the country and the women themselves, the number of assumptions and biases related to gender that attach themselves to the particulars of Saudi Arabian ECE are so numerous and entrenched that it takes serious work to disentangle them.

Here, I start at the proverbial beginning. A childhood in Saudi Arabia is significant in that it is the start of gender-based labour and ingrained notions of what is worthwhile for a boy to do versus what it is worthwhile for a girl to do. Out of all the narratives, the overwhelming majority included stories of caring for children. Being deliberately placed into this expected role by one's teens was especially pronounced for older generations of women.

For both Alia and Deena, who sought personal meaning in this space and *chose* to take care of their siblings with love and pride, I found it interesting that, at least with Alia, a maid was present in the household. For that reason, being of a higher socio-economic class may be a partial determinant of whether a young woman has the option to choose an alternate path beyond serving as a “second mother” while she is still in her adolescence.

I reiterate here that few of the women I interviewed chose to explicitly focus on this aspect of their childhood, despite the commonality of the phenomenon of female children raising younger siblings in Saudi Arabia, or childcare falling to female nannies. Particularly absent across all narratives was the presence of a male nurturer in the house, be it a father, brother, or other male relation. For example, none of the six women spoke of a time where their development as a human being was positively influenced by a kind word of reassurance, a memorable one-on-one moment of interaction, or a lesson taught to them by a male member of their household. As constructed through the narratives of these women, the Saudi Arabian household is one where fathers and brothers are absent in the childhood of their daughters and siblings, respectively. It often seemed to me that a sister and a brother growing up even under the same roof could

experience two completely different realities. This, I felt, was an aspect I had not encountered in my search of existing literature: the degree to which conceptions of Saudi Arabian ECE are connected specifically to the way to which boys and girls are raised in Saudi Arabia.

Articulations of how patriarchy makes itself known in Saudi Arabia did not call specific attention to how child-rearing becomes a part of an older sister's life—whether the female child wants the burden or not—in a way that does not hold true for boys and men.

To take this a step further, my findings show that statements about Saudi Arabia's patriarchal systems and the lack of esteem that men have towards women's child-rearing labour often seem to exist without a fully realized context. For example, when Baki (2004) notes that female jobs “are an extension of women's domestic roles, and utilize the stereotypical women's qualities of caring, nurturing, and service to others” (p. 6); when Chamlou (2008) explains that in Saudi Arabian society, “Men are responsible for providing for the family. Women are not” (p. 53); or when Forster (2017) notes that women in Saudi Arabia are often only granted opportunities that are not expected to bring them into contact with males, I feel that the question of “How did this state of affairs come to be?” is rarely asked or critically explored. My analyses lead me to the conclusion that childhood separation of gender roles is a powerful antecedent in explaining how Saudi Arabia's patriarchy comes to be maintained, and effectively strengthened, from generation to generation.

The expectation of child-rearing as an often inevitable part of a sister's or daughter's life also helps to explain Al-Ahmadi's (2011) observation that Saudi Arabian females often get passed over for promotion when they enter into direct competition with their male peers. In Sana's case, caring for younger siblings seemed like a burdensome chore, while for Deena and Alia it appeared to have been a privilege. I don't wish to marginalize the benefit of loving one's family and doing whatever one can to care for them. However, this aspect of a girl's life in Saudi Arabia frequently carries a large “opportunity cost” when one considers that a boy at the same age may spend an equal amount of time studying math or the sciences. ECE, incidentally, is the one career path where the formative (and often unasked-for) experiences of childcaring add to a body of professional knowledge.

I would further argue that even among the women of this study, there was a deeply rooted idea that the duty (or privilege) of childcare is an *exclusively* female activity. This, I felt reinforced

Ranck's (1999) explanation that because a society assumes women naturally love and can care for children, any job that makes extensive use of this skill set must therefore require little professional training, and by extension, does not command much prestige.

Indeed, the theme of ECE as babysitting appeared frequently in the narratives and was prevalent across various ecological chronosystems, including Walaa's story of being directly called "just a babysitter," as well as in Deena's recollection of others assuming her job was to "just watch the kids all day and send them back to their parents." As such, the women personally reflected aspects of the narrative that explain the expansion of ECE programs within Saudi Arabia as driven primarily by the need to obtain a daytime nanny, especially as "foreign" labourers become more expensive and fewer in supply (Alquassem et al., 2016; Vlieger, 2013). Once again, I would say that the narratives point us towards the insight that ECE's lack of prestige within Saudi Arabia begins within the family context, and it begins early in life—years prior, in fact, to a woman's selection of a professional path at the post-secondary level.

Additionally, just as the narratives revealed a pattern that it is "normal" to impose childcare upon a girl, so too did they reveal the degree to which male family figures imposed their will onto girls and women. For example, Walaa's career began only because she was not able to satisfy what her husband thought of as a more important role: having children. Only with the agreement of her husband did Walaa's career move forward. Deena and Nour both told stories of stern fathers hoping to push their daughters into careers in which they had no interest. On her part, Sana explained that the most challenging years of her marriage came from attempting to balance her career with the expectations placed on her as a wife and mother.

Various authors have noted that women in Saudi Arabia are often steered towards careers thought to be *in their nature* (Hamdan, 2005), and that power holders in Saudi Arabia are skeptical of female achievement because they doubt their ability to make intelligent decisions for themselves (Baki, 2004; Forster, 2017). Forster (2017), for example, describes a pervasive view among the Saudi Arabia's clerics that women "are, by nature, weak, hesitant, emotional, and lacking full control of their bodies and minds" (p. 285), which indicates an underlying political and cultural value that men should direct the activities of women, including their career paths.

However, the narratives also revealed an irony that I had not yet come across in the literature. Today, some Saudi Arabian fathers are perhaps becoming more progressive in the sense that they are telling their daughters to enter avenues such as business and finance that had long been denied to female students—much in the same manner that Nour and Deena's fathers had originally instructed. Within these commandments is still an implicit judgment that a woman cannot be trusted to select her own career path. This aspect of mistrust and judgment by one's own father was not explicitly mentioned in the literature, but I believe that this is another powerful explanation of why gender relations in Saudi Arabia are so entrenched. Additionally, it is worth considering that even as fathers direct their daughters into male-dominated sectors, the advancement of these women may be limited as other male gatekeepers outside of the family work to block their entry or constrain their advancement.

Despite these insights, I still find it fascinating that explicit discussion of the women's multifaceted roles *as women*, or articulations of how they existed in a political system dominated by male influence, was not a major focus or topic of conversation across any of the six individual narratives. To me, this seemed to be a tacit assumption among the six women that this is just the way things are in Saudi Arabia. As a whole, this was an interesting “blind spot” in the narratives that powerfully stood out in its absence.

Each narrative provided extremely specific details that reinforced women's status as a second-class citizen within Saudi Arabia. At various points in these women's lives—and consistent across Bronfenbrenner's concepts of macrosystem and chronosystem—the female ECE teachers were too often given the following message: it is not important that you are able to choose by yourselves what happens in your own life. It is amazing to me that all the women I spoke with decided to resist this message in one form or another. Not only is this a testament to the women's strength, it helps us understand the degree to which so many women working in Saudi Arabian ECE may simply be following the vision of a father or husband in determining where to work or what to study.

6.2 The Difficulty of Challenging Patriarchy in Saudi Arabian ECE

The literature is consistent in terms of characterizing Saudi Arabian politics as being inseparable from day-to-day family life. Joseph (1996) uses the word “fluidity” (p. 16) when describing how

lines are rarely drawn between public and private spheres within the country, or between family and government. Almunajjed (2010) noted that the goal of social policy is often to maintain the stability of the traditional family unit as a primary objective. As a whole, the literature surveyed in this dissertation is consistent and accurate in describing a top-down system of policy-making that exists in Saudi Arabia that limits the extent of a woman's ability to participate in both social and political dimensions.

What the narratives in this study added to the literature was the personal struggle of each woman as she attempted to push back against systems of control present in Saudi Arabia's ECE systems. Giving women a voice through narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as well as understanding their stories of frustration by composing their lives (Bateson, 2007) over the backdrop of the prevailing patriarchal systems, made such resistance more visible. It also brought into better focus how difficult it can be for a female Saudi Arabian ECE teacher to challenge a variety of factors that attempt to limit her personal and professional success.

One of the most important insights from the narratives I collected was the degree to which control of the ECE curriculum within Saudi Arabia was symbolic of the control over women themselves. Certainly, several authors had identified a multiplicity of reasons why the curriculum would be so strongly fixed, including a cultural trend towards viewing centralized decision making as efficient, the ease of not having to revise established protocol, and a pedagogy that favours a transmission-based approach to learning (Algarni & Male, 2014; Elyas & Picard, 2010; Iqbal, 2011). Each of these reasons provides a partial explanation as to why the curriculum exists as it does.

However, the narratives pinpointed moments where the fixed nature of the curriculum was constructed as a safeguard against women exercising their freedom. Deena being told, "You have everything you need ... stick with that" or Nour's administrator mentioning that paper crafts would be "too complicated" indicate a fundamental mistrust of an ECE teacher's professional instincts. Just as ECE itself is intended as a career field that compartmentalizes women's labour (El-Sanabary, 1994; Hamdan, 2005), the ECE curriculum itself constrains their decision making within the classroom in an attempt to "save women from themselves," as the saying goes. Alia's description of the state's vision of competent ECE instruction as "following a checklist" once

again reinforces a dominant cultural message that it is perfectly fine—even beneficial—for men to make decisions on behalf of women.

It is interesting that for the women who were determined to lead and set a positive professional example, the public ECE classroom in Saudi Arabia was viewed as a dead end. Walaa and Sana told stories of being scolded for caring for students. In the narratives of Deena and Nour, administrators explicitly discouraged teachers from attempting to bring in outside materials to enhance classroom engagement. This aspect of educators' lived experiences is rarely found in the literature. From the narratives, the following lived realities emerged: Saudi Arabian ECE teachers working in the public system have no pathways to promotion. From outside of the Saudi Arabian context, one might see the actions undertaken by Walaa, Sana, Deena, and Nour as being commendable, even worthy of greater attention or merit in an attempt to inspire other teachers to behave likewise. However, as described through the narratives, the exosystems of every public school reacted to the attempts to excel with criticism and negativity.

This depicted dynamic brought into greater focus the startling reality of how there are institutional factors that create an educational system in Saudi Arabia where ECE teachers are replaceable. Deena, Nour, and Alia explicitly mentioned the interchangeability of teachers in Saudi Arabian ECE. On one hand, the narratives confirmed a view within the literature that the curriculum is designed to create a “good enough” ECE teacher through checklists and standardization. However, what was more surprising was that the narratives characterized an environment where what many might term “professional autonomy” or “creativity” were largely seen as a deviation from the prescribed teaching methods, and were therefore devalued.

I wish the reader to consider the following: in a system where it is largely impossible for one ECE teacher to be seen as better or more effective than another, how would one teacher be more or less deserving of promotion, or more or less deserving of recognition? The women's personal narratives add additional dimensions to the literature's description of ECE in Saudi Arabia being a low-prestige and low-paying job (Algarni & Male, 2014; Gahwaji, 2013; Ranck, 1999). Systematic refusal of talent and merit creates an environment in which wages can be kept low and demands can be kept high, as female teachers can be swapped out as needed, much like parts of a machine. These factors also help to explain the burnout so prevalent in the field (Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Ranck, 1999).

Additionally, the interviews showed the embodied effects of this subjugation—specifically, when teachers persist in the public ECE system in spite of the absence of clear rewards or when they are driven exclusively by their own sense of professional excellence. For Deena, her narratives showed the toll on her physical health, especially in terms of her articulation that she experienced anxiety and migraines that were not previously a part of her life. Walaa's description of her teaching career as “being under a millstone” reinforced Mahdly's (2001) warning that the Saudi ECE system can become predatory, finding it easier to burn teachers out and replace them than to create a nurturing and fulfilling professional environment. When Walaa rose to a challenge, the administration simply asked for more, increasing demands and expectations to an unsustainable level without further recognition or reward.

The findings in the present study call some aspects of the literature into question. Several authors (Iqbal, 2011; Khan, 2011; Zakari, 2012) criticize the public sector of Saudi Arabia's workforce—which therefore implicates most ECE—as a collection of those who work only for a paycheck. It is therefore crucial to explore the latent power and subordination structures that would help explain such conditions. The narratives help us to see a particularly important dimension here: when there are no conditions for success, and no reward for going above and beyond, what is the use of trying? It may be that where some critics see stagnation in the country's ECE, what is not seen is the number of women who have reached a logical conclusion that it is in their best interest—both professionally and psychologically—to do the bare minimum needed. Narratives like Walaa's and Deena's remind us that the blame may not lie entirely with the teachers, but within the larger exosystems in which they work and live and the entrenched power structures that underpin them.

The factors that conspire against upward promotion make it even more difficult to challenge patriarchal systems, though this is not to say that challenge is absent. More to the point, ECE policy-makers have created a game that women may play, but they cannot often win. They are free to work harder, but they will rarely be rewarded or recognized for their contributions. They are free to seek education and learn new educational theories through college ECE programs, but they will be hard pressed to find a space in which these theories could be tested or applied. They are free to compete with their male peers, but even in cases where their skill sets will not be lacking due to inequalities of the training women receive versus men, jobs will be often denied because of matters associated with *wasta*, that is, “influence” or “clout” that mediates the

distribution of titles and positions of importance as a means of exchanging favours. Bourdieu (1986) has referred to this concept as “social capital.” Indeed, because of gender segregation in Saudi Arabian society, promotion of women within the field of ECE—as in several other fields—raises the inconvenient question of what to do with these women if they advance beyond the positions created for them. The status quo of Saudi Arabian society, as confirmed by the experience of several women surveyed in this study across multiple generations, has been simply to eliminate a pathway forward.

However, additional challenges in changing the patriarchal systems within Saudi Arabian ECE follow from our discussion so far. Women who are not fully aware of all of the various ways through which they are being marginalized (from childhood onward) become accustomed to—or “normalized” into—a second-class status, and are therefore less likely to change it. The greatest injustice of a patriarchal system is its ability to appear as though it is the only option, a hegemony that naturalizes oppression and subjugation.

6.3 Dissent in ECE: Movement into and out of the Curriculum

Throughout the interviews, two general patterns of resistance to patriarchal systems emerged among the female ECE teachers I spoke with. When confronted with the rigidity of the curriculum, many of the women decided to exercise a greater degree of control and autonomy where and when they saw a possibility to do so.

As explained through the literature, several scholars have drawn attention to the degree to which Saudi Arabian educational curriculum is centralized and homogenized (Algarni & Male, 2014; Almunajjed, 2009; Doumato, 2003). I believe this is certainly an accurate assessment. However, what the present narratives further illuminate—and what the Saudi Arabian ECE literature does not—is the reality that no centralized curriculum could ever account for every possibility, moderate every action a teacher could take, or even cut off every avenue that could make a difference; that is, as long as social actors exercise their judgments and reflections.

As evidence of one area where the educators in this study found an opportunity to excel, it was amazing to hear how much of Nour’s, Alia’s, and Walaa’s narratives revolved around the use of art. I will preface this thought by stating it is true that the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education

has attempted to make both art and play a larger component of its ECE, based largely on the works of social psychologists like Vygotsky (1967, 1978) and Piaget (1936, 1962), and because of a desire to adopt certain aspects of quality ECE that have led to successful outcomes in European and North American contexts (Al-Mogbel, 2014; Aljabreen & Lash, 2016; Alquassem et al., 2016; Al Shaer, 2007). Alquassem et al. (2016) mention what the Ministry of Education terms the “self-learning” curriculum, noting that essential components include “self-adopted curriculum expertise, designed to move and play, offering freedom and independence, research and discovery, to achieve the principle of learning to learn” (p. 6). Al Shaer (2007) reports that among Saudi Arabia's modernization and improvements to ECE is the “provision of opportunities [for children] to learn how to care for themselves and develop an independent nature,” in addition to integrating song, storytelling, and play into the classroom (pp. 12–13). These pronouncements would indicate a general movement towards art and play from the standpoint of the Ministry of Education.

However, whether those visions are being realized in Saudi Arabia's ECE classrooms is a different story. In the past, the Saudi Arabian educational system has been criticized for marginalizing art and play as part of education, with school textbooks including “warnings about music, laughter, and singing” following from a belief that the state should “encourage a Muslim to invest all of his being in thoughts of God, and not expend his energies in frivolous activities” (Doumato, 2003, p. 240). Additionally, Tobin, Adair, and Arzubaga (2013) note that it is common for parents who had been educated in a system of “direct and systematic instruction” (p. 39) to assume that their children should be given the same treatment in order to instill a sense of discipline and respect for one's elders. To this end, in their study of Saudi Arabian ECE, Al-Othman, Gregory, Jessel, and Khalil (2015) stated, “Although it is undeniable that the Self-Learning Curriculum has achieved a significant turning point in preschool history in Saudi Arabia, the last modification that was in 2005 has not caused any major shifts,” and noted that building literacy in Saudi Arabian ECE was based on a process of “training” children from a “maturationist view” (p. 2513). Thus, there is a degree of academic and professional disagreement as to whether the vision of ECE provided by the Ministry of Education over the last several years and through its official announcements is being effectively realized. One must consider the inertia that may exist at the levels of family mesosystems or administrative exosystems as possible explanations.

The narratives, however, suggested that art especially represented a “blind spot” in the curriculum where female ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia were eager to exercise a higher degree of freedom and bridge their own views of child-centred learning in an educational context that was transmission-based. From their interpretation of the curriculum, many of the women felt that whatever wasn't explicitly disallowed was a professional power they were able to use. In other words, adding to the curriculum was not the same as modifying it. For that reason, attempts by the participants in this study to bring play, painting, and sculpture into the ECE classroom were deemed successful.

Personally, I was fascinated by how the educators I spoke with used methods of physical and visual expression as a way of furthering lessons in manners consistent with quality ECE approaches outside of Saudi Arabia. Most of the teachers I interviewed were not familiar with the Reggio Emilia philosophy of ECE, or of Loris Malaguzzi and his belief that art was one of “the hundred languages” of children (Edwards et al., 1998; Rinaldi, 1993, 2005). And yet, several of these teachers had independently and intuitively arrived at the idea that art and play allowed children to transcend their age-based limitations as oral or written communicators, and that these moments improved the overall social and emotional health of the ECE classroom.

Introducing these dimensions of arts education was so important that the teachers were willing to fight and struggle for their inclusion into the curriculum they effectively practised. Nour's push for introducing paper crafts placed her in opposition to her administrator, though she persevered nevertheless. Alia's insistence that art and play were important resulted in a confident and successful negotiation with a Ministry of Education official during a compliance meeting. Walaa, already underpaid and overworked, often spent out of her own funds when materials were not approved by the administration. Deena, who faced an extraordinary amount of pressure to conform to the Ministry of Education's ECE curriculum—and found herself anxious about her job security—still found the courage to ask for visual props. All women educators in this study seemed to share Ebtessam's point of view: “Fun creates the need to look further.”

Likewise, emotional connections with the students became the women's own form of resistance. The narratives showed that while the centralized curriculum was oppressive in determining *what* needed to be done—including how long the activities should take and in what order they should be presented—they were often less clear in terms of *how* they could be administered and what

roles teachers could take. Often, these revised roles were directly centred around the social and emotional wellness of students, as when Alia asked herself, “What do students need from *me*?” and in viewing the ultimate goal of classroom activities as structuring a place where students could think critically. Walaa chose to engage with a student struggling with a learning disability because it struck her as being the correct path of action even when the school had no provisions or guidelines for how to provide for such children. When these women raised concerns over “support,” it was clear that the word transcended academic meaning and applied to the emotional foundations students needed to be successful. Especially as Saudi Arabian ECE has faced challenges in the field of offering quality special education programs (Alquraini, 2011; Bazna & Hatab, 2005), the narratives show that the sensitivity required to address students with learning disabilities could occur organically among teachers who integrate compassion and empathy into the classroom. As such, the narratives reinforced existing links between successful special education practices and emotional sensitivity on the part of the classroom teacher towards fostering understanding and inclusiveness (Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008; Wiener & Tardif, 2004).

Deena and Nour both explicitly talked about the need to balance an explicit role expectation as an efficient director of classroom activity with fairness and sensitivity. Deena's description of circle time as a moment requiring a hard “no talking” rule unless called upon came with the awareness that children who did not raise their hand had to be silenced or ignored, which created a sense of unease. Deena worried about “losing control,” but wanted to be flexible. Nour's work repeatedly lead her back to her journal, which raised larger questions about whether her classroom power was used not only efficiently, but *beneficially* for the children, encouraging their discussion and engagement rather than simply creating order.

The commonality behind these moments is that while the Saudi Arabian ECE teachers practising in the public sphere had clear expectations of *what* to do, each of these women working in the direct oversight of the Ministry of Education found it necessary to create their own framework of *why* the lessons were important and in what *context* the roles and information would be administered. Time and time again, I found that the role they created was a negotiation between the concept of what an ECE teacher should be doing, from a centralized or administrative point of view, and their own ideas of what a teacher should be doing, by being present in the classroom in a particular way.

However, in this study I also found that several women I talked with found that their journeys led them out of the Saudi Arabian public ECE system rather than remaining within it. Two of the women, Nour and Walaa, became so explicitly discouraged by their experiences that they ended their careers as classroom teachers. Nour's descriptions of her final conflict with the administration over her refusal to cover her face outside the classroom allows one to see the unnecessary degree of micromanagement of a teacher's professional life that can occur, as well as the lack of recourse teachers have to address these moments. Walaa's movement away from the classroom occurred due to countless years of toil—the years she described spending “under a millstone”—only to be told that she was “just a teacher.” Her quest was motivated by a desire that, having additional education, someone would “have to listen to [her].” These women considered their environment as a place of oppression and silencing. Faced with the decision of staying in an educational context that was not receptive to their needs or leaving, they chose to leave.

For three of the six women I interviewed, the decisions about how to build a career in ECE led to what could be deemed “non-traditional” occupational pathways in Saudi Arabia, made possible by a labour market expanded by entrepreneurship. Walaa found herself in charge of a magazine dedicated to the needs of teachers and mothers; Ebtesam's post-college career led her to establish an afterschool literacy centre; and Alia decided to found her own Montessori school. These moments of the narrative join an emerging body of research that suggests women are finding more personal freedom by becoming their own bosses (Danish & Smith, 2012; Hamdan, 2005).

In the literature, some authors warned that entrepreneurship was not a foolproof way to escape patriarchal oppression, especially considering that male gatekeepers still often provided regulatory oversight and were a source of funding for women (Chamlou, 2008; Forster, 2017). Within the narratives, however, none of the three entrepreneurs detailed moments of conflict with these power-holders, if they did exist as a factor in their current work. However, what may also be likely is that given the lack of male participation in Saudi Arabia's ECE program, there may simply be few male stakeholders with a frame of reference to judge the work of these women, allowing them to operate their businesses with relative autonomy.

As opportunities continue to expand in Saudi Arabian ECE with respect to the private and secondary education markets, the government will have yet another factor to consider when it comes to retaining quality classroom teachers, especially those wishing to retain their passion for teaching. It was easy for me to imagine a teacher like Deena one day becoming a part of Alia's school or Ebtesam's learning centre, bringing her enthusiasm to an environment where it would be likely rewarded and where her professional skills could be developed as opposed to marginalized. Dimensions of pay, autonomy, and career satisfaction must be addressed by the Ministry of Education if it wishes to maximize its efforts to make Saudi Arabia's ECE comparable in quality to that seen in ECE in other developed nations.

Furthermore, the migration out of the ECE classroom and into private markets (such as afterschool programs) has larger ramifications for the country's educational context. On one hand, one should be thankful that these women are finding hope, fulfillment, and success as these avenues become more prevalent and visible in Saudi Arabian society. However, the flow of experience and passion out of the public ECE classroom is troubling, as it may reinforce the notion of Saudi Arabian ECE as a low-quality or low-prestige field of occupation. As a thought experiment, if we imagine that all of the good teachers leave for more promising experiences, who would be left within the ECE classroom? If the nation's ECE classrooms are filled with those who entered the profession by default, this increases the need for a centralized curriculum that would compensate for that, thus re-entrenching alienation and furthering control.

Here, I wish the reader to note how a vicious cycle is operating in Saudi Arabia's ECE. As curriculum is restrictive and takes away the freedom of educators, those who are bothered by these trends will be at the highest risk of exit. While the intent of centralized ECE curriculum within Saudi Arabia is to create an environment of greater accountability and enhanced learning outcomes, the paradox is that a restrictive curriculum will *reduce* the level of professionalism among the targeted pool of educators. As the level of professionalism and competency drops, the only solution is a yet more restrictive curriculum that leaves even fewer decisions in the hands of ECE teachers. As long as the preparation of ECE teachers is based on the perception that they are deficient rather than capable, it is my opinion that Saudi Arabia's ECE teachers will face uphill challenges to locate themselves within spaces that allow them to forge viable notions of quality and professionalism.

6.4 Visions of Success in Saudi Arabian ECE

While I found Doumato's (1999, 2000, 2003) visions of Saudi Arabian educational systems to be enlightening, ultimately the narratives show that even in public settings operating directly under the oversight of the Ministry of Education, patriarchal systems are not absolute. Saudi Arabia's culture is not monolithic and teachers are not all working towards the state's most conservative conceptions of ECE. Simply put, despite everything, and against all odds, all of the six teachers interviewed developed their own personal philosophies and pedagogies that were propelled by their own conceptions of children's needs, rights, and achievement levels. Further, these conceptions were far more progressive than what one might conclude from the literature directed at Saudi Arabian ECE as a whole. While interviewing six ECE educators necessarily captures a narrow segment of experienced possibilities, it nonetheless allows me to argue that there are indications—which would need to be further researched—that some ECE teachers are bringing their agency to bear on what they seek to work towards and where they find success in their professional roles.

First and foremost, as a potential horizon of possibility, the narratives do illustrate that the Saudi Arabian ECE classroom has the *potential* to be child-centred in spite of patriarchal control and a centralized curriculum. Where Saudi Arabian ECE is often focused on the content and manner of direct instruction, most of the teachers seemed to share Ebtesam's point of view: that “teaching is all about answering questions.” Similar statements were observed from Deena, Alia, Nour, and Walaa, and even Sana, who tended to represent the most conservative views of parent-student interaction. As Sana stated, “When a teacher believes that a child isn't capable, all of the education in the classroom will be below that child's level of learning.” Simply put, none of the women I interviewed had a vision of the student in the ECE classroom as incapable or deficient, or still, as a mere receptacle of information and skills, an idea that has been critiqued by Paulo Freire (2000) in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Every teacher articulated through her narratives that a tremendous educational disservice would be done if they were to treat every child as identical, or if they were to administer a classroom without regard for developing a student's critical thinking skills or without an attempt to dig deeper into their underlying thought processes.

Furthermore, it was surprising to see how the female ECE educators I spoke with explicitly articulated a vision of the classroom and students as a site of professional development. A majority noted that their students were not simply a burden associated with the job. Rather, they pointed out that their students were stakeholders in the educational process that constantly showed the teachers where they could improve. Alia's statement that children "are there to remind you of what you teach them or what they've been taught" was powerful to me in that regard, as it allowed both of us to re-conceptualize the ECE classroom as a reflection of a teacher's effectiveness. In that sense, the children served as a mirror that allowed teachers to see where they have been successful or where they could stand to improve. As such, the narratives showed that for the Saudi Arabian ECE teachers themselves, true knowledge was not dictated by the curriculum, but by the constant processes of self-reflection and inquiry with respect to one's professional practice, made possible by interacting with the children being educated. Even in an educational context frequently criticized for a lack of professional development, the women educators I talked with looked to their students when they wished to become more compassionate and effective educators. Across the narratives, the metric of success or failure came not from standardized test scores or administrative feedback, but from whether these educators felt they were creating effective spaces for their students' learning, and whether they were rising to the professional challenges that their students were indirectly setting for them. Clearly, the intellectual and professional potential is there. The question remains whether further studies could inquire into this potential within wider contexts of practice in Saudi Arabia.

Of particular importance were the narratives showing the Saudi Arabian ECE classroom to be an environment where citizenship could be built—not according to the wishes of a centralized decision-making body, but according to the female ECE teachers' own social and cultural sensibilities. This said, over this specific point, I was fascinated by the split I found between Sana, Deena, and Alia on the one hand, and Walaa, Nour, and Ebtesam on the other. In the case of the first three, each felt that ECE was an important mechanism for being able to shape the next generation of Saudi Arabian citizens, including their value systems and the patterns of interaction they would have with their peers. However, in the case of the latter three women, their sense of a child's rights as a full human being was so strong that they did not feel comfortable with the notion of *telling* a child the kind of person they should become. This split, however, did not emerge across lines of age, social status, or educational level. I can only

attribute it to the diversity of opinions and to ideological differences among women. I also recognize that, within the limitations of my study, this aspect of citizenship education, and its correlatives, would require a more sustained and comprehensive study. This said, it was interesting to observe how each educator saw her own morals and ethics as a guiding light for classroom activities. The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education sees the curriculum as the best way to develop new generations of citizens, and much time and energy is spent attempting to monitor the curriculum to ensure that it is consistent with the political values of the state. However, for the teachers who actually administer this curriculum, and find themselves engaged in various ECE markets, the curriculum is the last thing on their minds when it comes to the larger role of developing the horizons of their students. In terms of the question “How can I care for a future generation of Saudi Arabians?” half of the women chose to make their own values and world views an inseparable part of their classrooms, and the other half simply could not see a way where their role as a classroom teacher could provide direct moral instruction. Instead, they worked to structure lessons and activities in such a way that children could engage with issues of social justice and morality in a more democratic manner. More to the point: interestingly, or perhaps paradoxically, none of the teachers looked to the curriculum or administration when it came to helping their students become moral, caring human beings. This was a component of a teacher's role that appeared too big and too important to entrust to a centralized decision maker. As such, I felt that this was one of the strongest facets of success or failure for the Saudi Arabian ECE teachers I spoke with: to ask the question, “Did my work make for healthier, happier, and more conscientious children?”

I wish to reiterate something I have mentioned previously: I cannot make the claim that every ECE teacher in Saudi Arabia is as driven and insightful as the six women I spoke with. It may very well be possible that a high percentage of the country's ECE teachers are more than willing to defer to the curriculum and to their administrators in all matters of classroom activity and devote no thought to the questions of “why” and “in what manner” when it comes to teaching an externally authored curriculum. However, I very much hope that the collected narratives—composed and analyzed along the lines suggested by Bateson (2007)—help to disprove an idea of the Saudi Arabian ECE teacher as entirely incapable and disinterested, and rather help the reader to consider the wider contexts in which they operate and live. These six women were as passionate, insightful, and considerate as any colleague I have encountered in North American

educational settings. As a citizen of Saudi Arabia I can only hope that future generations of ECE teachers will be as committed to their journeys as these six women have been.

6.5 Connections to Bronfenbrenner's Theoretical Framework

One of the constant challenges to Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) work has been addressing the question of where it can be applied and whether it can provide benefit to certain contexts under study (Tudge et al., 2007). In chapter 3, I theorized that Bronfenbrenner would be able to shed light on the findings. At this point in my study, I am better prepared to present evidence of why I think this is the case.

To borrow a phrase from Bateson (2007) that had powerful implications in my research, "A composite life poses the recurring riddle of what the parts have in common" (p. 15). Ecological systems theory gives researchers—particularly those working with a methodology inspired by narrative inquiry—an excellent way to break a system of relational interactions into pieces that bring similarities into sharper focus. In this dissertation, many of the insights were arrived at by my adoption of an ecological systems perspective, while remaining mindful of my own position within these systems, and the positions of the six participants.

For example, in exploring microsystems, I asked myself, "What has been common across the home lives of these women?" or "What commonalities exist from classroom to classroom in terms of the dynamics these teachers have with their students?" Examining Saudi Arabia's chronosystem lead to questions like, "Is the practice context in Saudi Arabian ECE substantially different now in terms of gender dynamics than it was twenty or thirty years ago?" In relation to these questions, I found Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) tremendously useful in terms of being able to keep the topic in question from becoming too large at any one time, and later in my research, ecological systems theory was a tremendous benefit in helping "compose" and analyze the data into larger thematic pathways, as suggested by Bateson (2007).

I generally agree with Darling (2007) in that Bronfenbrenner is often misunderstood and misread. There is a misconception that Bronfenbrenner's theory attempts to place people "in the center of the circles" (Darling, 2007, p. 203), whereby each person is looked at as a being that is only the sum of the influences that impose upon them. Darling argues that Bronfenbrenner

actually allows us to look for the interaction between that individual and the various systems. Here, this point helped me consider mesosystem-based interactions—involving the ECE women educators and the experienced realities in which they were positioned—in relation to professional achievement. I noticed that the lack of ability of each teacher to directly change the exosystem surrounding her represented a personal and professional “problem.” Again, the use of Bronfenbrenner in this context was not at all meant to be reductive to the individuals and their agency as a whole. However, it did help to better pinpoint commonalities between, for example, areas where the female ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia struggled, or among moments where the teachers found personal and professional fulfillment.

6.6 Thoughts on the Nature of Power in Saudi Arabian ECE

I set out in this study to better understand the contexts in which the women who form the backbone of Saudi Arabian ECE live and work. After the first round of interviews, there was a period in which feelings of disappointment emerged in me, as the more I explored the contexts of Saudi Arabian ECE, the more patriarchy was rendered visible. In thinking about relations of power, I was focused on what one might term classical definitions. Weber (1978) defined power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will” (p. 53). Dahl’s (1957) views of power leaned heavily on the presence of coercion as a way of seeing who held control. He writes, “[Person] A has power over [person] B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (pp. 202–203). Moments of powerlessness were repeatedly and bleakly characterized across the narratives. These were stories of women being denied the ability to choose their own path, of being forced to teach a curriculum in such a way that they believed their students’ own mental and emotional health was negatively affected, and stories of women being told that their aspirations were of little importance. In a small way, their sorrows became my sorrows.

These definitions, however, represent only one aspect of power that philosopher Amy Allen (1998) characterizes as “power over”—that is, the ability of one set of actors to *dominate* another group as a result of a more favoured status. I learned that for those who look only at this aspect of power, it is hard to escape a consistent message: as Allen describes, “To be masculine is to be free, whereas to be feminine is to be subjected” (p. 23). Indeed, the narratives brought me back to this point time and time again. Over time, they forced me to

confront the patriarchal systems that reinforced dominance over women who devoted their lives to some aspect of Saudi Arabian ECE.

Through the development of this thesis, I am happy to say that I began to see a multiplicity of other forms of power. To borrow Allen's terminology, while we can fairly categorize "power over" others as a conception of power, we can also find power in "power with" others and "power to" achieve what we wish in spite of systemic difficulty. As Allen (1998) writes,

A one-sided approach renders each conception of power incapable of making sense of the complex and multifarious power relations in which women find themselves, wherein they can both be dominated and empowered at the same time and in the context of the same norm, institution, or practice. (p. 31)

In other words, a true understanding of the power that women hold isn't based solely on examining where they are dominated in their social, professional, and political lives, but to look at power more broadly and from a relational perspective.

Evidenced just as strongly in the narratives were stories of "power with." Sana's path as an educator was built around attempting to develop new generations of teachers just as her "angel teacher" had inspired her. Alia's professional mission was built around giving her teachers the respect and positive reinforcement she knew was absent in the field. Walaa devoted herself to the education of mothers and teachers, giving to them the resources she felt she had lacked. Ebtesam spoke repeatedly of the concerns she had in her later professional life of wanting to stay in her position to build and maintain an effective community of educators, even when moving to a different school would have rewarded her with better pay. These moments of the narratives revealed women finding power as part of larger associations. Each of these educators were proud to know that their efforts were bringing women together and helping them find pathways that would uplift their spirits, hopefully leading them in time to personal and professional success.

Additionally, the narratives reinforced Allen's (1998) conception of "power to": the ability to achieve one's goals *in spite of* systemic oppression. Even in moments of the narratives where systemic oppression seemed at its highest, the women told stories of struggle and perseverance. To name but a few examples, Deena refused to fully compromise her visions of essential classroom care, Walaa struggled to provide for the special needs of her students, and

Alia refused to let bureaucratic concerns and regulatory inconsistencies stop her from opening her own school. Each of these women composed her life in a social and professional context where patriarchal systems of dominance made themselves extremely visible. However, while the presence of such systems provided complications and forced compromises, it did not completely preclude these women from accomplishing short and long-term goals. It would be a mistake to consider the extent of Saudi Arabia's patriarchy and its ramifications into systems of ECE and claim that these women must necessarily be powerless at an individual level.

Furthermore, the conception of “power to” extends to a range of gifts possessed by women. I do not wish to essentialize here: men can be extremely capable nurturers, emotionally sensitive to the needs of others, and interested in the care of children. I know many fathers in Saudi Arabia who are active and present in the lives of their children. However, these dimensions are not widely considered masculine domains within the social and political contexts of Saudi Arabian society. “Power to” for women often involves finding strengths in the dimensions of mothering, nurturing, and empowering, and leveraging these strengths to achieve political ends (Held, 1993; Ruddick, 1989).

Ultimately, Allen (1998) writes that “[d]ifferences between men and women are not in themselves problematic. Instead, what is problematic are the costs and benefits unjustly attached to those differences” (p. 23). I focus on Allen's use of the word “unjustly,” as it invites us to examine what our goal is in exploring issues of gender where Saudi Arabian ECE is concerned. I have no interest in living in a society where differences between men and women are eliminated. Instead, I am more interested in uncovering where inequities exist between the opportunities men and women have to make progress towards a life of their own choosing. Explorations of power invite more critical questions of what it looks like to exert power, and whether it is in the service of some larger goal—for example, the betterment of student outcomes as opposed to the reinforcement of political favouritism. In the context of this study, it is my hope that the reader sees the women engaged in Saudi Arabian ECE in a somewhat paradoxical manner: as actors often constrained in the exercise of their power, but who both together and independently exercise that power every day in classrooms all across the country. The narratives suggest that to look at them only as constantly marginalized or limitless in what they can achieve misrepresents the complexity of their personal and professional selves.

6.7 Significance of the Study, Revisited

At the conclusion of the present study, I stand more convinced to argue the point that this research is significant primarily because it gives voice to a population of Saudi Arabian ECE educators that I—and other academics—have found fascinating. However, I set out on this study with the goal of allowing these women to speak for themselves. Too frequently, they exist in a socio-political culture where, both as females and as professionals, they are already “spoken for.”

Even many female scholars, perhaps in an attempt to maintain scientific objectivity, have explained the challenges and burdensome expectations placed on female Saudi Arabian ECE teachers from a bird's-eye view, explaining general circumstances and phenomena without ever allowing the reader to see what this looks like through the eyes of the women themselves and in their specific practice contexts. To me, this is troubling because it once again removes the voice of Saudi women from a political space where they already struggle to be heard. As a remedy, Sandra Harding (1993) argues for the value of “an apparent contradiction in terms—socially situated knowledge” (p. 50). That is, she urges researchers in the social sciences to take a middle ground between an objectivity that becomes objectifying and a description of personal experience that lacks academic strength. This “strong objectivity,” as Harding terms it “[starts] from marginalized lives” (p.73) in an effort to maximize understanding and scientific value. This study has been undertaken in such a manner. Conducting a long-form series of interviews where the goal was to “co-compose” a series of narratives helped to link the contexts of Saudi Arabia's ECE systems and policy with real women, real experiences, and real emotions.

As such, this study is one of the few that I am aware of that attempts to bridge the general subject of Saudi Arabian ECE with the specific focus placed on what one might term “the whole” teacher. The work of women in Saudi Arabian ECE has ramifications on their emotional health, physical well-being, family roles, professional development, and civic engagement that can become lost in studies of state-level politics and policy. In my opinion, the composed narratives in this study provide a richer and fuller understanding of Saudi Arabian ECE as a complex set of embodied, and politically and socially situated, lived experiences.

By this point of the work, I am sure that the reader is aware that I have intended the work to be descriptive and analytic rather than prescriptive. However, I feel it would nevertheless be useful to pose a few recommendations aimed at the level of policy on the basis of insights gained through the literature and through the exploration of the narratives that were shared with me by the female Saudi Arabian ECE professionals who participated in this study.

First, I would suggest that ECE policy-makers within Saudi Arabia take more purposeful steps to include the voices of women—especially those with firsthand experience teaching ECE in the nation's classrooms—when decisions about curriculum are made. The narratives in this paper challenge prevailing notions that women are ill-equipped to analyze the effects of current and proposed policy in terms of educational outcomes. Female experiences in the ECE classroom and in working directly with children should be considered a valuable source of knowledge. Given the connections that “quality” ECE education has with catering to a student's social and emotional well-being, the country's current crop of ECE teachers have much to share when it comes to helping the Ministry of Education evaluate the positives and negatives of its curriculum. Actively soliciting these voices and recruiting women to senior levels of educational policy-making would also provide them with career advancement and aspiration that would allow the most driven women in Saudi Arabian ECE to remain within the public educational sector. Over time, the presence of talented and insightful women at the Ministry of Education would allow for progressively more frequent moments of female success, reducing the bias against hiring these women into senior positions, and thus opening the door wider for greater female participation.

Additionally, as many of the country's women return from studying abroad with advanced degrees that can be used in the service of Saudi Arabia's ECE, policy-makers should incorporate what these women have learned and observed in international contexts in an effort to further bridge the gap between Saudi Arabia's educational outcomes and those observed internationally. In short, Saudi Arabia has seen fit to educate more of its female citizenry than ever before, sending them out into the world in order to learn what they can and develop their passion and professionalism. Now, it is time to trust them and create a place for them in the country's economic and political systems.

I would also argue for the need for expanded mentorship within Saudi Arabian ECE. It is likely that the Ministry of Education would claim that one of its roles is to provide mentorship and career guidance to women entering the field, as would ECE programs through higher education. However, following from Allen (1998), I would argue for a separate series of mentorship organizations that are not chiefly concerned with telling women explicitly what to do within the context of a clear “power over” relationship. Instead, these mentorship opportunities would be most effective if mentors adopted a “power with” focus with a vision of helping female professionals in the ECE sphere come to a place where they see the “power to” opportunities in the environments around them.

For women currently working in the Saudi Arabian ECE system who have reached a point of comfort or satisfaction in their professional careers, I would strongly suggest networking with younger teachers, especially those recent graduates of ECE programs who will be entering their first years of public school teaching. I would encourage younger ECE teachers working in Saudi Arabia to form their own professional networks—or to connect to international ECE organizations—to share challenges, opportunities, and information with one another. For administrators working within Saudi Arabia's ECE system, I would implore them to create environments where feedback can be given and where discussions can be had without a teacher facing professional drawbacks or ramifications. These forums will help administrators working within the country to see the value of their female teaching staff and ways that a greater sense of mission and purpose can be continually re-established. This will also serve the goal of reducing the career turnover that is particularly threatening to providing exceptional ECE. In each case, I would claim that the overall goal through effective mentorship is to create a larger community of practice, where women can work together as colleagues rather than in strictly hierarchical relationships.

Granted, these suggestions are not to be considered all-inclusive and are by no means comprehensive. However, I believe that by addressing greater female representation in matters of policy and with a greater level of personal and professional support among teachers, Saudi Arabia can do much to address some of the largest issues present within its ECE. Positive change is built on a foundation of understanding that the work of ECE teachers matters, that the women themselves matter, and that their experience is an asset that can help us to make better decisions. Over time, the presence (and retention) of talented, educated women in this

dimension of Saudi Arabian society will ideally help us move towards a future citizenry that is truly and equally shaped by the participation of all present citizens.

6.8 Thoughts on the Relational Aspects of EdD Research

This dissertation was completed in partial fulfillment of UBC's Education Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy (EdD). Through this course of study, it was my intent to understand and confront challenges in educational systems as a whole, particularly those within my home country of Saudi Arabia and as they pertained to ECE. At the beginning of this work, I was not fully aware of the various dimensions to which this work would require me to position myself in the research and become an active participant rather than a passive observer.

One of the main insights I gained through this research was to understand how important these issues were to me. Explorations of a child's rights and psychological well-being cemented my awareness that the topic of ECE matters. Pursuing my EdD connected me on a deeper level to the educational and emotional needs of my own children, and allowed me to better see the gravity of why continual improvement and progression of ECE is necessary. Every ECE classroom is composed of children who deserve care, compassion, and the gift of a future. Keeping this thought bright in my mind gave me the drive to return again and again to this work, using my passion for and engagement with the material to dig more deeply.

Additionally, fieldwork of the kind described in this document helped me to visualize what an effective "ecology" of ECE might look like. As has been mentioned before, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) ecological systems theory is above all a framework based on relations. Coupled with Bateson's (2007) understandings of women as beings expected to occupy several competing and conflicting relationships simultaneously, this study has taught me to embrace the complexity inherent in my life and those of my colleagues. As a stakeholder in ECE, seeing the field as a series of interrelated networks has allowed me to more clearly assess what kinds of proposals and negotiations are realistic and attend to the needs of teachers as women, and what kinds of options are reductive—those, for example, that marginalize teachers and fail to anticipate their conflicting needs outside of the classroom.

Furthermore, by having put myself in a position to brainstorm, commiserate, and—most simply—to truly *listen* to my fellow educators, this dissertation has produced numerous personal benefits. I feel that I am a better mother, can be a better advocate for my fellow teachers, know how to be a more supportive parent to my children's teachers, and in the role of a leader, how to make sure that the voices of stakeholders at all levels don't become drowned out by the voices of those who may hold more power or influence.

6.9 Limitations of the Study

To begin, I believe that using the work of Mary Catherine Bateson as a foundation for this research opened up a variety of possibilities not made available through conventional methodologies. Following from the previous section, I believe that scholars who pursue a strain of methodology based on narrative inquiry will be rewarded with research that not only places them in a position to make an original contribution to knowledge, but one that encourages them to find a larger calling that is personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, for me, was strongest in its ability to help me find the voices that had been marginalized in top-down conceptions of various educational ecosystems. In fact, through the research I became aware that I had marginalized *my own* opinion and conceptions of Saudi Arabian ECE; this work served to reaffirm and empower many opinions and thoughts I did not think were initially important or valuable. Within Bateson's approach especially is the knowledge that women's lives are often fragmented and improvised to a degree that is often higher than their male counterparts. Being able to understand this complexity and the negotiations that necessarily take place in many patriarchal systems allowed me to better visualize possibilities rather than simply accept that the ecological systems in which I live and work were set a long time ago.

However, I wish to reiterate that this research was based on creating dialogues among those who were willing to fight for something that was important to them. All of the women in the study, including myself, were united in the fact that we all visualized a system of ECE led by capable and empowered women. I doubt this research would have been as effective among a population that didn't care as much, or didn't have a clearer conception of why our discussions were important to have. Narrative inquiry holds that the lives and negotiations of all participants are keys to greater understanding of a phenomenon being explored. This requires, however, a co-creator who is fascinated with the small, moment-to-moment details of a respondent's

personal life and the curiosity to ask probing questions about small details that could lead to something larger. Narrative inquiry as a methodology is not for those who wish to *only* study a topic. It is not for those who wish to marginalize the human actors involved in a topic in favour of analyzing only the data and facts they generate (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Additionally, I would add that my own conception of narrative inquiry based on the experience of researching and writing this dissertation is as follows: while it was extremely helpful when it came to establishing visions and aspirations of the ecosystem I wished to study, I would argue that this style of research requires a researcher who is also able to rise to the challenge of bridging such “big picture” visions with the often difficult realities of how things are. To certain researchers, it may seem demoralizing to help develop a nuanced and well-considered image of an ideal system, only to be stymied by bureaucratic obstacles or stakeholders unwilling to share power and influence. It is true that narrative inquiry can help the marginalized find a voice, but to this I would add that the concept of “voice” can be difficult to define. Clandinin and Huber (2010) note that one of the values of narrative inquiry comes from exposing differences in views of reality and with linking experience to context, and that good research should highlight differences in epistemological and ontological assumptions. Each of these components, I believe, helps to make one voice distinct from another, and I hope I have been able to make each of the participants' voices come across within this work in a way that is both dynamic and relatable. However, after these voices have been raised, narrative inquiry is less helpful when it comes to providing a straightforward pathway to the wished-for actions and policies illuminated and articulated by the participants. Bringing those visions to light is an effort that extends well beyond the process of narrative inquiry.

6.10 Areas of Future Research

At the conclusion of this study, there are several areas that would be of additional benefit. A very similar study to the kind presented within these pages could be conducted with policy-makers within the country's Ministry of Education, as well as among public school officials who are in frequent contact with those at the Ministry of Education in order to ensure school-wide compliance with the department's rules and regulations. Within this study, the mesosystem that existed among the administration and the Ministry of Education was one that remained unexplored, as was the microsystem of the Ministry of Education itself. This is not to say that

these ecosystems were not fascinating or worthy of academic interest—simply, they were virtually inaccessible to the Saudi Arabian ECE teachers who spoke with me.

A study of how both men and women find themselves in positions in Saudi Arabia where they are responsible for the curriculum itself would be extremely interesting, especially if it were to grant clarity into how this population of Ministry of Education officials makes decisions and what they feel are sources of moral, professional, and social obligation. Understanding their lives and compositions would be useful in helping bridge the gap between their lived experiences and those of the educators featured in this study.

Additionally, I would suggest further research on the constraints that women face in Saudi Arabia as they venture into new avenues of independence and entrepreneurship. My study has hinted that opportunities are indeed expanding within Saudi Arabia for women wishing to explore their full potential through private markets. However, the realities of economic dependence that face Saudi Arabia's female workforce and various systemic issues of gender-based inequality make it so that entrepreneurship will never be a perfect solution to solving issues related to bureaucracy. Further research is warranted to see where these women face challenges in their career path, as well as to see where they can be better supported.

Lastly, I would also recommend further study in relation to the positive mental health of Saudi Arabia's ECE teachers. Among the narratives were many stories of professional burnout, anxiety, and even physical symptoms that became associated with job-related stress. ECE in Saudi Arabia isn't important only because it concerns the health and capability of the country's future generations—the women who work in the nation's ECE classrooms are important as well. I believe that truly understanding what these women go through each day in the pursuit of providing Saudi Arabia's children with quality education would be extremely beneficial, not just as a matter of making life more fulfilling for the teachers themselves, but also in terms of reducing the factors that remove many talented women from the field every year. One of the surest pathways forward to improving the country's ECE is to break the cycle of having some of the best and brightest teachers exit the profession.

6.11 Final Thoughts

In closing, I wish to thank my readers for accompanying me in what has not only been a discovery of a complex educational context, but what has more importantly been a celebration of six women's lives and a journey of self-discovery. The ECE practice sites of Saudi Arabia are indeed very different than the sites that readers in North America may be familiar with, and these differences have powerful ramifications on the country's educational system—as well as on its citizenry as a whole. However, just like anywhere in the world, many of the ECE teachers in Saudi Arabia are focused on improving the opportunities we provide to our children. I hope the lives of the teachers included in this study have made an impact upon you. They certainly have made an impact on me.

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Appendix A: Comparison of Child-Centered ECE Methods & Philosophies

	Reggio Emilia	Montessori	Waldorf	HighScope
Ideological Roots & Views of Child Development	Inspired by Dewey, Bruner, and Vygotsky. Founder Loris Malaguzzi considered Piaget's stages to be influential, but too limiting. Born of a need to build tolerant, empathetic citizens in the aftermath of World War II.	European progressive philosophers, including Rousseau and Itard. Development consists of age-based stages in which children display differences in cognitive ability and human needs.	Created by Austrian scientist Rudolf Steiner, the founder of "Anthroposophy:" knowledge of the true nature of human beings. Proposed that education should bridge the scientific and the spiritual.	American in origin, Influenced by Jean Piaget's phases of cognitive development, as well as John Dewey's philosophies of progressive education.
Image of the Child	The child is powerful and capable. Children are born with the ability to speak "a hundred languages." Children of all ages are social and readily engage with adults and other children in order to extract meaning from the world around them.	Children have a natural need and ability to care for themselves and the environment that surrounds them. Children can and should be trusted to follow these instincts. Children are active and will be prepared to learn if materials and lessons hold their interest.	Children are competent, capable, and active learners. Childhood is an important time of life, and should not be rushed. Children should be given the opportunity to develop at their own pace.	Learning results from the child's pursuit of goals and personal interests. Learning is a byproduct of a child's purposeful engagement with material and from their deliberate thinking about materials.
The Learning Environment	The environment becomes the "Third Teacher." Classroom design is a critical consideration, with attention spent to color and texture. Materials and documentations of past learning activities are displayed at eye level for children to reflect upon.	The ideal classroom should be both beautiful and orderly. Classrooms should be constructed around the needs of children, with freedom of movement being a prime consideration.	A nurturing environment gives children the opportunity to demonstrate strengths and develop their personalities naturally and organically. Effort is taken to keep children in stable cohort groups as they age. Outdoor play and nature walks are common.	The class environment is held both indoors and outdoors, with thematic activity centers designed to allow children the ability to choose the course of their education and daily activity.

Appendix A, continued

	Reggio Emilia	Montessori	Waldorf	HighScope
Classroom Materials	Like the curriculum itself, the classroom material is considered to be “emergent,” and pulled from the lives of the students themselves. The classroom incorporates many found objects and plants in order to bridge the indoor and outdoor worlds. Furniture and play stations encourage collaboration.	Outside classroom materials should be well-considered and purposefully integrated. Only those materials that have a direct affect on the child's development should be included in the classroom. Where possible, children should be provided with the same kinds of tools used by adults.	Materials should be integrated into the classroom in such a way that allows for the exploration of all five senses. Natural objects and props are used to create a warm, inviting space that mirrors the home and encourages play and exploration.	Materials are selected with an eye for creative combinations and flexible approaches; children are encouraged to combine materials from multiple learning areas / activity centers.
Role of art / play	Art and play are considered to be part of a child's “hundred languages” and are invaluable in terms of allowing children forms of non-verbal self-expression and ways to productively contribute to the classroom.	Present, but controlled. Art materials are provided for exploration and as aids to specific learning objectives. Children are restricted from playing with materials that have not been introduced. “Fantasy play” is discouraged.	A critical aspect of the educational approach, as play allows children to make an emotional and personal connection with the lessons, stories, and materials presented.	Play is viewed as a form of active, participatory learning that is essential to human growth and development. Time is devoted during the school day to free play.
Role of Teacher	Teachers learn alongside children, co-constructing knowledge and reflecting critically about their pedagogy and classroom practices, often through purposeful documentation of class activity and student work. Teachers are more akin to guides or facilitators rather than direct instructors.	Montessori asserts that adults too quickly intervene in the lives of children. Teachers are trained to give children more opportunities to solve problems for themselves and exercise independence in the classroom. Teachers are to spend more time observing than instructing.	Teachers present material for children that serves as a foundation for additional reflection and creative elaboration through art and play. Much attention is spent on lessons and stories that stress listening and oral memory. Teachers are considered to be moral leaders.	Adults first scaffold and reinforce a child's knowledge, then challenge the child's problem solving, reasoning, and creativity. Adult teachers are responsible for finding age-appropriate classroom materials.

Appendix A, continued

	Reggio Emilia	Montessori	Waldorf	HighScope
Role of the Family	Reggio views the classroom as being connected to a larger sense of community that includes the child's home and the surrounding society. Parents are held in high respect, and viewed as the "first" teacher of any child in the class.	Parents are highly encouraged to continue to provide resources and opportunities for learning outside of the classroom. Parents are an essential part of a larger community of learning that allows the child to develop socially and emotionally.	Parents and teachers work together to ensure successful development outcomes. Parents are encouraged and/or required to attend evenings that share classroom activities and allow for parents to better understand pedagogy and classroom activities.	Parents are encouraged to participate in their children's education through group meetings; teachers are encouraged to speak with parents and make in-home visits to better learn about the families and daily lives of their students.
Curriculum	Curriculum is emergent, without prescribed scope or sequence of presentation. Long-term, open-ended, and collaborative projects form the foundation of most classroom activity.	Routines are kept at a minimum. New curriculum is presented through the form of teacher demonstrations which invite participation. Curriculum allows for teacher flexibility, but is structured and sequenced.	Based on a cyclical schedule of classroom work and activities. Activities are sequenced and structured, but do not have a textbook-based component.	Structured in order to target "Key Development Indicator" (KDI) content areas. For example, "mathematics," or "physical development and health."
Assessment methods	An educator's documentation of class activity also serves as a record of student performance and achievement, allowing for additional dialogue about the development of the student in the ECE classroom.	Montessori does not use any system of grading or systems of rewards or punishments. Whole-child development across dimensions of happiness, kindness, work habits, and overall maturity are considered more important than quiz or test grades. A student's failure to thrive is attributable to a teacher not providing adequate material to foster that student's learning.	Performance-based, but without any form of standardized testing. Teachers assess students in terms of their ability to successfully draw upon academic tools. Performance data is collected, but not used to score or rank students; the data provide feedback on the success of classroom activities and better facilitate classroom learning and development.	A "Child Observation Record" (COR) is created by the classroom teacher for each KDI, consisting of anecdotes and summaries of how children have engaged in play and with one another.

(Adapted from Edwards, 2002; French, 2012; Lillard, 2013; Mooney, 2000; Morrison, 2004; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2013).

Appendix B: Interview Data

Alias	Date of Interview 1	Duration of Interview 1	Date of Interview 2	Duration of Interview 2
Deena	December 12, 2015	53 min	December 13, 2015	1 hr, 7 min
Nour	December 19, 2015	1 hr, 1 min	January 11, 2016	1 hr, 12 min
Alia	March 16, 2016	1 hr, 57 min	March 24, 2016	1 hr, 24 min
Walaa	March 26, 2016	1 hr, 32 min	April 1, 2016	43 min
Sana	June 20, 2016	46 min	July 18, 2016	1hr, 16 min
Ebtesam	June 6, 2016	1 hr, 30 min	July 20, 2016	1hr, 45 min

Appendix C: Examples of Interview Questions

- When did you decide to become a teacher? What moment in your life convinced you that this was what you wanted to pursue?
- How would you define childhood? Was there a particular moment that you knew that your own childhood had come to an end or transitioned to something new?
- What were your own memories of school? Was it a positive experience or a negative experience? What do you remember most vividly about your early education?
- Why do you think there are so many women in the field of ECE? Can you think of a particular incident when your status as a woman helped you in the classroom or as a professional? Have there been moments that have shown you where women can succeed in ways that are unique from men?
- How likely do you think that your current work environment (and Saudi Arabian ECE in general) could change or reform? Have you or a colleague tried to reform or change your current system at some point in the past? If so, when, and what were the results?
- How capable do you feel that children are as participants in the direction of their own learning? Can you recall a time that you extended a greater amount of freedom to a child than you normally would have? If so, what happened?
- What do you think of educational approaches that place the teacher in the role of a “facilitator” rather than a direct authority figure? What do you think this would look like in your current practice environment? Where would it be successful? Where would it encounter difficulty?
- What kinds of professional development do you think that teachers should be doing? When was the last time that you self-consciously decided to improve your classroom skills, and what did you do?
- Do you experience role strain in your current position? If so, are there contradictory positions and actions you feel you must account for? Can you walk me through a professional or classroom dilemma that required you to balance two different sets of expectations?
- How would you define good citizenship? Can early childhood education effectively teach children about citizenship? Could a classroom be structured in a way to make this an educational goal? If so, how?
- Are you familiar with the Reggio Emilia concept of documentation? What kinds of work in your classroom have you documented? What else do you feel would be worth documenting?
- The “Emergent Curriculum” is a core component of Reggio Emilia. Are you familiar with this concept? Have you built lessons around something novel or topical in a student’s life? If so, what has been your experience? In your practice environment, what would be the

challenges of doing this with every lesson?

- In a philosophical sense, do you feel that knowledge is something that is constructed or something that exists in a perfect form? Can you recall a moment where a child in the classroom taught you something or re-framed your understanding of a phenomenon?
- How does your home life intersect with your professional life as an ECE teacher? When was the last time you can remember that you had to negotiate the demands of both worlds? What decisions did you make?
- What are your core values as a teacher? From what areas of your life would you say that these values come from? How is your unique cultural background present in the place of learning?
- What rules and regulations are present in your work environment that set limits on the way that you teach or what you can teach? Have you or a colleague deviated from those rules? If so, what were the results? If not, what do you feel would happen if a rule were to be broken?
- What is your relationship with the administration? Do you feel supported, underappreciated, or somewhere in between? Is there a story that you can tell that best represents the relationship you have with the person you consider a boss?
- How do you think teachers are represented in Saudi Arabia? What was the last conversation you had with someone outside of education about teaching or ECE? What did you talk about?
- What social scientists or child psychologists have been influential to you? How do you see their insights or recommendations translated into your ECE classroom?
- Is it a good time to be an ECE teacher in Saudi Arabia? What moments in your life inform that answer?
- What kinds of barriers or limitations should a teacher set in terms of the relationship she has with her students? What moments in your life contributed to establishing them or showed that they were necessary?
- What do you feel is the role of art and play in the classroom? If these are important elements of a classroom, how do you make space for them? How do you decide how much is necessary and how much is counterproductive?
- What are some of your current professional worries? How have you chosen to deal with them, or how would you suggest someone in the same position handle them?
- How would you define “culture?” What are ways that the culture of Saudi Arabia is visible within your place of learning?

- What is an “ideal” classroom? What does it look like? If another ECE teacher wanted to take steps to get closer to that vision, what would she need to do? What supports would she need?