Exploring Saudi Teachers' Views on the Assessment Approach of Learning Stories in Saudi Arabia's Classroom Settings

Prepare

Dr. Shatha Abdullah Mosaad Alfayez

Assistance Professor at the Department of Early Childhood, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia

Email: salfayez@ksu.edu.sa

Volume (88), Issue (4), October 2022

Abstract

Early childhood education has become a focus of government policy across the world. Part of the present increased interest in early childhood education has been a focus on curriculum frameworks and socio/cultural methods of assessment. Currently, New Zealand has emerged as a world leader in early childhood education, and observation and assessment techniques, developed in New Zealand, have become an international focus of research and pedagogic practice. One exemplar practice to have emerged from research in New Zealand is the assessment of children's learning called Learning Stories. This present research explored the introduction of Learning Stories into Saudi Arabia and investigated the potential of Learning Stories as an assessment tool for early childhood practitioners in the context of Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: early childhood; Learning Stories; observation; assessment; Saudi Arabia

تصورات المعلمين السعوديين حول نهج التقييم لقصص التعلم بالمملكة العربية السعودية

د/ شذى عبدالله مساعد الفايز، أستاذ مساعد بقسم الطفولة المبكرة، جامعة الملك سعود، المملكة العربية السعودية.

المستخلص

أصبح التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة محط اهتمام السياسات الحكومية في جميع أنحاء العالم، وقد انصب التركيز في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة على أطر المناهج وطرق التقييم الاجتماعية/الثقافية المتبعة، وقد برزت نيوزيلندا حاليًا كتجربة عالمية رائدة في تعليم الطفولة المبكرة، وأصبحت تقنيات المراقبة والتقييم التي تم تطويرها في نيوزيلندا، محورًا دوليًا للبحث والممارسة التربوية، وتمثلت إحدى الممارسات النموذجية التي ظهرت من البحث في نيوزيلندا في تقييم تعلم الأطفال المسمى "قصص التعلم". ومن ثم، عمد البحث الحالي إلى استقصاء سبل توظيف قصص التعلم في المملكة العربية السعودية وجدوى الاعتماد عليها كأداة تقييم لممارسي الطفولة المبكرة في سياق المملكة العربية السعودية

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطفولة المبكرة، قصص التعلم، الملاحظة، التقييم، المملكة العربية السعودية.

Introduction

Preschool education in Saudi Arabia has a more recent history than that of public education in Saudi Arabia. It is non-formal and includes day-care centres, nurseries, and preschool centres. There has been concern that different training backgrounds have created teachers with vastly different understandings of their role, children's needs, and the objectives of the centres in which they work. Several research studies investigated the issue of preschool teachers' education and training and concluded that there is a massive need for in-service training resources and programs for preschool teachers (Al-Ameel, 2002; Al-Noaim, 1996; Mahdly, 2001). In Saudi Arabia the first goal of early childhood education is to celebrate the nature of the children and encourage their development in all domains (cognitive, physical, social and emotional). The education system in the last few years has been trying to shift the curriculum and teaching practices from traditional methods—which are teacher-centred and non-interactive—to newer more child-centred practices. The present research was designed to help address Saudi Arabia's issues in regard to preschool teacher quality by developing in-service material for teachers so they can share an understanding of their role and children's needs and to prepare new students of early childhood teaching to be professionally ready, on graduation, to work with children. This study also supports the Saudi government's aims of shifting the curriculum and teaching practices from traditional methods to newer ones (Al-Ameel, 2002). This study has examined preschool in-service teachers' experiences in implementing teaching and learning strategies in Australia and observed how these strategies, namely Learning Stories, have been adapted as new approaches in Saudi Arabia. I believe this study has the potential to contribute to the enhancement of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia and has implications for the knowledge economy of Saudi Arabia.

The importance of early childhood development has been noted by economists, behavioural scientists, educators, neuroscientists, and biologists. For example, Young (2002) said that the economist, Fogel, who received the Nobel Prize for economics

in 1993, was a strong proponent of quality early childhood development because of its major impact on quality of life and health and education outcomes. Young also believes that early childhood education could affect children's learning, particularly their literacy and mathematics skills. Early childhood education is an important stage in the child's development. It gives the child the opportunity to engage in play groups and interact with other children and teachers. These experiences help the child to develop social skills and can even help to deal with some challenging behaviours. For example, it is common for preschool children to display aggressive behaviours. However, these challenging behaviours tend to disappear in the years between preschool and elementary school as children are socialised by parents, teachers and other children (Haapasalo & Tremblay, 1994).

Internationally, curricula for early childhood are quite new (Hewes, 2005). Ten years ago curricula for preschool only existed in a few countries, though guidelines have been in place since Froebel's time in the 1840s (Hewes, 2005). However, since 2009 early childhood guidelines had become more common. Curricula for early childhood education are also varied in their goals, objectives and assessment (Oberheumer, 2005). There are a number of national programs such as the Swedish (Lpfö) curriculum and the New Zealand (Te Whäriki) framework as well as preschool programs such as the American High/Scope and the Italian Reggio Emilia approach (Samuelsson, Sheridan & Williams, 2006). The most noticeable feature of all these curricula is that the child is described as an active child who is communicative and interested in the surrounding world. The High/Scope program is based on Piaget's theory about the structure of the intellect and the gradual change related to the age of the child (Rye, Smebye, &Hundeide, 1987). Children create their own knowledge within a combination of biological development and social experiences and teachers are responsible for supporting children through their development. In the Reggio Emilia programs the child is seen as competent, active and a critical member of the group. There is an emphasis on the child's rights rather than their needs (Samuelsson et al., 2006).

Children are involved in the educational process and they question and develop theories and meaning in interplay with the surrounding world in a continuous process (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). The Reggio Emilia philosophy is based upon the following principles:

- children must be in charge of the direction of their learning
- children will learn through experiences of touching, moving, listening, seeing, and hearing
- children will interact with other children and with material items
- children must have ways and opportunities to express themselves (Cadwell, 2002).

The Swedish curriculum emphasises that the responsibility of preschool is to give children the opportunity to develop (Samuelsson et al., 2006). The Te Whäriki program is:

> … influenced by the Māori human development theory and ideology. This means a deeper respect for the life force of the universe, where everything is interconnected, and a learning theory related to a Vygotskyan perspective with the social context as forceful indicator for learning and development. (Samuelsson et al., 2006, p. 16)

All these curricula are agreed on the importance of the parents' voice; and this has been recognised since the time of Froebel (Hewes, 2001). The Reggio Emilia pedagogy says that children must know the power of their own thoughts and how they can affect their reality. This reflects a socially constructive perspective which includes parents. Action and group socialisation are important (Rinaldi, 1993). In the Swedish curriculum document we can see a qualitative change in the relationship between parents and early childhood education. In 2009 we can see parental participation as making an equal contribution to children's learning and development (Pramling-Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2004). In New Zealand the link between the family and preschool has been very strong. This link became one of the bases in New Zealand's first

national early childhood curriculum, Te Whäriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education (NZMOE), 1996).

Early childhood education has become one of the most important education areas to study. Part of the present increased interest in early childhood education has been a focus on curriculum frameworks and sociocultural methods of assessment. Currently, New Zealand is a world leader in early childhood education. Many studies and much research has established the importance of different areas of early childhood education; for example, teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms (McNaughton, Lai, McDonald, &Farry, 2004). One of the most innovative practices that has emerged from the New Zealand research is the assessment of children's learning. Several studies have been done in the field of assessment. For example, the article, "*Trust your own observations: assessment of reader and tutor behaviour in learning to read in English and Mäori*" by Glynn and McNaughton (2002), has supported the New Zealand approach. However, the most comprehensive study of assessment occurred in 1995 when the Project for Assessing Children's Experiences—a research project with the Ministry of Education—was designed to recognise some key outcomes from the New Zealand curriculum to work with practitioners to develop a variety of assessment ideas and procedures that would be helpful for them when working with young children. The focus age group for this project was 3- and 4-year-olds (Carr et al., 1999). The project also took the view that: "Assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog. If we want to see real curriculum reform, we must simultaneously achieve reform of assessment practices" (Bredekamp&Rosegrant, 1992, p. 29).

The framework of outcomes for assessment to emerge from the New Zealand research study was described in the project as a "Learning Story" framework (Carr et al., 1999). The research presented in this thesis was interested in this new assessment approach called Learning Stories. Learning Stories are based on the learning narratives of Professor Margaret Carr from Waikato University in New Zealand (Carr et al., 2000). Carr was interested in how teachers could assess and track children's learning in the early

years in a way that included learning dispositions and avoided the pitfalls of over-formal methods, while being helpful for practitioners, interesting for families and supportive of learners (Carr, 2001).

As an early childhood aassistant professor in Saudi Arabia, I decided to introduce the new assessment approach of Learning Stories to early childhood teachers in Saudi Arabia. The aim was to see how teachers understand and reflect on this new approach. There appeared to be no research studies in this area at the time so the research went into uncharted territory. A descriptive study was planned to examine the responses of early childhood teachers in Saudi Arabia to this new Learning Stories approach. The research strategy was based on interviews with participants.

Background to this research

This research is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Fleer, 2003a;Rogoff, 2003;Vygotsky, 1978), which focuses on the social context of the child. Vygotsky (1978) believed that the social context influences more than attitudes and beliefs. It has a deep influence on how and what the child will think (Bodrova& Leong, 2007). Many psychologists and researchers have been interested in Vygotsky's theories (Bruner, 1985; Cole & Scribner, 1973; Rogoff, 1991; Tharp &Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1991).

Learning Stories, previously mentioned as New Zealand's model of assessment, is based on this sociocultural approach, which views learning as being social and occurring in a cultural context. The contextual nature of this approach led me to believe that a Learning Stories assessment approach would be able to be adapted to the Saudi culture and the Arabic language. This proved to be the case and the students' observations and recorded stories gave excellent insights into Saudi children's learning experiences and contextual knowledge. The Learning Stories assessment approach helped the participant teachers in Saudi preschools deal with the children as individuals who have different backgrounds and different abilities and needs, but are also part of a group, a culture and a society. However, Learning Stories also presented the participants

with some practical challenges, such as the time and effort that Learning Stories require.

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum framework became compulsory for funded early childhood programs in April 1998 (Carr et al., 1999). In 1996 the New Zealand Ministry of Education (1996) published a national early childhood curriculum for children aged birth to 5 years for Aotearoa New Zealand, popularly known by its short title *Te Whäriki*(the full title is *Te Whäriki: He WhärikiMātaurangamōngāMokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum*). Five strands shape the outcomes for children: belonging, wellbeing, exploration, communication and contribution. These strands are summarised at the beginning of the document as aspirations for lifelong learners—for children "to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (NZMOE, 1996, p. 9).

The use of stories is not confined to New Zealand. Witherell and Noddings (1991, p. 280) claim: "Finally stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems … They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and to what effect".

The Learning Stories method captures the context of the learning environment that appears to enable or constrain learning. Learning Stories are not the same as case studies or running records about children—they are narratives or stories and they need to be a good tale. There are usually three parts to a Learning Story: first, the actual story about the child's learning; second, an analysis that highlights the learning that the child is experiencing; and third, the opportunities and possibilities for the child to develop their strengths and interests further (Carr, 2001).

When researching literature I was interested in looking at some of the "child study" researchers where child observation was a basis for planning. In early childhood education many researchers use observation for their data source, as detailed in the following

publications: "*Not the same kind of leaders: four young children's unique ways of influencing others*" (Lee, Recchia, & Shin, 2005); "*A case study of an early childhood teacher's perspective on working with English language learners*" (Lee, Butler, &Tippins, 2007); and "*Transition from nursery to primary school*" (Bartholomew &Gustaffson, 1997). In order to gain a better and deeper understanding of the child's learning and development and design a better educational environment, these studies used naturalistic observations and/or video-taped observations. This latter method is becoming increasingly popular for program planning and research. Using these ideas the research design was based on similarities between early childhood beliefs in Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, and Australia to ensure that the proposed changes to observation and assessment would be scaffolding on existing knowledge and therefore have relevance.

What are Learning Stories?

Learning Stories are based on the learning narratives of Professor Margaret Carr from Waikato University in New Zealand (Carr et al., 2000). Carr defines Learning Stories as a type of documented assessment narrative that highlights dispositions for learning connected to the early childhood curriculum (Carr, 2001).

There are two vital features of Learning Stories that have enabled them to become cultural tools: they utilise storytelling strategies, and they spotlight the children's capabilities rather than their weaknesses. Therefore, they are based on understanding, skills and attitudes (Carr, 2001). "Exemplars are examples of assessments that make visible learning that is valued so that the learning community (children, families, whānau, teachers, and others) can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways" (NZMOE, 2004, p. 3).

Learning Stories have three major essentials:

1. They start with a narrative observation.
2. They contain a formal template for analysis of the learning related to the narrative.
3. They provide guidance for future learning experience.

Learning Stories can have multiple perspectives:

- the teacher's voice
- the child's voice
- the parent's voice
- voices of other children.

When analysing the learning that happens for the children, we not only look at the child's physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual development, we also concentrate on the child's learning dispositions. There are five domains of learning disposition of interest:

- taking an interest
- being involved
- persisting with difficulty
- expressing an idea or a feeling
- taking responsibility.

Each of these developmental domains and learning dispositions need to be looked at in three parts: being ready, being willing, and being able. The Learning Stories system will go through four stages: describing, discussing, documenting, and deciding. It is a folder that has its contents gradually built up with evidence of learning and development of the child. This evidence can be:

- written observations
- photographs of the child participating in different activities
- examples of their 'work', for example a picture they have drawn
- notes that have been made and any other relevant information (Carr, 2001).

Learning dispositions are defined by Carr (2001) as "situated learning strategies plus motivation—participation repertoires from which a learner recognises, selects, edits, responds to, resist, searches for and construct learning opportunities" (p. 21). She also described them in themes of "being ready, willing and able to

participate in various ways: a combination of inclination, sensitivity to occasion, and the relevant skill and knowledge" (p. 21).

This storied approach as a child assessment is an advance on what has been considered sound practice in child observation, which has played a major part in the early childhood curriculum since the 19th century (Brosterman, 1997). In her many accounts of teaching, Paley (1991) has confirmed that children always draw on stories to express who they are and who they would like to be. While Paley's motives for using storytelling have nothing to do with assessment, her approach gave her important knowledge of children, and she used her observations as a powerful research tool.

Carr et al. (2001) claim that it is the logic of the familiar, together with the emotional demand of storying that helps attract children and families into the assessment process when Learning Stories are used. Reading a story about yourself (if you are a child) or about "my child" (if you are a parent) is compelling. Learning Stories make sense and attract a range of audiences.

Early childhood assessment methods in Saudi Arabia

McAfee and Leong (2002) stated that the importance of assessments in early childhood education emanates from three codes: the first code is about early learning; the second code is about the episodic course of development in any given child and the enormous variability among young children in background and preparation for school; and the third code is about the central role of adult responsiveness to their healthy cognitive and emotional development.

Saudi preschools differ in the assessment they use for the children's learning. Some preschools use portfolios—the teacher is expected to make a portfolio for every child in his/her class to show the development of each child through the year and to assess his/her learning. The portfolio contains some work that the child produced and the teacher's comments about the child's development and the parents' comments (Alhariri, 2002).

Alhabib and Alholy (2009) documented three methods of early childhood assessment applied by Saudi centres. Rating scales is one of the methods that been used in Saudi Arabia which is a number of sentences that describe a behaviour that the child has according to special aspects. Some preschools are applying checklists, which have some sentences about behaviour or an activity that can help the teacher to assess the child's development. Checklists are similar to rating scales, the difference being that the rating scales show how many times a child's particular behaviour occurred whereas checklists show if the child's particular behaviour occurred without showing the number of times. Recently, anecdotal records appeared in the Saudi early childhood assessment process as a modern method. It is a note where the teacher writes about the child's behaviour in a special incident (Alhabib & Alholy, 2009). The early childhood education system in Saudi Arabia needs an assessment method that attains inclusiveness, continualness, objectivity and participation (Alhabib & Alholy, 2009): inclusiveness means the assessment process needs to cover all the developmental areas of the child; continualness means that the assessment process needs to be done continually; objectivity means the assessment process needs to be based on educational and psychological tools and ways; and participation means the assessment process needs to be shared by the teachers, the principal and the parents.

Teachers are not familiar with the alternative assessment evaluation techniques along with absences of structured training in educational assessment. Nassif (2007) investigated the assessment practices in Saudi Arabia, particularly the classroom assessment method in Jeddah city. The study was conducted in 18 public and private preschools. She found that out of 197 teachers, 54 per cent held a diploma or less and 46 per cent held a bachelor's degree. Nassif pointed out that the implementation of new assessment methods did not take into account teachers' training needs. She documented that a preschool culture is mostly influenced by a unified preschool curriculum, which applies very little attention to

classroom assessment, coupled with lack of knowledge, skills and confidence in the use of many assessment techniques.

Significant plans for early childhood education in Saudi Arabia

The recent years experienced a tremendous focus from the Ministry of Education on the area of early childhood education. The Ministry is working on several projects to develop the early childhood education and to solve and deal with some of the problems that face this development. One of the biggest projects is King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project (Tatweer) (Al-Dabass, 2013). The project aims to develop all levels of education starting from preschool and finishing by high school. The three main goals for this project in the area of early childhood education are: to create a practical national early childhood curriculum; to develop and train preschool teachers, supervisors and administrators; and to encourage the private sector to invest and help in the development of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia (Al-Dabass, 2013).

In planning for future development the Ministry of Education, along with "Tatweer", began working with The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Al-Dabass, 2013). The cooperation resulted in forming the project of developmental principles of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia. There were also two projects that were founded under the umbrella of "Tatweer"—the first project is developing a national preschool curriculum, and the second project is developing the profession (Al-Dabass, 2013). Hopefully the "Tatweer Project" will solve the three main problems that face early childhood education development in Saudi Arabia—providing preschools with buildings that are appropriate for preschool purposes, training preschool teachers, especially in the country areas that don't have teachers with an early childhood background, and finally focusing on quality in the development process (Al-Dabass, 2013; Tatweer, 2013).

In order to solve these problems the Ministry started using the early childhood environment rating scale (ECERS) to evaluate the preschools from all aspects. Moreover, most of the teachers who

work now started working in preschools a long time ago, in the early stages of establishing Saudi preschools. At that time, very few held a degree in early childhood education. Therefore, the government started employing preschool teachers with bachelor degrees or diplomas in any field of knowledge, not specifically early childhood, so a preschool teacher might have a science background or a history background. As a result, most of the preschool teachers now have no theoretical or practical training in the field of early childhood education. To deal with this situation the Ministry established early childhood training centres. In addition, the Ministry is trying to encourage investments in the area of preschools by working on a project called the "school allowance project"—this project suggests that the government support every child's right to attend at preschool level by contributing a voucher for every Saudi child that parents can present at any private preschool. This project might help many parents with the expense of private preschools. However, the project is under study by the Ministry of Finance. There are also suggestions a board concerned with academic evaluating and confirming be established. The aim of this board is to build united principles regarding evaluation, investigation and development for all educational levels starting from preschool level, in both government and private sectors (Al-Dabass, 2013).

The development plan is to expand the number of preschools by 50 per cent (Al-Dabass, 2013). Al-Fayez, deputy minister of education in charge of women's affairs, announced that 73 preschools were supposed to be established by the year 2010, with a total of 2019 classes (Al-Sakran, 2009). Faour (2010) and Al-Dabass (2013) said that in Saudi Arabia there are principles regarding the number of children in the class of one teacher. They both specified a ratio of 1:10 for children ages 3–4 years, and one teacher per class for 12 children ages 4–6 years. (If the class has a second teacher, then there can be more than 12 children.)

Objectives of the research

Since this Learning Stories method was developed, many researchers (e.g. Needham, 2007; Smith, 1999) have been interested in looking at different concepts of the approach, such as the benefits of using Learning Stories (Carr et al., 1999), how to apply Learning Stories in the classroom, the role of the teacher in Learning Stories and how to use Learning Stories to plan a good learning program for each child (Carr, 2001). However, This research allowed me to learn about Learning Stories and provided me with strategies to train teachers to tailor this approach for use in Saudi Arabia's early childhood settings.

The main aims of this research were to:

1. Investigate present practices in the use of assessment and planning tools for early childhood in Saudi Arabia.
2. Introduce Learning Stories to in-service teachers.
3. Evaluate the impact that Learning Stories might have on early childhood settings in Saudi Arabia.

Research questions

I discovered that in Australia, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is dominant in the early childhood field and therefore the New Zealand assessment approach of Learning Stories is very popular (Fleer & Richardson, 2004). I was interested in knowing more about this assessment approach and investigating the methods of teaching and training early childhood teachers in order to introduce these ideas in Saudi Arabia. At present early childhood students in Saudi Arabia are familiar with observations, but analysis is not developed (Kashkary& Robinson, 2006).

The research questions were:

1. What type of assessment and planning tools do the Saudi participants use in preschools?
2. What are the participants' reflections about the assessment approach of Learning Stories?
3. How could this approach impact on practices in a Saudi Arabian preschool?

4. Are Learning Stories an appropriate assessment tool for Saudi Arabian early childhood education students?

Methodology

Theoretical orientation

As stated earlier, Learning Stories have a base in sociocultural theory. Current conceptualisations of sociocultural theory draw heavily on the work of Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky states:

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (p. 57)

Vygotsky's theoretical contributions to the development of curricula and teaching strategies are widely known among educational theorists. Vygotsky devised a sociocultural theory that subsequently influenced the development of the constructivist movement. Although Vygotsky's contributions to the field of education are apparent, what has not been specifically addressed is how the particulars of his theoretical framework helped shape the development of constructivist curricula (Jaramillo, 1996).

According to Tharp and Gallimore (1988):

> This view [the sociocultural perspective] has profound implications for teaching, schooling, and education. A key feature of this emergent view of human development is that higher order functions develop out of social interaction. Vygotsky argues that a child's development cannot be understood by a study of the individual. We must also examine the external social world in which that individual life has developed ... Through participation in activities that require cognitive and communicative functions, children are drawn into the use of these

functions in ways that nurture and "scaffold" them. (pp. 6–7)

Socioculturally oriented writers have described learning as appropriated (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996) in authentic cultural locations, defining these as communities of practice (Carr, 2001). Learning Stories are a research tool that considers the context, location and people involved as all playing a part in learning (Carr et al., 2001). In keeping with this view of the significance of daily experience and relationships within a particular context, data was collected using interviews.

The method

This research was a qualitative, subjective, interpretive research project. I used interviews. I also conducted training workshop sessions in how to implement a Learning Stories approach.

The setting

The study was located in Saudi Arabia. As in Australia and New Zealand, the interviews were conducted with early childhood teachers in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi preschools divide children into classes according to the age of the child. The classes have both boys and girls at the preschool level. Every class has play corners and an open area, usually in the middle, where the children sit in a circle every morning. Every class has one teacher. The school has a big playground with some swings, slides and bicycles.

The participants

The participants were myself, the Saudi class teachers. To collect the data I:

- observed Australian centres (this provided background on the use of Learning Stories)
- prepared workshops on Learning Story methodology (previous research has been carried out in this area) (Alfayez, 2008)

- presented workshops on assessment and evaluation and also Learning Stories
- interviewed the early childhood teachers who attended the workshops

Class teachers agreed to be attend the workshops. They were interviewed about the new approach at the end of the workshops.

Data collection

Interviews took place with the early childhood teachers. Seven teachers were interviewed. I conducted semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Examples of the questions:

- Can you describe the new assessment approach Learning Stories?
- How did the new assessment approach help you plan further activities for the children?
- What are the benefits of this new approach?
- What were the difficulties that you faced when applying the new assessment approach?

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and partly translated. Tutty, Rothery, Richard, and Grinnell (1996) state that:

> The semi-structured interview has some of the advantages of both the structured and unstructured formats. While it allows questioning with respect to specific topics, it poses these questions in a more open-ended manner than is typical in structured interviews. (p. 56)

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data of the interviews. Thematic analysis is an approach that involves the creation and application of "codes" to data. The "data" being analysed might take any number of forms—an interview transcript, field notes, policy documents, photographs, video footage (Miles &Hurberman, 1994). This was in keeping with a sociocultural approach where actions are seen as occurring in relationships within

the cultural and historical context and are grounded in everyday experiences.

Interview analyses

The interview analyses showed that the teachers had experience using observation as an assessment tool. However, each teacher used a different assessment technique to assess the children in her class, which meant that the experience was different for every teacher. The teachers identified a number of advantages of using Learning Stories as an assessment tool. They agreed on some points such as that Learning Stories would help the teacher to discover the children's strengths and interests and that Learning Stories help the teacher to create future activities and educational situations according to the interests of the child. Four teachers believed that the review of the Learning Story was logical. Also four teachers stated that Learning Stories might help build the child's confidence and self-esteem through giving the child attention. Two teachers mentioned that using Learning Stories could help to develop a conversation between the child and the teacher. Three teachers believed that Learning Stories would help to improve the child's language and develop communication and social skills, and that using Learning Stories in the library corner would encourage children to visit the corner.

However, the teachers discussed four points they found to be disadvantages of the Learning Stories approach. The teachers agreed on the first and second point. The first point was that Learning Stories are not suitable to be used in a class with a large number of children and no support teacher to help the main teacher. The second point was the matter of time; they believed that Learning Stories would take a long time, both when observing the child and afterwards when writing the Learning Story. Three teachers mentioned the third point, concerning Learning Stories as only considering the positives of the child rather than seeking the child's needs and problems. The fourth point was that it would be too hard to plan activities that met every child's interests; this was mentioned by only one teacher.

When analysing the teachers' expectations of the parents' responses to the use of Learning Stories, the teachers agreed that a parent's response would differ depending on family characteristics.

Analysing the teacher response about understanding and implementing Learning Stories showed that all teachers agreed that it was easy to understand Learning Stories. However, there was a comment from one teacher that the review part of the Learning Story was a bit hard to understand and one comment that writing a narrative story might need skill or practice.

On the implementation level, they all agreed that there were many difficulties in implementing Learning Stories. The main difficulty was time, saying that Learning Stories take a long time to observe and put into the written form. The other difficulty was the effort required. As a result of these difficulties, the teachers had different responses towards using Learning Stories in the future. Two teachers said that they would not be using Learning Stories, two teachers said they might combine the use of Learning Stories and their previous observation tools, and three teachers said that they might use Learning Stories if circumstances in the class changed.

Conclusion

It would appear then that the research question can be answered by saying that the Learning Stories assessment approach could have a positive impact on Saudi early childhood practices. Saudi teachers were able to implement the approach. They had mainstream concerns that have been encountered also in New Zealand and Australia. Many advantages of the approach were identified and some fundamental issues about the role of observation and education emerged in the discussion of strengths and weakness.

References

- Al-Ameel, H. (2002).The effects of different types of preschool curricula on some aspects of children's experience and development in Saudi Arabia (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Wales, Cardiff, UK.

- Al-Dabass, H. (2013) Interviewed by the researcher in 15/2/2013.

- Alfayez, S. (2008).Learning stories – Practice driving theory: how university staff introduce a new assessment approach for early childhood.Unpublished master's thesis, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

- Alhabib, A., &Alholy, A., (2009). *The new preschool curriculum: the activities and basics*(1st ed.). Kuwait: Alfalah Library.

- Alhariri, R., (2002).*The establishment and management of preschools from the Islamic view*(1st ed.). Riyadh: Alobaikan Library.

- Al-Noaim, W. (1996). The skills needed for pre-school teachers in Saudi Arabia and in Kuwait (Unpublished master's thesis). King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

- Al-Sakran, R. (2009, June 1).Noura Al-Fayez issued adecision of opening of73newpreschools. Alriyadh newspaper. Retrieved 5 February, 2010 from http://www.alriyadh.com/iphone/article/434245.

- Bartholomew L., & Gustaffson U. (1997). Transition from nursery to primary school: conductive to learning? The story of "O".*International Journal of Early Childhood*, *29*(2), 1–7.

- Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. (2007). *Tools of the mind: the Vygotskian approach to early childhood education.* New Jeresy: Pearson Education Inc.

- Bredekamp, S., & Rosegrant, T. (1992). Reaching potentials through appropriate curriculum: conceptual frameworks for applying the guidelines. In S. Bredekamp & T. Rosegrant (Eds.), *Reaching potentials: appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children: Vol 1* (pp.12–17). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

- Brosterman, N. (1997).*Inventing kindergarten*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

- Bruner, J.(1985). Vygotsky: An historical and conceptual perspective. In J.Wertsh(Ed.),*Culture,communicationandcognition:Vygotskian perspectives*(pp.21–34).Cambridge:CambridgeUniversityPress.

- Cadwell, L. B. (2002).*Bringing learning to life: A Reggio approach to early childhood education.* New York: Teachers College Press.

- Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning stories*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Carr, M., Cowie, B., Gerrity, R., Jones, C., Lee, W., & Pohio, L. (2001). Democratic learning and teaching communities in early childhood: Can assessment play a role? Keynote address to the NZCER Annual Conference, Early Childhood Education for a Democratic Society, Wellington.
- Carr, M., May, H., & Podmore, V. N. with Cubey, P., Hatherly, A., & Macartney, B. (2000). *Learning and teaching stories: Action research on evaluation in early childhood.* Wellington, New Zealand: Council for Educational Research and Ministry of Education. ERIC 447930.
- Carr, M., May, H., Podmore, V., Cubey, P., Hatherly, A., & Macartney, B. (1999). Learning and teaching stories: New approaches to assessment and evaluation. *Roberta Tewharik Research*, *3*(2). Melbourne. Retrieved 25 May, 2010, from http://www.aare.edu.au/99pap/pod99298.htm.
- Cole, M.,& Scribner, S. (1973).Cognitive consequences of formal and informaleducation.*Science*, *82*, 553–559.
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (1999). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. London: Falmer Press.
- Faour B. (2010). Early Childhood in the Arab Countries: Status and Challenges. Paper presented at World Conference (UNESCO) on Early Childhood Care and Education (September, 2010), Moscow, Russian Federation.
- Fleer, M. (2003a). Post-Vygotskian lenses on Western early childhood education: Moving the debate forward.*European Early Childhood Education Research Journal,11*(1), 55-68.
- Fleer, M., & Richardson, C. (2004). *Observing and planning in early childhood settings: Using a sociocultural approach*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia Inc.
- Glynn, T., & McNaughton, S. (2002). Trust your own observations: Assessment of reader and tutor behaviour in learning to read in English and Maori. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, *49*(2), 161–173.
- Haapasalo, J., & Tremblay, R. E. (1994). Physically aggressive boys from ages 6 to 12: Family background, parenting behavior, and prediction of delinquency. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *62*(5), 1044–1052.
- Hewes, D. (2001). *W.N. Hailmann: Defender of Frobel*. USA: Frobel Foundation USA.

- Hewes, D. (2005, July 13). *Frobel's contribution to Reggio Emila*. Paper presented at San Diego Association for the education of Young Children, San Diego.

- Jaramillo, J. (1996).Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and contributions to the development of constructivist curricula.Retrieved 10 May 2010, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3673/is_199610/ai_n8734319.

- Kashkary, S., & J. Robinson. (2006). Does attendance at kindergarten affect pupils' mathematics achievement at primary school in Makkah, Saudi Arabia? And what are the teachers' expectations? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, UK: Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University.

- King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project (Tatweer). (2013). Early childhood education comprehensive development program. Retrieved 27 January, 2013, from http://www.tatweer.edu.sa/node/138.

- Lee, S., Butler, M., & Tippins, D. (2007).A case study of an early childhood teacher's perspective on working with English language learners.*Multicultural Education*, *15*(1), 43.

- Lee, S., Recchia S., & Shin, M. (2005). Not the same kind of leaders: Four young children's unique ways of influencing others. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *20*(2), 132–48.

- Mahdly, S. (2001).*The attitude of parents and pre-school teachers toward the direct teaching methods.* Unpublished master's thesis, King Saud University, Education College, Riyadh.

- McAfee, O., & Leong, D. J.(2002).*Assessing and guiding young children's development and learning*(3rd ed.). Boston, Allyn and Bacon.

- McNaughton, S., Lai, M., McDonald S., & Farry S. (2004). Designing more effective teaching of comprehension in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms in New Zealand. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, *27*(3), 184–97.

- Miles, M., & Hurberman, M. (1994).*Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. London: Beverley Hills.

- Nassif, Z. (2007). Beliefs and Perceptions of Early Childhood Teachers in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, about Classroom Assessments in preschools. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation).George Mason University, Fairfax, USA.

- Needham, M. (2007, September, 1–3). *Affordances: crossing the border from personal perceptual schemas to socially mediated learning dispositions.* Paper presented at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Conference,Prague.

- New Zealand Ministry of Education (NZMOE). (2004). *Kei tua o te pae: Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars.* Wellington: Learning Media.
- New Zealand Ministry of Education (NZMOE).(1996). *Te Whäriki: He Whäriki ma¨ tauranga: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- New Zealand Ministry of Education(NZMOE). (2009). *Kei tua o te pae: Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Oberheumer, P. (2005). International perspectives on early childhood curricula.*International Journal of Early Childhood*, *37*(1), 27–38.
- Paley. G. (1991). *The boy who would be a helicopter: The uses of storytelling in the classroom.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pramling-Samuelsson, I., & Sheridan, S. (2004). Recent issues in the Swedish preschool, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, *Vol.36*, 1, 7–22. Retrieved 12 June, 2010 from http://gupea.ub.gu.se/dspace/bitstream/2077/19107/1/gupea_2077_19107_1.pdf.
- Rinaldi, C. (1993). The emergent curriculum and social constructivism.In C. Edwards, L. Gandini, & G. Forman (Eds.), *The hundred languages of children.The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education* (pp. 101–111). Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Rogoff, B. (1991). Guidance and participation in spatial planning. In L. B. Resnick, J. M. Levine & S. B. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on Socially Shared Cognition* (pp. 349-364). Washington, DC: American Psycho-logical Association.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rogoff, B., Matusov, E., & White, C. (1996). Models of teaching and learning: Participation in a community of learners. In D. R. Olsen & N. Torrence (Eds.), *Handbook of education and human development: New models of learning, teaching and schooling* (pp. 388–414). London: Basil Blackwell.
- Rye, H., Smebye, H., & Hundeide, K. (1987). Aktiv læring i førskolealder. En presentasjon av High/Scopes barnehageprogram. Universitetsforlaget.
- Samuelsson, I., Sheridan, S., & Williams, P. (2006). Five preschool curricula- comparative perspective. *International Journal of Early Childhood38*(1), 11.

- Smith, A. (1999). Joint attention: learning to "know other minds". *Early Childhood Folio 4.*Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Tharp, R. G., & Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing minds to life: Teaching, learning, and schooling in social context*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Tutty, L., Rothery, M., Richard, M., & Grinnell, R. M. Jr. (1996).*Qualitative research for social workers.* US: Allyn & Bacon.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). The role of play in development. In M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner & E. Souberman (Eds.), *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes* (pp. 92–104). Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Original work published in 1930).
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Witherell, C.,& Noddings, N. (1991). *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education.* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Young, E. (2002).*Investing in our children's future from early child development to human development*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.