

Children's Construction of Meanings on Gender Appropriateness of Social Roles in a Preschool
Setting in Saudi Arabia

by

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*To my 4-year-old, Leena, my little investigator who recently asked me,
So, Mama, what do you do?
I do research, I said.
What does that mean?
I have specific questions and I explore to find answers, I replied.
But that's kids' work, she said.*

(July 2018)

Preface

I received ethics approval from McGill University Research Ethics Board III. The certificate number that approves the conduct of this study is 146-0816.

Abstract

While the subject of the construction of identities and children's play has been widely explored in the West, particularly within the English-speaking academic discourse (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989a, 1989b, 1992; Dyson, 1989, 1997; Kendrick, 2005; MacNaughton, 2005; Paley, 1984), there is little research about how identities are constructed and perceived across childhood in Middle Eastern cultures, especially in Saudi Arabia. Over a period of five months, I observed and participated in narratives told and enacted by nine preschool children in their everyday fantasy play practices during "free play" time in two corners, the playing-house and building-blocks corners, in a preschool setting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. My research questions interrogated the ways a group of children engaged in unstructured fantasy play to negotiate and enact social roles and examined the narratives children reproduced and/or produced about their understandings of their social roles as boys or girls. Adopting a sensory ethnography to guide my methodological approach has offered me various routes to understanding my experience in the field and attending to children's ways of knowing about their gendered selves. I entered the field as a participant observer and collected data by producing descriptive and reflective notes, recording children's play narratives, and utilizing the aid of visuals. Drawing from concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development and appropriation in sociocultural theory and multiplicity and discourse in poststructural theory, I read and interpreted my data to produce knowledge that pertained to children's ways of constructing meanings in relation to the gender appropriateness of various social roles. In my interpretations and discussions of my understanding of children's construction of gendered meanings in their fantasy play, three themes have emerged from the data: I argue that in their active engagement of constructing meanings about their gendered selves and social roles, the children appropriated from available cultural materials to perpetuate the gender binary discourse, following which I elucidate how the children disguised the

unfamiliar and silenced the norm to produce new meanings and, lastly, the data reveals that the children in this study drew from class and age discourses as a strategy for exercising power. This study argues that the children had actively engaged in reproducing the norm to seek recognition and avoid the failure of deviating from the recognizable category. The children simultaneously engaged in subtle ways of disrupting the gender roles and social norms. In spite of the children's active engagement in multiple discursive practices, data reveals that their ongoing construction of what femininities and masculinities entail is substantially shaped by the dominant ideology in a given discourse which is bound by time and place.

Résumé

Alors que le sujet de la construction de l'identité et des jeux d'enfants a été largement exploré dans l'Ouest, particulièrement dans le discours académique anglophone (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989a, 1989b, 1992; Dyson, 1989, 1997; Kendrick, 2005; MacNaughton, 2005; Paley, 1984); il y a peu de recherche par rapport à la construction et perception de l'identité à travers l'enfance dans les cultures du Moyen Orient, particulièrement dans l'Arabie Saoudite. Pendant une période de cinq mois, j'ai observé et participé à des récits racontés et vécus par neuf enfants préscolaires durant leur jeux fantaisistes quotidiens pendant la "récréation", dans deux coins: la maison de jeu ainsi que la zone de construction de blocs, dans une garderie à Riyadh, en Arabie Saoudite. Mes questions de recherche interrogeaient comment un groupe d'enfant engageaient dans un jeu fantaisiste, sans structures particulières, afin de négocier et imiter des rôles sociaux. Elles examinaient aussi les histoires que les enfants reproduisaient et/ou produisaient par rapport à leur compréhension de leurs propres rôles sociaux en tant que garçons ou filles. L'adoption d'une ethnographie sensorielle pour guider mon approche méthodique m'a offert une variété de voies afin de comprendre mon expérience sur le terrain ainsi que de porter attention à la connaissance des enfants de leur genre. Je suis entrée sur le terrain en tant que participante observatrice and collectrice de données en produisant des notes descriptives et réflexives, enregistrant les histoires des jeux des enfants, et utilisant des aides visuelles. En utilisant certains concepts de théories socioculturelle et post-structuraliste, j'ai lu et interprété mes informations pour produire un savoir concernant comment les enfants construisaient un sens en relation avec l'appropriation du genre se manifestant dans plusieurs rôles sociaux. Dans mes interprétations et discussions de ma compréhension de comment les enfants construisaient un sens par rapport au genre durant leurs jeux fantaisistes, trois thèmes entrelacés ont fait surface. J'argumente que à travers leur engagement actif manifesté dans la construction de sens par rapport à leur genre et rôles sociaux,

les enfants appropriaient un matériel culturel à leur portée afin de se positionner eux-mêmes dans les normes du genre dominantes. Je présente ensuite à quel point les enfants perpétuaient le discours du genre binaire afin de reproduire la norme. Ensuite j'élucide comment les enfants déguisaient et laissaient sous silence la norme pour produire un sens nouveau. Finalement, les données révèlent que les enfants qui ont participé à cette étude utilisaient des discours d'âge et de classe comme stratégie afin de défier les normes du genre et d'exercer un pouvoir. Cette étude argumente que les enfants activement engagés dans la reproduction de la norme afin d'obtenir une reconnaissance et d'éviter l'échec de dévier des catégories reconnues. Les enfants s'engagent simultanément dans des moyens subtils de perturber les rôles liés au genre et les normes sociales. Malgré l'engagement actif des enfants dans plusieurs pratiques discursives, les données révèlent que leur construction continue de ce qui constitue la féminité et la masculinité est formée de façon substantielle par l'idéologie dominante dans un discours donné qui est lié au temps et au lieu.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

A Glimpse into The Field

I walk into a preschool classroom of 4 and 5-year-old children in Riyadh city in Saudi Arabia. I see boys in loose beige pants and girls in unfitted beige skirt uniforms sitting in one big circle divided into two groups: boys to the left and girls to the right. It is my first day in the classroom, my new fieldsite. I attempt to make the least disruption possible as I sit in the vacant spot nearest to me, a red chair placed in the art corner. The children are reciting the *Quran* with their classroom teacher. They look at me, then at one another, and giggle; I smile back. The teacher reminds the children to sit still and show respect to the *Quran*. The girls and boys seem to listen to their teacher, but it is not too long before they go back to chatting and giggling.

I hide my anxiousness by sketching in my journal. I count the children, 21 girls and boys. I look around and notice a giant poster of The Pink Panther displayed on top of the white board and another poster of a snowman. On the opposite wall, there are two large corkboards placed above children's eye level with pictures of military troops and words of gratitude. A few posters and prayers are shown to praise the troops as the Kingdom undertakes military intervention in Yemen. Other commercial posters of English numbers, alphabets, and shapes are displayed on the classroom's walls with a small space kept for the preschool children's drawings. I gaze around searching for the two corners, playing-house and building blocks, within which I will attempt to engage as a participant observer.

In the playing-house corner, I see props that seem designed to stimulate children's playing of different social roles, such as a dresser and mirror along with assorted colourful fabrics and a box of fake jewels, an oven and sink, and two small seats. There are a few items which seem to correspond to the monthly theme, *Clothing*, such as a child-sized black *Abaya* (a loose garment worn by Saudi women in public spaces) and a white *Thobe* (a long and unfitted

robe worn by Saudi men). On the other side of the classroom, I find the building-blocks corner, with wooden blocks that come in different sizes and multiple shapes and plastic farm animals and cars. I take a few notes and put my journal aside.

Following is a map extracted from my field notes. A translated version along with details provided in chapter five (page 94).

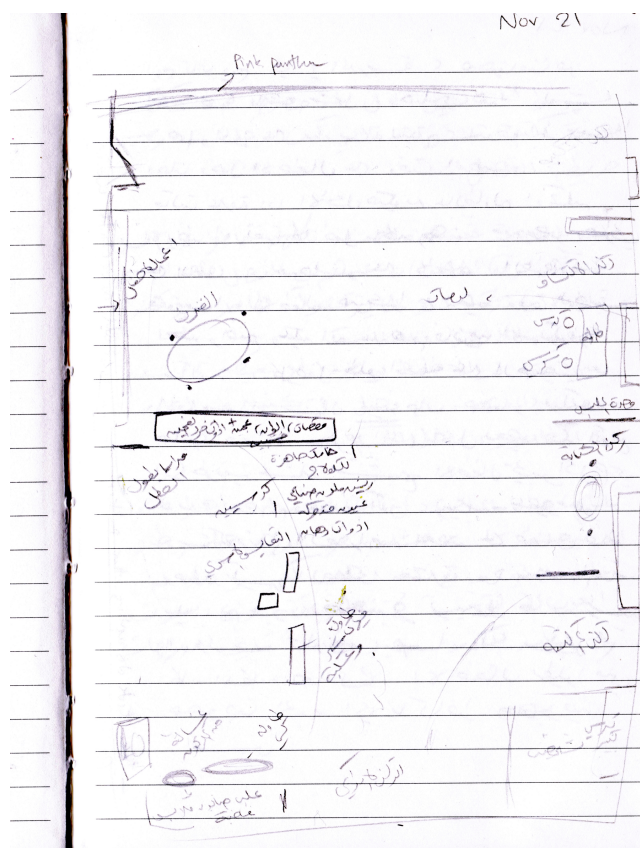


Figure 1.1 A map created in the fieldsite illustrating classroom's layout

Rationale

In this thesis, I am both a researcher and a subject of the study. In the research field, I listened not only to the stories told and the experiences embodied by the children during their fantasy play, but I further attended to my own voice, within which I place “the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the

process of research itself” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183). I recognized that my personal experiences, gender, race and class have a major impact on my interactive process in constructing and conducting the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). My everyday interaction with the children in the setting has consequently shaped my understandings of the data. My curiosity to explore how certain social roles and rules can be perpetuated and normalized from a very young age has led me to design a study that revolves around fantasy play and the construction of self. As a Saudi woman coming from a middle-class and mixed ethnic background, I grew up with female relatives who had received formal education in standard high schools abroad. However, their engagement in public life was minimal. I was brought up to believe that education is essential, but career should never be a constraint to a woman’s main duty in life which is that of wife and mother. Coming from a family that never differentiated between the education of its boys and girls has given me choices and opportunities that may not be available to every girl in Saudi society. Yet, I am aware that many of my life choices, from childhood into adulthood in Saudi society remain subjected to the permission of my male guardian, from whom I receive full support and strength. At the time of writing, a woman’s position in society is determined by her father’s or husband’s status (Hamdan, 2005), although the current government is modifying existing restrictions on the status of Saudi women (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2018).

In addition to my personal motivation to do this research, my prior experience as a preschool teacher in a private preschool in Riyadh city was key to forming my research interest. While teaching, I was once threatened with termination of my contract for holding beliefs that differed from the homogenous group. The preschool’s principal, whose personal religious beliefs were imposed on staff and teachers, was disturbed by my refusal to wear a *Niqab* (a piece of fabric that covers the face). When I expressed my approach to teaching my classroom children to

respect women regardless of whether they are fully covered or completely nude, I was ordered to resign.

A few years later, I began collecting data for my master's thesis, during which I found myself captivated by children's stories and performances that portrayed gender stereotypes. One story I vividly recall triggered me to proceed with my doctoral degree and to research the subject of gender in relation to social roles. The story is about a five-year-old girl who chooses to ride a bike in the playground of a childcare center in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Maryam, one of the research participants, attempted to participate in a race with two boys. The two boys blocked Maryam's pathway, informing her in an authoritative tone: "We're ordering you to give the bike to Ahmad. You're a girl. You cannot ride." Maryam responded angrily: "No, I am not giving this bike to Ahmad. I am your friend, and I want to join the race." She ignored the boys and joined the race; however, when Maryam lost, the two boys began to bully her: "We told you. You cannot ride." Maryam left her bike behind and joined a group of girls on the swings.

I observed this one incident when I was in the process of collecting data for my master's thesis. While this story was eventually omitted from my master's study because of its irrelevancy to my research questions, it provoked my desire to understand the ways social norms, as well as dominant practices, can construct children's understanding of their past experiences, present potentials and future possibilities.

The above is my introduction to the personal motive of pursuing and conducting the study explained in this thesis. I embarked on this study with the belief that an inferior self-concept of one's capabilities and roles in life is produced through a homogenous group which defines the norm and mark the other as deviant (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). Further, I recognize that my understanding of children's ways of comprehending and enacting different social roles is

inseparable from my own meanings of social and gender norms as well as subordination and resilience in the researched context (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Significance of the Study

I presented above the personal motive behind this study, and I follow that discussion with the academic significance. Through the pursuit of this study, I seek to produce new knowledge and understandings as well as to broaden the literature in specific academic areas. First, when searching the Arab world literature on the subject of gender within Saudi society, it appeared to me that the exploration of such a topic from an interpretive and critical perspective did not yet exist or had not yet been published (Hamdan, 2008; Makdisi, Sidawi & Bayumi, 2012). I have come across a few studies that examined gender in the Gulf region, but those were mainly conducted from positivist paradigms (Makdisi, Sidawi & Bayumi, 2012). Second, the term gender is often portrayed as dangerous within Saudi rhetoric and framed within a conspiracy theory that aims to Westernize and liberate Muslim women (Makdisi, Sidawi & Bayumi, 2012).

Therefore, the subject is seldom explored especially within the early childhood world. By shedding light on a selection of narratives told by a group of preschool children, this study could be amongst the few projects contributing to the literature of gender studies and early childhood studies within Middle Eastern societies. While the subject of gender identities in children's play have been widely explored in North American and European academic discourses (Davies, 1989a, 1989b, 1992; MacNaughton, 2005, Blaise, 2005), there is little about how gender is constructed and perceived in Middle Eastern societies, particularly in Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, children and childhood culture were seldom the foci of research and funding in the Saudi academic discourse, despite the fact that children represent a significant faction of Saudi society (Alqassem, Dashash & Alzahrani, 2016; Gahwaji, 2013). The latest national statistics revealed that children under the age of 12 represent 30% of the total Saudi

population (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2011). As such, the research described in this thesis has particular value to the current modernizing policies in early childhood education in Saudi Arabia. It could provide an impetus for progressive pedagogies that celebrate differences not only in gender but also in race, class, religion and abilities.

Purpose and Research Questions

I embarked on this study with a broad interest in the concept of identities, aiming to investigate how young children learn about the various social and occupational roles available to them and their intersectionality with the axes of identities which includes ethnicity, ability, gender and class. Throughout the process, I narrowed my scope to study one's understanding of her/his gender identities in relation to her/his social roles. I use the term identity because how we understand ourselves, who we are in relation to each other and where to position ourselves within the world, is a question of identity (Gee, 2000; Sawyer, 1996). The kind of identity in my study is one that is not fixed but rather "can change from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or unstable" (Gee, 2000, p.1).

As Judith Butler (2006) argued,

it would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (p.16).

Therefore, I delved into the study with the purpose of exploring the ways a group of Saudi Arabian preschool children engage in co-constructing meanings about the various social roles in relation to their gendered selves during fantasy play in a classroom setting. I am aware that gender construction in early childhood happens in all societies and my purpose is to examine

the narratives that a particular group of children generate in their fantasy play and the types of social norms that are reproduced or disrupted within their play patterns.

My main research question and two sub-questions are as follows:

- How does a group of Saudi preschool children construct their understandings of social and occupational roles in relation to their gendered identities during fantasy play? In particular,
 - What kind of activities do children engage in during fantasy play to negotiate rules and enact social roles?
 - What narratives do the children produce and/or reproduce about their understandings of their social roles as being boys or girls?

Outlining my Theoretical Stance

Ethnographic research is open to drawing upon many theories to guide the action of its inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The critical point is how to determine which paradigms can be tailored together to guide the process of my research. To answer this question, I bring to the fore the concept of epistemology which centers on the questions “how do I know the world? and what is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.157).

I believe that childhood and its connotations are a construct of social, political and economic institutions (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). It has been suggested that the classification of childhood as a category on its own is a creation of the modern era that emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). Prior to the forces of urbanization and industrialization, children took part in the everyday world of adults (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). In that sense, children live the life constructed for them by adult institutions, be they family, school, or media. When postmodern theories began to intersect with the field of education and child development, the perception of childhood as a natural and

scientific category shifted to one that recognizes multiplicity and non-linear classifications.

Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (2013) suggested that,

There is no such thing as ‘the child’ or ‘childhood’, as essential being or state waiting to be discovered, defined and realized, so that we can say to ourselves and others ‘that is how children are, that is what childhood is. Instead, there are many children and many childhoods, each constructed by our ‘understandings of childhood and what children are and should be (p.46).

In recent decades, the notion of childhood has shifted to one that views children as active, co-constructors in making meanings of their worlds questioning the legitimacy of developmental and socialization reasonings (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). In their everyday practices, children actively construct meanings about themselves and the other. Through their participation in multiple discursive practices, children learn meanings about what it means to be a boy or a girl within a particular social and political context (Anggard, 2005; Davies, 1989). In so doing, children make meanings about social and gender norms through the discourses available to them (Blaise 2005). Those meanings are mediated by various routes which include not only the spoken or written word but also the performed, smelled, touched and seen.

My perspective on the richness of children’s ways of knowing and expressing is derived from the concept of the *Hundred Languages of Children* proposed by the Reggio Emilia approach to education (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). In the Reggio Emilia approach,

Young children are encouraged to explore their environment and express themselves through all of their available ‘expressive, communicative, and cognitive languages,’ whether they be words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, or music, to name a few” (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998, p.7).

Such an understanding embraces and celebrates the complexity and multiplicity of children’s ways of constructing their understandings about themselves and the world around them. This overarching belief on childhood, play and identities foregrounds the usefulness of reading my data through post-developmental theories.

In the following chapter, I discuss my choice of paradigms that frame my work within particular concepts borrowed from both sociocultural theories (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990, 2003) and feminist poststructuralist theories (Davies, 1989a, 1992; MacNaughton, 2005, 2009).

Configuring my Methodology

My choice of methodology was in itself a journey of exploration. The process of outlining my own understanding of the construction of oneself and the notion of play have assisted me in designing a methodological framework that aligns with my own epistemological stance. As Maguire (2007) stated, a researcher's choice of paradigms in understanding reality and constructing knowledge is key to designing a research methodology.

In the discussion above, contemporary views on childhoods and children have placed the child central to her/his development and learning, that is, the child as capable and full of potential from birth (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). According to Rinaldi (2012),

As human beings, children possess a hundred languages, a hundred ways of thinking, of expressing themselves, of understanding and encountering others, with a way of thinking that creates connections between the various dimensions of experience rather than separating them (p.20).

It is worth noting that the *Convention for the Right of the Child* (United Nations, 1989/1990) has a major impact in reconstructing and changing dominant images of childhood and children. The *Convention on the Right of the Child* (United Nations, 1989/1990), particularly Articles 12 and 13, asserts that children have the right to express their views and ideas through various forms of representation, such as written texts, spoken words and visual methods. Within these developments, children's participation in research has been redefined, and thus a contemporary research method has emerged to place the 'voice of the child' as central to the process. Instead of conducting research 'on' or 'about' children, research is conducted 'with' children (Clark, 2005; Einarsdotti, 2005; Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith & Campbell, 2011).

This shift in paradigm has opened multiple routes to diverse approaches to listening to and co-researching with young children, such as utilizing visual and verbal means of expressions through inviting children to take photographs or videos (Clark, 2005; Einarsdotti, 2005) or draw pictures (Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith & Campbell, 2011), through initiating open-ended conversations (Maguire, 2005), and/or through utilizing visuals to elicit children's spoken words (Clark, 2001).

Though I agree that such approaches are feasible in many research contexts, I argue that in my study, within which hierarchies constitute the social structure of society, the concept of co-constructing the research with young children contradicts children's everyday practices and may raise ethical dilemmas. James (2007), Elden (2012), Komulainen (2007) and Spyrou (2011) argued for the risks of separating the ways of listening to children's voices from their contexts. Similarly, my encounter of collecting data with kindergarten children during my MA thesis in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia has led me to problematize the legitimacy of such a method in my context. Within that case study on Saudi children's views of the learning activities in their kindergarten classroom, I framed my study by viewing children as active participants who have rights and competencies, and yet I overlooked the role of the social and cultural contexts in shaping the ways children express themselves and their voices (Khoja, 2016). For instance, my proposal to conduct research 'with' young children was rejected by many preschools, questioning the credibility of such research in which the children collect the data by themselves (Khoja, 2016). Additionally, my approach of inviting the children to take photographs of their classroom environment in a culture that values privacy and confidentiality raised ethical concerns (Khoja, 2016). This realization of how the context, particularly the sociocultural and political contexts, can affect the research process had led me to question the meaning of voice and how voice is constructed and heard.

In my doctoral research design, I endeavoured to draw attention to the context when selecting a methodology and methods; that is, to situate the study within its social, cultural and political realms. I sought to recognize the complexity of the notion of voice, particularly voice as silent, collective and performed. Drawing from the belief that voices manifest themselves in multiple ways that extend beyond visual or verbal media (Khoja, 2016), I have chosen to explore my subject through the medium of fantasy play. Within fantasy play and when children enacted a social role with one another and negotiated the rules of a certain social role, they generated a narrative which I read as their collective voice. I interpreted their silence and/or noise as a form of voice. It would be false if I claimed that my data was collected ‘with’ the children.

Nonetheless, I put effort into following the children’s fantasy play without directing the daily routine. Thus, I employed a sensory ethnographic design through the adaptation of participant observation methods. In chapter three, I detail my choice of methodology and methods.

Introducing the Socio-political Context

Since this study is about understanding the social construction of self, particularly gendered selves among a group of Saudi preschool-aged children in Riyadh city, it is essential to offer an overview of the ways the historical, political and socioeconomic events have drawn the lines of education in the region. I thus briefly present the origin of the political system in the region, the central role of religion in the social and political structure, and the socioeconomic changes across the past seven decades in Saudi Arabia. Further, I discuss education prior to the establishment of a formal schooling system until current modernizing policies. I develop my discussion around the development of girls’ education in the region followed by the establishment of early childhood care and education in Saudi Arabia.

Geopolitical aspects.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stretches across the Arabian Peninsula, comprising the second largest Arab country after Algeria (MFA, 2018). The most recent shared statistics on population and growth rate published in 2016 reported a population of 31,015,999 with a growth rate of 2.11% (The General Authority for Statistics Kingdom of Saudi Arabia cited in Alqassem, Dashash & Alzahrani, 2016). Amongst the population, 49.1% are female and 50.9% are male (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2011 cited in Gahwaji, 2016). While the majority of Saudis are Arab from tribal origin (Ménoret, 2005), there are Saudis who do not identify themselves as tribal as they come from mixed ethnic backgrounds including Turk, Iranian, Indian, Russian, and Indonesian—many of whom had immigrated and resided in *Hijaz* region (the western region of Saudi Arabia) before the establishment of the current Saudi government (Ménoret, 2005).

The presence of the Saud family as monarch in the region traces its roots back to the 18th century when Muhammed bin Abdul Wahhab and Muhammed bin Saud both made an agreement to advocate for Islam (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2018). A few decades after the Ottoman army shattered the presence of the first Saudi State in 1818, the Saud family returned to establish a country that succeeded in unifying the tribes across the Peninsula (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2018). By 1932, Abdul Aziz bin Saud had unified many regions of the Arabian Peninsula and proclaimed the country as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The unification of the region in 1932 by Abdul Aziz bin Saud followed by the discovery of oil in 1938 has transformed the country's path and progression. It is therefore significant to highlight the profound alliance between religion and politics in establishing the country. Yet, the advancements that came following the establishment of the country and the discovery of oil was to a large extent confronted by rejection from conservative, religious men.

The capital city, Riyadh, is located in the heart of Saudi Arabia and is where Abdul Aziz bin Saud established the political system. This political system is ruled by the Saud House, as an absolute monarchy within which Islam is the only religion, and the *Quran* (the Word of God to Muslim believers) and Sunna (the saying and actions of Prophet Mohammed) are the constitution (Hamdan, 2008). Saudi Arabia is known internationally as a main exporter of oil while it is known among Muslims as the “Land of the two Holy Mosques” referring to *Al-Masjib Al-Haram* in Mekkah and *Al-Masjed Al-Nabawi* in Medinah (Ménoret, 2005). The king rules the country, acting as the Prime Minister, and appoints the crown prince for assistance with duties and preparations for the crown (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2018). The council of Ministers has a significant role in advising the King and contributing to the country’s development. Its 22 consultants are appointed by the king himself. In addition to the council of Ministers, a Consultative Council, *Majlis Al-Shura*, is formed of 12 committees and 150 members whose professions and expertise vary to include areas of education, human rights, social affairs, economy and finance and security (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2018). Those seats were exclusively held by male members throughout the past six decades until 2013, when the latest King Abdullah appointed 30 women to join *Majlis Al-Shura*, shifting the position of women in decision making and strategic planning.

Gender in Saudi Arabia: Women in patriarchy.

In my effort to situate gender within its context, I could not find an equivalent Arabic word to the term gender, yet the term sex implies both biological and social aspects (Makdisi, Sidawi & Bayumi, 2012). In Saudi Arabia, the discussion of gender is largely perceived as taboo, connoting the danger of “Westernization” and “liberation” of women and subsequently the collapse of family and social order (Makdisi, Sidawi & Bayumi, 2012; Hamdan, 2008). In the following, I posit that the absence of an equivalent term for gender and the deficit of research

that problematizes the case is produced by patriarchal discourses that dominate the production of knowledge and define the norm.

Moghadam (2004) described patriarchy as form of social organization that predates capitalism, existing across Europe and Asia and marked by the supremacy of the male line. Similarly, patriarchy in the Middle East is the core of its social order and family structure, as childbearing is female labour, and power is held and exercised by the senior men in the family (Moghadam, 2004). Within this profoundly-rooted gender hierarchy in Middle Eastern societies, it is argued that “traditional norms and patriarchal values have shaped the role [and status] of women in Muslim society” (Dangor, 2001, p.126, cited in Hamdan, 2008).

As Islam permeates every aspect of Saudi culture, not only the individual Saudi but also the socio-political system of the country, I devote this section to presenting snapshots of the role of women in the *Quran*. The *Quran*, what Muslims believe to be the primary source of Islam and the words of God [*Allah*], has been interpreted by diverse scholars, all of whom are men (Hassan, 1999; Hamdan, 2005). Within the lens of conservative interpretations of the *Quran*, women are meant to stay home, bear children and take care of the household. This narrowed view of women and their role in public life has been criticized by progressive scholars through evidence from Quranic revelations (Hassan, 1999, Hamdan, 2005, 2008; Wadud, 1999). In Quran, for example, women and men are addressed as equally accountable and responsible for acquiring knowledge and participating in social development without deviation between women’s and men’s roles (Hamdan, 2005). The following are examples of Quranic verses that imply the equal status of men and women:

Each human being shall face the consequences of his or her deeds. And their Lord has accepted of them and answered them: Never will I suffer to lose the work of any of you, be he/she male or female: you are members one of another. (Quran, 3:195)

If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith, they will enter paradise and not the least injustice will be done to them. (Quran, 4:124)

For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. (Quran, 33:35)

Thus, it is explicated in the Quran that both men and women have equal rights and responsibilities, substantially undermining the existing patriarchal structure in many Muslim societies. In fact, the Quran never describes Eve as being created inferior to Adam (Hassan, 1999). Additionally, the Quran never excludes women from political and religious leadership, but rather a wide range of stories of strong women figures such as Bilqis (the queen of Sheba), Hagar (wife of Abraham), Asiyah (wife of the Pharaoh) and Mary (the mother of Jesus) have been discussed positively in the sacred text (Hamdan, 2010). Quran entitles women to contract their own marriages, control their own wealth and inheritance, receive education, participate in political and religious leadership and contribute to social development (Hamdan, 2010; Hassan, 1999; Moghadam, 2004).

Nevertheless, all of the above contradicts the current status of women across many Muslim societies. The reality is that the Quran as a divine text is open to multiple interpretations within which diverse meanings can emerge. However, the sacred text has become institutionalized through ideological speeches that are grounded in the biological reasonings for legitimatizing certain social rules. In Saudi Arabia, as an example, there is a council of male senior scholars who monitor and issue Islamic law (Hamdan, 2008). The invention of Guardianship, '*Qawama*', a law that developed to control the relationship between men and women across many Muslim societies, is a relevant example of the male-dominant production of knowledge. The word '*Qawama*' is only mentioned once throughout the Quran,

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel (strength) the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means. (Quran, 4:34)

This particular Quranic verse has evoked controversial debates about the superiority of men above women. As a Saudi woman, I was taught in my schooling years that men have been granted guardianship over women due to their biological and intellectual superiority. I, however, concur with Wadud (1999) that the word *Qawama* and its current interpretations are inconsistent with many of other basic Islamic legal rights, which, in turn, problematizes the rationality of its current interpretation. Additionally, if Quran orders men to provide for women that does not mean women cannot provide for themselves nor does it give men authority over women (Hamdan, 2008). I agree with Hamdan (2010) and Hassan (1999) that the flexibility in interpreting Quranic revelations contradicts the current absolutist views on the meanings behind the Quranic text. Instead, the open interpretations can offer a contextualized approach to understanding the text within its historical and societal contexts and thus can rethink the current views of Muslim women's roles.

The singular interpretations of Quran and its domination by male scholars as well as the segregation of women from public life have played key roles in constructing the current status of women. Saudi women, in particular, have been long indoctrinated to value traditional roles as housewives and mothers with the exception of particular professions that do not entail mixing between the two sexes. I agree with Amani Hamdan (2005) that the subordinate position that many Saudi women have accepted for themselves is never an individualistic preference nor a conscious choice. Such negative self-concept of one's duties and capabilities in life is produced through a homogenous group (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

A historical narrative of girls' education in Saudi Arabia.

Prior to the establishment of Saudi Arabia in 1932, education had been offered for both boys and girls in the form of tutorials or learning groups. Those learning groups, *Kuttab*, were traditionally located inside or near local mosques and led by professional male or female *Quran* readers (Rugh, 2002). While children from both genders attended those tutorials, whether in separate or the same location, parents would stop sending their daughters to *Kuttab* at the onset of puberty (Hamdan, 2005). By the 9th century, a group of *Hijazi* merchants had established private schools in three cities, Jeddah, Makkah and Medina, offering a variety of subjects in Arabic (Rugh, 2002). Those schools aimed to minimize the Ottoman influence on education in the region (Ménoret, 2005). Education and politics within that era of history were in constant change. Since the scope of this research is the foci of education in Saudi Arabia, I demonstrate the history of education in the region from 1925 until 2018.

In 1925, after Saud bin Abdul Aziz's unification of multiple regions in the Arabian Peninsula including *Hijaz*, a board of Education was founded to supervise and expand the five private schools in the *Hijaz* region (Ménoret, 2005). Subsequently, the board became a Directorate of Education. In 1953, the Directorate of Education became the Ministry of Education, offering secular education for boys through 12 years of schooling in elementary, intermediate and secondary levels (Hamdan, 2005). Formal public education was exclusively offered to boys before the establishment of girls' education in 1956.

In 1956, King Faisal's wife, Queen Iffat AlThunayyan, introduced and formed a system for girls' education in Saudi Arabia (Hamdan, 2005). The Queen received her education in Istanbul before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and prior to her return to the Arabian Peninsula. Her full engagement and strong belief in the importance of women's education and development was confronted by opposition from conservative, tribal men (Rugh, 2002). In

Riyadh, this opposition manifested in demonstrations against education for women (Hamdan, 2005). King Faisal used official force to keep girls' schools open and clearly stated the importance of girls' education but did not force parents to send their daughters to school.

Queen Iffat's academy in the city of Jeddah aimed to offer modern education within an Islamic framework (Hamdan, 2005). The main objective was to provide girls with opportunities to pursue science, language or liberal arts. During those early years of girls' formal schooling, enrolment came from elite and upper-middle class families (Hamdan, 2005). Those families would often send their daughters to study abroad in boarding schools; they, therefore, celebrated the establishment of girls' education in their own country. For many Saudis, however, girls' education was deemed useless and harmful to those whose life duty was to be ideal Muslim housewives and mothers (El-Sanabary, 1994; Hamdan, 2005).

As a response to the opposition and demonstrations against girls' education, a General Presidency was created in 1960, staffed by conservative religious scholars, to govern the education offered to girls (Hamdan, 2005; Rugh, 2002). The General Presidency of Girls was given full control over the girls' education system from its formation in 1960 until the termination of its services in 2002. Their stance was clear: that is, education is only beneficial if it prepares a girl to become an ideal housewife and mother and if it may facilitate her in pursuing professions that suit her nature, particularly in the fields of education and medicine (Gahwaji, 2013; Hamdan, 2005). While the girls' schooling system was developed and supervised by conservative male scholars, teachers and staff inside girls' schools have been solely female.

Further to the formal schooling system, higher education was first offered to women in 1965 in the Department of Economics, King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah (El-Sanabary, 1994). It was followed by the establishment of women's campuses in different universities around the country, admitting women to medicine in 1978 along with a variety of majors

including home economics, education, English, Arabic, mathematics, chemistry, biology and physics (El-Sanabary, 1994). More recently, new departments such as computer sciences and schools of law have gained popularity amongst Saudi women (Gahwaji, 2013). To date, however, a wide range of disciplines such as engineering schools as well as geology and petroleum are held exclusive to men. Interestingly, the discipline of women and gender studies is unavailable as an academic discourse in the Kingdom, either as a department or in courses. When girls' education was declared obligatory in 1960, the available professions were also defined, that is, education or medicine (Gahwaji, 2013). Such restriction has caused overload in these two sectors, leaving women with few chances to be involved in other areas of the workforce.

It has been suggested that when some changes began to take place in women's presence in public life, a drastic incident occurred in 1979 that shifted the progressive perspective to a conservative one (Hamdan, 2005; Ménoret, 2005). In 1979, a Saudi extremist attempted to seize the Grand Mosque (the mosque where Muslims perform pilgrimage) in the city of Makkah, with the intention of ending the so-called "Westernization". After the attempt to seize the Grand Mosque in Makkah, women in Saudi Arabia were excluded from public life and the development of their nation (Hamdan, 2005). For example, the legal system required that businesses can be conducted only through a male representative, and televisions were banned from screening unveiled women (Hamdan, 2005).

Despite the restricting regulations toward women's presence in public life, girls' enrolment in schools has rapidly increased over the years. By the beginning of the 80s, the number of girls enrolled in elementary schools was almost equal to the number of boys (Hamdan, 2005). The closing of the General Presidency of Girls and the resulting absence of conservative men from the schooling system have transformed the face of girls' education in the

region. Since 2002, the Ministry of Education has been assigned to manage all types of education in one system for both genders.

Women, education & social roles: 2002-2018.

As demonstrated above, girls' formal education in Saudi Arabia was established a decade behind boys' formal education. The differentiation in the curriculum has been one of the powerful methods for continually reproducing the same results in girls' education. For instance, the domestic role of women in society can be traced in various textbooks and subjects. Nevertheless, recently, girls and boys have received education under the same institution through equal distribution of resources, curricula and textbooks. Though equal distribution of resources is maintained, the elimination of certain subjects from girls' education remains an issue. For instance, the implementation of Physical Education in girls' schools was a subject of debate until 2016, when a law was passed for PE to be officially implemented in girls' schools (MOE, 2018). The current Saudi government is introducing major reforms to open new opportunities for women and increase their participation in public life (MOE, 2018). Yet, the absence of education for wide strands of the working sector remains a major constraint to women's participation in the workforce. Despite the high rates of women university graduates, their involvement in public life compromises only 13% of the total workforce, as women's job options are limited to education, administrative jobs and medicine (Gahwaji, 2013). The latest law to lift the ban on driving and issuing driving licenses for women, as well as opening the industrial market to women, have expanded the scope of work opportunities and challenged the dominant segregation between the two sexes (Gahwaji, 2013).

The above political, social and economic events have had a significant impact on Saudi society and its culture. The rise of income and the change of family structure, from extended families to nuclear ones, have redefined the lifestyle of many Saudi families, particularly women

from the upper and middle classes whose presence in the workforce is most obvious (Gahwaji, 2013). One evident phenomenon is the increase in the employment of foreign nannies and housekeepers within the family as an alternative solution to insufficient childcare services (Gahwaji, 2013). Therefore, the demand for childcare services has increased over the past few years.

Early childhood education in Saudi Arabia.

The idea of preschool education was first introduced in Saudi Arabia by the government in 1975 with the establishment of one preschool in Makkah city (Alqassem, Dashash & Alzahrani, 2016). A decade later, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organization (AGFUNG) as well as the General Presidency for Girls' Education developed a self-learning curriculum for early childhood education programs in the region. The program offers a comprehensive source for teachers that includes a detailed written account of all materials required for teaching aids (Alqassem, Dashash & Alzahrani, 2016). The latest reformation of the self-learning curriculum, the 7th edition, was published in 2004.

Preschools in Saudi Arabia are considered independent education since enrolment in primary school does not require previous formal education (UNESCO, 2011). However, the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia supervises preschool education (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016; Rugh, 2002). The current preschool system in Saudi Arabia stretches through three years that cover the age range of 3 to 6 years old offering care and education for girls and boys in the same setting. The Saudi government advocates providing free education under the slogan "Education for All," but there are few resources and funds allocated to preschool education. In 2010, for instance, there were only 1,667 preschool centers, whereas the number of elementary schools exceeded 13,000 for boys and girls. In 2008, the enrolment ratio of children in preschool was

estimated to be around 11% which is drastically low compared to other countries (Alqassem, Dashash & Alzahrani, 2016). Besides the limited presence of preschools, the number of public preschool centers is relatively low compared to private preschools across the country (Gahwaji, 2013). Today, there are a total of 2,559 preschools across the country, with more classes and a higher number of enrolments in private preschools (Alqassem, Dashash & Alzahrani, 2016). The Directory of Education in Riyadh city reported a total of 319 private preschools with 32,792 students and 132 public preschools with 11,496 students (MOE, 2018).

The above shows that preschool services are exclusive to certain social groups. As mentioned earlier, women from the middle and upper-middle classes are more likely to be seen in the workforce, especially within high-status professions such as medicine, higher education and banking (Gahwaji, 2013). Despite the shortage of funds and restrictions, the latest strategic plan (2015-2020) aims to expand and develop education for preschoolers, with a goal of establishing 1,500 in five years (MOE, 2018). In that sense, the field of early childhood education is considerably new and has yet to be listed as compulsory or to be formally funded by the government.

However, the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia provides a guidebook for preschool teachers offering a curriculum for children between the age of 3 to 6 years old (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016). This guidebook suggests themes, activities, worksheets and songs. In order to demonstrate accountability, teachers are required to plan lessons ahead, and be evaluated by supervisors afterwards (Khoja, 2013). The curriculum consists of multiple themes, including family, friends, libraries and books, clothing, sand, and health and safety. In each theme, teachers are required to provide activities that promote children's reading and writing skills, their social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development and their understanding of Islam. The national curriculum for preschool provision is described in the document as a child-centered curriculum

(Aljabreen & Lash, 2016; Gahwaji, 2013). Its implementation is based on the self-learning approach (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016; Gahwaji, 2013).

This curriculum document is organized into chapters; each chapter elaborates on a theme. The chapter begins with an introduction that provides the rationale behind a particular topic as the theme. Then, each chapter presents concepts which classroom teachers are expected to deliver to children. There is also a list of the milestones that children are expected to reach by the end of the theme. The government curriculum discusses the classroom environment and suggests different classroom layouts. Preschool classrooms are supposed to include corners such as a building-blocks corner, a playing-house corner, a literacy and numeracy corner, a science and discovery corner, an art corner, and a library corner. The guidebook invites teachers to make changes in the classroom environment based on the theme of the month. Often, parental involvement is limited to attending parents' evenings and school events and communications with parents commence through daily reports.

The kindergarten school day often starts with circle time that follows a routine, starting with the calendar, Quran recitation, songs, and then a teacher-planned lesson (Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia, 2004). The lessons are intended to encourage interaction between the teacher and the children. However, since the early period of the Saudi schooling system, memorization continues to be a main feature of Saudi educational (Rugh, 2002).

In the above section on the Saudi Arabian context, I located my thesis in its political and social system. I established my discussion with a geopolitical overview, followed by the historical and contemporary status of girls' education in Saudi Arabia. Lastly, I noted the progress of early childhood education and care across the past four decades.

Locating Myself in the Research

Researchers in interpretive studies are often confronted with the integral question of classifying themselves as insiders and/or outsiders to their research context (Katyal & King, 2011; Tangen, 2008; Thompson, 2014). As the thesis unfolds, I unravel my positionality within the research context through the discussion of reflexivity and the practice of writing field notes. For the purpose of this section, which is intended to define my locatedness in the thesis, I reflect on my positionality as an insider and outsider to the research context. Later, I revisit my positionality in the field to reflect on the paradoxes of writing about my own culture to a Western academic audience, contributing in particular to the English-speaking academic discourse.

The question of the impact of my positionality arose from the early stages of defining my questions and designing my research. I am aware that critiquing and troubling the cultural and social norms of a traditional, conservative society may lead to questions about my loyalty, especially as a woman within a culture that condemns resistance to cultural traditions. However, I clarify that my study is not meant to condemn nor to approve of the reality. As an insider, I aim to create alternative ways of viewing the world. That is, my research puts the current normalization into question, and alternatively proposes possible ways of promoting equitable possibilities for boys and girls within existing political and religious frames. As an insider adopting a self-reflexive approach, I challenge myself to reveal aspects of my identities. Coming from a conservative culture that values silence and obedience, I have been constantly disturbed by my urge to critique my own culture and reveal my own subjectivity. However, I deliberately adopted an interpretive, self-reflexive methodology to explore not only the embedded social and gender norms in a preschool classroom in Saudi Arabia, but also the hidden subjectivities within my insider-outsider position to the researched world.

My experience of living in two contexts, East and West, has exposed me to a wide range of views on sameness, differences and multiplicities. Growing up in Saudi Arabia in the 80s, a period within which girls' education was to a great extent controlled by conservative, religious men, has impacted my perception of myself and the other. If I had to describe my schooling experience in one word, I would choose 'dichotomy.' To me, the absolutist views that once defined my world in two opposite dichotomies were never a source of total acceptance nor a motive of conscious resistance. Over the years, however, I have become motivated to see beneath and beyond the two ends, to explore the multiple narratives of every story.

Recognizing that multiplicity was not confined to my research questions and interpretations but extended to include my perception of my positionality in the field, and later to revisit the role of being an insider-outsider in shaping my experience of writing to a Western audience. Typically, being defined as an insider implies that the researcher shares commonalities with her researched world (Agar, 1986). Such a category is often defined by a range of biographical, social or political axes, including language, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, abilities or/and political beliefs (Katyal & King 2011; Kim, 2011). The assumption is that commonalities entail special affinity between the researcher and her participants and provide contextualized understanding of the research field (Kim, 2011).

In the case of my research, I initially positioned myself as an insider to my research context since I shared, to a large extent, the same language, religion, class and gender, as I identify myself as a Saudi Muslim middle-class woman whose native language is Arabic. Immediately, however, I began to feel a partial displacement to the setting. I am an insider as a Saudi woman, yet simultaneously an outsider as my dialect, skin tone and family name can be distinguished from the norm in the city of Riyadh. In my visits, I had teachers approaching me inquiring into my ethnic background and, in a few cases, requesting to check my national

identification card. Their queries were perhaps a source of discomfort and implied misrecognition but rarely placed me in an inferior position. I entered the field as Saudi/Hijazi doctoral student coming from a Canadian/North American academic location which placed me in a privileged yet alienated position, especially among teachers and school staff (I explicate issues of power in chapter three through the discussion of reflexivity and ethical considerations).

As a former early childhood educator, I encountered a myriad of moments within which I felt as an insider to the environment which, in turn, enabled me to communicate with the children and the classroom teacher. Interestingly, my conversations with the classroom teachers were often regarding my experience in teaching preschool children. That is, my professional experience created shared meanings between me and the classroom teacher. In cases when the assistant teacher was unavailable, I offered to facilitate by reading a book to a group of children or to assist in the art corner. Though the classroom teacher had often thanked me and politely rejected my offer, she approached me on other occasions for assistance. However, I put effort to locate myself as a researcher and avoid imposing myself or replacing the role of the classroom teacher. I did that through arriving in free play time and leaving once the play was terminated by the classroom teacher. I introduced myself to the classroom teacher and the children using my first name to avoid being defined as a teacher, which can imply authority. However, the children, who come from a hierarchical culture within which titles represent respectful manners, were confused. Soon they began to call me “the student.” I acknowledge that being a doctoral student and coming from the adult world constituted a form of power that placed me as an outsider to the children’s world.

Thus, I contest that my presence in the setting was never located in one end of the continuum. Rather, the constant and ambiguous shifts due to the nature of my relationship with the researched world have placed me as both an insider and outsider to the context. I learned that

being an insider or outsider is a continuum that underlies one's positionality in the field which is prominently influenced by power relations. Kim (2011), who interrogated the question of positionality in research with children, argued that an insider can yet be "the native going to a stranger" (Kim, 2011, p. 265).

Outline of the Chapters

Though I briefly introduce my conceptual understanding in this chapter, I elaborate on my choice of paradigms for the purpose of grounding my research with the academic discourse as well as illustrating a conceptual map to understanding and interpreting my data. In chapter two, I begin with a historical overview of play and gender within the discipline of early childhood education. I expand my discussion through defining my choice of theoretical framework. I explicate how the choice of sociocultural theory and feminist post-structuralist theory can provide insightful and pertinent understandings to my study. In my discussion, I concentrate on specific concepts within each theory. Then, I review interpretive research on the subject of gender, preschools and fantasy play.

Chapter three details the methodology, choice of methods and the procedure of data collection. Within my discussion, I describe the research site and introduce the participants involved in the study. I demonstrate my strategies to minimize issues concerned with ethical and methodological dilemmas in the field.

In chapter four, I present and discuss my analysis procedure. Then, I expand my discussion through a presentation of eight narratives performed by the children in their fantasy play followed by my own interpretations of each story. I share those stories along with the codes and my interpretations. I note that my themes are not generated through the eight stories but extend to include other narratives from the fieldwork. Those narratives are interpreted in relation

to my descriptive and reflective field notes. I synthesize my data through a discussion of three common themes traced across the data set.

In chapter five, I address my research questions with the purpose of connecting my emergent findings with my research questions. Following, I revisit my position as an insider-outsider in the research and I discuss issues of representations in ethnographic work as well as trustworthiness of findings. Then, I situate my conclusion within multiple contexts, that is, Saudi Arabian society, the practices of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia and the existing academic knowledge in early childhood education. In my implications, my discussion is concerned with sharing my insights with practitioners, particularly early childhood educators and pedagogues. Additionally, I address the implications of my study in the research discourse, describing the uncertainty surrounding the process of framing my work within sensory ethnography methodology. Finally, I briefly present limitations and suggestions for future studies and conclude the chapter by a summary of the findings.

Summary

This chapter offered an introduction to my research through which I shared my rationale behind this particular study and the significance of the research. Next, I demonstrated the purpose of my study and defined my research questions. Following, I briefly described my conceptual belief regarding the notion of childhood in order to provide a foundational understanding of my choice of paradigms. Similarly, I presented my process of selecting and designing a methodology for the study. The second part of this chapter detailed the historical and political events of the context. I presented a narrative of the historical and political context of education in Saudi Arabia. I focused my discussion on girls' education, then concluded with early childhood education in the region. Then, I discussed my locatedness in the study which I revisit throughout the following chapters. Lastly, I offered an outline of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In this chapter, I outline the shift in thinking regarding children's play and the formation of identities, particularly gender identities, over the past few decades. This historical overview is meant to provide insights into the ways gender and play have been defined and explored within the discourse of childhood. I begin by tracing the history of play, starting with the influence of developmental psychology before moving to the recognition of the pivotal role of sociocultural theories and then the critical views that poststructural theories have offered to the field. Similarly, I discuss how gender has been examined across childhood studies. I conclude each section of the above with a definition of the two central concepts in my study: play and gender. Lastly, I present my understanding of children's fantasy play and the construction of gender identities through the lens of two paradigms: sociocultural and poststructural theories. In so doing, I intend to explain how my data (presented in a subsequent chapter) are analyzed and interpreted. The last section in this chapter is a literature review of interpretive research that has explored children's construction of meanings about gender and fantasy play within preschool settings. I categorize the literature into three strands: 1) play, school and childhood; 2) play, gender and resistance; and 3) play, gender and popular culture. I craft my review of the literature around these concepts as I intend to link the discussion of my findings to existing work on children's play and the construction of gender.

Historical Overview: Play in Childhood

Play, in its broadest sense, has historically existed in varying forms with respect to its cultural, social and developmental contexts (Bergen, 2014). According to Reifel (2014),

When we talk about play, we are dealing simultaneously with an abstraction, a cultural phenomenon, a very broad set of activities, states of mind and particular activities that each human has participated in over the course of a lifetime (p.159).

Thus, the complexity of the phenomenon causes difficulty in defining play due to its multiple manifestations (Bergen, 2014). On the whole, the discussion of play in relation to development and education can be traced back to the work of Froebel (1887), the designer of the kindergarten, who introduced play as a tool for fostering children's education (Bergen, 2014). Eric Erikson (1963) expanded theories of play by theorizing that pretense play and construction play offer children space to practice power over their life. He argued that play is vital for children's development, as it is through play that they learn how to deal with emotional and behavioural dilemmas (Bergen, 2014). Jean Piaget (1896-1980), a leader in child developmental theories, established a set of stages that deviate the different types of play as children go into their stages of cognitive development (Reifel, 2014). For instance, Piaget differentiated between games with rules and fantasy play. His clinical observation of a small group of children led to the development of sequential stages that begin with functional play and move to symbolic play and finally game play (Lyle, 2000; Reifel, 2014).

Subsequently, when Piagetian theory attracted the attention of American researchers, the focus shifted to the characterization of children's developmental stages, and efforts were made to produce a system of classification and normalization that measures the growth of children (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013; Rogoff, 2003). In this way, human development has been primarily defined by using age as an indication of growth; for example, the age at which children can understand game rules or abstract concepts. This characterization of development in accordance with age has formed what has become known as Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), which has long been used as a measurement of development and learning in the field of early childhood education (National Association for the Education of Young Children NAEYC, 2009; MacNaughton, 2000). However, Piagetian stages of play in relation to age and maturity have been widely criticized (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014). The criticism is

focused on the absence of the role of social, historical and cultural factors as major components of a child's development.

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), an influential Russian sociocultural theorist, offered a contextualized perception of development that gained popularity within the field of early childhood education. His theory contributed to play, particularly fantasy play, through his discussion of the complex skills that fantasy play can bring to children's development. Unlike Piaget, whose universal developmental theory anchored cognitive development to age and maturity, Vygotsky's theory proposed that development is socially driven (Vygotsky, 1978). That is, the understanding of human development and learning can only be located within its natural setting, not in a laboratory (Lyle, 2000). Within the sociocultural theory, play is a means of development, rather than a measurable tool of growth. Overall, sociocultural and historical theories contributed in locating children's play within a particular historical and discursive context (Saltmarsh, 2014).

Following the twentieth century, the politics and economics of the contemporary world have formed a new discourse of childhood; that is, childhood is "conceptualized, managed and scrutinized" through the intersectionality between culture, policy and pedagogy (Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 98). Thus, socialization is not the only context within which development occurs, but rather the normative practices that children experience at home, school and/or through mass media intersect with one another to create multiple discourses. Contemporary understandings of play within early childhood education foreground the active role of children in negotiating their multiple worlds in their everyday life (Blaise, 2005; James, 2007; MacNaughton, 2005). The ideology of play as innocent and neutral is rendered problematic when viewed within the framework of power and privilege.

This post-developmental era of understanding children's ways of knowing is explained more fully in the conceptual framework section.

Defining play in my research.

I concur with MacNaughton (2005), Davies (1989a) and Paley (2004) and Saltmarsh (2014) by quoting that “play [is].... a means of children's participation in the production of contemporary culture and their implication in the operations of power” (Saltmarsh, 2014, p.98). Such an understanding of play contradicts the biological reasoning that presents the phenomenon as a simple natural behaviour as well as the simplistic socialization perspective that sees play as a platform within which children internalize what they encounter in their community (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014). Across the literature of early childhood, educators have utilized various terms to describe the social interaction between two people or more in their engagement to stimulate social roles from their reality and imagination (Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Rogers & Evans, 2008). These terms range to include sociodramatic play, pretense play, imaginary play, role-play and fantasy play. I adopt the term fantasy play to describe social and imaginary situations, specifically how children enact social roles and negotiate rules through my investigation of their narrative and performance during fantasy play moments.

In this research, fantasy play is analyzed and interpreted as a means through which children construct meanings and knowledge about themselves as boys and girls within their social, political and cultural contexts. I view the narratives or stories told in children's fantasy play as “a tool for making sense of our lives and organizing memories” (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2014, p.240) as well as a medium within which children express concerns or desires (Paley, 1984). Because this research is about studying the fluid and complex concept of self in relation to others, I view fantasy play as an unstructured discourse with unspoken and subtle

rules which offer opportunities for children to experiment with meanings and values away from the failure of deviating from the norm.

Historical Overview: Gender in Childhood

Research on gender, childhood and play is driven by feminist scholars and their commitment to providing equitable practices and opportunities for children (Blaise, 2014). Within the field of early childhood education, the meaning of gender has been explored through various theoretical perspectives, which include viewing gender as being both biologically determined and socially constructed. As such, the discussion of gender, sex or sexuality can vary based on its orientation. Here I discuss the historical review of gender within the field of early childhood education. The study of gender across childcare centers and childhood was prominently grounded in the biological reasoning of the meaning of gender (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014). This is especially overt across programs influenced by Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014). In Wohlwend's study (2007) of a child-centered setting, the researcher used discourse analysis to interpret teachers' understandings of gender norms and their disciplinary decisions. It was shown that child-centered practices are not particularly neutral, but rather reinforced gender stereotypes of passive femininity and active masculinity.

Critical feminist scholars such as Davies (1989a), Paechter (2007), MacNaughton (2005) and Blaise (2014) have explored early childhood settings through poststructuralist views, shifting the simplistic view of gender as neutral and proposing a complex perspective that places children's agency at the core of the construction of their gendered selves. Within poststructuralism, children are deemed active participants in constructing meanings about themselves. Their subjectivities regarding such concepts are formed through their usage of language and their active engagement in the everyday discursive practices (Blaise, 2014).

Moreover, the intersectionality between and among gender, race and social class has been a subject of concern, especially to women with disadvantaged ethnic or racial backgrounds and/or lower social status (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013; Hamdan, 2008). For example, bell hooks (1994) in her influential writings, reflected on the concept of gender, placing race and class as central to the ongoing processes of constructing one's gendered selves. In that sense, gender identities are not limited within binaries of maleness and femaleness, but rather as "a more complex understanding of identities and social relations" (Blaise, 2014, p.117). This awareness of such intersectionality proposes that children's gendered identity cannot be understood away from their experiences as coming from particular racial background and social class as well as their engagement in multiple discourses.

Defining gender in my research.

In my study, I differentiate between sex and gender by locating the former as biologically based and the latter as socially and culturally constructed. The biological characteristics determine the sex (female or male) which exist within social and cultural continuum of meanings (Blaise, 2014). Gender, on the other hand, is "the collection of attitudes which society stitches together (dress, behaviour, attributed personality traits, expected social roles, etc.) to clothe boys and girls" (Eileen Bynre, 1978, cited in Arnot, 2002, p. 118).

To characterize my approach to studying gender in relation to choices of social roles, I concur with Blaise (2014) and MacNaughton (2005) that gender is socially and culturally constructed through social relations and the available set of expectations. According to Blaise (2014), gender is "learned by social interaction, interpersonal relationships, cultures and opportunities" (p.115). When a child engages in social practices, the pre-existing meanings of gender become part of her/his understandings and the taken-for-granted assumptions. In this way, I propose that a child negotiates the meanings of gender in relation to enacting certain

social roles and actively engages in constructing her/his understanding of gender stereotypical attitude towards certain social roles. This process of co-constructing meanings occurs through the discursive practices in a child's everyday dominant discourses (Davies, 1989a; Paechter, 2007; MacNaughton, 2005). While I propose above that gender is not fixed, I recognize that fluidity is confined within what meanings are normalized and recognized in a given place and time.

Overall, children play active roles in forming their understanding of meanings of femininity and masculinity within their social realm. However, the agency that children have in their learning and meaning-making is limited to the discourses available to them (MacNaughton, 2005). That is, the active role in constructing one's identities is never a boundless activity, but rather a set of processes that functions within power and social relations.

Theoretical framework: A Sociocultural Perspective

In framing my study, I draw from both sociocultural and poststructural theories to craft a conceptual framework to assist me with reading and interpreting my data. In this section, I focus on the social and cultural contextualized nature of one's understandings of her/his world. In so doing, I borrow from the work of Vygotsky (1978), which revolves around the idea that human development, particularly cognitive development, originates in social interaction with others (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Roth & Yew-Jin, 2007). The holistic child is a notion developed within sociocultural theories to criticize the emphasis on identity formation as an individualized experience that exists in isolation from its social, cultural and historical contexts (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Nicolopoulou, 1991).

Vygotsky's views on fantasy play/role-play contributed substantially to meanings of play in early childhood settings (Reifel, 2014). Play to Vygotsky was a means of development within which children from age 2 to 8 learn the language of their culture. The skills that children

encounter during their social interactions in playing with more competent peers or/and adults can ultimately become part of the children's independent achievements. In his writing, Vygotsky posited, "In play, the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behaviour; in play he is, as it were, ahead above himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 92).

Within the sociocultural concept, play is always social, and identity is always in the making. To Vygotsky (1978), play occurs within a social context even when a child plays alone, as materials and rules are products of a certain social and cultural environment (Nicolopoulou, 1991). Whether a child is playing alone or with peers, he/she is interacting with sociocultural materials, stories and themes (Nicolopoulou, 1991). The social interaction that takes place among two children or more creates a space within which children engage in *higher mental processes* to learn and construct meanings (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, "play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky cited in Nicolopoulou, 1991, p.136).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a central concept in Vygotsky's theory which explicates the support, scaffolding, that adults or more competent children give to their peers during their social interaction with one another (Vygotsky, 1978). It is a concept that defines the relationship between learning and development as,

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

As such, when fantasy play commences among a group of children, it can create a context that broadens the possibilities and competencies of the children involved. In so doing, a child's understanding of her/his world is constructed through and in relation to the peers/adults involved in the Zone of Proximal Development. When two or more children interact socially, new meanings unfold as a result of their social interaction (Roth & Yew-Jin, 2007). In their

fantasy play within which a zone of proximal development is created, children construct meanings about who they are in relation to what and whom. Such meanings are constructed collectively and collaboratively and, thus, are entirely subjected to the people involved in each play event.

In addition to the concept of ZPD, Vygotsky characterized play using two elements which are inherently essential to my research, that is, imagination and rules (Nicolopoulou, 1991). First, Vygotsky did not draw a distinct line between reality and imagination. On the contrary, his approach to imaginary-real world in children's play was that imaginary situations are the foundation of any type of play regardless of the nature of play. Vygotsky defines imaginary situations as,

In everyday life, fantasy or imagination refer to what is not actually true, what does not correspond to reality, and what, thus, could not have any serious practical significance. But in actuality, imagination, as the basis of all creative activity, is an important component of absolutely all aspects of cultural life, enabling artistic, scientific, and technical creation alike (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 9).

The above definition suggests that in children's fantasy play, imaginary situations are interwoven with their realities. In Vygotsky's writing about imaginary situations, he posited,

A child's play is not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired. He combines them and uses them to construct a new reality, one that conforms to his own needs and desires (2004, p.12).

Vygotsky's perspective on imagination and reality suggests that situations, scenes or narratives created by children are known to the children through their everyday life experiences. That is, reality constitutes imagination and children's imaginary situations produce new realities.

Second, Vygotsky theorized that social rules are evident in children's play, including the most unstructured types of play such as fantasy play. Those rules follow cultural meanings and scripts that scaffold children's learning and development (Bergen, 2014). Vygotsky argued, "there is no such thing as play without rules. The imaginary situations of any form of play

already contains rules of behaviours” (1978, p.74). Rules are often subtle in children’s fantasy play, whereas in implicit imaginary situations such as structured games the rules become explicit. Children’s understanding of social rules is overt in their role-play or fantasy play, manifesting in ways such as how they perform certain cultural practices (for example, how to address a senior) or how they choose proper words in a social situation (for example, how to tell bad news) (Oers, 2014). Therefore, children’s social interaction in their fantasy play is regulated by implicit rules that portray children’s understandings of their everyday life and that project their hopes.

It is significant to note that Vygotsky may have not specifically theorized the formation of identity. Nevertheless, his method for understanding human development was grounded in general concepts which offered a wide range of explanations for understanding identity as a learning process (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Nicolopoulou, 1991). From a sociocultural perspective, identities are regarded as both the narratives and practices shared and performed by members of a particular group through cultural tools as well as through the ways members of a group position themselves in relation to each other (Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Nicolopoulou, 1991). In so doing, children construct meanings through what Barbara Rogoff (1990, 2003) referred to it as “apprenticeship thinking,” in which children learn from more experienced people through their active participation in a shared practice. Rogoff (1990, 2003) whose work was largely influenced by Vygotsky, proposed that children, in their active participation in their cultural practices, do not internalize or absorb, but rather appropriate meanings and materials from their dynamic world. The notion of appropriation, which has been employed widely in the literature of early childhood (Kendrick, 2003; Paley, 1984; Sawyer, 1996; Wood & Cook, 2009; Madrid 2013), refers to,

The process by which individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation.... the basic idea of appropriation is that, through

participation, people change and in the process become prepared to engage in subsequent similar activities. By engaging in an activity, participating in its meaning, people necessarily make ongoing contribution” (Rogoff, 1995, p.6).

In that sense, the concept of ‘appropriation/participatory appropriation’ contradicts the notion of internalization, and alternatively foregrounds children’s active participation in co-constructing events and activities. Rogoff (1990, 1995, 2003) asserted that children not only appropriate words, but also events, materials and activities and adapt them to fit into their own purposes.

Corsaro (2011) argued that through appropriation and embellishment of popular culture materials, children challenge the authority of adults and thus propose their understanding of how to be a girl or a boy in their culture. The concept of appropriation implies that children’s active participation in transforming events and meanings can enable children to not only manifest their resilience, but also maintain the social norms. The meanings that a group of children construct through their social interactions contribute to the creation of their own culture, and, on the other hand, culture contributes to the way in which children form an understanding of the world (Corsaro, 2011; Rogoff, 2003).

Overall, the holistic approach in sociocultural views on play and identity formation situates the process of learning within its context, and regards play as a complex social practice that fosters children’s understanding of their social reality. However, sociocultural theory does not offer a sufficient explanation to children’s everyday complex and multiple social and cultural practices (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013; MacNaughton, 2000) and does not necessarily interrogate the forces shaping children’s choices (Orellana, 1999). Since children are exposed to numerous resources in various social and cultural realms that differ in their messages, a child’s construction of self cannot be understood independently from her/his interaction and positions in

many discourses. In the following, I broaden my framework to include a paradigm that elaborates on the notion of multiplicity and discourse.

Theoretical framework: A Poststructural Perspective

In this section, I introduce another scope to my theoretical framework to include a selection of arguments from poststructural feminist scholars such as Bronwyn Davies (1989a, 1989b, 1992), Mindy Blaise (2005, 2009, 2014), and Glenda MacNaughton (2005, 2009), whose work is predominantly conducted within early years and school life. In my effort to synthesize relevant concepts to my study, I choose to focus on two elements: 1) multiplicity and 2) discourse.

As I discuss above, children do not simply internalize and model what others do. In their appropriation of meanings and materials, children not only learn about their social reality, but actively, as well as selectively, transform and construct their realities by choosing what to be and say in a particular time and place. To poststructuralists, a child is not defined by a singular trait, situation or culture. Rather, a child's understanding of her/himself is constituted and reconstituted through her/his relationships with others within various discursive practices (Davies, 1989b). The reality is that children are born into a pre-existing world with a set of dominant social orders that play a key role in constructing children's views of their subjectivities as boys and girls (Blaise, 2014; Davies, 1989a). Such existing relations of power position certain practices and ideologies as dominant than others (MacNaughton, 2005). Those dominant practices and ideologies are sustained by historical, sociocultural and institutional—be they religious and/or educational—forces which create discourses (Gee, 2000). The concept of discourse is not only linguistic but refers to “powerful, integrated complexes of language practices, social identities and ideologies” (Keenan, Solsken & Willett, 1999, p.36) which are

expressed and produced in one's many ways of "being-doing certain kinds of people" (Gee, 2000, p.21) within a particular frame of time, space and group of people.

When children engage with one another in negotiating practices and ideologies, they develop a set of resources for the multiple dominant discourses in their lives (Keenan, Solsken & Willet, 1999). The term ideologies refers to, "the shared sets of ideas that guide our actions and enable us to justify them" (MacNaughton, 2005, p.6). Yet, not every ideology is powerful and dominant (Gee, 2000; MacNaughton, 2005). In this study, the dominant ideologies are ones that maintain the status quo of certain social and gender norms.

As they participate in and engage in dominant discourses available to them, children actively construct meanings about how to position themselves within the recognizable categories (MacNaughton, 2005). For example, children are aware that some discourses of being a certain type of girl or boy are dominant in a school setting while other ways of enacting the appropriate gender can be more desirable in a community ritual. In so doing, participating in discursive practices not only positions children as girls or boys, but also as certain kinds of girls or boys in relation to the discourse (Keenan, Solsken, Willet, 1999). According to Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (2013),

dominant discursive regimes work through the concepts, conventions, classifications and categories that we use to analyse, construct and describe reality; through them we acknowledge what is seen as true or false, normal or abnormal, right or wrong (p.33).

Such discursive practices in a society can be traced across the spoken words, texts, practiced ideologies, images, metaphors and titles (Davies, 1989b). As a result, children learn that some emotional and moral meanings are more legitimized and recognized for every category of the social order (Davies, 1989b). MacNaughton (2000) argued that when a child speaks or enacts social roles that correspond to the dominant gender discourse, she/he feels in control and finds pleasure in depicting the norm. On the other hand, a child's resistance to fitting into those

social orders may be deemed as failure or lead to unrecognition in their group or society (Davies, 1989a, 1989b). In order for the individual to feel recognized, empowered and celebrated in one society or group, one has to subordinate to her/his society's definitions and expectations.

MacNaughton (2000) explicated children's construction of identities through a set of ongoing processes that begins with the child reading the meanings available to them, they interpret those meanings in relation to their experiences and discourses, they live them and embody them, desire them and gain pleasure of depicting the norm, they eventually understand them and take them as their own. Nevertheless, the active role of the child in creating reality leads her/him to position her/himself in various categories and consequently work actively in not only sustaining the norm but also constructing new discursive practices. As such, the ongoing construction of meanings about oneself does not result in one way of understanding their positions and roles in society, but rather in multiple ways that differ in relation to the time, space and people involved. Thus, children's active participation in producing meanings about the social and occupational roles in relation to the gender norms cannot be separated from the discourses available to them, that is, the discursive practices which are more desirable and powerful in a given time and place. Poststructuralist theory suggests that children may make choices about what social roles to enact, such as being a nurturer boy or a tough girl; however, such choices are never independent from power relations and dominant discursive practices (Blaise, 2014; MacNaughton, 2000). The agency of a child is rather limited to what practices are more desirable, powerful, available, or pursuable in a certain discourse (MacNaughton, 2000).

When bringing the two elements of discourse and multiplicity to framing my work, I posit that fantasy play and its sociocultural, political and historical factors create a discourse. Since many stories can be told within fantasy play, a child may experience a wide range of possible ways of enacting social roles. In so doing, I put effort into reading and interpreting

children's play, including its performances and narratives, as a discourse. Sawyer (1996) suggested that unstructured social play, particularly fantasy play, is a complex discourse genre; its complexity comes from the absence of explicit rules. Because fantasy play as a discourse is complex and involves participation in multiple social roles within one classroom, its possibility to create a fluid site in which children experiment with different identities is evident across the literature (Wohelwend, 2009). That is, within fantasy play, children engage with one another as a community to enact roles that may produce and/or reproduce discursive practices. Those discursive practices may anchor children's construction of meanings by offering dualistic definitions about who they are and how they should perform. Yet, it has been suggested that in fantasy play children have been shown to disrupt the taken-for-granted norms, and to try new ways of enacting femininity and/or masculinity (Wohelwend, 2007, 2009).

It is significant to point out that in fantasy play, as a discourse that opens opportunities for imaginary situations, each play occurs in a different time and space and involves a new group of people. As such, each play episode carries its implicit new rules which are prevailed in children's negotiations. These rules reflect issues of power and control: for instance, who can speak, and what can be said and when (Sawyer, 1996). The central point is that poststructuralism views the process of negotiations in play not only as a way to understand children's realities, but to critically examine the phenomenon through the lenses of power and privilege. According to Wood & Cook (2009), the complex and contradictory nature of play requires children to position themselves in particular narratives, yet children produce new narratives and rules in order to sustain their play. Additionally, viewing play as a discourse suggests that the same child who plays the role of an innocent princess in one discourse may also enact the role of a powerful princess in another. The active participation within one discourse or another constantly construct new practices and meanings.

Overall, a child is never a passive recipient of social roles, but she/he draws from available discourses to try out new ways of enacting femininities or masculinities. The failure of recognition or fitting into the social and gender norm can prevent children from disrupting the available discourses. Yet, critical feminist theorists have urged that play can open dialogue and encourage children to create new possibilities (MacNaughton, 2005, 2009; Roger, 2010). That is, children's play practices can create safe spaces to challenge unjust assumptions and to engage children in equal practices.

Literature Review on Gender in Preschools

In this section, I review the existing literature on the construction of meanings about gender among preschool children whose ages range between three and five years old. I focus on young children's understandings of their gender selves since it is a key concept in my research despite my profound belief on the complexity of identities that include multiple axes such as race, class, ethnicity and/or (dis)ability (Gee, 2000; Ghosh & Abdi, 2013; MacNaughton, 2000). The creation of imaginary situations between two or more children is the focus of this study and the scope of my literature review. I adopt the term fantasy play to describe the type of play within which imaginary situations and characters are created among a group of peers in a preschool setting. In the following discussion, I review (1) interpretive research within the (2) field of early childhood that has closely examined the (3) subject of self in relation to the other within the (4) discourse of play.

Play, School & Childhood

Children start the long-life process of constructing meanings about who they are in relation to whom and what from a very young age (Ahn, 2011; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013; Davies, 1989a; Gee, 2000; MacNaughton, 2000). A large body of research has suggested that

fantasy play occurs mostly when children are between the ages of three and five and requires an adequate range of familiarity between the children involved (Sawyer, 1996). MacNaughton & Davies (2009) argued that by the age of three, children begin to classify themselves in oppositional gendered categories. In Paley's (1984) ethnographic work on children's play, she examined how children's embodiment of gendered roles shifted by the age of four to portray their awareness of normality in their context, that is, children become eager to classify and assign roles which could help them to make sense of their social world.

While I previously posited that developmental theories have been criticized for associating development and learning with age and maturity, the theory remains legitimate and useful for curriculum development (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). Schools are often designed to place peers together, and props and play spaces are generally readily available within these institutions. Play and learning have formed strong allies throughout the development of the field of early childhood education. In Roger's (2010) discussion of the critical relationship between play and pedagogy, she stated,

At the same time, early childhood discourse has been shaped by a very different perspective, suggested by the often made claim that 'play is the child's work', a phrase originally coined by that pivotal figure in early education's history, Frederick Froebel, and reiterated a century later by Susan Isaacs: 'play is indeed the child's work' (1929: 9). These words have inspired generations of educators to strive for a full and unqualified recognition of the value of play in early learning. (p.152)

As such, play as a practice is essential to early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. While some scholars have argued for the usefulness of unstructured free play for young children's learning and development (Paley, 1984, 2004; Rogers, 2010), others argued for the necessity of reconceptualizing play in early childhood settings to ensure equal opportunities for every child (MacNaughton, 2000; Wood, 2010). Like play, peers and their culture constitute a persistent theme in early childhood settings. Löfdahl (2014) defined peers as children who meet in the specific environments of preschool settings and spend time together on a daily basis over a

longer period of time. Preschool classrooms, like other communities, are social environments that facilitate social interaction among individuals who come from diverse backgrounds to create a complex web of relationships (Lee & Recchia, 2008).

Since play is a complex term to define, preschool teachers have been shown to carry different understandings of the meaning of play and its application in classrooms (Reifel, 2014). Its availability and acceptability as a discourse across childhood settings are often minimized to accommodate for structured and planned play. As a result, there is little time allocated for children's fantasy play in our contemporary world as well as minimum appreciation of children's imaginary situations and stories (Rogers, 2010).

Despite the devalued status of fantasy play within school settings, play and its significance to a child's development has been the subject of investigation by psychologists, educators and ethnographers for decades (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014). The emphasis on such a phenomenon along with the myriad studies on play in relation to cognitive development place the activity as central to children's development and learning. Researchers such as Davies (1989a), Dyson (1989, 1997), Paley (1984), and Kendrick (2003, 2005) studied children's fantasy play as a means through which children interact with one another and subsequently negotiate and produce meanings about oneself. Scholars who studied children's performances during social play have demonstrated the extent to which children construct meanings about themselves and their lives when playing with one another (Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Paley, 1984; Kendrick, 2005).

Play is not only an essential factor in children's development and learning, but it is placed amongst the basic rights granted for children among others such as the right to healthcare, housing and education (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the child, 1989).

Moreover, play has been shown to have a significant impact on our adulthood (Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000; Sandberg, 2003). In one research study on memory work that invited women to recall memories of playing with Barbie dolls, the collective memories provided evidence of girls' active engagement in constructing their gendered identities during their childhood and girlhood (Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000). Sandberg (2003) suggested that, in light of the importance of play in our lives and its role in individuals' constructions of self and recollection of memories, there is a distinct need to study childhood play episodes from different angles.

Play, Identities & Resistance

Play allows children to experience the world, both as they know it and as they would like it to be (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007). Researchers such as Ahn & Filipenko (2007), Paley, (2004) and Kendrick (2005) have addressed how children's interactions with one another through play illustrate the ways they understand themselves and others. Fantasy play, in particular, creates spaces for children to move beyond the boundaries of reality, where they can construct meanings, appropriate social roles and produce narratives that reflect their understandings of and wishes for their world (Paley, 1984; Kendrick, 2005). Dyson (1997), who studied young children's literacy practices in relation to their lived experiences, demonstrated the ways children create multiple worlds in their school life. Dyson (1997) suggested that, in the official world, children are expected to engage in activities that are introduced and regulated by teachers, such as writing a journal or solving a puzzle. In the unofficial world, however, children are given more freedom to interact with one another with little supervision or expectation, in which teachers are barely involved. Dyson's research work documented how children would often combine popular culture materials, such as their favourite characters, with stories about their realities or from their imaginations. For example, in one of Dyson's ethnographic studies (1997),

African-American girls engaged in creating alternative narratives about themselves as powerful and beautiful as opposed to the popular culture narrative in which power and beauty are confined to whiteness.

Dyson (1997) highlighted the intersectionality between the official and unofficial worlds in children's school days. Children often find ways to bring their unofficial world into the most regulated activities that occur in the classroom. Dyson's studies (1989, 1997, 2003) suggested that the unstructured moments of children's play can never be confined to a certain activity or time. Rather, those moments occur when children choose to interact with one another without regulating their interaction. It has been suggested that unstructured moments of children's play, thus, enable children to challenge the dominant discursive practices (Pardhan, 2011). Those particular moments and the possibility for children to converse or interact at any time differ from one social and cultural context to another (Pardhan, 2011).

Parallel to Dyson's conclusions on children's resistance to school culture, Tam (2013) studied the ways children resist their teacher's agenda by appropriating a cultural text and transforming its meanings to meet their purposes. In a kindergarten classroom in Hong Kong, the classroom teacher arranged a corner for the children to play following certain teaching purposes. For instance, after teaching the children about the role of a firefighter, the teacher would provide props that encouraged children to simulate such roles. Yet, despite the teacher's attempts to regulate the children's play, the researcher found that the group of children involved in the study had resisted the teacher's scripts and plans to a large extent. This resistance could be mostly observed when the teacher was absent from the play setting, at which point the children manipulated the props and setting to fit their own purposes.

Nonetheless, children often conform to the discursive practices within which they partake. When Kendrick (2005) engaged with Leticia, a 5-year-old girl, in the narratives of her

fantasy play, aspects of reality, imagination and identity were interwoven in Leticia's narratives and were deemed to be representative of her social and cultural contexts. Through her imaginary play, Leticia negotiated issues associated with power relations and social roles within the structure of her family. The child's stories revealed her understanding of the social role of girls or boys, mothers or fathers, and women or men, as well as how to start and maintain relationships. The researcher argued that since a child's play cannot be performed without the implications of language, culture and politics, her creation of alternative narratives is substantially grounded in her realities (Paley, 2004; Shimpi & Nicholson, 2014). Hence, reality and imagination are interchangeable aspects within children's fantasy play.

Yoon (2014) interrogated how children enact play episodes within the structure of the classroom and how children use writing as a cultural tool to accomplish social goals. In a two-month case study involving four focal children in a kindergarten classroom, the researcher collected data from children's structured formal and unstructured writing time through field notes and artifacts as well as transcribed audio-recordings. The discussion of the study focused on the incidents in which children used their writing to negotiate relationships in some of their play episodes. For example, while two participating girls were engaged in writing practice, Mona held her toy dog near her ear pretending that the dog was whispering to her before saying out loud, "What does puppy want me to write about?" (Yoon, 2014, p. 114). Mona acted as though she was listening to the dog before writing on the board "I love Jasmine so much" (p. 114). Jasmine smiled. The author discussed the ways social interaction took place through fantasy play which, in turn, allowed children to initiate friendship, negotiate identities and conflicts and put their hopes into episodes of realities.

During fantasy play, children negotiate their understandings of the many messages they receive from their interaction with peers, media and/or the institutions (Dyson, 1989; Kendrick,

2005). Children, therefore, engage with one another to experiment, understand and construct their own conceptions of what it means to be a member of a certain group within a specific time and place (MacNaughton, 2000). The studies by Dyson (1989, 1997, 2003) and Kendrick (2005) described above revealed the ways fantasy play provoked children to position themselves in their world and to provide distinct insights into their understanding of authority, power and gender.

Similar to the work of Dyson (1997, 2003) and Kendrick (2005), Ahn and Filipenko (2007) investigated the ways in which a group of six preschool children constructed meanings about their world to find their place within it. The findings discussed the extent to which children are aware of social structure and power relations, and how through these lenses they explore and position themselves in relation to one another. The researchers employed narrative inquiry within a phenomenological framework that examined both children's stories in their imaginary play as well as children's descriptions of their visuals. The researchers concluded that the children's appropriation of a variety of roles allowed them to explore their social world and to position themselves within it. The discussion presented in this study highlighted the intersectionality between fantasy play and learning about oneself.

In one of the very few cross-cultural research approaches that examined children's fantasy play episodes in two different school settings, Hyun & Choi (2004) conducted a study involving 84 young children with the intention of studying gender-doing and gender-bending in North American and South Korean schools through observing children's performance and expressions in their play. During the daily discussions, the classroom teacher participated in the research by interviewing the children and asking them questions about boys and girls playing together. The teacher then observed the children's performance, asked them questions during the free drawing activity and documented their discussions and interpretations. The outputs of this study revealed that children talked about their understanding of gender in a manner that

conveyed their awareness of acceptable practices; yet, within their play, children shifted between diverse gender roles producing new ways of enacting gender roles. For example, a Korean boy expressed his interest in playing with dolls, saying, “Yes I’m a boy, ... but my favourite activity is role-playing because I can raise a baby” (p. 56). This study concluded that young children could identify the social and cultural beliefs about how girls and boys should act and behave. Drawing from both interviews and observations, the data resulting from the study indicated that children were more stereotyped in their views than they were in their performances during fantasy play. While interviews with children may provide insights into children’s awareness or consciousness, children’s performance can act as a way of resisting social practices by producing new meanings and projecting hopes.

Cook (2003) examined children’s learning in role-play through the role-play activities that took place in her classroom. Wood & Cook (2009) wrote a reflexive paper that examined the former study by considering specific episodes in which children used gendered discourses and practices. The researchers analyzed these episodes, looking at the differences in children’s choices, behaviours and negotiations in their fantasy play. In their reflections, Wood & Cook (2009) realized the extent to which each child negotiated play roles and rules in different manners; such negotiations are vital in maintaining inclusion in children’s fantasy play. The researchers suggested that the complexity and variety of rules and roles allowed children to explore the fluidity and ambiguity of their identities. Through such play, children found opportunities to test the various concepts associated with being a boy or a girl as well as to negotiate power dynamics and relationships. A girl named Alice dominated the domestic play and excluded any boys and girls who challenged her authority. Some of the boys would act out as furious animals to resist Alice’s power; however, their efforts were not always successful. Lucy, on the other hand, would seldom negotiate or interact with boys. Her engagement in

fantasy play centered in domestic play was passive, consistently avoiding interacting with boys by excluding herself from some play episodes. This particular study noted that while some children resisted the domination of their peers, others agreed to take the assigned positions and sought inclusion. As in Francis (1999) who noted that young children are aware of gender discriminative practices, but their engagement in discriminative discourse often prevails over equitable discourse as the former may locate them within the norm. Scholars such as MacNaughton (2000) proposed that engaging with children in dialogues about their choices and problematizing their stereotypical assumptions is one way to address politics of play whereas Davies (1989a) used textual narratives to evoke children's thoughts and emotions toward assumptions regarding femininities and masculinities.

Play, Gender & Popular Culture

There are few North American and/or European studies on gender and childhood without the interrogation of the role of popular culture. Researchers within the field of early childhood have examined how *Disney* characters and *Superheroes* contribute to shaping children's play narratives and how they influence the construction of oneself (Dyson, 1998, 2003; Wohlwend 2007, 2012). As mentioned in Dyson's research (1998, 2003), children's learning experiences move beyond the boundaries of school curricula and activities to include the available popular culture materials (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). For instance, Lee (2008) examined a group of Korean immigrant girls' perceptions of gender roles by exploring their insights into American popular culture. During the discussions with the girls, Lee focused on the theme of marriage in Disney films and then traced the girls' ideas to discuss their beliefs as to whether such a theme manifested in real life. The aim of this study was to examine the intersection between popular culture and cultural beliefs. The researcher discussed how children receive messages from

popular culture that may meet with or contradict their cultural beliefs on gendered roles and identities.

In a relatively similar study, Anggard (2005) conducted research in a Swedish setting to examine children's narratives through the production of pictures and words with the intention of analyzing the data as a way of doing gender. Her examination of the narratives indicated that, despite the presence of gender-stereotyped content within children's narratives, it was evident that children have reinterpreted the gendered messages embedded in traditional stories and popular culture to produce new meanings. In this way, through children's reworking some of the cultural texts, whether stories or popular culture, children have an opportunity to play and experiment with the different ways of being a boy or girl. The appropriation of the available roles in their lives and the subsequent experimentation with these roles in their sociodramatic play was mainly about status, control and power.

In similarity, Wohlwend (2007, 2012) discussed the subtle messages given by Disney Princess identity texts as well as franchised toys and how young children negotiate such messages in their play. However, Wohlwend argued that the 'anticipated identities' that toys or cultural materials imply are often implicit and inseparable from the construction of children's identities. That is, children take up such anticipated identities in their play and narration. In one of her studies, Wohlwend (2009) examined the construction of gendered identities of five and six-year-olds through doll play. The researcher followed ethnographic methods to document children's usage of literacy tools, toys, talks and actions during the school day. Wohlwend then identified events in which the children changed the expected gendered identities by manipulating the available materials and toys. Although some of the actions of children's play portrayed the anticipated identities of particular discursive practices and, thus, constituted shared meanings among children, other play actions were fluid and complex and challenged children to negotiate

meanings in relation to self and identities. In a more recent work, Wohlwend (2012) examined the play of two boys in a play-based early childhood classroom in the United States by looking into the ways the two boys negotiated the multiple identity texts given by transmedia while playing with their favourite Disney princesses. She argued that Disney princesses transmedia offer specific storylines and narratives that may anchor or provoke certain gendered messages. The children in the classroom were puzzled by the two boys' choice to become Disney princesses, yet they sought to negotiate and compromise to sustain play and the shared story frame. The children entered into a process of negotiations through the use of Disney princess characters and dolls, and this facilitated the invention of new narratives and storylines as the two boys resisted the so-called 'anticipated identities' by engaging in non-hegemonic discourses of gender.

The resistance of hegemonic gendered roles in children's fantasy play was also investigated by Madrid (2013), who argued that children are exposed to contemporary storylines in media and popular culture that promote the notion of a female being powerful and independent; for example, a story of a super girl who rescues a prince. Such storylines propose the possibility of being a powerful, successful, and independent female. Yet, through the examination of children's play, the researcher argued that being a 'sassy girl' in real life, specifically the school setting, engendered the discomfort of teachers and peers. The study stated that fantasy play gave young girls spaces to explore various meanings away from being judged and encouraged the girls to try out roles that may not be desirable out of a play context.

Concluding Remarks

Many of the childhood studies mentioned above have been conducted to initially investigate reading and writing practices in children's worlds. This includes the investigation of mass media, popular culture and fantasy play in relation to literacy (Anggard, 2005; Dyson,

1997; Wohlwend, 2009, 2012). These studies have demonstrated that literacy is inseparable from our learning about oneself. In other words, the surge in early childhood studies on the construction of identities in relation to play have often focused on narratives and dialogues during children's play with little attention to materials and performance (Skattebol, 2006).

Play as much as literacy is a meaning-making discourse that offers children opportunities to combine and rework the available cultural materials (Black, Korobkova & Epler, 2013). Such cultural materials are proven to carry with them deep meanings with relation to gender, class and race (Dyson, 1997; Moletsane, Mitchell & Smith, 2012). Through play, particularly fantasy play, children conform to and challenge the dominant discourses, and yet they also perform the normative ways of femininities and masculinities that are learned from adult members in their cultural group, or from popular culture and transmedia. The above review of literature suggested that play may create a sphere that is relatively disconnected from expectations and judgment and, therefore, allows children to experiment with multiple social and occupational roles.

Lastly, it is evident from the above literature review that studies on gender and play have been mostly conducted in Western contexts and discussed from Western perspectives. There is a distinct lack of research on the Arab world that examine the conflicts that are inherent in terms of play and gender, and this increases my interest in exploring the subject from my point of view in a culture where gender issues are a subject of concern.

After having reviewed the literature, I note that the construction of gender begins from early childhood and happens in all societies. I am particularly interested to learn how a group of Saudi middle-class children, who live in a conservative society yet have access to many resources, negotiate and construct meanings in relation to their gendered selves through the multiple messages communicated via different resources such as Western popular culture, franchised toys, traditional and cultural beliefs and the religious institution.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented a historical overview of play and gender within the field of education and child development. Throughout the chapter, I defined my key words, including play, gender, patriarchy, discourse and discursive practices. Further, I discussed my conceptual perspective which is framed to combine several insights from two theories: sociocultural theory and poststructural theory. Following this, I detailed the map I designed for my theoretical stance which enabled me to create a comprehensive understanding for reading and interpreting the stories told by children in their play. Lastly, I reviewed the literature of my research topic with a focus on discussing empirical rationales behind studying play and gender in a school setting, synthesizing current research on children's resistance to school culture and social expectations and highlighting existing research that examines the role of popular culture in shaping children's meanings and values. These studies have enabled me to think analytically and trace the gap of the available discourse on play and gender in the West and its relation to my current work in the East.

In the following chapter, I present my methodology and the methods of data collection utilized in this study.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

This chapter explicates the methodology, source of methods and procedure of data collection. I discuss the process of selecting and designing of methodology. Following, I define ethnographies with a focus on sensory ethnography, followed by a discussion of critiques and possibilities of employing ethnographic research in educational setting. Next, I describe the process of data collection, including finding a research site, recruiting participants, and negotiating ethical dilemmas. Lastly, I discuss my data methods through a presentation of the process of being a participant observer and writing notes in the field.

Introduction

Prior to defining my methodological stance within an academic discourse, I engaged in free writing, aiming to understand my own beliefs towards conducting research with young children and the rationale behind my research questions. In particular, I attribute my choice of methodology and sources of data to the nature of my research questions, choice of paradigms, and the context and participants. My research raises the question of how a group of Saudi Arabian children construct their understandings of the social and occupational roles available to them in relation to their gendered identities. The question proposes three main elements: 1) examining a group of preschool children in their everyday fantasy play practices within its natural setting, 2) listening to the stories told by the children in their fantasy play with a focus on how gender and social norms are narrated and enacted, and 3) recognizing the role of my own voice in constructing data.

This exploratory nature of my research questions requires a methodology that contextualizes the study and foregrounds the necessity of multiple routes to understanding children's experiences (MacNaughtan, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Additionally, my conceptual framework invites a methodological approach that celebrates different ways of

knowing about oneself and the world, it brings to the fore the situated nature of one's experiences and knowledge as well as the interdependence between imaginary and real situations.

In designing my research, I moved further to draw attention to situating my study design within its particular context (Harcourt, Perry & Waller, 2011). My position as a Saudi woman who grew up in the same culture as my participants and my prior experience of conducting research with young children in Saudi Arabia have led me to pay additional attention to how power relations are dealt with during the data collection process. To demonstrate, the participants and I come from a culture in which a child's refusal or disagreement with an adult may, to a large extent, be considered a marker of impoliteness. Jabeen (2009) and Mahbub (2016) raised concerns regarding conducting research in hierarchical societies discussing the complexity involved with the nature of child-researcher relationships. In my early stages of designing my research, I similarly avoided data sources that include any direct requests, and alternatively considered a methodological approach through which I could learn about children's ways of constructing meanings in their everyday fantasy play within their school routine.

Thus, I suggest that the process of designing and selecting methods that correspond to my questions, beliefs, and context has led to adopting sensory ethnography as a methodology. Sensory ethnography, a methodology proposed by Sarah Pink (2015), "is a critical methodology which, like [Pink's] existing work on visual ethnography (Pink, 2007, 2015), departs from the classic observational approach promoted by Atkinson et al. (2007) "to insist that ethnography is a reflexive and experiential process through which academic and applied understanding, knowing and knowledge are produced." (Pink, 2015, P. 5).

In so doing, I concur that attending to the sensory aspect involves being reflexive to what the experience and the place entails throughout the research process. Along with sensory

ethnography, I utilized reflexivity as an approach to make sense of my own experiences and of the participants' world. According to Sarah Pink (2015), "ethnographic work is the outcome of complex negotiations and relations, where the self is the central, rather than peripheral" (p.45). This choice of methodology opened my eyes to the myriad possibilities of listening to and understanding the everyday practices of a group of preschool children. Thus, sensory methodology corresponded to my conceptual framework of celebrating the multiplicity of children's ways of expressions by seeing beneath the spoken, written or visual data to explore sounds, smells, textures, and feelings as major components of a child's production of stories and meanings (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Pink, 2015).

Methodological Stance

Ethnography: A Methodological Framework

For over a century, ethnography as a research methodology has been adopted to frame the design of many early childhood research studies, particularly those examining children's play cultures (Corsaro, 2011; Davies; 2003; Murkherji & Albon, 2010; Paley, 2004). James (2007) argued that ethnographies as a methodology have been shown to provide an in-depth understanding of the 'real' world of childhood through studying children's active participation in childhood's natural setting (Murkherji & Albon, 2010). Such an argument troubles existing emphasis on participation and co-research approaches to research that legitimize certain types of methodological approaches and place others in an inferior position (James, 2007; Spyrou, 2011, 2015). In ethnographic work, within which participant observation mostly occurs, research is conducted in a naturalistic environment that offers participants, particularly young children, a familiar context with little instruction on ways of participating. Such an approach has been argued to illuminate children's practices without placing them in uncomfortable context (Murkherji & Albon, 2010).

Ethnography is defined by the observation of a group of people going about their everyday practices as well as the active interaction between researcher and participants, providing descriptive written accounts and thorough interpretations (Punch, 2009; Pink, 2015; Murkherji & Albon, 2010). According to Agar (1986), an ethnographic approach is one that concerns itself with understanding and learning rather than testing, evaluating, or generating a hypothesis. It is an approach for researchers whose questions are concerned with making sense of a group of people by participating with them and describing how they go about their daily activities (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj, 2010). What counts as a group of people can range from a community in a village or a family in a house to students in an educational institution (Agar, 1986; Pink, 2015). The key concept is how social interaction within one group can be interpreted from the researcher's point of view (Agar, 1986; Pink, 2015; Punch, 2009).

Nevertheless, I suggest that my own point of view of children's fantasy play was produced within a particular discourse/ event and, thus, generated a collective voice of a particular spatial and temporal realm. In other words, my understanding of the stories told and performed by the children, and my sharing of my point of view of such narratives, was not merely my voice nor the children's; it was rather a collective understanding that was shaped by our experiences within a particular time and place. By examining the stories told by the children as collective and situated I hoped to further my interpretations, to move beyond the initial assumption and open myriad routes to understanding the meanings behind children's experiences (Spyrou, 2011).

Critiques and possibilities: Classic and contemporary.

The application of ethnography as a methodology has been a subject of criticism more than any other interpretive approach (Murkherji & Albon, 2010). A classic ethnographic approach to research is concerned with two main traits: 1) the length of time spent with the participants and 2) the researcher's familiarity with the setting (Atkison, 2015). Time and strangeness are viewed

as two primary elements in generating ‘thick description’ as a key component to classic ethnographic work (Atkinson, 2015).

Within the literature of ethnographic research, classic ethnographers have questioned the credibility of educators conducting ethnographic work within educational settings, specifically the ways familiarity with the context can diminish the possibility of understanding the complexity of educational matters (Wolcott, 1987). However, the notion of legitimizing knowledge based on its unfamiliarity and strangeness to the researcher has been questioned by feminist poststructuralists whose work has transformed the way subjectivity and positionality are viewed in research discourse (Dowling, 2006). Once the positivist approach to studying human beings had been problematized, one’s subjectivity and positionality in research began to be legitimized and placed in the core of the process. In so doing, strangeness, in many cases, is rendered a constraint rather than a key factor of credibility (Pink, 2015). My familiarity with the context was in constant change in relation to the story line and the children involved (MacNaughtan, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). That is, familiarity among and between student participants, classroom teachers, and researchers is relational. Through such a perspective, aspects of familiarity and time function in flux (Pink, 2015).

Additionally, in their everyday school life, children’s learning and development extend beneath the sequential and linear concept of time within which aspects of culture and space co-construct children’s learning processes (Taser et al., 2016). Children have shown to play with time to tailor their story line (Taser et al., 2016). In the case of my study, children’s play events were never orderly. Similar to Paley’s ethnographic work (2004), the children in my study were less interested in finishing a story, and their interest was mostly shown in the process of creating and enacting a narrative. Such processes did not stretch from one defined point into a fixed ending, but rather the play events performed by the children have shown to be intersected and

messy. For instance, the children would begin a play episode about a wedding event and, within seconds, the play would erupt another story line that would stretch for days.

Additionally, a current criticism that is overt across early childhood ethnographic work revolves around the notion of “entering children’s world”, and the possibility of falling for “colonizing children’s bodies” (Mukhreji & Albon, 2010, p.78). This argument derives from the imbalance of power between children and adults, an imbalance that implies that ethnographic work may position children as a different species whose world is exotic and intriguing to adults (Mukhreji & Albon, 2010). However, I argue that my choice of conducting a study in a childcare facility comes from my familiarity with the context as a former early childhood educator whose education and career is grounded in that field. In fact, the purpose of my engagement with the children was never to create differences or *otherness* (Atkinson, 2015), but rather to generate a collective understanding through observing and participating.

On the one hand, scholars such as Corsaro (2011) suggested that researchers should aim to immerse themselves in the childhood culture by adopting the ‘least adult role,’ playing with the children and participating in their children’s everyday activities (Warming, 2011). On the other hand, James (2007) and Spyrou (2011) questioned such a method, as it overlooks the existing power differentials between the researcher and children. That is, the researcher can never be a member of the childhood culture. In my work in the field, I rejected the concept of ‘immersing’ myself in the childhood culture, but rather sought to participate in and learn from the children while also acknowledging that my positionality and power influenced my relationship with the people involved.

Furthermore, Sarah Pink (2015) has argued that while ethnographers’ work in the past was lauded by their extended period of time in the setting, ethnographers in recent days have shown to produce rich, detailed, and holistic studies within familiar settings that involve

restricted timelines. While classic ethnographers have typically spent a year-long or more studying their fieldsites (Burawoy, 2003; Greetz, 1983; Paley, 1984; Dyson, 1989), some of the recent ethnographic studies have been carried out within months or even weeks (Blaise, 2005; Pink, 2015). This is especially relevant when studying school life as access to schools and classrooms is restricted (Mukhreji & Albon, 2010). In educational settings, in particular, the presence of researchers in the setting may trouble existing structure and raise power conflict among and between the people involved. The classroom, as an intimate and confined space, can be influenced by the presence of researchers (Mitchell, 2011). Over the course of my fieldwork, I put effort to locate myself as a researcher and avoided imposing myself or replace the role of the classroom teacher. While I did that through arriving at free play time and leaving once the play time was terminated by the classroom teacher, I can never claim that my presence in the two corners did not change the structure of the classroom. Additionally, researchers may not be able to spend long hours or to live in with their participants due to different constraints in contemporary life within which people move rapidly across multiple settings.

Therefore, contemporary ethnographic researchers have worked on developing new approaches to understand the everyday experiences in people's lives. Such approaches have not been sought to replace the direct contact with participants in their daily living experience, but rather are aimed at providing multiple means and routes to understanding and interacting with participants (Punch, 2009).

Why sensory ethnography?

I have chosen to follow Sarah Pink's (2015) proposal of understanding people's lives, values, and hopes through ways that extend beyond the classical observational approach. Unlike classic ethnography, which values the distance in observing the everyday life in order to understand the culture, Pink (2007, 2015) asserted that ethnographic research should be

conducted through participation and the creation of shared experiences. According to Sarah Pink (2015), sensory ethnography revolves around the researcher's understanding of unplanned moments rather than structuring the research process. In those unplanned research moments, "the researcher arrives at an understanding of other people's memories and meanings through their own embodied experiences and/or attending to other people's practices, subjectivities and explanations" (Pink, 2015, p.98). Pink asserted that sensory ethnography is not concerned with studying the senses, but rather is an approach to engaging with the participants through constructing shared experiences. She suggested, "the multisensoriality of the research context is often something that emerges through ones' encounter with both people and the physical environment one is participating in. It involved unanticipated smells, tastes, sounds and textures, and unexpected ways of comprehending them" (Pink, 2015, p.51), and "these [physical] environments [or places] might have material, digital, invisible, intangible, social and other elements" (Pink, 2015, p.53) which enrich the researcher's experience in the field.

Three fundamental concepts in sensory ethnography have proven pertinent to my study, that is, sensory ethnography conceptualizes the concept of place as well as knowing, and places imagination at the core of people's everyday practices. To illustrate, the notion of place is conceptualized in sensory ethnography as "open and in process- as 'event' or 'occurrence' – offers a way of thinking about the contexts of sensory ethnographic research" (Pink, 2015, p.50). This concept of place as event is "constituted through lived bodies and things." (p.37). The notion of place as event meets with my understanding of children's play as situated within time, place, people involved, and material used. In Pink's words, "we can understand ethnographic places as events that bring together combinations and interweaving of memory, imagination, embodied experience, socialities, theory, power relations and more" (Pink, 2015, p.142). I propose that a preschool classroom is a fluid place within which children co-create ongoing set

of meanings, memories and imaginary situations. The fluidity of its events can be traced in the constant movements of children across the multiple corners in their classroom. In the case of my research, the children construct a wide range of play events in the playing-house and building-blocks corners. Such a rapid change of everyday play events enhances the choice of exploring children's play through multiple routes and senses.

Pink further stressed, "indeed, place and our relationship to it cannot be understood without attention to precisely how we learn through, know and move in material and sensory environments" (p.38). Pink established her proposal of sensory ethnographic approach through questioning the legitimacy of certain types of ethnographic methods such as interviews and/or observations with little attention to other various routes to attending to the everyday experiences of one's research participants. In introducing her methodology, Pink contended,

it is important that we understand how knowledge and ways of knowing are produced, what particular qualities and types of knowledge are currently emerging and the implications of this for how researchers, artists, designers or policy makers comprehend the world and intervene in it, and how future are imagined and made. To do this we need to understand the implications of particular research methodologies for how we research, account for and how futures are imagined and made." (Pink, 2015, p.xii)

Re-envisioning the notion of knowledge is not only central to the development of sensory ethnography, but its meanings are further essential to the employment of the methodology in practice. Likewise, I deliberately reject the sole reliance on spoken and visuals. Alternatively, I put effort to borrow from a methodology that embraces the complexity of children's fantasy play. Therefore, sensory ethnography as a methodological approach has enabled me to attend not only to the narratives told by the children, but to how such narratives were embodied and experienced by the group of participants. According to Pink (2015), "the implications of understanding knowing as situated in practice is that it implies that to 'know' as others do, we [researchers] need to engage in practices with them, making participation central to this task" (p. 40). This very notion of knowing as relational, emplaced and multiple aligns with my theoretical

understanding of children's construction of meanings and my role as a participant observer of children's play. Sensory ethnography pushed my thinking to understand learning and knowing as experienced through the whole body. The intellectual and the physical, mind-body, work together to construct an understanding of environment and experiences. The sensory experience is "part of how we understand our past, how we engage with our present and how we imagine our futures" (Pink, 2015, p.3).

Lastly, I was able to trace a common strand between Vygotsky's view on fantasy play and Pink's discussion of sensory imagination. Like Vygotsky (1978), Pink (2015) argued that imagination rather than a cognitive skill is an embodied practice. The children imagine through their senses and in relation to the materials provided to them. Though the invitation to sensory imagination seems to be a complex practice in researching the adult world (Pink, 2015), the nature of researching childhood indicates the multiple possibilities of the intersectionality between reality and imaginary situations. Similar to my theoretical framework within which I argue that imagination and reality are interdependent, sensory ethnography invites the ethnographer to attend to participants' imagination. As Pink stated, "I take imagining to be a more emplaced everyday practice carried out in relation to the multisensoriality of our actual and material relations. (p.45)

The concepts discussed above are my primary motives in designing my research within a sensory methodology framework. Yet, I recognize that Pink's methodological approach to attending to sensory aspects was employed to explore various places such as homes and streets but not in classroom settings. One of Pink's sensory ethnographic works had explored self-identity within the context of home. She demonstrated how sensory ethnography enabled her to understand the everyday unspoken and invisible practices as well as values, particularly, how she became aware of the unspoken routes to comprehend people's understanding of the concept of

clean or dirty houses. In such an example, Pink demonstrated that the study of the senses is not the primary objective of a sensory ethnography, but it is an approach that seeks to understand experiences, values, identities of a group of people through attuning to their senses.

In searching for projects that employed sensory ethnography within the classroom setting, I was able to relate to a Swedish study conducted by Johansson and Løkken (2014) whose work examined how sensory ethnography may open possibilities for teachers to understand children's senses and embodied experiences. The observers followed narratives being told by a group of children in a preschool classroom whereby they found themselves engaged in the event because of their embodied and emplaced experience. The article argues for the effectiveness of sensory pedagogy that attends to "bodily existence of the child, the pedagogue and the world" (p. 896). The authors conclude that sensory methodology have the potential to bring forward a pedagogy that recognizes senses and embodied experiences as fundamental to children's knowledge.

Though senses in Western culture are defined in five traditional means which include the smelled, touched, heard, tasted and observed, Pink (2015) argued that the perception of senses may vary from one culture to another. When doing sensory ethnography, the researcher opens new doors to understanding "how other people experience, remember and imagine" (p.25). Similarly, children, in their fantasy play, enact their different experiences by recalling events and emotions, creating the wished-for and positioning themselves within the given discourse.

In that sense, the lived or embodied experiences of children and their unstructured moments cannot be experienced or understood without attending to the multiple senses and ways of knowing (Warming, 2005. Pink, 2015). In their fantasy play, children engage with their senses; they appropriate roles and create scenes that involve their understanding and feeling of the smelled, touched, felt, seen and heard.

As a novice participant observer, I might have failed to fulfil the ethnographer's role completely, but I have encountered plenty of moments within which my senses have influenced the ways I carried myself and participated with the children, and, in turn generated my data and my understandings. In this particular study, I participated in and interpreted children's play through attending to not only the senses traced across children's play but also my own senses. Overall, the adaptation of an approach that accounts for the senses in a setting had enabled me to engage in reflecting on the ways I experienced the research setting through my emotions and "the whole experiencing body" (Pink, 2015, p.27) as well as my understanding of children's everyday ways of making sense of their own world.

Reflexivity: A Methodological Framework

"Reflexive ethnography presumes an "external" real world, but it is one that we can only know through our constructed relation to it" (Burawoy, 2003, p.655).

In that sense, the key to being an ethnographer is the active yet reflexive engagement in the research field (Burawoy, 2003). According to Pink (2015), "a sensory ethnography calls for a form of reflexivity through which the ethnographer engages with how his or her own sensory experiences are produced through research encounters and how these might assist her or him in understanding those of others." (p.58) The critical self-reflexive practice in research has been widely recognized as a methodological approach across the literature of interpretive studies, particularly in the last century (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Finlay, 2002). In their self-critique of their ethnographic work, ethnographers such as Clifford and Marcus (1986) contributed to pushing the positivist approach aside and, alternatively, to positioning the reflexive perspective as central to ethnographic research. Reflexivity in the field, particularly in ethnographic work, can enable researchers to understand commonalities and differences across data and to find connections between the researcher and the researched world (Burawoy, 2003). Finlay (2002)

discussed different techniques employed in reflexive practices within qualitative research. These techniques range from generating data out of reflective accounts to reflecting for the purpose of monitoring power relations and writing to situate the research within its cultural, political and historical context (Finlay, 2002). In her paper on reflexivity, Finlay (2002) argued that intersectionality across the multiple approaches to reflexivity is visible in the written accounts of contemporary interpretive researchers. Such multiplicity manifests itself in writing to follow the process of research while also reflecting on power relations in practice and rethinking approaches to data collection.

The practice of writing, nevertheless, may not necessarily lead to a reflexive understanding of the researched world; however, when such as practice is carried out through a continuum of revisits over a period of time, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of her field in relation to her theoretical framework, historical changes, and context (Burawoy, 2003). Although my notes involved traces of each category proposed by Finlay (2002), the broad concept that underpinned my writing was of a ‘critical standpoint’ (Dowling, 2006). I was aware of the role of my voice in creating the text and its interpretations; therefore, I kept a written account to identify my assumptions, to address ethical dilemmas, and to relate my observations to theory and context (Dowling, 2006). I wrote reflective entries with an intention to make sense of the various factors involved with being a participant observer in the field; in particular, through writing, I discussed my experience in the field in relation to not only the participants but to the cultural, historical, and political aspects as well as their implications on my own understanding.

As a native Saudi and novice researcher, whose past ten years were spent between three different cities in Canada and two in Saudi Arabia, my familiarity with the Saudi context was neither a motive of curiosity nor a source of comfort. I was nervous to return and to participate in

the schooling system in which I spent most of my childhood, youth, and, later, my early career years. In the first few weeks and through my reflective notes, I negotiated the messiness of familiarity and strangeness. And yet, familiarity created within me a paradoxical feeling of alienation. After finishing one of my first visits, I wrote:

It is my third day at the school. I already feel overwhelmed. Women dressed in black, men in white. Every school building is painted in beige and the sky is always covered with dust. I am here sitting in the backseat and my Uber ride who seems in his early teens is behind the wheel leading the way.... I look at him, then around. I can see the school. It is a 7-minute walk away from where I live. But to walk alone in those anti-friendly pedestrian roads sounds like a suicidal mission. Within three minutes, I found myself in front of my research site. The preschool building is hidden behind high cement walls with a few numbers of small windows that are protected with metal fences and a large solid metal gate that is kept locked by the gatekeeper, the only male in an all-girls' school. I walk into this humongous complex; the preschool is one building between other eight buildings....

The different smells, colours, sounds and movements around the school trigger in me a feeling of discomfort. I hate the long-unfitted skirts. I am disgusted by the smell of the boiling Arabic coffee coming from the kitchen at the end of the hallways. I remember my first teaching job; teachers' discussions around a coffee pot. I was forced to resign because I refused to sign a document presented by the manager requiring teachers to wear *Niqab* (a piece of fabric that covers the face) when entering and leaving the school. My colleagues tried to convince me to sign the document and abide the rule. I was told, "just wear it for a few seconds and then take it off once you are in your car". But I refused and left my job.... Or perhaps it is my experience as a schoolgirl. The loud sound of the bells coming from the near building every 45 minutes reminds me of my schooling years. The long hours sitting in a classroom listening to a teacher and wishing for the loud disturbing bells to ring – and then another teacher comes in and speak for another 45 minutes (November 22, 2016, 12:30 pm, extracted from my reflective entries).

Interestingly, the reflective approach provided me with routes to questioning the legitimacy of defining my experience within the dichotomies of being an outsider or insider and/or familiar or stranger to the setting (Davies & Gannon, 2005). The disruption of such a dualistic view is founded in discussions by poststructuralist theories through which it is argued that both self and place are fluid concepts, and the fixed position of oneself in a dynamic context is rather problematic (Pink, 2015). The practice of writing and reflecting on myself in the field

enabled me to embrace the ambiguity and messiness of the process. In adopting a reflexive approach, I had to embrace my uncertainty, that is, to accept the messiness of the process. According to Mercieca and Mercieca (2013) “uncertainty is not a lack of knowledge of facts. When able to tolerate the sensations and frustration which accompany the state of uncertainty, the researcher becomes conscious of this emotional experience and is able to abstract from it a statement that will represent this experience adequately” (p.232). I thus began to accept the reality of being a partial insider and outsider (Kim, 2011). Once I embraced the paradox of my positionality, I was eventually enabled to participate in and observe the regular patterns of the children’s interaction and the embedded cultural meanings in children’s play.

On the whole, adopting reflexivity as a methodological approach played a key role in placing my experience within its time and place, through which I was allowed to recognize my subjectivity in formulating my understandings, rethinking ethical concerns, and accepting the many phases of analysis and interpretations as parts of the process (Punch, 2009; Mahbub, 2016). On doing sensory ethnography, Pink (2015) noted that the process “involves the researcher self-consciously and reflexivity attending to the senses throughout the research process: that is, during the planning, reviewing, fieldwork, analysis and representational processes of a project” (p.7). Furthermore, Pink elaborated that a reflexive approach in sensory ethnography can be pursued through a conceptualization of place in relation to power, that is, “both ethnographers and participants in ethnographic research are emplaced in social, sensory and material contexts, characterised by and productive of particular power configurations, that they experience through their whole bodies and that are constantly changing (even if in very minor ways)” (p.38).

In the fieldsite, I learned that ‘being there’ cannot be pursued without attending to how my engagement in a play event is encountered by the children; to be able to reflect on what

senses were evoked and how power was exercised. I eventually began to recognize the extent to which power was at play between all those involved in the research including the school administration, the children, the classroom teacher, the parents and/or guardians and myself. When reflecting on my experience as a participant observer in the classroom setting, I might have overlooked the indirect ways within which power operated between me and the classroom teacher. Revisiting my fieldnotes in retrospect has altered my initial perception of power in the classroom. For instance, my decision of dissociating the classroom teacher from my fieldwork manifested a certain level of power. In response to my research agenda, the classroom teacher provided me with the needed space to exist in playing-house and building-blocks corners which, in turn, might have reduced the teacher's presence in the two corners. I do not claim that my engagement with the participating children did not affect how the classroom teacher was positioned and perceived within her own space. Over time, the children approached me for assistance and casual conversations during play. Though such moments were especially valuable to the construction of my data, they may have inflicted power imbalance in the classroom. This thesis discusses how hierarchy is embedded in the everyday practices of the classroom setting and schooling system. At the time of writing my thesis, I began to recognize how my privileged status in the hierarchical structure, particularly among school teachers and staff, could have silenced the teacher from communicating her concerns.

By reflecting on and reliving the experiences, I became aware of my anxiety and positionality which I subsequently attribute to originating from the unknown of being a participant observer in the field. Pink (2015) asserted, "it is impossible to ever be completely prepared for or know precisely how an ethnographic project will be conducted before starting" (p.51).

Research Procedure and Data Collection Methods

Research Procedure: Selecting the Site

Upon receiving approval from the Behaviour Ethics Research Board of McGill University in August 2016, I left Montreal to fly to Riyadh city, Saudi Arabia, for a field trip that lasted six months. I immediately began the process of applying for a researcher card from the Ministry of Education in the city of Riyadh for the purpose of facilitating my field work. Simultaneously, I visited preschools with an intention to receive initial approvals for my research (Appendix 3.1). I arrived in Riyadh city on September 20th, 2016, when it was just the beginning of the school year. As the purpose of my research was to examine children's fantasy play with one another in their everyday school life, I had chosen to give the prospective participants time to adjust to the school routine before entering the field. I, however, visited preschools to invite and gain initial approval to start data collection in November 2016. I believe that my physical presence in those visits was more culturally appropriate than phone calls or emails. Those informal visits were meant to increase the chances of voluntarily participation rather than contacting a preschool through a higher authority, such as requesting the Ministry of Education in Riyadh to allocate my research in a preschool of my choice. Thus, I considered those informal visits as an approach to inviting a preschool with minimum obligation of participation.

As the research purpose required an in-depth investigation of one group of people interacting in their natural setting, my choice of sampling had to follow a set of specific criteria that corresponded to this purpose. I employed a purposeful sampling procedure when searching for a site for my study (Punch, 2009). My inclusion criteria were primarily focused on the choice of the site. More specifically, I selected a context in which children from the same age group (4 and 5 year-olds) are invited to play with one another with little restrictions, particularly from adult/teacher authority given that preschools often provide children with time, space, and

materials that prompt children to initiate play (MacNaughtan, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). In the case of my research, my objective of studying children's fantasy play that is specifically concerned with enacting different social roles and negotiating play rules posited a certain level of familiarity among the participants which could be found in preschool settings. I sought to select a preschool, be it public or private, that implemented the self-learning curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia [*al-manhaj al-motawwer*, 2004]. I then narrowed my search to private preschools in the northern district of Riyadh city. As explained in previous discussion of context, I intentionally avoided public preschools as those have limited capacities and a smaller percentage of enrolment in comparison to private preschools (MOE, 2018). The choice between a public or a private preschool was not a major variable in my search for site. However, I was aware that class could substantially influence the nature of children's play and their understanding of gendered identities (Dyson 1989, 1997); thus, it could produce a completely different set of data.

When I selected the site, four characteristics were considered essential:

1. Adaptation of the Saudi Arabia government curriculum document, specifically the availability of playing-house (a corner with domestic cultural materials) and building-blocks (a corner with blocks, toy animals and cars). In the Saudi Arabian government preschool guidebook, children are usually invited to play freely between different five or six corners for a given period of time (this ranges between 30 to 50 minutes each day).
2. Inclusion of children from both genders. This is especially important because some preschools segregate boys and girls in different classrooms.

3. Permission for audio-recorder and provocation materials (toys and fabrics) in the classroom during my field work.
4. Approval by the classroom teacher of my presence for the period of 15-18 weeks.

In addition to these four basic characteristics, I took into consideration factors such as the variety of materials in playing-house and building-blocks corners and the accessibility to school. For instance, my selected classroom provided a variety of props to scaffold children's fantasy play in playing-house corner including, but not limited to, a small kitchen with utensils, a dresser, and a small-sized couch and a seat. I rendered those materials as essentials in provoking children's play and contributing to generating answers to my research questions. Also, the challenge of commuting in a spread-out city that occupies 1.798 km² in which women were not yet allowed to drive cars was another major factor in limiting my search to one district. I, thus, only considered preschools that were accessible to me.

After I had visited seven preschools in the northern district in Riyadh city, I received one approval from a private preschool. The annual tuition for the selected preschool is 17000 Saudi Riyal (around 5000 Canadian Dollars) which offers an indication of the demographic nature of the children involved in my study. The latest national statistics on family income indicates that 14073 Saudi Riyal (around 4893 Canadian Dollars) is the average of the Saudi family monthly income (MOP, 2018). Statistics further indicate that Saudi family spend only 2.2% on its children's education in comparison to other categories such as housing, food, transportation and clothing (MOP, 2018).

Having received the approval from the preschool's director to begin my visit in November 2016, I was expecting to be invited to meet with a volunteer teacher. The preschool coordinator, however, invited me to choose one of any of the three available classrooms of children whose ages were between four and five years old. When I asked the school coordinator

if any of the selected classroom teachers had been informed about the nature of my presence in the classroom, the coordinator responded, ‘No, it’s not the teacher’s decision anyway.’ This incident was one among the many to follow whereby I realized the rooted hierarchical structure in the schooling system and across my data.

Thus, I endeavoured to communicate with the teachers directly. One classroom teacher mentioned the possibility of any overlap between my visits and her classroom schedule as she might switch play time with other planned activities. I considered the classroom teacher’s concern as an unspoken dissent of my presence in her classroom. I then reached out to another classroom teacher who showed willingness to host me for the period of my research. I discussed with her my research, the period of my presence, and the nature of my participation, and then provided the teacher with a copy of the invitation letter and consent letter. I explained to the classroom teacher that my research is concerned with children’s play in the classroom without interrogating her own beliefs or praxis in the classroom. I deliberately excluded the classroom teacher from my research trying to reduce any pressure of participation. My objective was to eliminate my power as a privileged doctoral student coming to the classroom setting. Nevertheless, my decision, which was driven by my personal experience as a former early childhood educator in Riyadh, had created a different form of power in the classroom.

Describing the site.

Upon the classroom teacher’s approval, I began my informal visits to the classroom. In the selected preschool classroom, a monthly themed program and learning activity corners were offered to children. The classroom was well-equipped with props and materials to stimulate children’s play. Children were introduced to reading and writing through teacher-planned lessons. The school day started at 7:00 a.m. beginning with structured literacy lessons that were delivered in a traditional teaching approach through tracing and copying Arabic letters and

words. Throughout the day, the children were introduced to literacy and numeracy in Arabic and English, they were introduced to the monthly theme in circle time in the morning. Two native Saudi teachers worked in the class with 21 children; one holds a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and another majored in English Literature. The school day included 30 minutes of recess time and another 30 minutes of snack time, and lastly 45 minutes of free play time which took place in different corners before the day ends at 12:45 p.m.

Inside each classroom, there were multiple corners for each of the activities: art, building-blocks, playing-house/doll-corner, library, discovery/science, cognitive, and literacy/ writing, with shelf cabinet used as dividers. In my chosen site, the playing-house/doll-corner corner is called family-corner. The classroom teacher would organize the layout of the playing-house corner in accordance to the theme of the month which covered several topics during the course of my field work beginning with *Clothing, Health and Safety, My Hands, Sands, and lastly Water*. Yet, there were a few items that the teacher had kept across the themes, including the wooden kitchen, small couch, and a dresser.

In the library corner, there was a selection of both information and picture books. A set of wooden blocks in different sizes and shapes, cars, plastic trees, and farm animals were provided in the building-blocks corner. The cognitive corner included puzzles and board games with the intention of developing cognitive skills such as classifying, sorting, matching, and tracing skills. In the art corner, markers, crayons, and blank sheets were offered to children. Across the classroom, there is a small desk and a chair for teachers' use only. The corners are divided by shelf cabinets speared out across the classroom. To join a corner, the children had to have a badge upon entering the corner, those badges are meant to regulate the number of children in each corner with little supervision from the classroom teacher.

When it is the first week of a new theme, the teacher would invite the children to the art corner to introduce a new craft activity, through which she would ensure that children have produced an artwork that depicted her sample. On other days and during the 45 minutes of free play around the different corners, the teacher would write the daily reports for each child with little interference with children's play.



Figure 3.1 Playing-house corner during the theme, Health and Safety (December 20, 2016)



Figure 3.2 Playing-house corner during the theme, Sands (February 12, 2017)



Figure 3.3 Playing- house corner during the theme, Water (March 9, 2017)

In the following, I share a map that I created to illustrate the layout of the classroom. I concur with Pink (2015) that “places are not static, they are not places we can ‘go back to’ or places that we can reconstruct; indeed they are places that we make because we are participating in them” (Pink, 2015, p.49). I recognize that neither my words nor my sketches can represent the classroom, nonetheless, these collective of visual data are meant to elicit my experience in the field and to invite my reader to imagine themselves in the experience.

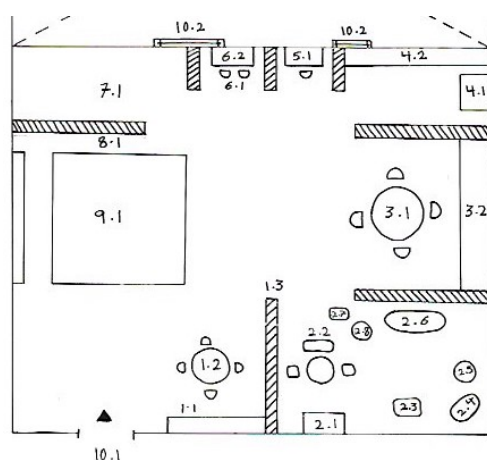


Figure 3.4 A map illustrating the layout of the classroom (original copy shown on p. 10)

Table 3.1 Describing the corners in the researched setting

Space	Description
1. Art corner	1.1 Bulletin board with children's artwork 1.2 Round table with four seats Shelf cabinet with multiple containers of art supplies (crayons, coloured pencils, construction papers, scissors, glue sticks, googly eyes, glitter, coloured feathers).

2. Playing-house corner (clothing theme)	2.1 dresser (a table with a chair, a small mirror, and a box of fake jewels)
	2.2 one couch and two armchairs with a table in the middle
	2.3 washing machine (made out of cardboard)
	2.4 laundry bag filled with assorted fabrics
	2.5 empty boxes of laundry detergent and a stand mirror
	2.6 ironing table
	2.7 small table with a wooden cashier and a sewing machine
	2.8 purses, sun glasses, dolls and baby clothes placed in a basket
3. Cognitive corner	3.1 a table and four chairs
	3.2 puzzles, board games, and lace and trace activity sets
4. Library corner	4.1 one couch with soft pillows
	4.2 library shelves with a collection of picture and information books in Arabic and English
5. Writing corner	5.1 one table with one chair and a set of blank sheets and pencils
6. Discovery corner	6.1 one table with two chairs
	6.2 objects varied in accordance to the theme (for example: skeletons, sand tray and some rocks, containers filled with water)
7. Teacher's space	7.1 A desk and a chair for the teacher
8. Building-blocks corner	8.1 shelf cabinet with wooden blocks, farm animals, plastic trees and cars

9. circle-time and group activities	9.1 Large square-shaped carpet placed in the middle of the room facing the white board
10. entrance and windows	10.1 classroom door 10.2 two small windows

In the following section, I present my recruitment criteria, discuss gaining access to children's play, and configure practices to minimize ethical issues.

Accessing children's worlds.

"Researchers doing ethnography need to account for the ethical issues that are raised by specific cultural contexts and the culturally and personally specific moralities of their research participants" (Pink, 2015, p.68).

In my first two weeks in the classroom, I spent the full school day in the classroom with the purpose of acclimatization and initiating rapport with the children (Harcourt, Perry & Waller, 2011). During those two weeks, I had children who would come and look into my field notes. I would, in return, offer to have them look into my journal and would introduce myself as a learner. I would say, "I am here to learn about your play, and writing those notes help me to remember my thoughts." I particularly used the term 'learn' rather than 'research' because it has been suggested that children in a preschool setting may be familiar with words such as 'learn' and 'writing' more than 'investigate' and 'document' (Harcourt, Perry & Waller, 2011). Harcourt & Conroy (2005) proposed that finding shared meanings between the researcher and children and communicating the research through such language can potentially increase the chances of gaining informed assent from young children.

In addition to my objective of establishing rapport with the children, I conducted initial observations during the initial two-week period of full-day attendance, seeking to make an informed decision about the time in which fantasy play mostly occurred. I was present as a participant observer throughout the school day, which gave me not only opportunities to play with the children and initiate a relationship, but also to gain insights into their play routine. For example, I noticed that some moments of play took place between teacher-planned activities, such as the few minutes between finishing Quran recitals and starting math activities. In my second week in the research field, I wrote extensively about my experience in the classroom, in particular, the moments in which I encountered children's social fantasy play in the setting and my own understanding of those moments in relation to my questions. To demonstrate, I wrote:

On this day, I am thinking of examining the transitional moments as a potential space for unstructured fantasy play. I've noticed that those moments may be useful for my research, but they last for seconds. They are difficult to research given I have limited time and they may or may not occur as the teacher usually asks children to sit still and stop talking to one another. But the major problem here is how to ensure confidentiality of kids without approval. I think my decision will depend on the number of kids involved in the study. Also, if my intention is to listen to stories told by the children in their fantasy play, then I should focus on playing-house and building-blocks as I can see that both corners are provoking children's stories and imagination (November 27, 2016, extracted from my reflective entries).

Overall, the initial full-day observations gave me a holistic overview of the everyday school routine. From my notes, I was enabled to trace the richness in children's stories in playing-house and building-blocks corners as well as accessibility to them. Accordingly, I became confident in my initial plan of focusing my fieldwork on playing-house and building-blocks corners. By the beginning of the third week, I distributed informed consent letters along with an information letter detailing the research to the parents/guardians of the 21 children in the classroom (Appendix 3.2). I invited every child in the classroom to participate since my research objective was to study children as members of one cultural group. The exclusion criteria were limited to children whose parents or guardians disapproved their participation and those who

showed discomfort during the data collection process. All invitation letters and consent letters were translated into Arabic before distribution as the population of my study is Arabic-speaking children. Within a week, I received nine written parental approvals out of twenty-one distributed forms. One parent had contacted me via email inquiring into the nature of the research and if his child would be evaluated in the process. I asserted that my research is concerned with children's play in relation to their understanding of being a boy or a girl and that academic evaluation is not part of the study.

After I had received parental approvals, I planned my visits with the classroom teacher. As noted above, I began to focus my presence as a participant observer to take place during free play time (corners). My presence in the classroom took place five days a week from 11:00am to 11:45am each day, over the period of 15 weeks (November 2016 until March 2017). I began my documentation by observing from a distance with minimum intervention or participation in children's play. It was not very long until the children approached me asking for assistance, such as helping them to dress up for a role or repairing a toy. Those were my signs to enter children's play and participate with them.

Although I alluded to the idea that minimum pressure of active involvement was imposed, I was aware that my presence in the setting as researcher from the adult world constituted a form of power and placed me as a privileged outsider. (Kim, 2011; Spyrou, 2011). Pink posited, "if place is central to our way of being in the world and we are thus always participating in places, the task of the reflexive ethnographer would be to consider how she or he is emplaced, or entangled, and her or his role in the constitution of that place" (2015, p.46)

However, I argue that despite that rigid view of power imbalance in child-adult interaction within childhood research, the dynamic nature of play and fluidity of its discourse cause constant shifts in power. As a participant observer, I encountered changes in my

positionality in research through constant shifts in power between the children and myself in fantasy play. In my analysis chapter, I illustrate the ways power was being exercised. While in many cases the children sought assistance from me as an adult, they took the initiative to assign a role or another for me.

Ethical considerations: No child left out.

Prior to my work in the field, the classroom children were divided into four groups: blue, red, yellow and purple. The classroom teacher would start by inviting the children of one group to enter a corner of their choice, each child would put on a badge to identify her/his selected corner, then the teacher would invite another group to choose. The children were given ten to fifteen minutes to play in each corner, and then they would be asked to switch corners. For the purpose of my research, the classroom teacher and I discussed strategies to place the children with parental approval together in one group with little probability of excluding any non-participant child from the play. We finally decided to rearrange the existing groups by including two additional groups: orange and brown within which the children whose parents have approved their participation were placed. The classroom teacher might have felt obligated to accommodate for my research agenda. Therefore, I put effort to communicate my reason of regrouping the children which are attributed to ethics and confidentiality.

The children in my research groups were often invited first. However, on many occasions, the children would choose to enter different corners which gave non-participants a space to join a corner with the participant children. I made a great deal of effort to reduce the exclusion of any child during the process, even when such a strategy has reduced my chances of recording many of the fantasy play episodes. Nevertheless, I was always present to observe and/or participate in the play of my participants. In many cases, I interacted and participated with the classroom children, be they participants or non-participants. However, any documentation of data was strictly limited to the play episodes of the nine participating children. While I tried to limit my

exclusion criteria and to follow ethical practices, I bring to the fore that my data set, especially the eight episodes in this thesis, come from three key informants, Sara, Salem and Fahad, whose play narratives and performance played a key role in raising gender assumptions

Ethical considerations: Obtaining consent and assent, or dissent.

Accessing children's world through parents and/or guardians is a subject of debate, particularly in contemporary world and democratic research approaches within which children are viewed as active participants who are capable of co-constructing research (Harcourt, Perry & Waller, 2011). While this is true, children throughout the world are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, with slightly different variations from one culture to another. Legally, in the North American context, participation of children in research must be approved by parents or guardians (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2012; Harcourt, Perry & Waller, 2011). At the same time, children whose parents have approved their participation are invited to give their assent or dissent. That means if children's decision of participation is based on their guardians' approval, their decision remains secondary, as parents/guardians are the main decision makers.

In the context of my research, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia requires written approval from children's parents/guardians if research includes voice recording or photographing. This requirement is listed in my researcher card (issue no. 38504519). While children's assent/dissent is an uncommon practice in research with children in a Saudi Arabian context, I had previously employed that strategy with a group of Saudi kindergarten children (Khoja, 2013). In my MA research, when I asked each child whether he/she agreed to participate in the research, I noticed that some of their verbal responses contradicted their actions. Thus, I concur with Pardhan (2010) that hierarchical cultures where children might have been seldom asked to give their opinions or refuse an invitation from adults, the concept of gaining assent or dissent can be problematic (Khoja, 2016). I simply learned that approaches to seeking assent or dissent must be culturally appropriate (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2012).

Conroy & Harcourt (2005, 2009) have written extensively on ethics of dissent and assent with young children, discussing the aspect of context in relation to inviting children to give their informed consent to participating in research. In my first official day of being a participant observer, I sat next to the playing-house corner and explained to the participating children the reason behind my presence in the setting; that is, “I am interested in learning about play, and I would also be happy to join your play.” I intended to provide the children with hints that may assist them to express their desire to opt out; for example, I demonstrated to the participants how to disable the sound recorder. Whenever I placed the recorder in a corner, I would show the children how to operate it and invite them to disable the sound recorder if they wished for privacy. While I employed that strategy for ethical purposes, I had doubted that children would relate to the phrase “wish for privacy” as children live in a world where adults monitor their behaviours and actions (Syrou, 2015). However, I decided to give them one direct strategy to express their dissent, and to potentially encourage them to express their emotions about my presence. In those occasions, the children never stopped the recorder, but they repeatedly removed the sound recorder to another spot or used it as a play object.

Another way I endeavoured to listen to children’s ways of assenting or dissenting was to attend to their feelings toward my presence in the field (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2012). While in many cases children showed excitement about my participation in a corner, there were a few cases when I felt unwelcomed and, thus, decided to withdraw. To illustrate, in one of the visits, I offered to cook dinner with Maha, but when she responded with silence, avoided eye contact, and walked away, I decided to leave the space. One of the boys, Waseem, was seldom present in any of the play events. When the children are invited to choose a corner, Waseem would often go to literacy or library corner. In that case, I had to choose either to consider his disinterest in participation as a dissent, or to explore the other corners. I eventually decided that

my methodology is concerned with exploring the construction of gender among a group of children in two specific corners. Thus, I interpreted his choice as an implicit dissent which could be attributed to my presence or his uninterest in playing in these two corners.

On other occasions, I considered a smile or a request of help as an indication of a child's assent. In brief, as Harcourt & Conroy (2005) argued, children, like adults, need time to make an informed decision about joining or opting out.

Table 3.2 Introducing the participating children.

<i>Ayah</i>	<i>Girl</i>	<i>5 years old</i>
<i>Fahad</i>	<i>Boy</i>	<i>4 years and 9 months old</i>
<i>Fatima</i>	<i>Girl</i>	<i>4 years and 8 months old</i>
<i>Ghada</i>	<i>Girl</i>	<i>5 years old</i>
<i>Tamara</i>	<i>Girl</i>	<i>4 years and 3 months old</i>
<i>Maha</i>	<i>Girl</i>	<i>5 years and 2 months old</i>
<i>Sara</i>	<i>Girl</i>	<i>4 years and 10 months old</i>
<i>Salem</i>	<i>Boy</i>	<i>4 years and 7 months old</i>
<i>Waseem</i>	<i>Boy</i>	<i>5 years old</i>

The above names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the children as indicated in the consent forms. The age of each child was given by their parents, along with their signed consent, in the week of December 7th, 2016.

Data Collection Methods

The choice of methods is shaped by the methodology adopted in a research (Clark, Kjørhol & Moss, 2005). In her demonstration of methods in sensory ethnography, Pink (2015) explicated,

the choice of method should be matched to two key factors: the method should serve the research question- it should be the method that will best enable the researcher to explore

the themes and issues and acquire the understandings that she or her is seeking; yet this first factor requires that the method must simultaneously be suitable for and amenable to the research participants in question (p.57).

In this section of the chapter, I present my choice of data sources and the application of data collection in the field. I ground my discussion in my role as a participant observer since it is the primary source of data that is textually mediated through my field notes and the audio-recording device. Following, I describe the secondary data sources including photographs and maps of the classroom environment as well as provocative materials.

Table 3.3 Data collection methods

Source of data	Mediator/ tool
Play narratives – stories told and enacted by children	• Field notes (descriptive notes in my journal and reflective entries in an electronic document.) • Audio-recording device • Transcribed text
Maps & photographs – visual accounts of the environment	• Field notes • iPhone camera
Reflective entries- my own account of the experience	• Field notes
Provocative objects	• Four toy cars • Two toy figures

Being a Participant Observer

Pink (2015) suggested that an ethnographer can learn about her or his participants by their engagement in the commonplace activities such as eating and talking. Likewise, I entered the field as a participant observer with a focus of engaging with my participating children in their everyday fantasy play. Pink's believed that through one's embodied engagement whether in eating, walking or playing, the ethnographer can expand the ethnographic knowledge on the subject. In that sense, being a participant observer is the in-situ translation of carrying out an ethnographic work (Punch, 2009). According to Atkinson, Delamont & Housley (2008) "ethnographic fieldwork is founded on a commitment to understand everyday life in a given social world through a sustained engagement with that world" (p.31). Participant observation is the core activity in ethnographic fieldwork and a powerful tool for listening to children's multiple ways of knowing (Einarsdottir, Docket & Perry, 2009; Warming, 2005).

The employment of participant-observer method in children's everyday life allowed me to further my ways of exploring how children interact with social roles and negotiate rules to examine not only their spoken words but also to participate in and learn about children's stories, performance, and movement in a given time and space (Warming, 2005). As a method, participant-observer has proven to allow childhood researchers to study children's interactions with one another in their natural setting (Clark & Moss, 2005; Warming, 2005). It further contextualizes the study by examining the multiple elements that contribute to the children's lived experiences. It enables the researcher to listen to children's narratives, their body languages, and their senses, and to interpret these voices within a specific context (Warming, 2005). In the case of my research, I put effort into being a participant observer rather than simply an observer. I wanted to ensure that I was not merely documenting what I saw and heard, but rather constructing knowledge through experiencing and engaging with the children.

Having said that, my anxieties in the first days of my presence in the field hindered me from seeing ways to introduce myself and interact with the children. I was more emotionally-engaged in my experience than intellectually-engaged. My feeling of displacement and the urge to ‘find’ meaningful data played major roles in diminishing my chances to listen to myself and the children in my first encounters in the field. I feared to inadequately correspond to my methodological approach or to fail the role of the ethnographer in-situ, I found myself in a ‘suspended position, a state of not knowing, which status can be rather unsettling and frightening” (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2013, p. 232)

My experience shifted once I stopped trying to ‘find’ insightful stories and, instead, started to listen to the everyday stories of myself and the participants. Despite my confusion about my positionality, I believed that even on the least participating days, my presence in the field was never a mere observational experience. I could never eliminate my actual presence in a setting and the way my nervousness had shaped the relationship between the children and myself. In my first few weeks, I was occupying the space, and children could see me sitting on that rug or chair even on days when there was minimal participation. By week five, my participation with the children began to take an active dimension, through which I offered to work with them on an art project, by reading a storybook, or by enacting a role in the playing-house corner.

I was aware that to be a participant observer means to reflect on my own experiences, feelings, and the reactions to my methods of participating (Warming, 2011). Pink (2015) stated that sensory ethnographic work appreciates the multiplicity of exploring the field. In participant observations, the researcher’s comprehension of sense emerges as she reflects on her own participation in people’s everyday experiences. That is, listening through participating goes beyond listening with eyes and ears, but rather incorporates many senses, including one’s

feelings (Pink, 2015). My participant observer role in the field involved tasting imaginary coffee and sweets with Fatima and feeling the confusion in Maha's eyes when I invited her to play with cars. Being a participant observer was about my experience in being accepted to join a scene by having children offering me imaginary food, asking me to enact a role, or in feeling rejection to be in the corner. Such acknowledgment of the role of emotions in understanding my own experience and using reflective notes as a medium to understand those feelings were my main source of data and contributed significantly to my understanding of children's play. The feelings I had towards one specific story or another were central to my understanding of children's performance. My feelings were central to the process of producing interpretations that are meaningful within my research context (Warming, 2005).

Following, I explain the process of documenting and generating data in my role as a participant observer. I discuss writing notes in the field (descriptive and reflective), transcribing the play narratives, and introducing provocations.

Writing field notes.

The practice of writing field notes is, traditionally, associated with observing and describing the research site, including its events, people, scents, actions, and emergent themes, with a little attention to how researchers cope with personal and emotional struggles in the field (Punch, 2009). Punch (2009) distinguished between field notes and field dairies, in which the former describes the field and the latter describes the emotions. Thompson (2014), on the contrary, argued that emotions weave themselves into field notes and, thus, separating the personal from the researched can be overwhelming.

To me, writing in the field included my descriptive notes in the classroom and in the school hallways as well as my reflective notes in the car, at my living room in Riyadh, and, later, in Montreal. The field work began from day one of my search to find a research site in

September 2016 and continued until the days of my preliminary analysis in December 2017. I viewed my engagement in the field from a time span rather than a spatial domain. I could never claim that I wrote without boundaries, but I certainly viewed my notes as safe space within which I negotiated my own understanding of oneself and the other. My experience of writing in the field included the descriptive notes in my journal and my reflective notes which I kept in my laptop. In my descriptive notes, I mainly documented my observations at the school setting or, in some cases, wrote memos to connect some thoughts to previous events that had taken place. In my reflective notes, I write about my initial understandings as well as my emotions in-situ. In the following, I present in more detail the process of writing notes in the field, both descriptive and reflective.

Descriptive notes. I kept those descriptive notes in a hand-written journal which totaled in 110 pages. When in the research site, I took notes in Arabic as I did not want to create boundaries with my usage of a foreign language in the research setting. In my first visits, I was alert to the details of the classroom environment, drawing charts and writing detailed accounts describing the educational materials and the layout of the classroom. I gradually started to feel more comfortable opening my journal and focusing on documenting children's stories or conversations. Conventionally, when my relationship with the children had taken another form, my notes started to be brief as I was participating more than observing and writing. By the month of March, my journal showed more of the children's scribbles than my own notes.

of time (Warming, 2011). I wrote occasional reflective accounts in a Microsoft Word document in my laptop that totalled in 19 logs starting from November 15th, 2016 to March 12th, 2017 most of which were generated in English (few selected reflective notes are shared in this document). I wrote reflective notes in an effort to understand my every day experience in the field, view it from a theoretical perspective, and evaluate my ethical approach in context. In my reflective notes, I discussed my presence in the setting from various angles, such as my gender, class, and ethnicity which enabled me to see the multiple identities within me and how they shaped my relationship with the participants and data. My notes gave me a space to test my hypothesis and express my concerns. I was able to articulate how my positionality was constantly shifting based on the different ways the children and I performed the multiple roles in a given place and time. The distinction of such roles is never linear but rather blurry and messy; thus, writing reflective notes enabled me to trace patterns and understand my practice. James (2007) lamented the absence of reflexivity on practices and highlighted its significance in learning about children in the researched setting.

In addition to my personal and emotional encounter in the setting, I had debated some ethical dilemmas over the notion of voice in my attempts to make sense of my own understanding of the collective voice and selective silence (James, 2007; Elden, 2012). For instance, prior to my experience in the field and because of my familiarity with the context, both as a Saudi woman and a former preschool educator, I was concerned with the probability of overlooking some of the stories told by the children. In my first few visits, I caught myself categorizing many of the play episodes as unworthy of analysis or interpretations. I was feeling anxious about my position in the research setting and uncertain of any commentaries I had written in my field notes. I kept writing about my experience with a persistent urge to find

‘interesting’ insights from the stories told by the children. In my personal struggle to understand the concept of voice, I wrote:

I am reading the REB application again because I want to relocate myself in the research – where am I in relation to my research question, purpose and methods? I am not sure to what extent children’s stories are being heard in this study because most of the time I am listening to myself – not them. I attempt to explore how children construct meanings, and I chose a methodology that suits the context, yet even with those methods I am not attending to children– or what they want to say, but rather I have been looking for what I want to hear. (December 8th, 2016 8am, extracted from my reflective entries)

The practice of reflecting on my practice and my experience in the field had opened my eyes to a core concept in my work: that is, even the most mundane stories and actions in the classroom were told and performed by the participants (Komulainen, 2007); thus, they are valuable and meaningful to the children and my research. Once I overcame the urge to find the unknown or to write about the unfamiliar, the concern of missing that one ‘valuable moment’ began to fade. My engagement in writing about my experience has shifted my perspective from finding interesting and unusual knowledge in the field into listening to the many stories told and shared by the children. Those reflective accounts and my visits to my reflections have constantly led me to rethink my definition of voice. That is, it is not the children’s voices or my voice. The practice of listening to children’s stories, observing their play, and participating in it with them constructed a collective understanding of the everyday practices that was shaped by both the children and myself. Through my reflective notes, I engaged in understanding the critical aspect of the data as well as my experiential encounter in the field. Moreover, I learned that the dilemmas involved with the relationships in the field and the emotional issues that I encountered took part in constructing my experiences and interpretations (Punch, 2009). My reflective notes have enabled me to comprehend/ to make meanings of the multiple roles and challenges in my life and its implications on my work the field. Following one of the visits, I wrote about the preschool teacher within me whose interaction with the children might have extended beyond participating

to understanding their daily experiences; but in many cases, I found myself provoking their thinking and challenging their beliefs on certain roles and ideas.

Today I arrived at my usual time, 11:30am. I found the teacher reorganizing the classroom since it is the beginning of a new theme. The children sitting around a circle waiting for their teacher to finish and invite them to play around the corners. The teacher immediately told me that her assistant was absent, and she would have to cancel play time in order to finish the new theme rearrangement. Instead of inviting the children to play, the classroom teacher had chosen to keep them sitting while constantly asking them to be quiet. I found this as an opportunity to strengthen my relationship with the children as well as to offer help to the classroom teacher. I walked close to the teacher and offered to help by reading a book for the kids. I had done this before, I told her. So she smiled and agreed. I picked up two picture books for the library corner in the classroom; Arabic book on clothing, and then the children asked me to read them *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* in English. While reading through the Arabic book on clothing, I could not stop myself from questioning the text and opening dialogue about its content. In page two, for example, there is a picture of a brown man wearing thobe and another of a white man wearing pants – along with writing that says, “Arab men wear thobes and Western men wear pants and shirts.” I asked the children “what do you think of that? what other clothing you see when you go out with your parents? what do you think of men who wear clothing other than thobes? What about girls? The children were not very responsive, I might have put pressure on them to answer my questions. The form of the relationship between me and them was shifting in that moment. They have known me as a student/ learner, but now I am sitting in their teacher’s spot reading a book and asking questions. Their silence could be attributed to their discomfort with my new approach. Or to the nature of power I was exercising on that moment. A few seconds into my questioning and frustration with the book, I realized that my interference with the content was not my role. I am not the classroom teacher and my input may cause conflict with my interest as a researcher; I would be simply asked to leave the research site. Within those seconds, I completed reading the story aloud for the children, I thanked the children for listening, informed the teacher about my next visit and left the setting. (December 18, 2016, extracted from my reflective entries)

Reflecting on the process not only enabled me to acknowledge my subjectivities but also to rethink my practices and constantly situate my research in the moment. It enabled me to unravel meanings from unstructured and unplanned moments of my participation in the setting.

In Pink’s words,

often moments of sensory learning are not necessarily planned processes through which a particular research question is pursued in a structured way as it might be in the context of a survey or even a semi-structured interview. Rather, there are often unplanned instances whereby the researcher arrives at an understanding of other people’s memories and meanings through their own embodied experiences and/or attending to other people’s practices, subjectivities and explanations (Pink, 2015, p.98)

Drawing maps and taking photographs.

The data encountered in ethnographic approach to research is often transformed into written and/or visual accounts (Pink, 2015; Tedlock, 2000). In this study, I produced photographs only when children were out of sight to ensure confidentiality. On other occasions, I drew maps to illustrate the classroom layout, particularly playing house corner in which I spent most of my visits. I consider the maps and photographs as visual aids that had assisted me in my experience as a participant observer, especially in attending to details and later retrieving information about the context. The photographs and maps facilitated my understanding of my experience along with the audio-recorded narratives. In that sense, the various routes of data collection provided me with multiple ways of understandings to each story, rather than seeing one side of the story.

Recording children's play narratives.

The use of digital sound recording is shown to enrich the knowledge produced in the research field and induce new understandings (Pink, 2015; Tilley, 2003). Pink (2015) argued that one's sensory embodied experience cannot be inextricable from the digital world. In my approach to participating in and observing children's fantasy play, I chose to utilize an audio-recording device to mediate my experience in the event of play. My primary motive was to gain insights into the pattern of play and the power dynamic among the group of children, that is, to explore the sounds and rhythms of their ways of sustaining and/or resisting the norm.

In every visit to the classroom, I entered the site with an audio-recording device along with my journal to record and document the stories told and enacted by the children in their play. However, my usage of the device was restricted to the children whose parents approved their participation and therefore was relatively infrequent. Through my fieldwork from November 22nd 2016 until March 16th 2017, I recorded 13 play episodes (nine at playing-house corner and four

at building-blocks corner). In those sound records, each play episode ranges between seven to fifteen minutes.

The audio-recorded data offered me a look into the play from an angle that differed from my notes. To demonstrate, when I compared some of my notes to recordings from the same day, I recognized that my notes had focused on certain features shaped by my personal interest and research questions. Often, my gaze was centered around subjects and conversations formed by my subjectivities. However, the recorded play episodes added detail that I might have overlooked in my notes. The transcribed text allowed me to revisit the conversations produced by the children and to re-examine my initial interpretations.

Thus, I suggest that the practice of bringing together different forms of data such as a recorded play narrative along with my field notes and maps have stemmed new understandings. If my observational notes were driven by my research questions and my interests, the audio-recorded play episodes introduced me to the voices of the children involved in each fantasy play narrative. Yet in utilizing an audio-recording device, I acknowledge my biases in choosing what and when to record, and later what and how to transcribe and analyze.

In fact, even when the medium of an audio-recording device might have facilitated my experience in collecting specific types of data, the process has caused some ethical challenges. I had explained to the children how to operate the sound recording with the purpose of giving them agency to control the privacy of their play. As I noted, to invite the children to control and operate the device might not be a common practice, but the children had rarely disabled the device. In some events, however, the children relocated the device to accommodate for the flow of their play. For example, I once spotted Maha removing the audio-recording device from the dresser to place her fake jewels. On a relevant example, the children used the device as a microphone to call each other or to perform a song.

Nevertheless, the main challenge of the usage of an audio-recording device was the treatment of issue of confidentiality in a classroom setting within which only 9 children out of the 21 had given approval for participation. I had to pause the recording device frequently as both participating and nonparticipating mangled in the corner. In such events, I relied on my field notes to describe the event and to document the experience, or I would participate in and later describe the told and enacted narratives within the frame of my experience. Since my research intended to explore the experience enacted and told by the children and myself rather than providing a discourse analysis of the stories, the audio-recording was not a core practice to my study. This notion led me to engage with the process and to become less concerned with recording every play narrative over the course of the research.

As I describe in the following chapter, the transcriptions of those narratives have assisted me to widen my understanding of the experience.

Introducing provocations.

When designing my study and preparing the ethics approval application, I mentioned the possibility of introducing provocations to the research setting. The purpose of introducing provocative objects, sounds or smells is to stimulate a conversation or a story between a group of children (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Provocations is a term proposed by Reggio Emilia's approach to early childhood education (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). They are introduced to children based on previous observations and documentations to spark children's thoughts or emotions about a specific concept or words (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Ideally, provocations are designed to challenge children's experiences rather than to teach them.

In the case of my research, the classroom teacher introduced different props and materials that corresponded to the monthly theme. These included her role in reorganizing and remodifying the classroom environment as well as adding props such as a hairdryer, first-aid kit,

coffee pot and a collection of fabrics. The classroom teacher might have not defined those props as provocations, but her materials and props had served the purpose of my research. For instance, the teacher added fabrics, accessories and coffee pots which were used to spark conversations around meanings of masculinities and femininities.

However, I noticed that my girl participants had seldom participated in building-blocks corner. This observation, therefore, led me to consider integrating provocations that may encourage them to engage in fantasy play in building-blocks corner. I added two small cars; yellow and silver. The girls still hesitated in exploring the cars or playing with the blocks available in the corner, I therefore brought in two additional cars; one with a girl behind the wheel and another pink car as well as two figures. The additional objects provoked the girls' interest to join the corner and generated stories around power relations (I will discuss the stories in the following chapter).



figure 3.6 building-blocks corner before the addition of provocations



figure 3.7 building blocks corner after the addition of provocations

Terminating the Field Work

A main issue in observational fieldwork is that harm has the tendency to be indirect rather than direct (Murphy, & Dingwall, 2001). Because researchers form close relationships with their researched community, it is not uncommon for participants to experience a feeling of loss when the researcher leaves the field. I was aware of my gradual transition from being a complete observer in the first two weeks, to initiating relationships with the children during their play, to being invited by the children themselves to take a part in their play with one another. By the second week of March, the classroom teacher approached me explaining that play time would be soon replaced with structured literacy and numeracy lessons as children were to be evaluated for their academic progress. I asked the classroom teacher to give me one more week to finalize my work. In my last visits, I explained to the children that my role in the classroom would soon end. On March 23rd, I sat in a circle with the classroom children to thank them for hosting me for the past four months. I gave each child in the classroom a stationary gift that cost a total of \$70 and the teacher a gift certificate with a value of \$50.

Summary

I chose to conduct my study within an ethnographic approach that examined the everyday experiences of children's fantasy play in a preschool setting in Riyadh city in Saudi Arabia. I took an active part by participating with the children in their play. The choice of sensory ethnography corresponded to my theoretical framework and opened venues to listening to our collective voice, that of the children and myself. I discussed being a participant observer as a primary research method and how utilizing field notes and recoding narratives facilitated my experience. I, simultaneously, debated ethical dilemmas in the research setting with young children by presenting my approach of reducing any harm of feeling excluded and gaining children's assent.

On the whole, I could not claim that my written account and participation provided a holistic overview of my participants' beliefs, values and daily routine. Nonetheless, I endeavoured to enter the field with the aim of providing 'a partial ethnographic account' that corresponds to my research question (MacNaughtan, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

In the next chapter, I share my process of analysis and segments from the story shared by the children along with a discussion of common themes traced across the fantasy play narratives.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Interpretations

In this chapter, I explain my process of data analysis, undertaken in multiple phases including transcribing the audio-data into written text, revisiting the field notes, mapping and translating the play narratives, and generating codes and themes. I then share my interpretations of the stories told by the children during my field work. In so doing, I present eight fantasy play narratives, six from the playing-house corner and two from the building-blocks corner. The eight selected narratives in this section draw from the transcribed text and from my field notes. While I illustrate in a subsequent map how my thematic analysis has been formulated through the coding of 17 play episodes, I present eight episodes which have shown adequate translation and visible relevance to my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These eight chosen narratives present a wide range of stories on domestic play, labour work and high-status positions. Within these stories, the children discussed their understanding of their gendered selves in relation to the social norm. They told and performed narratives that depicted their knowledge of power and status. Since the presence of non-participating children was visible in the playing-house corner, the range of data dissemination was chosen accordingly. I subsequently elucidate my understating of the stories, drawing from my paradigms defined in chapter two as well as existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition to providing interpretations for each story, I demonstrate the common themes traced across children's fantasy play. These thematic understandings are meant to provide answers to my research question:

- How does a group of Saudi preschool children construct their understandings of social and occupational roles in relation to their gendered identities during fantasy play? In particular,

What kind of activities do children engage in during fantasy play to negotiate rules and enact social roles?

What narratives do the children reproduce and/or produce about their understandings of their social roles as being a boy or girl?

I provide answers to my research questions through the discussion of three emergent themes:

- 1) Class, age and exercise of power
- 2) Cultural materials and perpetuation of gender norms
- 3) Disguise, silence and disruption of gender norms

Procedure of Analysis

Departing from the concept of accounting for and attending to the senses in the experience of data collection, analysis becomes “the process of bringing together or entangling a series of things in ways that make them mutually meaningful” (Pink, 2015, p.142).

My process of analysis entailed transcribing the audio data into text on the same day of each school visit, a process through which my preliminary understandings of fantasy play episodes have emerged. Simultaneously, I constantly visited the transcribed text in its original language, Arabic, and included commentaries drawing from children’s emergent play episodes. In so doing, my analysis was partially situated within the fieldwork process.

After I had completed my work in the field, I revisited the written account of the data that included my field notes, descriptive and reflective, as well as the transcribed narratives of children’s fantasy play. In my efforts to contextualize my analysis, I read each transcribed story along with the available reflective and descriptive notes of the classroom environment and children’s performance on a particular day. As such, the collected social text of data, which ranged between field notes on images, conversations, and body movements as well as the transcribed play episodes, were examined in relation to one another rather than as disjointed pieces of data (Saldana, 2016). I was then able to create a map that illustrated the components of each performed narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These steps allowed me to familiarize myself

with data and develop a cohesive understanding of children's fantasy play narratives and thus to start coding and then generating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the sections below, I explain the analysis process in sequential order.

Transcribing.

The use of audio-recording along with field notes, sketches and photographs are meant to bring to my readers the sense of being there (Pink, 2015). Departing from the belief that transcription work is data constructed by the subjectivity of the researcher (Tilley, 2003), I viewed my engagement in the process of transcribing as a method of generating data rather than representing reality. I approached my transcription process as "an interpretive act, where meanings are created, rather than simply a mechanical act of putting spoken sounds on paper" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78). I purposefully transcribed each recorded play episode on the same day of its occurrence in order to recognize and unravel the many voices in the tape and to contextualize each play episode within its space and time (Tilley, 2003). By transcribing the audio on the same day, I was able to connect my experience, be it writing observational notes or participating in with the children, to the stories told by the children.

In my transcription work, I basically listened through headphones and typed in a Microsoft Word document. The process included multiple visits to each audio-recorded play narrative through which I engaged in hearing the voices, pausing, typing, and repeating the tape. Overall, I spent from 60 to 90 minutes on each play episode, in order to convert each of the audio-recorded play narrative to a transcribed text.

Although transcription work is often oversimplified, I learned the extent to which the process was significant in familiarizing myself with the data and forming my interpretations ((Braun & Clarke, 2006; Davidson, 2009). The transcribed stories told by the participating children in playing-house corner and the building-blocks corner, along with my descriptive and

reflective notes, were considered as primary sources of data in my research. The revisits to those field notes and transcribed narratives provided me with a holistic overview and grounded my analysis in my conceptual lens, that is to look into the collectiveness of voices and to examine data in relation to context, history, and theory (Burawoy, 2003).

Cyclical visits.

When I chose to adopt a self-reflexive approach, I did so on the premise of rejecting the view that my analysis would be formulated when all data had been collected, sorted, and then coded (Burawoy, 2003). Instead, I analyzed my data through cyclical processes to reflect on my engagement as a participant observer in the field: transcribing the audiotapes, revisiting the transcribed text, creating a map of initial codes, re-coding and categorizing, and developing themes. Braun & Clarke (2006) argued, “analysis is not a linear process of simply moving from one phase to the next. Instead, it is more recursive process, where movement is back and forth as needed, throughout the phases” (p.86).

When employing a cyclical analysis or *rolling revisits*, as proposed by Burawoy (2003), I kept examining my written accounts through the lens of my research questions, theoretical perspective, subsequently added commentaries and formulated preliminary interpretations. With the repetitive revisits to my reflective entries, I was able to trace a pattern of a range of emotional and conceptual issues. Such engagement with the field has been shown to enhance the researcher’s account of her participation and her understanding of the social construction of power amongst the people involved in the setting (Finlay, 2002). According to Punch (2009), finding repetitive and contradictive patterns across data is the main rationale behind the significance of time in typical ethnographic research. A contemporary view of ethnography, on the other hand, opens various routes to exploring the reality of the group of people being studied for the purpose of overcoming the constraint of time in many settings (Pink, 2015). Across and

within the various routes to researching the world of children, patterns of behaviours and actions may entail deeper understanding of the meanings constructed in a particular context.

The revisits have engaged me in the moment and reminded me that the site never exists in isolation but rather shifts and changes in relation to the people involved and the temporal and spatial specificities (Burawoy, 2003). I suggest that my reflective logs were not only a source of data but also a form of analysis. In some events, I wrote in response to my revisits to the data as those cyclical processes assisted me in rethinking my language and interactions and, in some cases, to draw attention to the embedded meanings in some of the daily events. As I will demonstrate throughout my interpretations, the attentive and repetitive readings of the data have allowed me to identify discursive patterns that carry gendered meanings as well as inconsistent patterns that indicate disruption of social order (Blaise, 2005).

Mind-mapping.

Prior to developing codes and generating themes, I created a map to illustrate the most evident characteristics that defined each fantasy play narrative told and performed by the children. It has been suggested that visual representations can be helpful in sorting codes and generating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In my effort to synthesize the data, I utilized a visual approach to categorize the spaces (events), senses and cultural materials in the fieldsite (Clark, 2001). I categorized the spaces created by the teacher for the children, such as a walk-in clinic, a pharmacy, a painting area, and a camping site, as well as the places the children brought into their fantasy play, such as transforming the painting area into a castle for princesses or changing the walk-in clinic to an intensive care unit. Further to the physical locale, I listed the props available to the children in the playing-house and building blocks corners, for example, wooden blocks, plastic farm animals, plastic food (veggies and fruits), kitchenware, coach with two seats, chair, coffee table, jewel box, dresser, assorted fabrics, fake jewels (necklaces, bracelets,

```

graph LR
    MST(mapping the stories) --- Places[places]
    MST --- Spaces[spaces]
    MST --- Props[props/ materials]
    MST --- Roles[roles]
    MST --- Senses[senses]

    Places --- Restaurant[restaurant]
    Places --- Home[home]
    Places --- Clinic[clinic]
    Places --- Pharmacy[pharmacy]
    Places --- Classroom[classroom]
    Places --- EmergencyRoom[emergency room]

    Spaces --- PaintingArea[painting area]
    Spaces --- ClinicCheckupArea[clinic/checkup area]
    Spaces --- Kitchen[kitchen]
    Spaces --- Pharmacy2[pharmacy]

    Props --- PlasticFarmAnimals[plastic farm animals]
    Props --- PicturesOfXrays[pictures of X-rays, kids doctors boys&girls]
    Props --- Coach[coach]
    Props --- WoodenBlocks[wooden blocks]
    Props --- PlasticFood[plastic food (veggies, fruits)]
    Props --- Dresser[dresser]
    Props --- Kitchenware[kitchenware]
    Props --- CleaningProducts[cleaning products (mop, sweeping)]
    Props --- GlovesMasksScrubs[gloves, masks, scrubs, white coat, 1st aid kit]
    Props --- PhoneCallsOrCellPhone[phone calls or the cell phone]
    Props --- Eyewear[eyewear]
    Props --- PinkWoodenObject[pink wooden object used as cell phones]
    Props --- AssortedFabrics[assorted fabrics]
    Props --- Jewels[jewels]
    Props --- ColouringPencils[colouring pencils/ markers]

    Roles --- Doctor[doctor]
    Roles --- Teacher[teacher]
    Roles --- MomDad[mom & dad]
    Roles --- Princess[princess]
    Roles --- Pharmacist[pharmacist (gender specified)]
    Roles --- FamilyFriends[family friends]
    Roles --- Prince[prince]
    Roles --- Baby[baby]
    Roles --- Sisters[sisters]
    Roles --- Housemaids[housemaids/ helpers]
    Roles --- Cousin[cousin]
    Roles --- DoctorAssistant[doctor assistant]
    Roles --- Firepit[firepit]

    Senses --- Tastes[tastes]
    Senses --- Smells[smells]
    Senses --- Textual[textual]
    Senses --- Sounds[sounds]
    Senses --- Firepit2[firepit]

    Tastes --- Good[good]
    Tastes --- MakingCoffee[making coffee]
    Tastes --- Disgusting[disgusting]
    Tastes --- BakingCake[baking a cake]

    Sounds --- Soft[soft]
    Sounds --- Loud[loud]

    Soft --- PhoneCalls[phone calls]
    Soft --- FamilyVisit[family visit]

    Loud --- Firepit3[firepit]
    Loud --- FoodDelivery[food delivery]
    Loud --- EmergencyRoom2[emergency room]
  
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Through such a technique, I found myself writing a brief sketch of each play episode. I was synthesising children's stories in my own words. This map offered an overarching visualized sketch of the context and content of the stories told throughout my visits. The breakdown of the transcribed texts was simple and linear; however, it was data-driven and, thus, insufficient for

providing conceptual understandings of the data and for generating answers to my research questions. Thus far, the above step had barely revealed any hidden meanings behind the stories shared by the children. Since my method of interpretation is driven by thematic analysis, I moved my analysis further to developing codes that are ‘theory-driven’ in order to correspond to my research questions and theoretical assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Shifting between languages.

“Rather than essentialising the individual as having just one subjectivity we should recognise that people may shift between different subject positions, depending on the contexts in which they find themselves.” (Pink, 2015p.62)

The process of translating children’s fantasy play narratives from Arabic into English has broadened my understandings and given me new insights. In the previous chapter, I discussed how familiarity and strangeness have been challenged by contemporary ethnographers (Pink, 2015). Here, I elaborate on the notion of familiarity by explicating a personal experience in positioning myself between two languages. As a native speaker of Arabic, I had relied on the assumption that the processes of analysis and understanding can induce significant meanings if carried out in the original language. However, I later realized that when reading children’s fantasy play episodes in my first language, the prejudices and stereotypes seemed too mundane to me. I argue that the set of data had become extremely familiar, to the extent that I began to devalue my work. Shifting to the English language while writing a few vignettes has provided me with new insights and enabled me to ground my emergent findings within my theoretical understandings. In so doing, the so-called familiar appeared to me as noteworthy and, in some cases, paradoxical.

It could be argued that my familiarity with my native language, Arabic, has hindered my understanding of the taken-for-granted assumptions, whereas seeing the data from a new lens,

English, enabled me to read beneath the surface (Atkinson, 2015). I, however, reject categorizing my usage of language in dichotomies. Instead, my conceptual and methodological stance implies that one's engagement and understanding of her daily contemporary world is fluid and ambiguous. Maguire (2007) suggested,

translation as a methodological aspect of bilingual research...[is] a dynamic, multifaceted process in which translator and translation are co-implicated in the meaning making from interviews and verbal accounts provided in a language that is not the language of the research report (p.11).

My practice of shifting between Arabic and English in my daily life is never linear. I may go further to propose that my familiarity with terminologies within English academic discourse has enabled me to illustrate my insights and offer theoretical interpretations. After I had translated 13 fantasy play episodes, performed at different times throughout my visits, I was able to trace patterns in children's fantasy play narratives. I then began to create codes and categorize the codes to trace common understandings that correspond to my research questions.

Coding and categorizing.

The process of coding and categorizing is meant to generate thematic analysis that "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). According to Saldana (2016), coding in qualitative research enables the researcher to assign a short phrase or a word that identifies salient parts of textual and visual data. The codes are words that describe pieces of data, be they full stories or/and responses to a question or a sentence (Saldana, 2016). Themes, on the other hand, elaborate and reveal the embedded and subtle meanings of the coded data (Saldana, 2016). I examined each play episode as a discourse, locating each play discourse within the multiple factors that may have shaped the narrative and its performance. In addition to the concrete (physical and instructional) factors, I explored the sensory aspect of each play episode by describing noise, smell, texture, and/or feelings. For

instance, I asked myself questions as to how the children expressed their excitement for the appetizing smell of baking a cake in the kitchen area, specifically how the boys and girls showed their interest in baking and tasting the cake. Who was involved in the baking process? For what occasion and for whom it was prepared?

Thus far, the codes became “theory-driven” within which I coded the data within the scope of my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Those codes (Table 4.1) have enabled me to pinpoint patterns between the stories and to highlight contradictions (Coffey & Atkison, 1996).

Below, I illustrate the development of my codes, categories and themes.

Table 4.1 list of codes, categories and themes

List of codes	Categorising/refining the codes	Emergent themes (phase one)	Defining the themes (phase two)
social class; popular culture; subordination; romance; hierarchy; princesses; authority; body movements; cultural materials; social roles; social norms; domestic roles; beauty; stereotype; disguise; femininity; language; inferiority-	1) hierarchy; authority; patriarchy; inferiority-superiority 2) popular culture; princesses; romance; body movements; cultural materials	1) The use of class and age 2) The appropriation of cultural materials	1) Class, age & exercise of power 2) Cultural materials & perpetuation of gender norms 3) Disguise, silence & disruption of gender norms

superiority; silence;	3) beauty; femininity;	3) The
marginalization	stereotype;	perpetuation
domestic roles;	domestic roles;	of gender
hegemonic-masculinity;	strength;	binary
exclusion; institutional	hegemonic-	
norm; space domination;	masculinity	
strength; physical force;	4) disguise;	4) The use of
disruptive; resistance;	disruptive;	silence and
patriarchy;	exclusion;	disguise
misrecognition;	resistance; silence;	
nonrecognition	misrecognition;	
	nonrecognition	

In the process of categorizing, I discarded some of my initial codes whereas other codes have been moved to categories and later to themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The continuity of certain codes performed by the children in their play was a key element in understanding dominant narratives of children's everyday life. Such patterns enabled me to see the commonalities across children's conversations and, therefore, to generate themes. Parallel to the commonalities across the data, I traced children's disruption of the social norm through the examination of inconsistent patterns in children's play. According to Braun & Clarke (2006),

No data set is without contradictions, and a satisfactory 'thematic' map that you will eventually produce – an overall conceptualization of the data patterns, and relationships between them – does not have to smooth out or ignore the tensions and inconsistencies within and across data items (p.89).

Thus, my themes have been developed to elaborate on both commonalities and contradictions, specifically, I addressed how the children reproduced social norms and/ or

disrupted existing social norm. In generating themes, I collated the play episodes, be they full stories or pieces of extracts, into categories formulating an overarching theme for each category (figure 4.2).

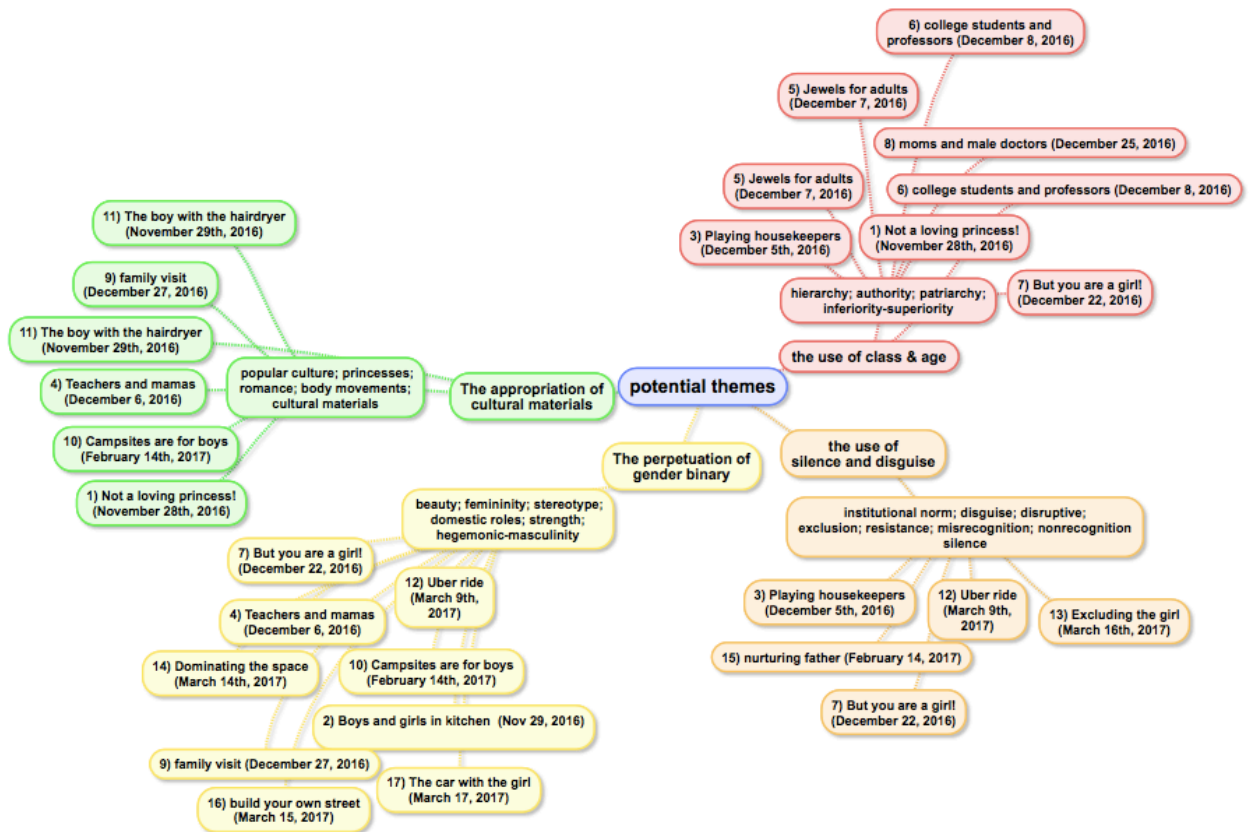


Figure 4.2. A map illustrating the development of emergent themes (phase one)

Defining the themes.

In this phase, I followed a strategy proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) through which I revisited my emergent themes for the purpose of refinement and validation. Thus, I reworked my map whereby I examined each theme in relation to its codes and extracted data. The motive behind this phase was to ensure that “Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). At this stage, I centered my thematic analysis around my research question and began to notice an overlap across two of my initial themes, particularly, the appropriation of cultural materials and the perpetuation of gender binary. Thus, I reformulated the four themes producing three main themes, that is, class, age and exercise of power, cultural materials and perpetuation of gender norms, and disguise, silence and disruption of gender norms (figure 4.3).

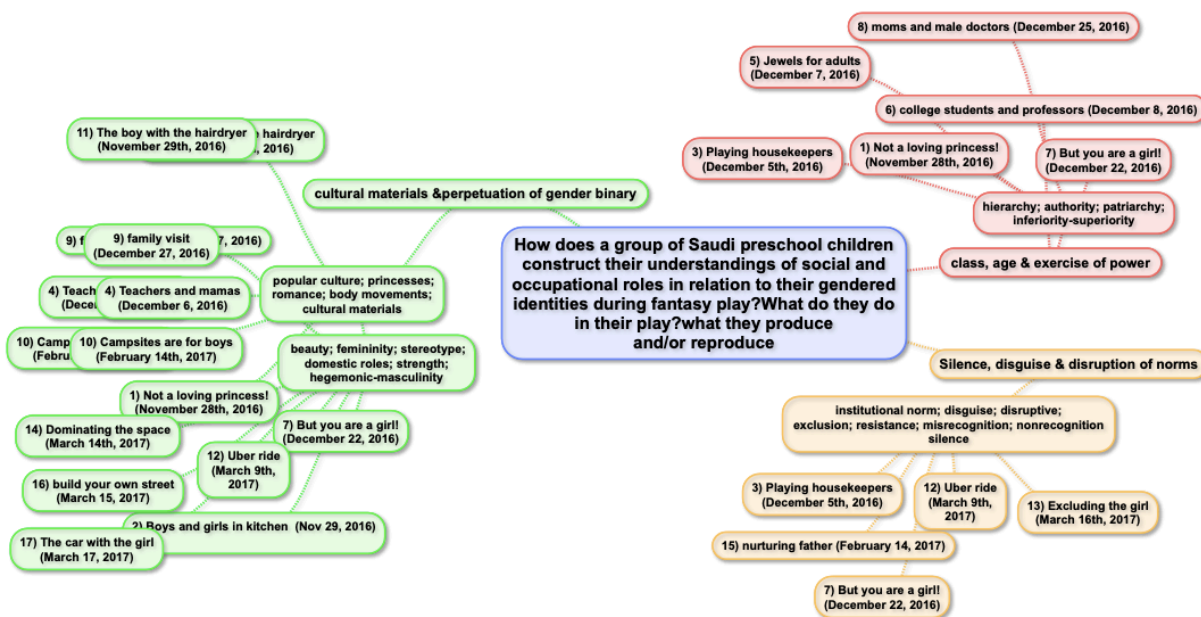


Figure 4.3. A map illustrating the refinement of emergent themes (phase two)

Stories and Interpretations

In this section, I gradually reveal the process of formulating my main understandings and interpretations of the data. I present a set of stories told by the children in their embodied fantasy play in both the playing-house and building-blocks corners followed by my interpretations. In the research field, I observed, attended to and participated in countless play episodes for the purpose of being there in the unplanned everyday fantasy play experiences during the children's school day (Pink, 2015). In her description of sensory ethnography, Pink (2015) explained,

Such forms of ethnographic learning are characteristic of 'participant sensing' where the ethnographer often simultaneously undergoes a series of unplanned everyday life experiences and is concerned with purposefully joining in with whatever is going on in order to become further involved in the practices of the research participants. When we participate in other people's worlds we often try to do things similar to those that they do (although we might not fully achieve this) or play roles in the events, activities or daily routines that they invite us to participate in.... This relates to participation in both actual activities and more generally through 'being there' in a shared physical environment. (p. 101)

I produced field notes on the majority of the fantasy play events that took place during my visits, but I was only able to record and transcribe a total number of 13 play episodes in the playing-house and building-blocks corners due to confidentiality reasons. First, I discuss six narratives told and performed in the playing-house corner. These narratives have been translated from Arabic to English for the purpose of including them in this thesis. I then share two fantasy play narratives from the building-blocks corner. I presented particular parts of a selection of play narratives using my researcher's judgment of their adequate translation and relevancy to the research question. My codes and themes were extrapolated through reading and interpreting a number of 17 play narratives (13 from the transcribed text and four from my observational notes), not exclusively the eight episodes presented below.

Playing-house corner.

Since the concept of discourse is central to my research, children's stories and their commentaries can only be relevant when understood through their historical and physical

emplacement (Davies, 1989b). The children have formulated multiple discourses with the available materials and monthly/weekly themes discussed in the classroom. The classroom teacher would introduce planned activities in the morning during circle time through which the theme content is presented to the children. The organization of the classroom and the availability of certain materials and props have profoundly determined the possible and acceptable social roles and rules in that given place and time (MacNaughton, 2005). In each monthly (in some cases bi-monthly) theme, the teacher reorganized the classroom, particularly the playing-house corner to add relevant cultural materials and props. There are a few items, however, that were kept in the corner throughout my visits, including the wooden kitchen counter with the oven, plastic fruits and vegetables, culinary set, kitchenware, a mop and a broom.

In the following, I unravel children's play episodes in a chronological order to share the development of my own understanding of the data.



Figure 4.4 Photograph of playing-house corner (December 18, 2016)

Episode one: Not a loving princess! (November 28th, 2016)

Ghada and Sara (two girls) walk into the house corner. Sara is in the kitchen area washing plastic fruits and vegetables. Ghada is sitting on the couch in the living-room area.

- Sara: Would you like some salad?
- Ghada: No, I would like pizza (holding a pink wooden piece as a cell phone).
- Sara: Pizza for free for the princess. Understood your Majesty! (holding her imaginary cell phone)

One minute into the scene, a conflict arises between Ghada and Sara about who should be the princess. Sara asks Ghada to move to the kitchen so that she could sit on the couch and be the princess. Ghada refuses to stop being the princess. Sara insists and Ghada leaves the corner. At the same time, Salem, a boy, walks into the kitchen. Sara is sitting on the couch and holding her imaginary cell phone.

- Sara: Hello, bring me some food. The food must be for free because I'm the princess.

Salem does not respond.

- Sara: What's your phone number? (talking to Salem)
- Salem: 5679400

Sara pretends to dial some numbers.

- Sara: Hello!
- Salem: Hello, hold on for 5 minutes, I am busy preparing food right now.

Salem brings a big bowl and places it on the table in front of Sara.

- Sara: Pour some for me and add salt and pepper.

Salem takes the dish to the kitchen, adds salt and pepper, and brings the dish back to the table.

- Sara: Did you add enough salt?

- Salem: Yes.
- Sara: No, not in the food! Just bring the salt and pepper here on the table.

Salem brings a few boxes to the table and sorts them neatly.

- Sara: Good, you may leave now.

Salem stands next to the couch for a few seconds then he sits next to Sara.

- Sara: I am the princess!! (looking at him with confusion)
- Salam: You are the princess, and so I am the prince!

Sara attempts to remove the badge (typically worn by the children upon joining a corner) from Salem. He refuses to give it up. Sara leaves the corner.

Codes.

social class; popular culture; subordination; romance; hierarchy; princesses; authority

Interpretations.

Thus far, my relationship with the children was just being established. I entered the classroom and sat on a chair near to the playing-house corner. I began taking notes when I spotted Sara and Ghada walking into the corner and later Salem joining their play. Having read the stories told by young children in the existing literature on play and gender, such as in Paley's (1984, 2004) work and Wohlwend's studies (2007, 2009, 2012), I entered the field expecting to hear stories about princesses and castles. From my first few visits, I began to notice Disney characters and superheroes imprinted on children's school bags and lunchboxes, and thus I was driven to learn about how Western popular culture is consumed in my research field. In Paley's stories (1989, 2004), for example, the boys kept rejecting the girls' invitation to enact the role of princes. The girls attributed that to the nature of boys, as enacting a prince entails kindness and romance while boys like to be 'bad guys.' In the case of my research and during my visits from

November until April, the story of being or enacting princes and princesses came just once to the classroom.

In this particular story, Sara's positioning of herself took a superior and authoritative form. She initiated the play by inviting Ghada to take up a proposed role, a princess. Sara enacted an inferior role, a servant, through which she created an imbalanced relationship based on title and service (setting dinner table and preparing food). Then, Sara firmly asked Ghada to switch roles, but the latter refused and left the space. When Salem joined the play, Sara was already enacting the role of a princess. She noticed Salem's presence in the kitchen and immediately assigned him as her servant. While he was indifferent to the new role, he agreed to prepare food. Soon, Salem sat next to Sara announcing himself the prince. Sara declared her rejection of that proposal both verbally and physically and finally by submitting and leaving the space.

The intriguing aspect of the dialogue above was Sara's explicit refusal to have a prince by her side, which contradicts the available literature on playing princes and princesses in the North American and European contexts. Salem's proposal of occupying an equal position by sitting next to Sara and enacting a similar role might have been perceived as domination rather than partnership. As an insider, I was able to read the dynamic of power within its political context that constitutes the children's everyday reality. To those children, the absolute monarch is not a fairy-tale, but an everyday reality. In their context, the children are born in a society where titles such as King and/or Prince are pivotal parts of the individual understandings of the social order in society and thus their social class.

A prince in Sara's world may not be a figure of romance but rather a source of power and domination. Sara sought for someone to serve her as the princess, not to save her. Yet her efforts

to stop Salem from dominating the scene failed, so she soon left the space while Salem began a new episode in which he acted as the prince.

My predominant understanding from this particular story sheds light on children's awareness of the social structure, specifically the hierarchical ranking, and the ways boys and girls resolve conflicts in not only a patriarchal but also hierarchical society. I further posit that even with the current social reformation in the country, changes are made through monarch and power is exercised through maleness. Those meanings can make sense when situated within their current social and political discourse.

Episode two: The boy with the hairdryer (November 29th, 2016)

After a few disagreements between Salem and Fatima in the kitchen area, Maha enters the corner.

- Salem: I am the father, Maha is the mother, and Fatima is the chef (Salem referring to the chef using Arabic feminine pronoun).

The girls did not show any objection to Salem's proposal. Salem holds an imaginary cell phone (a small pink wooden block which has been used as a cell phone throughout my field work) and walks around the corner speaking in a very soft voice. He comes closer to the dresser, checking his appearance in the small mirror. He styles his own hair using a pink plastic hairdryer. He stands firmly facing the mirror drying his hair with confident body movements while manipulating the hairdryer, then checking his look with confidence. He does all of that while still holding his imaginary cell phone.

Salem puts the phone away and sits on the couch.

- Fatima: I will bring more tomatoes to you, Salem (speaking while placing a plate full of plastic vegetables on the table).

Salem returns to the dresser, styling his hair with the hairdryer while still speaking on the phone.

Codes.

body movements; cultural materials; social norms; domestic roles; beauty; stereotype

Interpretations.

When I spotted Salem assigning roles, I sat closer to the corner to observe the play and document the conversation. Since non-participating children were playing in the corner, I did not use a sound recorder. From the first few days of my presence in the field starting November 15th, I noticed that children had established a norm of certain social roles for each gender. A few days before this play episode, I wrote in my reflective notes, "it seems as though the children, in this

classroom, had created a set of normalized practices and expectations of maleness and femaleness... I see the boys playing by the cashier and the girls ironing and washing clothes. Some of the boys would enter the kitchen but only with other boy peers.” (November 24, 2016, extracted from my reflective entries).

I, thus, was astonished to see Salem using a pink hairdryer, a product and colour that are typically associated with femininity and beauty. At first, I interpreted the play episode as if Salem were disrupting the dominant discourse of doing maleness. However, I soon realized that my preliminary interpretation was taken out of context. In other words, my understanding of gender in relation to beauty is grounded in the available academic discourse on meanings of femininity and masculinity. However, meanings vary not only in heterogeneous societies but even within a homogenous culture. In the case of this story, Salem was aware of the dominant way of doing masculinity in his culture, as portrayed in his firm pose and sharp look at the mirror. He walked around the corner and interacted with the girls in a very distinctive authoritative manner. When locating the above story within its context, the regular visits to barbershops for haircuts and facial exfoliations are a culturally appropriate and acceptable form of doing maleness often associated with hygiene and social class rather than heterosexuality.

Additionally, I have come to realize that the colour ‘pink’ has very little to do with femininity in this classroom. Through my visits, the children never regarded ‘pink’ as a symbol of femaleness. Once again, such an observation distinctly differed from existing research in the North American and European context, in which pink and blue are regarded as two essential traits of femininity and masculinity. And yet, children in my context may have been exposed to the dichotomy of pink-blue due to their encounters with mass media and commercialized toys. But those meanings were not shown to dominate children’s understanding of gendered social norms.

Over the course of my research, I learned that being there is not a simplistic form of observing, participating in and taking notes, but it entailed becoming involved with what I see, hear and embody in the classroom and outside of the classroom. In attending to the children's ways of narrating and enacting their gendered selves, I realized that masculinity within my researched context is a sacred discourse to the extent to which neither physical appearance nor body movements can be reasons for relinquishing its superiority and powerful status in society. Throughout my visits, the girls have never questioned the boys' ways of doing maleness, neither in this play episode nor on other occasions. The six girls, on the other hand, put visible effort to be recognized by the boys when playing with the boys, particularly when playing with Fahad and Salem.

Episode three: Playing housekeepers (December 5th, 2016)

Sara puts on a pair of eyeglasses, wears a few necklaces in different colours and sizes and bangles on each arm, and speaks and moves with confidence.

- Sara: I am the mom (she gazes around the kitchen area in which Fahad and another non-participant boy are playing).
- Sara continues: You guys are my housekeepers.

She initially addresses them using a masculine Arabic pronoun but soon changes to a feminine pronoun [*shaghalin, la shaghalat*]. Sara then moves to the dresser area.

Ghada walks into the corner. She goes to the dresser where Sara is located.

- Sara: you're my elder daughter, Ghada.

Sara calls Ahmad, inviting him to be the father, but he refuses to join. She then calls one of her girl peers.

- Sara: you will be the dad, Tamara.
- Sara: I am the mom, my name is Ghala, and Tamara is the dad, her name is Rashid (a male name).
- Sara: Rashid, go check on those housekeepers (speaking in a furious tone)! Oh wait, Rashid, see this necklace before you go (pointing to the necklace and smiling coyly).

Tamara (Rashid) leaves the corner without responding.

- Sara: Put the food in the oven now. No!! not here, in there!! (speaking to Fahad whose role in the play is a foreign housekeeper. She orders him in broken Arabic to do some chores, emphasizes some words, and uses her hands and body to demonstrate her order).
- Fahad: Okay, madam!
(a few minutes later)
- Sara: Who made this drink? And who put it here? (speaking in broken Arabic)

Sara and Fatima fighting over the jewel box.

- Sara: Those are for grown women, only women.

Salem comes to the dresser area where the girls are still arguing over the jewels.

- Salem: Can I make a cake, Sara? (speaks in broken Arabic)

Sara ignores Salem's request. She comes closer to him attempting to put a necklace around his neck.

- Salem: No, I am not a girl! (responds in his regular Arabic dialect)

Salem leaves the corner while Fahad mops the floor, and the girls argue about who gets to wear the jewels.

Codes.

class; disguise; beauty; femininity; social norms; language; inferiority-superiority; silence

Interpretations.

Earlier that week, a new theme, my hands, was introduced to the children providing children with wider choices in the playing-house corner. The theme explores the many skills and occupations that occur in the wrists, hands and fingers. The classroom teacher made minimum changes to the corner by keeping the kitchen, living room, and dresser while making some room for free painting. From day one of the new theme, the children of the classroom generated a story around housekeepers. Children would enter the corner and leave developing many narratives around the same topic. Since my participation and presence was limited to free play time, I had little information about the theme content presented to the children. However, I suggest that the development of such story lines might have stemmed from a discussion around cooking, cleaning, washing and other household chores.

The story above resonated with me because of its consistency with other narratives on sustaining gender norms. I was mostly struck by Fahad's acceptance to enact a female role and

his complete immersion in the character. He wore an apron and accepted the docile position as opposed to previous observations of his assertive manner in interacting and playing with the girls. Similarly, Salem barely spoke: he mopped, cooked, making little interaction with Sara, the source of authority. Interestingly, Fahad and Salem had consistently rejected the prospect of identifying themselves with femaleness in other play event.

Thus, I was particularly drawn to this episode by two phenomena: 1) the boys' acceptance of being foreign female housekeepers – which I might have initially viewed as a way of disrupting the norm — and 2) the boys' and girls' awareness of the power structure in their hierarchical system. In this specific story, I argue that what determined the nature of the children's relationship was not gender but rather class. The girl, Sara, positioned herself as a privileged housewife by enacting and embodying femininity, appropriating from the available gendered social norm in her society within which women dominate households and childrearing. She sought to find herself a husband and further shared her understanding of the role of a husband: 1) compliment her beauty to reassure her about her femininity and 2) sustain the quality of everyday life.

On the other hand, Fahad and Salem showed particular interest in preparing food, washing dishes, and mopping the floor. They kept coming to the kitchen area but always while enacting the role of a foreign female housekeeper, speaking in broken Arabic and obeying rules coming from family members. Later, I came to realize that Fahad and Salem enjoyed being in the kitchen together, but they never entered the kitchen when the girls were around. I had spotted them a few times in the kitchen playing together as two chefs in a restaurant or male friends in a vacation cabin. They would joke about making 'meat juice' and create names of food that may not be particularly associated with feeding and care. Such observation correlates with existing

literature within which boys carry distinctive understandings of maleness and thus deliberately detach themselves from enacting care and kindness (Paechter, 2007).

By enacting the role of housekeepers, Salem and Fahad may have found a gap in the regular discourse or the social norm, which opened routes for them to express their wishes without the failure of alienation. I move further to argue that the children may not necessarily associate the role of housekeeping with either femininity or masculinity. In this story, the children's awareness of class in the structure of their society was central in forming their views towards the Other. To them, the role of a housekeeper/helper is associated with strangeness or foreignness. In adopting the role of a foreigner or stranger, the ambiguous category created a gap in the regularity and a safe space for the boys to disrupt the taken-for-granted without the 'risk' of deviating from the correct category (Davies, 1989a).

In other words, the uncertainty surrounding children's perception of enacting housekeepers has encouraged the boys to disguise themselves with little chance of being placed in the 'wrong' gendered category. Salem was aware of his housekeeper's masquerade in the play; when Sara came closer to him with a necklace, which in Saudi society is typically associated with beauty and femininity, Salem revealed the mask and explicated his masculine gendered self.

This play episode brought to the surface issues of power relations and revealed the children's awareness of social status. In this story, I conclude that children's awareness of the hierarchies in their society is overt in their tone, usage of language, and attitude towards each other. Within these hierarchies comes another strand, that is, the power of patriarchy within the family structure. Interestingly, Sara's conversation with her husband, Rashid, was carried out in a completely different manner than her way of communicating with the housekeepers. She smiled coyly and fluttered her eyelashes when speaking to Rashid.

I conclude that the uncertainty opened venues for children to try out new roles and ways of enacting different social roles, and yet children have shown distinct understandings of the 'right' ways of enacting certain social roles within each binary of maleness and femaleness. Although disguise was used to explore new roles and to sustain the play, it seems as though a child's concerns with being unrecognized and/or misrecognized was a key motive in terminating the play.

Episode four: But you are a girl! (December 22, 2016)

Sara puts on a white coat. Salem is busy trying to put on the scrubs.

- Sara: You are my assistant, Salem. You are the doctor's assistant.

Salem does not respond. Sara sits down and pulls out her imaginary cell phone.

- Fahad: Hello, may I speak to Dr. Ahmad? (speaking in his imaginary cell phone from the other side of the corner)
- Sara: who here is Dr. Ahmad?

She looks around and says, "Salem, are you Dr. Ahmad?"

- Salem: No.
- Tamara: All right, all right, you can come and see me at 9 (speaking in the phone).
- Salem: Fine, I can be Dr. Ahmad.
- Fahad: But Tamara is Dr. Ahmad.
- Tamara: No, I want to be a pharmacist (using feminine pronouns).
- Fahad: But you are a girl! (with confusion)
- Sara: it's okay, she can be a boy, and I can be a boy, too.
- Sara: it is fine, I will be Dr. Ahmad.
- Tamara: Hello, Dr. Rashid? (speaking on her phone while looking at Sara)
- Fahad: Are you a female police officer? (directing his question to Tamara)
- Sara: I want to be a pharmacist (using feminine pronouns).
- Tamara: I want to be a physician (using feminine pronouns).

Codes.

patriarchy; social norms; disguise; misrecognition; stereotype; exclusion; silence

Interpretations.

Thus far, I had been visiting the classroom for a month and had begun to feel comfortable in carrying out casual conversations and to assist the children and the classroom teacher. This above episode took place during the first few days in the new theme, Health and Safety. The playing-house corner was modified and reorganized, and children were keen to take turns playing in the corner. There were clinic and pharmacy sections where the teacher had displayed a variety of pictures of boys and girls dressed in different medical uniforms.

In this play event, I was surprised to see the girls disguising themselves in maleness in order to enact a profession in the medical field, especially given the visible presence of Saudi women in the medical field (Gahwaji, 2013). Sara, who crafted the story and assigned roles, submitted to Fahad's doubt of the appropriateness of being a female pharmacist. However, Sara gave a quick alternative scenario by choosing to disguise herself within existing dominant gender norms. The power of hegemonic masculinity entailed the choice of enacting the role of a pharmacist man as more acceptable and accessible than the possibility of challenging the institutional norm. The children have shown their understandings of what being a girl allows them to do and/or say. To them, the social norms are strictly defined, and thus it is easier for girls to conceal their femaleness behind maleness in order to fulfil their wishes. Yet when Fahad proposed an unusual social role for a woman in Saudi Arabia: a police officer, the girls immediately expressed their true wishes without concealing their gendered selves: Sara as being a pharmacist and Tamara as being a physician. Sara and Tamara chose to disguise themselves in maleness in order to achieve a goal or sustain the play, whereas Fahad was more confident in disrupting the norm and proposing a social role that is atypical in his culture.

Episode five: Campsites are for boys (February 14th, 2017)

Fahad is standing near the imaginary bonfire throwing some wood chips in the firepit. Sara and Tamara join the play.

- Fahad: Stay away from the fire, woman, stay away (yelling at Sara).
- Sara: Let me do it. I know how to set up a fire.
- Fahad: No, that's my job, I am going to set up the bonfire (Sara still standing there without touching the wood chips).
- Tamara: Watch the coffee please because the kids are running around the place. I am going to get us some sweets and come back right away (speaking to me).

On the following day, February 15, 2017, a group of non-participating children had entered the house corner. I joined them without my recorder. I sat around the bonfire in the middle next to Fatima and Ghada.

Fatima fetched some woodchips and threw them in the middle.

- Fatima: I am doing exactly as Fahad had taught me the other day.

Codes.

hegemonic-masculinity; social norms; cultural materials; body movements; exclusion; stereotype

Interpretations.

By this time, I had become familiar in the setting, and the children would often approach me for assistance in the corner or to offer me a role in their play. In the scene above, the monthly theme was about Sands. The playing-house space had been entirely remodelled by the classroom teacher. A traditional tent was placed in the corner and a space for a pretend bonfire in the middle. A few props relevant to the theme were added, such as wood chips, coffee pots, and traditional outfits.

On that day, Fatima asked me to help her dress up for her role as the mother. I considered it an opportunity to participate with the children in their play. Fatima suggested that I would be a friend and thus visit her in the tent, and I agreed. I sat on the floor next to three other children. One girl pretended to hold *Bakhoor* (scented woodchips which are typically used for perfuming houses and welcoming guests), and she approached me as a gesture of greeting; another girl offered me coffee. The girls kept filling my cup with their imaginary coffee and perfuming my hair with the pretend *Bakhoor*.

Meanwhile, Fahad and Salem were engaged in building a fire going around the pit, chanting and yelling. Sara came closer to the firepit, a move that triggered the boys. Fahad yelled at Sara. She confronted his discriminative behaviour with a clear statement that showed her certainty about how to contribute to the play. Fahad's response offered a distinct understanding of masculinity and femininity through his statement "that's my job". Although Sara had defended herself, she shortly subordinated to the role given to her by her male peers. She stayed in the area for a few minutes and then left the space.

During that week, the boys' presence in the playing-house corner was prominent, with a noticeable change in the noise level and occupancy of the space. The boys exercised power through their explicit exclusion of any girl from being around the imaginary fire. It was evident that the boys associated camping with masculinity. While most of the girls in the playing-house corner had enacted the dominant gender discourse by sitting far from the fire, preparing coffee, and welcoming visitors, Sara attempted to challenge the norm. Her effort, however, failed, and thus she left the scene.

Episode six: Uber ride (March 9th, 2017)

- Fatima: My husband is very, very busy. He cannot take the girls to school today. Our only solution here is Uber.
- Me: What if we couldn't find any Uber rides around?
- Fatima: Then we go to school on horses (She spoke in a sarcastic tone).
- Me: Interesting! How about I drive the car and give you a ride to school?
- Fatima: No, thank you. I will drive myself. The mom can sit next to me in the front seat and the kids in the back, and we can pick up some food together.

Codes.

institutional norm; disguise; social norm; hegemonic masculinities

Interpretations.

Today I arrived after the children had selected corners. A few non-participating children were playing in the house corner, which prevented me from recording the play. However, I spotted Fatima, one of my participants, sitting in the playing-house corner pretending to drink from a cup. I sat next to her. She then began the conversation above.

At that point in early 2017, Saudi Arabia was the only country in the world in which its national law prohibited women from driving cars. In the above, Fatima told a story about the everyday struggle of Saudi women in commuting, be it for work, school, or running errands. She expressed her understanding of the meaning of being a woman in patriarchy, and, interestingly, she enacted her awareness of how women console themselves in her society. Fatima chose sarcasm. When I gave her an option that was not typically available in her context, she politely thanked me and offered an alternative that may not necessarily disrupt her absolutist definition of femaleness and maleness.

When revisiting the narrative, I realized that she said “the mom can sit next to me” which led me to assume that Fatima had abdicated her previously asserted role as mother in order to be able to drive. Once again, a girl had disguised her femaleness in maleness for the purpose of expressing her wishes without the failure of deviating from the norm or being unrecognized.

Building-blocks corner.

Compared to the playing-house corner, my engagement with and observation in the building-blocks corner were considerably minimal. However, I deem the data that I collected in the two weeks of my presence in this particular corner as rich in content. By March 2017, I had taken a regular part in participating with the children during their fantasy play. I observed and participated in seven play episodes in the building-blocks corner, but I was only able to record four play episodes for ethical reasons.

It was evident throughout my visits that my participants had little interest in building blocks. In contrast to the playing-house corner, within which changes regularly took place, the building-blocks corner remained the same in terms of variety of materials and organization of the corner. I thus decided to introduce provocative materials to the corner. On March 12th, 2017, I added two car toys, a yellow and a silver. I included two small figures: a boy and a girl with different skin tones. The boys in the classroom were thrilled to see such amendments and showed interest in taking turns in the play. On the contrary, the girl participants were uncertain about their position in the construction area, but they joined to explore the new provocative materials. The girls might otherwise have avoided the corner, to ensure their identification with the acceptable and desirable category of femaleness in their classroom and to sustain the oppositional gender binary with little ambiguity involved. Nevertheless, they gradually showed interest in exploring the building-blocks corner and experimenting with the cars and blocks.

As I will explain below, the discourse of play in the building-blocks corner has created story lines and conflicts that can be viewed or analyzed differently from discourses created around the playing-house corner. In the coming selected play episodes, I present and comment on the children's—both girls and boys—stories and negotiations in the building-blocks corner.

Episode seven: Dominating the space (March 14th, 2017)

Fahad, Salem, Maha, and Sara join the building-blocks corner together as a group. Fahad is playing cars, and a few steps away Salem is playing with animals. I am sitting on the same corner next to Sara and Maha, with whom I was constructing a building. The girls were engaged in building their construction, and they would pause every 1-2 minutes to discuss their work. Fahad and Salem would move their cars and animals in furious and sudden movements onto the construction being built by the girls. Sara and Maha would shout and show frustration by saying, “hey, stop doing that”, then they would continue their work. In their conversation with one another:

- Sara: I will build a bed for the Queen. How about if you build a tower, Maha?
- Fahad: I will invade your tower and destroy it.

The girls ignore Fahad.

- Sara: Look at me, I am an artist!
- Fahad, mocking Sara: Look at me, look at me!! Now, how about you see my own tower?
- Maha: I think you should add some blocks to this part of your construction, Fahad.

Maha reaches out to add blocks to Fahad’s tower. Salem grabs the blocks from Maha’s hand, at that moment the girls’ construction falls apart.

- Sara: No!!!

Salem fetches some blocks from the girls’ tower (he starts building a construction)

- Sara: Let’s build it again, Maha.
- Maha: No, Salem stop it. Stop taking away our blocks.
- Salem: My castle looks better than yours.

Codes.

space domination; power; physical force; exclusion; disruptive; resistance

Interpretations.

A significant strand of existing literature on children's play in the building-blocks corner is devoted to discussing the domination of boys in construction play through the discourse of strength, physical force, and noise (Blaise, 2005; Paechter, 2007). Komulainen (2007) argues that noise and physical movement could be more meaningful than spoken words in such play. The boys in my research context, particularly Fahad and Salem, had sought to be included in the domestic play in the playing-house corner through subtle but powerful strategies, such as disguising their maleness or voicing their wishes through silence. In contrast to the subtle exercise of power in the playing-house corner, the boys in the building-blocks corner used noise and disruptive behaviour to voice their rejection of having the girls there. The boys' domination of the space in the building-blocks was evident in their implementation of not only physical force but also psychological exclusion, such as mocking and threatening. In the above event, Fahad mocked Sara and later Salem started playing with the blocks deliberately to push the girls out. The boys constantly attempted to exclude and marginalize the presence of the girls. Though I was participating in the play with the boys and girls in most of the building-blocks play episodes, the boys seldom readjusted their discriminative behaviour towards the girls. They would mock and laugh at them and, in many cases, destroy the constructions built by the girls.

The nature of play in the building-blocks corner caused conflicts which led the girls to either resist the power of maleness and stay or to submit and leave the space. Wohlwend (2007, 2009, 2012) suggested that rough play is valued by boys as it portrays power and strength, traits that are typically associated with superiority of maleness. Since meanings associated with gender can only be meaningful in relation to one another (Davies, 1989a, 1989b), the meaning of femaleness is subjected to the meaning of maleness. If girls are viewed in the gender discourse as

sensible and caring, then boys had to show the opposite by being silly and disruptive (Francis, 1997).

Episode eight: Excluding the girl (March 16th, 2017)

Tamara begins with her construction. She builds a vertical tower.

- Tamara: There is a security camera on top of the building to control robbery.
- Salem: We don't need that!
- Tamara: Yes, we do! What if doctors could not be around?!
- Salem: Are you saying if someone came in, they would just die?? Just put the car here!!
(he rephrases her suggestion with sarcasm)
- Tamara: We're building a hospital.

Salem turns around to exchange cars with Waseem, with whom he is playing.

- Tamara: This is the hospital, and people can enter from here. How can they exit though?!
(speaking to herself)

Tamara makes changes to the construction by taking out some blocks to make an exit. Salem is working with Waseem and talking about building a parkade for the hospital.

Codes.

exclusion; disruptive; resistance

Interpretations.

As it appears above, the storyline and the approach to solving power conflicts differed distinctly in the building-blocks area in comparison to the playing-house corner. The children in their play have shown a prominent understanding of their gendered selves. They have acquired their knowledge through their participation in discursive practices and thus tended to classify themselves within femininity or masculinity. Their understanding goes beyond the surface level.

Despite constant attempts from Salem, the boy, to violate the constructions made by Tamara, she was evidently soft and submissive in her reactions. In building-blocks, Salem was vocal and physical in asserting his presence and domination of the space. Waseem, who barely

participated in any play events across the course of my research, showed little interest in projecting masculine traits. Yet, Waseem was there to play with Salem and dismiss the presence of Tamara.

It is visible from the examples provided above that the female participants were uncertain about their position in the construction area. They only joined because of the new provocative materials. Further to their uncertainty, they showed hesitation in confronting the boys, and alternatively they seemed to absorb the discriminative behaviour towards them.

Common Themes

Thematic understandings have emerged through reading, coding specific conversations, be they entire play episodes or multiple short conversations, and then exploring each labelled chunk through my descriptive interpretations (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In so doing, I offered an interpretation for fantasy play episodes in a contextualized discussion through viewing each fantasy play narrative as a discourse. I initially had little intention of offering general understandings of the data, but the reoccurring themes traced across the various play episodes encouraged me to explore the general understanding across my experience. In the following, I explicate three themes that I deemed relevant to my research questions,

- Cultural materials and perpetuation of gender binary
- Disguise, silence and disruption of gender norms
- Class, age and exercise of power

In response to my research questions, within which I aimed to explore the ways children enacted social roles and negotiated rules to produce and/or reproduce understandings of gender appropriateness of social roles, I propose that my group of participants has repeatedly appropriated from the multiple sources in their environment and actively engaged in perpetuating the gender binary to maintain the gender norm. In their attempt to disrupt the norm and thus produce new meanings, the children used subtle strategies such as disguise and silence, through which they enacted roles or proposed rules that are not necessarily acceptable in their culture. Additionally, I argue that hierarchical structure of class and age is shown to be central to children's understandings of their gendered selves.

In the following, I discuss the three main themes drawn from the children's fantasy play narratives while locating my discussion in my theoretical framework and the existing literature.

Cultural materials and perpetuation of gender binary.

I argue that in many performed narratives, the nine children appropriated available cultural materials to facilitate their performance and dialogue within the recognizable gender norms. The notion of appropriation described in my theoretical framework situates children as active co-constructors in creating their own culture (Rogoff, 1995, 2003). It problematizes the idea of social modelling and welcomes children's complex ways of understanding the multiple messages that they receive from their family, school, media and/or institutions. In this framework, children's appropriation of cultural materials available to them posits their active role in reworking or redefining some of the available cultural materials from one form to another to comply with the dominant practices in their social domain.

It has been suggested that children experience their school life through cultural materials, such as images, uniforms, picture books, and wall posters, available to them; thus, such artifacts may carry both "personal and collective meanings" (Moletsane, Mitchell & Smith, 2012, p.36). For instance, the children in the classroom have shared a collective meaning of the set of necklaces available to them in the playing-house corner. The boys were aware that using accessories has certain social and moral meanings associated with femininities while hair styling with a pink hairdryer might not necessarily diminish one's masculinity. The girls, whose interest in playing around the fire pit was overtly unwelcomed by the boys, used some of the wood chips to enact an acceptable social role that is recognized within their patriarchal context. Instead of resisting the norm, they subordinated themselves to it by leaving the fire pit and alternatively used some wood chips as scented *Bakhoor* to facilitate their performance and dialogue in enacting domestic roles.

Moreover, children's appropriation of cultural materials was not confined to tangible objects. It could be traced in twisting characters or retelling a story. Sara, whose casual

conversations with me had often included princesses and Barbies, did not model the demure femininity discourse but rather enacted a tough and assertive princess. It was evident through my visits that my participating group of middle-class Saudi children are exposed to North American popular culture; however, Sara's interpretations of the meanings of playing the role of princesses were grounded in her sociocultural and political context.

Thus, I posit that the children's appropriation of cultural materials has been shown to produce the dominant norm in their context despite the multiplicity of sources in their everyday life. For instance, the dominant gender norm of this group of children might hold minimal association between the dichotomy of blue-pink and masculinity-femininity. Over the course of my fieldwork, the boys and girls never shared an explicit association between femininity and pink or masculinity and blue. Nevertheless, the classroom children had personal belongings that are typically designed for a specific gender. The girls came to school with backpacks and lunchboxes in pastel colours with images of Disney princesses, and the boys would carry lunchboxes with bold colours and superhero characters. Yet, I did not encounter any discussion from the children regarding appropriateness of colour in relation to gender. During artwork projects, I spotted girls choosing blue pieces of construction paper while boys wore pink aprons.

In McNaughton's (2000) discussion of the formation of gender identities, she proposed the concept of a 'free marketplace' debating that children's agency to construct their identities is never free but rather controlled by dominant choices. The classroom teacher and her significant impact on the creation of the classroom environment had offered a controlled set of choices and established a set of norms. Her choice of props as well as her emplacement of certain kind of materials offered a set of expectations and norms in the classroom, for instance, the dresser and the kitchen are introduced to the children as elements of carrying out domestic roles in "playing house" whereas cars and wooden blocks imply creation and construction through "building

blocks.” In that sense, I conclude that children’s choices of what to say or how to perform were confined within the dominant practices, not by the multiplicity of resources.

In addition to the role of the classroom teacher, the children in my context entered their schooling world with pre-existing distinct definitions of dress codes within which the social and moral meanings of dress and appearance are legitimized (Moletsane, Mitchell & Smith, 2012). Though in many early childhood studies girls have been shown to perform femininity through clothing choices (Blaise, 2005; Dyson 1989, 1997; Paley, 1984), my participating children had little space to express their understanding of gender through their outfits. In the context of my study, children wore uniforms in school which limited their personal choices in expressing their understandings of femininity or masculinity through clothing. Preschool girls wore long unfitted beige skirts and long-sleeved white shirts to school. Boys wore long unfitted pants with long-sleeved white shirts.

Nonetheless, the children used the cultural materials available to them in the classroom to position themselves in the acceptable gendered discourse. For instance, the girls utilized the jewel box to position themselves in feminine domestic roles such as enacting mothers, eldest sisters, and aunties, and they used a pair of eyeglasses to perform powerful and authoritative positions as classroom teachers and doctors. The pink piece of satin fabric in the playing-house corner was used both as a wedding veil by the girls and a Superman cape by the boys. On one occasion, Fahad pulled out the pink piece of cloth and tied it around his neck; the boys were thrilled, shouting out “Superman, Superman!” A few days later, as Fahad and two other boys were looking in the jewel box near the dresser, Fahad picked up a necklace and put it on with hesitation; the boys laughed at him and pointed, saying, “look at him, he’s a girl.” Fahad pulled it off right away and left the group.

In their fantasy play, the children explored the social world from various angles, and their appropriation and transformation of materials might have allowed them to explore the ‘correct’ positioning of oneself in their dominant gender discourse. I conclude that the children in my study appropriated meanings from different sources and manipulated them to correspond to the acceptable dominant categories in their cultural and social world. They brought in meanings and attached them to the available materials in their environment as well as to the acceptable roles in the discourse. Their appropriation portrayed the discursive practices within which children partake in their everyday experiences.

My discussion of how the nine children appropriated cultural materials to position themselves in the discourse of gender proposes that children shared a collective as well as individual understanding of the social codes available to them in their context. Even before birth, the first categorization imposed on children is the binary of gender (Blaise, 2014). As such, children in all societies and from a very young age construct meanings about gender norms in their world through their partaking in dress code, toy selection, and usage of language (Moletsane, Mitchell & Smith, 2012). The children in my research are born into a world of black and white that identifies femaleness and maleness. Men’s traditional white clothing, *thobe*, is recognized as culturally appropriate while women’s public black attire, *abaya*, is legitimized by religious institution.

Accordingly, each child in my research brought into the classroom his/her understanding of categories associated with gender and social roles: what it means to be a male/female, capable/uncapable, masculine/feminine, or good/bad (Davies, 1989b). In the case of my research, the children enacted imaginary roles through which they allocated meanings to those categories. Their construction of such meanings was not novel but rather reflected their experiences with people and places. Parallel to McNaughton’s work (2005), the children in my study showed that

despite the variations in their fantasy play narratives, there were a myriad of moments in which the children repeatedly shared a set of similar beliefs sustaining the social system of morality, reproducing the dominant “good” ways to be a girl or a boy in a given time and space. This is evident from Fahad’s domination of the campsite, to Fatima’s acceptance of her inability to bring her imaginary children to school, to Salem’s assertive stance in refusing to wear a necklace.

As my participants have shown their awareness of the ‘anticipated identities’ in every discourse (Wohlwend, 2009), I propose that my group of children actively used and manipulated available cultural materials that continued to reproduce the gender norms in their culture. For instance, Maha’s rejection of playing with cars could be attributed to her awareness of the gender norms in her context. Her disruption of such a norm may position her outside of the continuum. Similarly, when Fahad attempted to wear a necklace, his male peers laughed at him and pointed, loudly saying, “look at him, he’s a girl.” In disrupting the norms, Fahad’s peers used the binary of gender to deviate him from one category and identify him with another. The probability of being alienated or unrecognized from the group led Fahad to shed his interest and re-establish his position in the dominant masculine discourse.

Interestingly, the boys viewed femaleness in an inferior position and, thus, they not only alienated him but also relegated Fahad’s positionality in the play with their behaviour. I concur with Bronwyn Davies (1989b) that meanings of maleness and femaleness are

meaningful only in relation to each other and understood as essentially oppositional terms. The opposition embedded in the terms is not an opposition of equals, but one in which part of the definition of one is its dominance over the other (p. 234).

Therefore, I posit that the children’s active engagement in perpetuating and reproducing binary opposites is inseparable from existing patriarchy and also acts in preserving and continuing them generationally. The children not only sustained the gender binary but also located femaleness in an inferior position through the practice of strength and superiority. In

other words, the children were shown to regulate the social order in their play by legitimizing existing patriarchy through their active participation in discursive hegemonic masculinities. Connell (1995) defined hegemonic masculinities as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” (cited in Moule, 2013, p. 33). Across the play episodes, the children used gender dichotomies to regulate their play through a shared understanding of what it means to be a boy or a girl in a particular story line. When Fahad was around the fire pit, he exercised power through reinforcing hegemonic masculinities by positioning Sara inferiorly, yelling at her, “stay away from the fire, woman, stay away”.

Though she confronted his gender stereotypical assumption with a clear statement of her knowledge and ability, “Let me do it. I know how to set up a fire”, she soon subordinated to the superiority of maleness which is legitimized in her culture by religious institutions.

Moreover, the girls did not seem to only accept their inferior position as females but also sought for their femaleness to be legitimized through maleness. In that sense, femaleness was proven to be constructed in relation to maleness. Sara sought for recognition and acceptance from her husband Rashid, and the girls disguised themselves taking on male roles to perform powerful and high-status positions until Fahad disrupted the norm by asking, “Are you a female police officer?” It was only then that both Sara and Tamara expressed their true wishes of being a pharmacist and a physician using feminine pronouns.

On the whole, a child’s positioning of oneself in a certain character or role is not an ultimate reflection of his/her individuality. The negotiations among the group of children actively involved them in constructing or creating a set of meanings for the available categories.

Their participation in these categories through the appropriation of cultural materials was shown to maintain the gender binary opposition that is dominant in their discourse.

Yet, though children sustained the gender norm, they showed an understanding of the gaps in the binary category of gender. The following theme proposes that in the ongoing process of children's construction of self, my participants employed two distinct behaviours to disrupt the norm and experiment with the unfamiliar.

Disguise, silence and disruption of gender norms.

The children in my study have shown the extent to which their understanding of sex and gender is seen as the same thing. As Davies argued (1992), children's understandings of the biological traits of being male/female lead to the construction of certain meanings in each binary category. In my data set, the boys and girls have been shown to conceal themselves behind one sex or another for the purpose of enacting unfamiliar roles in their social context. Drawing from the above theme, the nine children have shown an adequate understanding of the available gender discourses in their world.

I agree with MacNaughton (2005) that in sustaining gendered norms, the children exercised control and experienced pleasure in being part of the norm. In the case of my research, however, I argue that the fluidity of fantasy play offered the children opportunities to disrupt the regularity of the norm, within which the children found moments to produce new meanings. The children in their play undertook or enacted different ways and roles of being a boy or girl, and through their ventures they put meanings to their daily experiences. In those trials, the children encountered conflicts such as alienation and deviation from the correct category in the dominant ideology. In such conflicts, the children were shown to respond with subtle strategies, specifically, silence or disguise.

Thus, I posit that the ambiguity of fantasy play encouraged the children to position themselves in roles that might not fit within the norms, such as enacting a nurturing male or a powerful female figure. However, the children employed subtle methods in their attempts to enact an unusual or unacceptable social role. Through their disguise and silence, the children might have avoided the risk of falling into the unrecognized. That is, the practice of disguise and silence allowed the children to disrupt the norm with little risk of failure.

The notion of disguise for the purpose of deconstructing categories of identities is discussed by feminist poststructural scholars (Davies, 2003; Tseelon & Tseëlon, 2001). Disguise is defined by Davies (2003) as “concealing in the sense of misrepresenting (employing false elements)” whereas masquerade refers to “assuming false appearance” and masking indicates “hiding from view” (p.2). Davies (2003) argued that the dynamic nature of the three concepts renders them intersected. I chose to employ the term disguise particularly as I believe that the children in my setting did not hide completely from the scene nor did they change appearance to enact roles. Rather, the children chose to conceal their gendered selves for the purpose of enacting social or occupational roles that are not desirable or acceptable in their society.

In my study, the girls disguised themselves as males to position themselves in powerful social roles, to exercise strength and power, whereas boys disguised themselves in female roles to enact domestic work and show care and kindness. Within the stories told by the children, the boys accepted enacting female housekeepers and performed household chores throughout a few play events which lasted for days. They even adjusted their usage of language to master their misrepresentation of themselves as foreign workers. The girls had also chosen to disguise their femaleness and to access the power of maleness in order to perform powerful actions that contradict the norm in their society.

As mentioned above, femaleness in patriarchy is not equal to maleness. There are certain behaviours and acts that are deemed difficult for girls to achieve. Girls are trapped in certain roles and social expectations. The children were able to disrupt those expectations through concealing their femaleness by joining the powerful category of maleness. When Fahad had questioned Tamara's choice of being a pharmacist, Sara interfered immediately, "it's okay, she can be a boy, and I can be a boy too," disrupting the patriarchal assumption without challenging the norm. For Sara, to remain in her powerful position as a doctor in the scene was more important than to raise a conflict with Fahad about her capability of enacting the role. Sara challenged Fahad in a subsequent play narrative within which she clearly asserted her ability to build a fire in a campsite. Nevertheless, the boy, Fahad, excluded her from the scene.

Sara and Tamara seemed to have repeatedly disguised themselves in maleness to access power via high-status jobs. Similarly, Fatima, in one of the play episodes, shared her concern about her powerless position of being unable to bring her imaginary children to school. Interestingly, when I offered her a ride, she responded, "No, thank you. I will drive myself. The mom can sit next to me in the front seat and the kids in the back, and we can pick up some food together." I read Fatima's response as a way of concealing in maleness. By proposing to have the mom next to her and the children in the backseat, she might have chosen to enact the father's role.

I further propose that in their attempt to experiment with the unfamiliar, my group of children not only hid aspects of themselves but also used silence to produce new meanings. As such, the children responded with silence to avoid the confirmation of being associated with the opposite gender binary. In his article on the complexity of children's voices, Spyrou (2011) discussed the richness of the "silent or unsayable" (Spyrou, 2011, p.157), to recognize that silent is "not neutral or empty" (Lewis, 2010, p.20). Given that both the children and I come from a

cultural context which values obedience, I knew that the practice of openly expressing one's opinions is undesirable and could be discouraged. To attend to the silent moments of the participants is seldom explored in qualitative research, given that verbal and written language are central to the academic discourse (James, 2007). I however put effort to draw particular attention to seeing how the children's silent moments can be interpreted in my research context.

I propose that the children in my context have relied heavily on silence not only to resist the norm, but also to express their hidden wishes. For instance, Salem, whose role was of a sick child, began to call Fahad "mom," who, in turn, responded with silence neither confirming nor rejecting the assigned feminine roles. Fahad, who enacted a role of carer and nurturer, showered Salem with hugs and kisses, fed him, and changed his clothes when Salem's sickness escalated during the course of the play. When Sara insisted that Fahad choose a male name for himself, he responded with silence. I conclude that in the playing-house corner, the boys relied heavily on silence to share their wishes as well as to exercise power. Salem, for example, did not respond to Sara's request to assign him the role of assistant: "you are my assistant, Salem. You are the doctor's assistant." Instead, Salem enacted his desired role as a sick child.

In the above thematic understanding, I discussed how the children actively engaged in constructing gendered meanings through their embedded and unspoken disruption of the norm. The resistance in the children's play manifested in their disguise and silence might have enabled them to enact roles that are not particularly acceptable in a given discourse. Through disguise and silence, however, the children did not challenge the moral and social meanings associated with each gender binary. Instead, the children found myriad moments of emancipation in their fantasy play to express their wishes in enacting roles that are less desirable in their culture.

Class, age and exercise of power.

Through their interaction and dialogue, the children co-constructed their understanding of meanings around the intersectionality between resistance, gender, and power (who can exercise power in a particular discourse and when and how can the norm be disrupted?). In existing literature on gender norms in North American and European academic discourse, it has been suggested that children associate maleness with power and strength and femaleness with beauty and care (MacNaughton, 2005; Francis, 1997). In my research context, within which patriarchy is grounded in hierarchical structure, the children draw on dominant discourses to establish social power. For my group of participants, power was exercised and beauty was performed not only through the lens of gender but also class and age.

While I recognize the intersectionality between gender and class in constructing one's identities (hooks, 1994), I embarked on my study with little awareness of how the factor of class is key to the social structure of my research context. Nonetheless, it became evident throughout my data that the children's awareness of social norms expanded beyond gender to include their profound understanding of social order. As stated in Ghosh and Abdi (2013), "in schools, as in society, power is exercised through the hierarchical classification of difference as binary opposites (i.e., man/women; rich/poor; black/white) to which meaning is given through social construction" (p.14).

I later began to understand how theories of power intersect heavily with studies on gender and identities (Blaise, 2009). In this section, I ground my understanding of power in feminist poststructural theories which draw from Foucault (1926-1984) to define power "as a process operating in our social world, rather than as something possessed by individuals" (Blaise, 2009, p. 456). Thus, I posit that when the children, particularly the girls, did not know how to challenge the patriarchy, they used the power of hierarchy to control the scene. In the

struggle for power between femaleness and maleness, the children were aware of the dominant discourse in their culture, that of patriarchy, and thus brought in the factor of class to disrupt regularity and introduce a new aspect.

Like the discourse of gender, I propose that the discourse of social order was essential to children's understandings of their everyday practices. The children brought in meanings about the hierarchical structure in their everyday discursive practices, and thus their exercise of power was manifested in playing the superior-inferior roles, that is, housewives and housekeepers, teachers and students, princesses and servants, or doctors and assistants. Though, in many cases, the power of maleness prevailed, social order was key in forming children's meanings of doing the 'right' gender in the 'correct' class. Through the discourse of class, Sara was empowered to perform a tough and authoritative female princess. She exercised power on Salem whom she assigned him an inferior position, a male servant. But when Salem readjusted his inferior position by proposing an equal title, announcing himself a prince, the power shifted from the discourse of class to gender: Salem stayed in the playing-house corner and Sara left.

Similarly, the girls exercised agency in a couple of play episodes by enacting high-status positions as middle-class housewives speaking to their housekeepers, a role often assigned to the boys. The boys, on the other hand, concealed their gendered selves to sustain the play and thus accepted the role of foreign female housekeepers. And yet, when Salem was disturbed by Sara's attempt to put accessories on him, he clearly identified himself as a male. Once again Sara used her social status in the play to control Salem, then Salem used his male superiority to exercise power over Sara.

Additionally, the factor of age is key in the existing hierarchical structure within childhood years (MacNaughton, 2005). The child-adult relationship is never equal, but rather authority and control over children are legitimized through the discourse of age and ability. The

children have been shown to use the discourse of age to justify their power. This was especially overt when girls played with girls. Sara would explain that the jewel box is only for grown women in her attempt to maintain power over the possession. On other occasions, a girl would enact the role of a mother or a teacher to direct the play scene or create new roles within the scene. The girls would begin the play with a statement such as 'I am the mother' and subsequently give themselves the agency to assign the other roles. The girls might have heavily relied on age and class to exercise power, and yet their choices as female figures were limited to feminine domestic roles which, according to Davies (1992), may render them less powerful but not cause failure in adopting the recognized or acceptable "anticipated roles" in their societies. Overall, the children constantly shifted between the two discourses, the patriarchal and hierarchical structure, to position themselves as powerful figures.

Discussion of Themes

In the classroom, where knowledge and meanings are validated by the classroom teacher and textbooks (Davies, 1992), children have limited spaces to create and construct meanings about their realities. Fantasy play, however, created multiple discourses for the children to confirm particular ideologies, experiment with uncertain ideas or roles, and exercise power with little risk of deviating from the norm. The children's interactions with one another and their ongoing construction of gendered meanings have taken multiple shapes over the course of my research.

The same child has shown different ways of dealing with conflicts from one story line to another. Their understanding of what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how to enact the 'good' boy or girl is relational. This means that children's understanding of doing gender varied in relation to the peers involved, the materials offered to them, and the desirable roles in a specific monthly theme. Each child had enacted multiple possible selves. Sara partook in multiple roles

from being an assertive princess to a loving wife, and from a resilient girl to a submissive one. In positioning themselves as gendered beings, the children performed their understanding of gender through their past experiences and, in turn, their performance created their present realities. The possible selves in each discourse remain subjected to the many narratives and experiences in a child's life. The child as an active agent who co-constructs her/his cultures and realities has partaken in sustaining or disrupting the norm.

Like power, agency is not a possession (Blaise, 2009). A child's agency in creating new realities depends on how much flexibility she/he could draw from the everyday acceptable practices. I propose that the lack of dialogue in considering alternative realities captivated the children within the available scenarios in their lives. Even when the children had put effort in disrupting the norm or confronting the regularity, they did not seem to create alternative realities. Rather, they chose to fit into the social norm of certain gender roles within the ambiguity of disguise and silence.

I am aware that the intersectionality amongst my multiple roles in my everyday life and my approach of dealing with challenges have had an imperative effect on my interpretations of children's narratives. When I observed, participated in, and attended to the stories told by the children, I was actively engaged in selecting what to include or exclude from the narrative performed. My interpretations were formed within those daunting days in which I could barely find connections between children's play and my research, or other days where I was determined to explore the meanings behind a scene that the children had enacted. I might have failed to observe and participate in or write about every story in the setting, but I can say that I succeeded in tracing moments in which the children disrupted an existing cultural code or emphasized or argued for specific social norms.

Summary

In this chapter, I began by explaining my employed process of analyzing the data. I suggested that my constant visits to my field notes allowed me to contextualize children's narratives and to make sense of my own experience in the field. Translating some of my notes from Arabic to English opened my eyes to seeing new insights and to making new understandings of the data. Additionally, I used mind-mapping techniques to synthesize the stories told by the children from my field notes and transcribed text. I then demonstrated my coding strategy which led to three thematic understandings.

In the second section of this chapter, I presented a selection of segments from the children's transcribed text. Within each play narrative, I discussed my codes and narrated my interpretations of the story within my theoretical framework and in relation to my research questions. The stories told and enacted by the children were divided into two sections: six stories from the playing-house corner and two stories from the building-blocks corner.

Lastly, I discussed the common themes across the children's narratives and performances in fantasy play from November 22nd, 2016 until March 16th, 2017. I explicated my understandings in three themes that demonstrated children's ways of producing and reproducing the gender norms. I posited that 1) the children appropriated available cultural materials perpetuating the gender binary discourse and reproducing the norm, 2) the children disguised the unfamiliar and silenced the norm to produce new meanings, and 3) the children drew from class and age discourses to exercise power.

Through the discussion of those themes, I endeavoured to answer my two research questions, which interrogated the ways my participating children constructed meanings of their gendered identities during their fantasy play and the type of narratives the children produced or reproduced in their process of understanding their gendered selves.

In the last chapter, I revisit my locatedness, discuss treatment of issue of representation and trustworthiness of data, and situate my thematic understandings within three lenses. I then state potential implications, explain the limitations of the study, and suggest possible future research projects. I finally conclude with a general discussion of my experience in the field.

Chapter five: Conclusions and Implications

In this chapter, I summarize the emergent understandings from my thesis. I begin the discussion with a summary of my findings presented within the frame of my two research questions.

Following that I revisit my positionality in the research and relocate my understanding of oneself as insider-outsider to the field work. Next, I discuss the treatment of the issue of representation and the trustworthiness of the findings. Following, I describe my thematic understandings within three categories: 1) the context of Saudi Arabian society, 2) the current status of early childhood education in the region of Saudi Arabia and 3) existing contemporary research on early childhood across the English-speaking academic discourse. Then, I offer a discussion of the possible implications of this study amongst early childhood practitioners and researchers. Lastly, I acknowledge the limitations of the research and propose ideas for potential future studies.

Summarizing the Inquiry

In my effort to situate my work within its sociocultural and political contexts and to address the forces behind the children's ways of constructing their gender roles, I framed my research within two theoretical understandings. I described how play and gender is viewed from sociocultural theory to read and interpret children's experiences and their social interactions with one another within their social and historical realms. I additionally borrowed certain conceptions from feminist poststructuralist theories for the purpose of questioning the gender norms pertaining to certain social and occupational roles.

In this thesis, I sought to examine the ways children enacted social roles and negotiated rules in their fantasy play by attending to and participating in the narratives told and enacted in their fantasy play. I documented my observations through writing notes in the field and reflecting upon my experience. In many cases, I was assigned by the children themselves to play a role and, thus, documented my experience in retrospect. I utilized an audio-recording device to mediate

my data collection. I further created maps and took photographs of the two play corners to provide another route to understanding and reliving my experience.

My guiding question to this study examined is how do a group of Saudi preschool children construct their understandings of social and occupational roles in relation to their gendered identities during fantasy play? In particular, how do the children engage in fantasy play to negotiate rules and enact social roles? And, what narratives do the children reproduce and/or produce about their understandings of their social roles as being boys or girls?

Through the pool of data, including my field notes (descriptive and reflective) and the 17 play narratives, I suggested three main themes to address my research questions. On the whole, the children appropriated and manipulated available cultural materials to construct meanings that reinforced and reproduced the dominant gender norm in their culture. Within each play discourse or event, the children enacted different social roles that were largely shaped by the more accessible and pleasurable gender discourses producing and reinforcing existing norms. The children's understanding of masculinities is shown to be sacred and unquestionable, including their possibilities and shortcomings. In contrast, the children have enacted femininities as passive, uncertain and, in some cases, unvalued. Additionally, the children were shown to resist the norms, but their resistance was confined within power relations and hierarchical structure. In particular, the children resisted the norm by disguising the unfamiliar and silencing the norm. The social roles enacted within the discourse of masculinities implied high-status positions, power and strength, such as enacting the roles of doctors, pharmacists, firefighters, police officers and campers. The social roles enacted and imposed in the discourse of femininities were restricted to domestic and teaching roles.

This study suggests that the main commonality across the told narratives embodied by the children and my experience in attending to and participating in children's play in the field is the

reinforcement of the norm and yet the subtle resistance to such normalization. Within these two strands, the enacted social roles were often narrowed to the discourses available to the children in a specific time and space.

Revisiting my Positionality

The impact of my positionality as being insider-outsider to the field extends beyond my experience in the research site to affect the process of crafting this thesis and configuring issues of representation and voice. Therefore, I made an effort to relocate myself and understand my positionality across the process of interpretation and writing.

I ventured into this research carrying with me my own beliefs, past experiences and future hopes. I entered the field with uncertainty surrounding my positionality and with assumptions regarding how children may interact with one another and with me. I collected data from my home country, yet I entered the setting with two profound affiliations; being Saudi citizen and PhD student in a Canadian university. My selected approach pushed me towards reading and interpreting the data through Western paradigms that question and problematize realities and prejudices in my own culture. Nonetheless, I attempted to contextualize my findings through which I situated my interpretations within the social, cultural and political contexts of Saudi Arabia.

My insider's views and discussions of the culture and norm were never meant to be apologetic of its pitfalls, but rather to situate my interpretations within Saudi Arabian society. Yet, I acknowledge that my critique is derived from my disposition as a partial outsider, a doctoral student in a Canadian university. This complexity in being an insider-outsider has put me in a paradoxical position within which I sought to critique and question the social and gender norms in my culture, and yet I tried to avoid devaluing my culture through imposing Western paradigms. On the whole, being an insider has given me privileges to see the pitfalls of my own

culture and to question its normalization of certain social roles. This is a common experience when one sees one's culture from another perspective, as for example in study-abroad programs (Ghosh, in press). My intention was never to approve or condemn, but rather to question and trouble the taken-for-granted assumptions about the concept of gender appropriateness of certain social roles.

I may claim to have been aware of the child-researcher power imbalance, but in the field the imbalance was fluid and constantly changing. By being present in the field, my gaze and my physical presence altered the experience and the dynamic of play. If I was not participating in that play event with Fatima and if I had not proposed to drive her imaginary children to school, the play event might have taken another route. If I was not attending to Salem's secret phone call and his manipulation of the hairdryer facing the mirror, I might have generated a different set of interpretations about that particular play scene. While I reflected on my relationship with the children throughout my work in the fieldsite, I acknowledge my failure of addressing the ways power operated between me and the classroom teacher. Revisiting my fieldnotes and reflecting on my experience in retrospect has brought the question of the "presence of absence" to the fore (Mitchell, 2011, p.99). During the fieldwork, I positioned myself as a participant observer and explained to the classroom teacher that her role in my research was to assist me with grouping the children and planning my visits. I presumed that the classroom teacher's willingness to host me in her classroom might not be her free choice. As I mentioned earlier, I chose to dissociate the classroom teacher from my research for ethical reasons since accessing the classroom setting, the fieldsite, was predominantly obtained through school administration.

As an outsider doctoral student, I entered the fieldsite with certain privileges. However, the classroom teacher had utilized her authority in the classroom through managing my visit days and inviting the participating children groups (orange and brown) to choose a corner before

calling the non-participating groups. In fact, I existed in a space that belonged to another adult, the classroom teacher, and I had to negotiate my presence for the purpose of data collection. Through such negotiations, the classroom teacher might have felt obligated to rearrange her own classroom to meet with my research agenda. I dominated the space during free play time and yet the classroom teacher used her authority to control my spatial and temporal presence in the fieldsite. She arranged my visits and approached me to terminate my presence in the classroom. Despite the subtle ways in which power operated between the two of us, the commonalities that we shared had engaged us in various casual conversations.

Had I not had shared components with my participants and the classroom teacher, my experience in the field could have been interpreted differently. I conclude that being an insider as a Saudi Muslim Arabic-speaking woman born and raised in Saudi Arabia who has previously worked as a preschool teacher there has put me in a privileged and yet paradoxical relationship with the production of this thesis.

Addressing Issue of Representations

According to Pink (2015), “scholarly writing remains a central medium in which ethnographic research through and about the senses is described, evoked and theoretically debated” (p.165). Pink moved further to explain how arts and media practices provide alternative routes to representing sensory ethnography; her discussion of representation in relation to sensory routes of knowing seeks to engage the medium of text and visual to work together. Unlike the work of Pink (2015), whose sensory ethnographic experience relied heavily on a wide range of visuals, I transformed my experience in the field from an embodied practice to texts, with minimum usage of the aid of visuals.

In my study, I restricted my representation to written words, although a few photographs and maps of the environment were also considered as body of data. My choice of the textual

representation is attributed to cultural reasons. Within a Saudi Arabian conservative society, the usage of a camera in a girls-only school setting is uncommon and, to some extent, might not be tolerated. As a Saudi woman, I knew that preschools are exclusively staffed by female teachers whose appearance in women-only environment entails the respect of their privacy and confidentiality. As discussed earlier, women in Saudi Arabia are obligated by law and culture to wear special clothes in public (Abaya and, in many cases, Niqab) concealing their identities. Within girl-only schools, however, female teachers and students remove their public attire and wear professional clothing. In that case, the notion of employing visuals to capture and represent the everyday fantasy play practices contradicts the cultural values of my studied group. In fact, the 17 photographs that I produced during my field work were monitored by the classroom teacher to ensure that my camera captured the objects without any details that may disseminate the identity of the children and the classroom teachers.

Since my representation is restricted to writing about my experience, including the narratives I deemed relevant to my research questions and the reflections I viewed imperative to the construction of this thesis, I openly address the probable risk of representing “one way” of the “social world” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.184). That is, my writing may imply that children’s ways of understanding gender are limited to what I had experienced and how I represented my experience in text, to say that, “the world is ‘this way’ when perhaps it is some other way, or many other ways.” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.184).

I posit that the scarce amount of research within my researched context may increase the issue of representation as my study may comprise one of the few out there examining gender, childhood and play within a Saudi Arabian context. Further, if the translation of children’s play brings to the surface another issue of representation, I argue that translation was crucial to the process of this study. It offered me new routes to reading the texts and grounding my work in

academic discourse. To create many texts of the text, I interpreted my transcribed and translated data in relation to the field notes.

Similarly, writing to a Western academic discourse, particularly an English-speaking discourse, about another culture, language and set of values may amplify issues of representation. I was able to relate to the experience of Amani Hamdan (2008) and her journey in researching Arab Muslim women in Canada, within which she put enormous effort to describe the religious and cultural values of her context. Likewise, I had to construct a shared knowledge with my reader regarding religion, social structure and cultural values in my researched context. However, I am aware that my subjectivity has honed my choices of what narrative about the development of education in Saudi Arabia to choose and how to explain the status of women in the Quran. Similar to Hamdan (2008), I clarify that to elucidate the background of my research context and to discuss the cultural values are not meant to either represent or cover the social and cultural norms among a population of over 30 million people spread out within a land area of approximately 2,150,000 km².

I tackle the issue of representation through my self-exposure of how my personal history and current beliefs have shaped my experience and my interpretation of my experience. I shared my interpretations in this thesis of the texts to offer my reader a lens into my adopted process of interpreting and representing the data. Linclon and Guba (2000) posited,

One way to confront the dangerous illusions (and their underlying ideologies) that texts may foster is through the creation of new texts that break boundaries; that move from the center to the margins to comment upon and decenter the center; that forgo closed, bounded worlds for those more open-ended and less conveniently encompassed; that transgress the boundaries of conventional social science; and that seek to create a social science about human life rather than *on* subjects. (p.184)

To move beyond the boundaries and to experiment with narratives is believed to produce messy texts (Linclon and Guba, 2000). Yet, I contend that the engagement in messy text in research that pursues an understanding of ambiguous phenomena like play and identities has opened new

avenues to understanding and representing my studied social world. In Lincoln and Guba's words (2000), "Postmodern representations search out and experiment with narratives that expand the range of understanding, voice, and the storied variations in human experience" (p. 184). Drawing from that concept of variations of texts, I shared my personal history, I extracted texts from my reflective notes and I explicated my interpretations of several play episodes prior to discussing the emergent themes.

My written account of being a participant observer in the field represents my own experience bounded by the children involved, the materials offered and the time spent in the field. According to Pink,

While usually ethnographic representations become permanent texts, - as in the case of written texts, films and sound compositions- they can still be understood as open to other places and to space in that their meanings will always be contingent on what is going on around them, that is, in relation to new findings, politics, theories, approaches and audiences, as they move on temporally and in the imaginations of their viewers and readers (Pink, 2015, p. 94).

I finally concur with the above by proposing that the issue of textual representation never ends in one entity but will eventually be shaped by the reader's orientation to the subject

Addressing Trustworthiness of Findings

The discussion surrounding validity and/or credibility is especially critical and largely arguable in studies that investigate people's lives (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). I embarked on this research knowing that studying the everyday fantasy play of children is messy and complex, and thus, to adopt rigorous methods to validating my data could be problematic and might prove a failure in corresponding to my nature of research. Alternatively, the nature of an ethnographic study implies certain criteria for trustworthiness. Therefore, the process of producing trustworthy data can be approached through strategies that adhere to the nature of ethnographic work such as reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) and transferability (Merriam, 2009).

The concept of validity refers to “the question of how research findings match reality” (Merriam, 2009, p. 213). Departing from the poststructural belief within which reality can never be matched and relating to an ethnographic understanding of reality as a social construct, I choose to discuss the trustworthiness of my work through *credibility* within which I sought to “increase the correspondence between research and the real world” (Merriam, 2009, p.215). The reflexive approach and adequate engagement in data collection are strategies used to increase the credibility of one’s findings (Merriam, 2009).

First, I relied largely on reflexivity to explain my biases and assumptions and the constant shifts in my position in the field. Through such discussions, I endeavoured to share with my reader how my interpretations were formed and created. The adoption of a reflexive approach “demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives.” (Linclon & Guba, 2000, p.183). To me, such engagement included the paradoxes experienced in being outsider and insider, the negotiations surrounding familiarity and strangeness and the nature of the power dynamic in the classroom.

To be particular, I addressed throughout chapters three and four how power was continually shifting in relation to my disposition in the classroom. This is visible in the ways the children interacted with my journal, starting with their puzzled gazes toward it to feeling comfortable with scribbling and writing in my journal. Nevertheless, I must note that familiarity was not the factor in defining the nature of power, but rather the dynamic of power in the classroom and over the course of my research has shifted in relation to the children involved in each event. The dynamic of the relationship between the children and myself has changed from one moment to another and from one play event to another across the course of my fieldwork

Second, I suggest that the adequate engagement in observing and participating in my participants' play events has enriched my experience and, subsequently, enriched the set of data. That is, being there across the four months has enhanced my engagement with the children and enriched my learning. Through participating in the unplanned moments, I was able to obtain a cohesive understanding of the dynamic nature of the play of the nine children. According to Merriam, "Adequate engagement in data collection is a third strategy that makes sense when you are trying to get as close as possible to participants' understandings of a phenomenon" (2009, p.219). She further noted, "the best rule of thumb is that the data and emerging findings must feel saturated; that is, you begin to see or hear [or experience] the same things over and over again."

Finally, I define this study within its context and I reject generalizing its data. However, I acknowledge that *external validity*, which deals with the extent to which data can be generalized, is one way to evaluate the trustworthiness of data (Merriam, 2009). I posit that my collection of data and descriptive accounts of the setting has produced understandings that invite the reader to decide which parts of the study may be applicable in her or his potential research or classroom setting. That is, the description of the setting, quotes from my reflective accounts, narratives of children's play as well as photographs and maps are components of data that are meant to enhance the *transferability* and, thus, invite the reader to assess the similarity between my research and her or his potential work.

Situating the Conclusions

Within Saudi Arabian society.

Although women are marginalized in most societies, in Saudi Arabia they are separated from the public sphere. The educational system has been designed and supervised by religious men for more than 40 years, with the express goal that education for women is meant to produce ideal mothers and wives (Hamdan, 2005). With the current reformation in the country pushing

for modernizing visions and policies, education is provided for both boys and girls with little distinction in resources and policies (Gahwaji, 2013). Yet, the equal distribution of resources does not mean equal life choices and opportunities (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). The passive role of women has been engrained across generations and its disruption is a challenge. This absence of women's presence in public life leads to issue of nonrecognition and marginalization (Tylor, 1992). Such issue of nonrecognition and/or misrecognition extends to affect the social development of the society (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). According to Ghosh & Abdi (2013), equal opportunities in education are not simply the application of equal access to schools and colleges but move further to treating boys and girls equally in the curriculum and the system. The equal access and treatment should be coupled with equal results and offer equal life choices (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013).

The necessity of a system that recognizes girls and women as full human beings, both as a group and as individuals, is the core of recognition. I contend that if a girl is expected to join public life and contribute to the development of her nation, her education must recognize and celebrate her capabilities and potentials to perform various roles in society. The children in my research had sought for acceptance and recognition; in doing so, they avoided the risk of misrecognition and/or nonrecognition through their subtle strategies of disruption as well as their explicit association with one category or another.

I must clarify that my argument does not propose that differences between femininities and masculinities are problematic, but rather to assert that differences enrich children's learning and development rather than hinder one and privilege the other (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). Thus, a child's understandings of her/his roles in society are constructed through their recognition as meaningful and legitimate (Davies, 1989a).

This othering of girls and women and distancing them from the public sphere is produced through dominant educational and religious institutions and, thus, can only be challenged through critical and reflective pedagogies (Ghosh & Abdi, 2014; MacNaughton, 2005). Since my research revolves around early years, play and gender, my implication section will be devoted to the discussion of critical play pedagogies and reflective practices.

Within early childhood education in Saudi Arabia.

In Saudi Arabia, the conceptualization of early childhood education has been developed within the lens of developmental theories (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016). Similarly, the notion of play in early childhood settings is, to a larger extent, influenced by Developmentally Appropriate Practices and universal development charts. Though the implemented approach in the preschool system across Saudi Arabia promotes play-based and child-directed approaches to learning (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016; Alqassem, Dashash & Alzahrani, 2016), early childhood educators are expected to deliver certain knowledges and meet with specific academic achievements. Thus, the classroom educator creates an environment that meets with the monthly theme outcomes, and the child in the self-directed learning is expected to explore the environment and engage in problem solving skills. The role of early childhood educators is implicit in terms of their manipulation of the environment. Yet, an educator is expected to teach language and math using structured and planned activities.

In the case of my study, the teacher invested in preparing the environment for the classroom children, especially the science and discovery corner and literacy corner. The classroom teacher had further organized the playing-house, building blocks and library corners, to facilitate the children's self-directed learning with her minimal intervention during the free-play time between those corners. The classroom environment was created to correspond to curricula content and developmental growth. The classroom educator, thus, created a discourse

that was not relevant to children's knowledge, but rather followed a universal developmental chart. On the other hand, she implemented planned activities to regulate and measure academic achievements in literacy and numeracy.

Within the available and desirable discourses in the classroom, the children in my study sought recognition in their social discourse by sustaining the status quo images of the accessible roles for femaleness and maleness. At the same time, the children's ways of voicing their wishes or expressing their ideas were grounded in their everyday discursive practices within which patriarchy and hierarchy constitute the norms. I propose that the children's subtle disruption of the norm might have created gaps for an emergence of possible alternatives.

Within the academic research on early childhood education.

An overall understanding of the conclusion above posits that my interpretations of children's fantasy play narratives does not necessarily expand on the correlation between unstructured moments of play and the emergence of alternative narratives (Paley, 1984, 2004; Dayson, 1989, 1997, 2003). However, my data align with poststructural scholars like Blaise (2014) Francis (1999) MacNaughton (2000, 2005, 2009) Madrid (2013) and Wohlwend (2007, 2009, 2012) who argued that unstructured play and alternative narratives are never free of control and power, but rather framed within the dominant discourses available to children. Though the current Western academic discourse on children's learning and development pushes for practices that engage children in questioning inequitable practices, the dominant early childhood education practices have a heavy reliance on universal biological and socialization reasonings (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014; Brooker & Edwards, 2010). Moreover, studies discussed in my literature review chapter indicated that play has a substantial impact on children's construction of their cultures and realities. However, it has been suggested that early childhood programs and educators vary in their perception and appreciation of play spaces and

practices in school settings (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014; Brooker & Edwards, 2010; MacNaughton, 2000).

In situating my conclusion within the field of early childhood education, I discuss play as a means through which social and gender norms can be questioned and equitable practices can be promoted. In so doing, I depart from the work of early childhood feminist poststructuralist scholars such as Blaise (2005, 2014) Davies (1989a, 1992) and MacNaughton (2005, 2009), whose work foregrounds existing social injustice in children's play and simultaneously posits that play opens spaces for educators to learn about children's worlds and create dialogue of the many possibilities for being a boy and girl. It is through play that educators can learn about children's realities and challenge those realities. Within poststructural theory, the notion of free play has been problematized arguing that even in the most unstructured moments of play, children's production of alternatives is anchored to the available and desirable discourses.

MacNaughton (2000, 2005) and Brooker, Blaise and Edwards (2014) have explained how disruption of social and gender norms contradicts the most common approach to early childhood education, Developmentally Appropriate Practice. The DAP approaches to early childhood education, often promoted as child-centered and self-directed programs, tend to naturalize the practice of play through play-based programs and free play time. Francis (1999), MacNaughton (2005), and Wood and Cook (2009) questioned the notion of free play and the naturalization of play and gender. In free play and play-based programs, educators would often offer children spaces and time to play together with minimum intervention from their teachers. Wohlwend (2007) contemplated child-centered early childhood programs and argued for their tendency to reinforce passive femininity and active masculinity. Within such approaches, educators interpret children's practices and choices through the normalization and naturalization of gender and

childhood; for example, educators expect aggression from boys and passiveness innocence from girls.

This simplistic view of play as innocent, free and neutral has been challenged, and it has alternatively been contested that politics of play are evident across children's performances and story lines. The review of existing research in chapter two along with the data presented in this thesis assert that play is controlled by politics and dominant ideologies. Alternatively, the adaptation and implication of *critical play pedagogies* have been discussed as an approach to enable teachers to question their practices, beliefs and prejudices (Rogers, 2010; MacNaghton, 2000). Such a pedagogy emphasizes the politics of play and the nature of power among the children and teachers and between the children themselves.

Implications for Practitioners and Researchers

For pedagogues and educators.

There is a large body of research that explores the subject of play within the scope of education (Wood, 2010). The act of pedagogizing play has been investigated not only for the purpose of social justice but also to achieve quality and effectiveness in early childhood practices. While the former intends to create possibilities for children and shed light on power, agency and privilege, the latter works toward reaching measurable educational outcomes. The commonality in both initiatives is the significance of a pedagogy that regulates play. Nonetheless, the concept of regulating play is problematic as it may privilege teacher-planned play and demote child-initiated play.

The reality is, however, that even in the so-called child-initiated play, or free play, the institution of education governs children's play through time, space and/or materials (Spyrou, 2011). For this exact reason, scholars such as MacNaughton (2000), Rogers (2010) and Wood

(2010) have argued for the necessity of reconceptualizing play in such a way that play is neither regulated nor naturalized.

Ryan and Northey-Berg (2014) proposed that, “a play pedagogical toolkit helps teachers to navigate competing definitions and purposes of play in the curriculum, informing their responses and actions in the classroom” (p. 205). A pedagogy of play, in particular, revolve around encompassing the “professional philosophy about teaching, learning, and the purpose of early education, a knowledge base that informs these beliefs, as well as a range of methods for putting these views into action” (Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014, p. 205). Such a pedagogy can be developed through teacher education programs and professional learning communities, through which educators can be provided with knowledge on how to respond to children’s learning moments during their play (Ryan and Northey-Berg, 2014). Through early childhood teachers and researchers, a pedagogy of play can be generated and contextualized. The rationale of a pedagogy of play is to widen teachers’ knowledge on the subject of play and its multiple interpretations. It also aims to prepare early childhood educators to respond to moments of learning.

Nevertheless, to generate a pedagogy of play that is not grounded in critical perspectives can lead to replacing existing one institutional discourse with another (Rogers, 2010). As issues of power exist within the various forms of play, a critical perspective that recognizes existing power relations within the discourse of play is central to promoting equitable practices with little regulation of children’s play patterns. A critical pedagogy of play enables educators to acknowledge power relations and question the taken-for-granted assumptions about children’s discriminative behaviour as being innocent and temporal.

Therefore, I choose to subscribe to the argument proposed by feminist poststructural early childhood educators whose work places critical and reflexive practices at the core of their

conceptualization of play. Poststructuralist theorists and their views on the agency of the child value the accessibility to alternative gender discourses and the engagement in a critical pedagogy of play that promotes equity and condemns discriminative discourse. Nolan and Kilderry (2010) noted a set of characteristics that inform a critical examination of children's play including, but not limited to, repositioning (moving from the reliance on developmental growth), reframing (exploring multiple theories and pedagogies to childhoods and learning), engaging learners (responding to children and co-constructing learning processes with them) and critically reflecting (thinking about the norms within one's context in terms of how childhoods, children, play, development and knowing are traditionally perceived and how children's differences can be appreciated and celebrated). The above strategies are meant to provide educators with routes to understand and implement critical self-reflective approaches in their everyday teaching experiences.

Scholars such as MacNaughton (2005) and Rogers (2010) put emphasis on the effectiveness of critical self-reflective approaches among educators. In so doing, the process of generating a pedagogical view on play becomes situated and continually reformed. The adoption of a critical self-reflective approach has shown to shift the conception regarding children's learning and ways of knowing. Through such an approach, educators can engage in looking back at their practices to question the taken-for-granted assumptions and rethink their approaches.

MacNaughton (2005) suggested that,

Reflective educators need to be inquisitive and sceptical. They need to be inquisitive about what is happening in their classrooms and why. They need to be sceptical about whether they have the right answer for their current questions. They can use their inquisitiveness and scepticism to examine their specific classrooms and to build pedagogical theories that can inform their daily professional judgements about how best to act in their classrooms. (p. 5)

The concept of introducing educators to critical self-reflective practices goes further to avoid replacing one existing type of knowledge (play as innocent and neutral) with another (play

as political and subjective), but instead aims to engage the educator in questioning her or his everyday practices and cultural assumptions. Play is ambiguous, situated, collective and relational, and thus an attempt to categorize its concepts and practices has been confronted with difficulties (Rogers, 2010; Wood, 2010).

Hence, I move with my discussion to suggest that adopting of a critical self-reflective approach can create “a negotiated ‘space’, both physical and conceptual, for children and teachers to explore identities and desires, and evaluate questions of voice and power in the classroom” (Rogers, 2010, p. 163). Teachers may or may not recognize the politics involved in what is defined by the teachers themselves as free play. According to Saltmarsh (2014), “teachers are themselves situated by and implicated in gender and racial social orders and discursive regimes that pose additional challenges to maintaining critically aware classrooms that create safe environment for interrogating taken-for-granted norms” (p. 99). Such taken-for-granted norms never exist in vacuum but rather are a product of social institutions including, but not limited to, family, religion, or/and school (Saltmarsh, 2014). Adopting a critical self-reflective approach can enable educators to not only recognize the unequitable practices and discriminative language in their classroom, but also assist them as teachers in understanding their own biases and subjectivities.

According to MacNaughton (2005), a critical self-reflective approach extends beyond looking back to documenting the experience to emphasizing power relations and unequitable practices.

Critical reflection is the process of questioning how power operates in the processes of teaching and learning and then using that knowledge to transform oppressive or inequitable teaching and learning processes (McLaren, 1993). It assumes that there is no single, correct way to be an educator and that all teaching and learning can either contribute to or contest oppression and inequity. (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 5)

Through such an approach, educators are able to create negotiated spaces to discuss the many choices and desires and, most importantly, to recognize how power operates in her or his classroom setting. Drawing from my experience in the research field, I suggest that my engagement in writing critical self-reflective notes allowed me to problematize the existing unequal opportunities for boys and girls in the building-block corner. I had designed my study to explore children's fantasy play in the playing-house and building-blocks corners, but I soon realized the stereotypical assumptions of children's choices in the classroom. The girls were seldom seen in the building-blocks and rarely invited by the teacher to partake in the corner. Having been exposed to diverse theoretical perspectives had led me to trouble the normalization of children's choices, alternatively, I decided to reconceptualize building-blocks play. I began with incorporating provocative materials in the corner. Maha, a girl participant who entered the building-blocks corner upon my invitation, had picked up a yellow car then looked at me and said, "that's for boys." I regarded her assumption as political and as situated within the desirable and available roles to her. Thus, I told her, "I think it is for both boys and girls," however Maha left the corner. A few days after her refusal to play with cars, she entered the corner and fetched the yellow car. She sat quietly, examined the car with admiration as if she had never played with one. She would look through the small windows, open and close the doors repeatedly, trace the small wheels, then move the car on the carpet, the hard floor, and on the walls.

Her engagement in redefining the meanings of a material object has opened my eyes to a key factor in shifting the dominant norm, that is, the factor of troubling children's assumptions and offering them alternative stories. This type of child-adult dynamic is inseparable from power imbalance as my impact, as an adult, had led to troubling Maha's assumption. The children have been anchored within the available and dominant discursive practices in their life. However,

when a child was invited to consider an alternative way of understanding her positionality as a girl, she showed interest in exploring the alternative and disrupting the dominant norm.

I considered myself a privileged woman to have been exposed to many theoretical understandings of children's ways of knowing, and I also acknowledge that reflexivity has allowed me to question the unequitable practices and concepts in the classroom. I further acknowledge that my status as a doctoral student had empowered me to reconceptualize and reframe the play in building-blocks corner and engage the participating children in the corner.

Nonetheless, I suggest that despite my privileges, the engagement in critical self-reflective approaches can allow early childhood educators to examine their own personal and professional subjectivities, that is, to examine their own beliefs on children's, girls and boys, competencies and potentials. The adaptation of a critical stance enables educators to rethink their understanding of the normalized social and occupational roles in relation to gender, and thus to question children's gendered stereotypes and assumptions. Moreover, critical reflective practices have been shown to enable teachers to rethink their ethical and pedagogical choices (MacNaughton, 2005). The objective here is never to regulate children's play but rather to understand its meanings and intentions. Similarly, the critical approach to one's practices is not meant to construct new dominant discourses, but rather pushes to question the politics of relations.

For researchers.

Here, it is not possible to know from beforehand where it is that the research will take us; one does not know what the becoming will lead to. One is in the middle of multiplicities, in the middle of forces and the researcher is one who connects with different intensities. 'To affect and be affected' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, xvi), to be in a process of becoming is what Deleuze and Guattari are suggesting. One can see how uncertainty is a fundamental part of this becoming (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2013, p.237)

I drew upon sensory ethnography as a methodology for my research for the purpose of attending to the embodied experience of the children and myself in the research field. However, I

acknowledge that my choice was surrounded with uncertainties. I was faced with the challenge of bringing the abstraction of attending to the senses in the field into concrete written words to represent my experience to the reader. In fact, I was terrified with my choice of being a participant observer in a classroom, let alone the aspect of observing, participating in and attending to the embodied experience through the senses.

Nevertheless, I cherished sensory ethnography as a methodology drawing from the belief that senses can stem multiple routes to understanding the experience and that senses interweave with the multiple ways within which children construct knowledge of their world (Pink, 2015). Moreover, the intersectionality between concept of place, knowing and imagination and the nature of my research questions played a major role in selecting the methodology. The idea of viewing the classroom as changing and fluid and knowing as multiple and relational as well as the concept of imagination as central to the construct of one's understandings have pushed me towards exploring the implication of sensory ethnography in a classroom setting despite the uncertainty surrounding the effectiveness of such a methodology in educational settings.

I might have failed to fulfil the role of an ethnographer or to attentively represent my experience in-situ. Yet, I believe that I have succeeded, even if partially, in attending to and participating in children's stories in their fantasy play. I have put effort into understanding the narratives enacted and embodied by the children through attending to my experience in the setting. I witnessed that within childhood worlds, experiences move beneath words and visuals to extend to how children bring to the moment their knowledge of certain smells, textures or sounds. Thus, their embodied ways of understanding the collectiveness of such senses constitute their knowledge.

I acknowledge the uncertainty in designing my study within a sensory methodology, and yet I draw from the work of Mercieca and Mercieca (2013) to argue that uncertainty allows for

more engagement with the research. This is especially pertinent when research is conducted in dynamic and interactive environments such as classroom settings. As Mercieca and Mercieca (2013) contended, “It is important to experience the feeling suspended in research, of not knowing or not being certain. Neither research courses nor texts even mention this phase in research, let alone describe it as important and crucially necessary” (p. 232).

To conceptualize a study within a methodology that attends to the senses is one way to assert that young children’s place, knowing, imagination and memories are essential to their construction and understanding of the world. The fact that sensory methodology does not privilege certain types of methods and, alternatively, invites for multiple routes to explore the research world makes its application flexible and suitable for many contexts. Pink (2015) noted the increased application of sensory methodology in applied research; she argued sensory ethnography as an approach to research is meant to lead to change “because it promises to bring to the fore the tacit, normally unspoken (about) ways of knowing and doing that are part of everyday life” (p. 193).

The adoption of such a methodology opened my eyes and prompted me to account for how the children enacted a play event in the kitchen: to understand what coffee entails and represents in their culture. It also made me aware that the colour pink worn as a cape is different from pink as a veil. I uncovered new routes to understanding how children interacted with one another, with the material worlds and with their own senses.

As mentioned, I embarked on the study uncertain about my choice of sensory methodology, but I relied on reflexivity in the field to guide me through the process. Prior to my field work, I had read that a reflexive approach in the field “involves a self-conscious recognition of the way embodiment, location, and habitus affected the ethnographer’s relations to the people studied” (Burawoy, 2003). In that sense, I endeavoured to reflect upon my relationship to the

field work and my experience through attending to my senses. However, to engage in the field required more than being physically there but also being conscious about the dynamics of the relationships. As I explained earlier in this thesis, I had engaged in more descriptive writing of the environment in my first few weeks, but eventually my presence took a different form within which I found myself leaving my journal aside and playing with the children. In that sense, I began to reflect upon my experience in retrospect with a focus on the dynamic of play and the emotions and senses evoked within these events. Those reflective accounts represented and translated my application of sensory ethnography in the research field.

To build on my existing work in this thesis, I suggest a potential method that may enhance reflexivity in sensory ethnography in early childhood settings. I borrow from the concept reliving (Johansson & Løkken, 2014; Pink, 2015) to propose that the researcher's sensory experience in the field can be enriched through the utilization of multiple mediums within which the researcher could revisit and re-examine her/ his data (Pink, 2015). In her extensive discussion of visuals, Pink (2009, 2015) discussed the effectiveness of employing the medium of video and audio mediums to elucidate the narrated and embodied experience of the researcher and participants alike.

Though I eliminated the usage of video cameras for cultural reasons, I point out how writing reflective notes, recording children's play, and creating maps have offered me many routes to reliving my experience and reflecting upon my work in retrospect. Yet I acknowledge that if I had the chance to see the children's embodied experience through the lens of a video camera, I might have gained new perspectives of the sight of children's faces in negotiating a social norm, the sound of relegating a social role or the feel of their dynamic in sustaining or disrupting a normal discourse. According to Johansson & Løkken (2014), "In (re)living and (re)interpreting the video-recorded interaction... we can grasp different layers of seeing and

being seen” (p. 889). In that sense, such a strategy of employing video cameras in sensory ethnography allows the researcher to reflect upon her or his power in-situ. The researcher in reliving the experience does not only see beneath the surface but can also reflect upon how her or his embodiment has shaped such an experience.

I concur that the medium of a video camera can potentially facilitate the experience of the novice ethnographer in the field through providing new levels of awareness and understanding (Johansson & Løkken, 2014; Pink, 2015). Such a methodology might have enabled me to “liv[e] it while being there and when reflecting upon it in retrospect” (p.887). Nevertheless, despite my eagerness to have tried the video camera usage as a medium to facilitate my experience, I acknowledge that the process of audio-recording and transcription has enabled me to obtain new understandings. The usage of an audio-recording device in the process of data collection has drawn my attentions to new layers of understanding. It further offered me a medium with little risk of dissemination, especially within a conservative culture within which having a camera in an educational setting is unusual. Similarly, for early childhood educators whose research is concerned with exploring the lived and embodied experience of young children, the employment of sensory ethnography with the implication of multiple sources of data suited for their research context can prove productive.

Limitations

Like any other interpretative study, this research is not meant to represent, generalize or provide conclusive perspectives. My choice of studying one category of play, fantasy play, within one classroom may raise criticism with regard to the small sample size, however I argue that selecting one classroom and focusing on one form of play has provided me with an in-depth perspective on the researched subject. The greater depth acquired through observing and participating in the play of the children meets with the criteria of my methodological choice. As I

mentioned earlier, the scarce amount of research on Arab communities, in particularly Saudi Arabian society, may render the conclusions of this study as representative of the culture. However, I clarify that my choice of the site, my concentration on a specific form of play and interpretations of children's play are honed by my subjectivities and thus can never represent an entire population.

I acknowledge that interviewing the classroom teacher and observing the children's play across the school day could have strengthened my sensory ethnographic experience in the field. Yet, I am also aware that school settings cannot accommodate for such a request. In my school visits, the school's principal inquired into the length of time and nature of my interaction in the school. Having researchers coming for a day or two for questionnaire-type inquires is a common practice, as opposed to hosting a participant observer for five months. Thus, I sought to accommodate the nature of society and contemporary school life by focusing my observation and participation on fantasy play periods.

Another significant limitation could be my focus on gender with little attention to how race and class might have an impact on the children's construction of meanings about their gendered identities. Yet, the emergent findings of this thesis have brought to the fore the axes of class in its centrality in constructing children's meanings about their social roles as gendered selves.

Another limitation could be the complexity of play which could devalue my investigation, especially among policymakers who constantly seek to develop a "pedagogy of control" rather than "pedagogies for complexity" (Wood, 2010, p.19). The objective of policy frameworks or guidebooks is to provide order and stability for the purpose of measuring outcomes and achievements. Since play is fluid and complex, it is either devalued in the process of learning and development or categorized into certain curricula or approaches. I neither

advocated for “structured play”, “purposeful play” nor for “free play”. Rather, I prioritized complexity and undermined control. Thus, I suggest that early childhood educators can better their understanding of their conceptual and practical views through engaging in critical self-reflective approaches.

While a typical one-year long ethnographic study would enrich my experience in the field and result in more data, I believe that a 5-month study generated sufficient amount of data that provided holistic understandings and proved explanatory to my research questions. Another limitation is the complexity involved in translation. I have translated the children’s narratives in order to write for English-speaking communities across the academic discourse. In so doing, I might have overlooked some of the cultural meanings and perhaps misunderstood and/or miscommunicated some of the concepts such as how gender is explained within the lack of an equivalent to the term gender in Arabic.

Further Research

This ethnographic study invites further studies that explore the subject of the social and gender norm and children’s play from several directions. Drawing from my implications, which bring to the surface the significance role of educators and pedagogues I suggest that a study on Saudi teachers’ perspectives on children’s ways of knowing would be of a great value. Another area to explore would be the role of the teacher in reinforcing or disrupting gender and social norms through interviewing teachers and observing their practices.

Additionally, children’s perspectives could be examined through listening to their rationales in relation to their choices in enacting certain social roles. It would be highly valuable to examine the perspectives of children by asking them about their understandings of social and gender identities. Such an addition may enrich the data and contribute to resolving the issue of representation. It would be beneficial to continue with the same children while introducing other

methods to explore their ideas and perceptions about gender, for example, to explore children's play and the construction of self across several contexts such as home, school and playground.

Research on how race and class intersect in the construction of one's gendered identities can enrich the knowledge produced on the subject. Since children's ways of reinforcing binaries may result in extremist views about the other (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013), it would be interesting to conduct a study that explores the concept of difference and othering. These latter research projects have the potential for complementing my work on defining the norm and distancing the other.

I hope that my inquiry will invite prospective researchers to explore the unequal practices embedded in cultural norms in all societies. It could also be an invitation to explore the possible approaches to improving teacher education programs, specifically focusing on developing reflexive practices and consciousness within the Saudi Arabian context.

Concluding Remarks

The children in my research, who had been given the space to enact social roles with limited intervention from the classroom teacher, were shown to enact a variation of social roles within the acceptable and desirable ways of narrating and enacting gender in their dominant discourses. The boys dominated the building-blocks corner through their vocal and physical forces while subtly reinforcing the patriarchal structure in the playing-house corner through their silence and disguise of the unfamiliar. The narratives told and embodied by the children revealed that their understandings of what it means to be a boy or a girl are defined within the dominant discourses available to them, embedded in and reinforced by several forces such as the monthly themes, available props, teacher's expectations and my gazes around the site.

The cultural materials that the children actively transformed or manipulated were another sign of children's awareness of the social norms and their reinforcement of the dominant

patriarchal discourse. Moreover, the children have shown their in-depth understanding of existing hierarchical structures in their society and the meanings associated with certain social classes. I suggested that the children's engagement of performing high-status positions to exercise power indicates the interdependence between class and gender. A similar conclusion was discussed by Davies (1989a), whose work with preschool children has shown how children, particularly girls, seek to enact high-status professions such as doctors and managers to exercise power. The data revealed children's adequate knowledge of the desirable and more pleasurable roles in their discourse. One example could be Sara's choice of enacting a male physician rather than a female physician (which is a common profession for women in Saudi Arabia), and Salem's disguise in female roles to cook in the kitchen.

Had the children in my study been exposed to alternative ways of enacting social roles as boys or girls, they might have been encouraged to disrupt the norm with less concern of deviating from the 'correct' category. The children in my study, thus, positioned themselves as 'good' boys or girls to fit in the 'correct' category in a particular time and place. The children's ways of understanding gender appropriateness of certain social roles are seen across their play. They negotiated who can be a pharmacist, who can wear jewels, who can drive a car, and who is capable of building a fire or not. Through their negotiations for the purpose of sustaining the play, the children selected specific social and occupational roles that deemed them acceptable and recognizable in their play discourse.

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Appendixes

(Appendix 3.1)



McGill University, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, Faculty of Education

Invitation Letter

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Title of Project: Young Children Construction of Self within the Unstructured Moments of Play

Dear Principal/ Owner:

I am writing to seek your approval for conducting my doctoral research study in your preschool. I will examine the ways 4-year-old children engage with one another in free play during center-time activities. I am particularly interested in the ways children enact social roles and negotiate rules that are related their gendered identities – being a boy or being a girl in the classroom. My study will not interfere with the children's daily routine since my focus is to study children's play in its natural setting. My presence in the classroom will last between 15 to 18 weeks. My research will take place during center time. I will collect data by observing children's play in three centers: art center, playing-house center and building-blocks center. I may participate in children's play if invited. However, I will not interview them.

- In the first 4-5 weeks, I will be observing the setting while gradually introducing myself to the children. This period of time will assist adjusting to the classroom routine and building rapport with the children.
- In the following 10-12 weeks, I will collect data as a participant observer of children's play. In order to document children's play narratives with one another, I will use a digital recorder which will be placed in one center each day of data collection. My research will also include looking into children's drawings as well as their talks in art center. I will maybe bring toys or fabrics to use them as provocations. However, I will not place any provocative materials in any centers/ play area before discussing the materials with the classroom teacher.

This research will contribute to the understanding of children's production and reproduction of meanings and knowledge. Research has shown that children are exposed to many messages from different sources. Those messages may or may not contradict one another. I have a particular interest to examine the ways young children bring different messages together while engaging with one another in producing meanings about self and others.

If you agree to participate in this study, your role as the school's principal/owner will include the following:

- 1- Selecting one classroom of 4-year-old children with a teacher who approves my presence during center time for 15-18 weeks.
- 2- Signing this letter to indicate your approval of participation in the study. The teacher will be asked to sign this invitation letter too.

After receiving your agreement, I will start attending the learning center time while also sending consent letters to parents. Collecting data will take place in the classroom and during center time. This research will exclude only children without parental approval. Please be assured that my research doesn't intend to change the daily routine of the classroom. The research raw data will not be given to any one in the school including the principal and the classroom teacher. However, I am willing to share my preliminary research findings at the end of the data collection period.

Your signature below indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Principal name

signature

Date

Teacher name

signature

Date

طلب موافقة بحث علمي

الى من يهمله الأمر

السلام عليكم و رحمة الله و بركاته

أود منكم الموافقة بملاحظة أحد فصول مرحلة رياض الأطفال في بحث علمي كأحد متطلبات التخرج بدرجة الدكتوراه من مجال التعليم من خلال بحث علمي يتخصص في كيفية تكوين المفاهيم المتعلقة بالذات في مراحل الطفولة المبكرة.

عنوان البحث: اللعب الحر و علاقته بتكوين مفهوم الذات في سنوات الطفولة المبكرة

الهدف من البحث:

انطلاقاً من خلفية علمية تثبت أن لحظات اللعب الحر ما بين الأطفال هي محض لتبادل و تكوين المعرفة و تشكيل ثقافتهم القادمة، يهدف هذا البحث العلمي الى دراسة كيفية تكوين المفاهيم الاجتماعية لدى الأطفال ذوي الأربعة سنوات. سأقوم بملاحظة دور اللعب الحر في صياغة و تكوين المفاهيم التي يشكلها الأطفال عن دور المرأة و الرجل في المجتمع. كما يتطلع هذا البحث الى توفير دراسة مفصلة عن دور الأطفال الفعال في معالجة مصادر المعلومات المختلفة (البيت، المدرسة، الاعلام، التطبيقات الالكترونية، الخ...) و المفاهيم التي ينتجها الأطفال تبعاً لذلك من خلال اللعب و تناقل المعلومات. نرجوا أن يكون هذا البحث لبنة في صياغة مستقبل أكثر اشراقاً للأطفال في المملكة العربية السعودية.

شرح تفصيلي لخطة سير البحث:

طبيعة البحث الوصفي تتطلب مني التواجد و ملاحظة لعب الأطفال لفترة ما بين ٣-٤ أشهر علماً بأن تواجدي سيقصر على فترة اللعب الحر في الأركان. سأقوم بتجميع البيانات عن طريق ملاحظتي للعب الأطفال في ثلاثة أركان: ركن المنزل، ركن البناء/ المكعبات، و الركن الفني.

- في **ركن المنزل** سأقوم بتدوين المناقشات التي تدور حول اللعب الحر الخيالي و يتضمن ذلك ماهية الأدوار الاجتماعية التي يتقاسمها الأطفال فيما بينهم و كيفية مشاركتهم للأدوات المتوفرة في الركن من ملابس المهن و أدوات المطبخ. كما يتضمن التدوين تسجيل صوتي لنقاشات الأطفال خلال اللعب.

- التدوين الكتابي و التسجيل الصوتي سيتم تفريغه و تحليله كمصدر لبيانات البحث.

في ركن المكعبات ملاحظاتي تركز على كيفية مشاركة الأطفال للمكعبات و معالجتهم للمشكلة فيما بينهم كفريق عمل

في الركن الفني سأقوم بدراسة الرسومات الناتجة من مجموعة الأطفال المتواجدين في الركن، و علاقه الرسومات بالنقاشات التي تدور بينهم كمجموعة. الرسومات التي تنتج في الركن الفني تعتبر ايضاً مصدر ثري للبحث.

ملاحظتي للعب الأطفال ستطلب مني في بعض الأوقات التفاعل معهم. اخلال ٤-٥ أسابيع الأولى سيكون تركيزي على روتين اللعب الحر في الأركان و التعرف على الأطفال و طريقة تفاعلهم خلال اللعب.

- خلال الاسابيع التالية ١٠-١٢ أسبوع سأقوم بتجميع البيانات عن طريق ملاحظة لعب الأطفال و نقاشاتهم خلال اللعب، سأستخدم مسجل صوتي لمساعدتي على توثيق البيانات. سأقوم بوضع

- المسجل في أحد الأركان الثلاثة خلال أيام تواجدي في موقع البحث، و سأقوم ايضا بنسخ بعض رسومات الأطفال و اعادة النسخة الأصلية الى الطفل/ المعلمة في نفس اليوم.
- سوف يتم تجميع البيانات عن طريق تواجدي في الصف وقت الأركان و ملاحظتي للعب الأطفال. لن يتم تجميع أي بيانات من أي طفل من دون موافقة ولي الأمر الخطية.

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(Appendix 3.2)

Participant Consent Form

(Parent's permission for a child to participate in the study)

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Title of Project: Young Children Construction of Self within the Unstructured Moments of Play

What is this study about? I am a doctoral student in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. I am interested to study the ways 4-year-old children engage with one another in enacting different social roles and negotiating rules in relation to being a boy or being a girl in their free play at the classroom. My research focuses on children's gendered identities, their understanding of themselves in relation to being a boy or a girl in the classroom. You can agree or disagree to your child's engagement in this study. Your approval or disapproval of participation is voluntary.

What does this study involve? All children in the classroom are invited to be part of the study. If you approve of your child's participation, I will start collecting data by observing your child's play. My presence in the classroom will last between 15 and 18 weeks. My research will take place during center time activities, particularly art-center, playing-house center, and building-blocks center. I will observe children's play, take fieldnotes, participate in play if invited, and engage in casual conversations if initiated by the children. But I will not interview your child. I will use a digital recorder in order to record children's conversations during play.

The identity of the participants is confidential: any identifiable characteristics will be kept confidential and only accessible by the doctoral advisor and myself. Some of your child's narratives and drawings will be included in the final paper; yet, the chosen data will not identify your child's identity - including names or any identifiable characteristics. The school board including the classroom teacher and the principal will not be given any of the participating

children's data for confidentiality purposes. Your child's raw data will be kept in a secure locked place. The recordings will not be disseminated in an audio form.

Your child's participation is voluntary: You have the right to refuse to include your child in the study or in some parts of the study if you wish to do so. You may withdraw your child from the study at anytime, for any reason. The withdrawal will not affect your child's daily routine at school or his/her school evaluation. If you decide to withdraw your child from the study, the child's data will be destroyed unless you give permission otherwise. Once data collection is completed, data can no longer be withdrawn.

Yes:___No:___You consent for your child to be audiotaped during play.

Yes:___No:___You consent for your child's drawings to be shown publically

Communication of Results:

The findings of this research might be shared at local and international conferences and among scholars. I aim to share what I learn from your child with preschool teachers in Saudi Arabia to provide new insights into children's ways of knowing.

Potential Risks:

There are no potential risks to your child.

Potential Benefits:

Participating in the study might not benefit the child directly, but it will enrich the existing literature on young children's play and construction of identities.

Compensation: I will offer every child in the classroom (participant and non-participant) stationary gift (stickers or crayons) in appreciation for their collaboration.

Questions: If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me directly or contact my doctoral advisor.

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, and want to speak with someone not on the research team, please contact the McGill Ethics Manager at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca".

Please sign below if you have read the above information and consent to participate in this study.

Agreeing to participate in this study does not waive any of your rights or release the researchers from their responsibilities. To ensure the study is being conducted properly, authorized individuals such as a member of the Research Ethics board may have access to your/your child's information. By signing this consent form, you are allowing such access.

A copy of this consent form will be given to you and the researcher will keep a copy.

Child's Name: (please print) _____

Parent's Name: (please print) _____

مشاركة طفل في بحث علمي

أولياء الأمور الأعزاء،

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

أنا طالبة دكتوراه في مجال التعليم في جامعة ماكجيل، مونتريال، كندا. أود منكم الموافقة بمشاركة طفلكم في بحث رسالة الدكتوراه والذي يدور حول اللعب الحر وعلاقته بتكوين مفهوم الذات في سنوات الطفولة المبكرة. يمكنكم الموافقة أو الرفض بمشاركة طفلكم، علما أن موافقتكم بالمشاركة هي مبادرة تطوعية منكم.

الهدف من البحث: انطلاقا من خلفية علمية تثبت أن لحظات اللعب الحر ما بين الأطفال هي محض لتبادل وتكوين المعرفة و تشكيل ثقافتهم القادمة، يهدف هذا البحث العلمي إلى دراسة كيفية تكوين المفاهيم الاجتماعية خلال سنوات الطفولة المبكرة. سأقوم بملاحظة دور اللعب الحر في صياغة وتكوين المفاهيم التي يشكلها الأطفال عن دور المرأة والرجل في المجتمع. كما يتطلع هذا البحث إلى توفير دراسة مفصلة عن دور الأطفال الفعال في معالجة مصادر المعلومات المختلفة (البيت، المدرسة، الإعلام، التطبيقات الالكترونية، الخ...) و المفاهيم التي ينتجها الأطفال تبعا لذلك من خلال اللعب و تناقل المعلومات. نرجوا أن يكون هذا البحث لبنة في صياغة مستقبل أكثر إشراقا للأطفال في المملكة العربية السعودية.

طريقة جمع البيانات: جميع أطفال "فصل الورود" مدعوون للمشاركة في البحث ولكن ستقتصر مشاركة كل طفل على موافقة ولي أمره الخطية. خلال الأسابيع التالية (١٠-١٢ أسبوع) سأقوم بتجميع البيانات عن طريق ملاحظة اللعب الحر بين الأطفال و نقاشاتهم خلال اللعب في فترة الأركان، سأستخدم مسجل صوتي لمساعدتي على توثيق البيانات، و سأقوم أيضا بنسخ بعض رسومات الأطفال ومن ثم إعادة النسخة الأصلية إلى الطفل. ملاحظتي للعب الأطفال ستطلب مني في بعض الأوقات التفاعل معهم و لكن تفاعلي مع الأطفال مقتصر على مضمون اللعب و لن يتضمن طرح أي أسئلة خارجية.

سرية المعلومات: أسماء الأطفال المشاركين في البحث ستعامل بسرية تامة، و كل طفل مشارك سيكون له اسم مستعار سيتم استخدامه في ورقة البحث النهائي. جميع المعلومات التي يمكن أن تكشف هوية الطفل المشارك (الاسم و عدد افراد الاسرة) سيتم حفظها في مكان آمن ولن يطلع عليها أحد سوى الباحثة ومشرف البحث فقط. البيانات التي سيتم نشرها كالرسومات و نقاشات الأطفال في اللعب ستكون مجردة من أي علامات تكشف هوية الطفل. تبعا للوائح أخلاقيات البحوث في الجامعات الكندية فلا يحق لمعلمة الصف وإدارة المدرسة بالاطلاع على البيانات الخام للبحث حفاظا على حقوق الطفل و سرية بياناته.

مشاركة النتائج: سيتم مشاركة النتائج من خلال رسالة الدكتوراه والمشاركة في مؤتمرات محلية أو دولية.

- أود أن أوضح أن الموافقة على مشاركة طفلكم هي مبادرة تطوعية منكم و من حق كل ولي أمر رفض المشاركة أو قبولها. كما يحق لولي الأمر سحب الطفل من المشاركة في أي وقت خلال تجميع البيانات و من دون الحاجة إلى توضيح أسباب. انضمام الطفل للبحث أو عدمه لن يؤثر على البرنامج الدراسي اليومي أو تقييم الطفل في الصف. في حالة موافقة ولي الأمر ومن ثم طلب الانسحاب من حق ولي الأمر أن يطالب باتلاف بيانات طفله و عدم نشرها ضمن البحث. تنتهي فرصة سحب ولي الأمر لطفله من البحث مع انتهائي من تجميع بيانات البحث.

- لا تشكل مشاركة الطفل في البحث التالي أي عقبة أو خطورة عليه ومشاركته لن تؤثر على نمو أو تعليم الطفل بشكل مباشر ولكن ستكون عامل مهم في تطوير تعليم الطفولة المبكرة. سأقوم بتوزيع هدايا رمزية على جميع الأطفال مع انتهائي من تجميع البيانات.
- التوقيع بالموافقة سيكون في الورقة الثالثة المرفقة. في حالة موافقتكم على مشاركة طفلكم أرجو توقيع الورقة المرفقة و اعادتها الى المدرسة مع الطفل.
- في حال وجود أي تساؤلات أخرى عن البحث يمكنكم التواصل معي او مع مشرفة البحث مباشرة.

الباحث: نزيهة سمير علي خجا، طالبة دكتوراه، جامعة ماكجيل، قسم دراسات التعليم، مونتريال، كندا

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إذا لديكم اي استفسارات عن المعايير الأخلاقية للبحث يمكنكم التواصل مع مركز أخلاقيات البحوث و الذي

قام بدراسة البحث بجميع تفاصيله قبل الموافقة عليه.

McGill Ethics Manager at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca