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Preschool strategies among the Saudi middle classes: mobilising capitals, negotiating cultural arbitraries and anticipating change

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Abstract

Parental choices in non-compulsory pre –primary education are typically analysed in relation to dispositions influenced by class-related cultural capital. In Saudi Arabia, where early childhood education is yet to be fully institutionalised, other local socio-cultural dynamics enter in the formulation and approval of choice. This article focuses on choices and their justification expressed by a group of mothers from the wealthy Saudi middle class encountered at a private preschool in the city of Al-Madinah. The article reports the complexity of strategies of distinction in a conservative society that tends to exacerbate the weight of others on individual decisions. In particular, the protective importance of social networks is revealed when singular models of education are chosen, which, albeit promoted by the government in the name of modernity, remain disapproved of by many across the social spectrum.

Keywords

Parental choices; cultural capital; social capital; private education; Early Childhood Education; preschool; Saudi Arabia.

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Introduction

In contexts where early childhood education [1] is non-compulsory and largely privately run, choosing a 'good' preschool represents a significant educational investment, requiring a certain amount of knowledge and experience from the parents (Ball 2003; Reay 2004a; Vincent, Braun, and Ball 2008). Parents or guardians' own educational trajectories are said to fully operate at this level where state regulations and support interfere less (Van Zanten 2015). In the context of Saudi Arabia, where despite a significant policy push in recent years, early childhood education remains the lot of a minority (Al-Harthi 2014), parental strategies at pre-primary level involve a more complex blend of social and cultural influences. This paper aims to address this complexity by relating the influence of class-based social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1986) to other local socio-cultural dynamics entering in both the formulation and justification of choice. Our qualitative perspective on the formulation of choice explores the uneasy route to legitimisation of early years education through the practice of parents who champion it. In doing so the paper aims to reveal how new educational practices unfolding in Saudi Arabia represent much more than a governmental modernisation agenda and a public policy in search of international legitimacy.

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[1] Early childhood education typically refers to the education provided to children under the official age of primary education. Depending on countries, and sometimes within the same country, different names (nursery school, pre-primary school, playschool, kindergarten, pre-kindergarten, maternal school ,etc) are given to the establishments called "preschool" in this article. They may provide either early childhood educational development (ISCED level 01 in the age range of 0 to 2 years), or pre-primary education (ISCED level 02 for children from the age of 3 years up to the start of primary education), or both. It is this broad non-compulsory sector (primary education starts at the age of 6 in Saudi Arabia) that the article refers to as pre-primary although the UNESCO figures on pre-primary enrolments only relate to children aged 3 and over.

Early childhood education in Saudi Arabia: a late but rapid process of legitimisation

With a 25 % gross enrolment rate in pre-primary education in 2016 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2018), Saudi Arabia still shows one of the lowest figures of the Arab world (average 32%) where some countries like Lebanon and Algeria are today recording growth enrolment ratios as high as 84.5 % and 79.2 % respectively (UNESCO 2018).

Yet a positive impact of the recent movement in the country to encourage early years learning is being acknowledged by a number of studies (Gahwaji 2013; Alharthi 2014; Adihaish 2014; Al-Othman et al. 2015; Al-Mogbel 2014; Alqassem, Dashash, and Alzahrani 2016; Aljabreen and Lash 2016).

As the most recent available data are showing (figure 1) , numbers began to rise in the 2000s when pre-primary education was made a national priority, and grew more steadily from the early 2010s.

Figure 1 here

An embryonic private pre-primary sector (in urban centres and essentially for non-Saudi children) predated publicly funded preschools, which were not introduced in Saudi Arabia until the mid-1970s (Alqassem, Dashash, and Alzahrani 2016). However, benefiting from two decades of strategic efforts to align the educational framework of the country to international standards, both types of organisations are now widely available (Aljabreen and Lash 2016), and public preschools (mostly operating under the Ministry of Education) are now outnumbering private establishments (see figure 2) although the enrolment remains higher in the private sector (Alqassem, Dashash, and Alzahrani 2016). This dynamic presence of private providers at pre-primary level is being encouraged by the government in an attempt to catch up with enrolment rates observed in the region, in

a context of constrained public expenses. The Ministry of Budget introduced a scheme in 2015 to facilitate access to loans for private companies willing to invest in preschools (Alqassem, Dashash, and Alzahrani 2016). The General Department for Nursery School is also explicitly given the task to "Work on attracting Private and National Investments and motivate their participation in growing of Nursery Schools and minimizing Government Intervention at this level" (Ministry of Education 2017)

Figure 2 here

In order to comply with the 2030 vision of Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Education also launched a scheme of income-related educational vouchers available for early childhood education in an effort to encourage participation from all segments of the society (*Al-Madina*, 9 February 9, 2016). All these measures contributed to boost enrolments and encouraged the proliferation of organisations under various forms of ownership and with varied quality standards (Aljabreen and Lash 2016).

The strong private sector presence observed at pre-primary level is therefore the result of a public policy seeking to catch up with neighbouring countries and with international expectations regarding pre-primary enrolments[2] on one hand, and of the opportunistic responses by educational entrepreneurs of a growing demand by wealthy middle classes on the other hand. In a move typical of policies employing a "language of choice in which rights, duties, responsibilities and choice are all welded together to encourage parents to become active choosers" (Bowe, Ball and Gerwitz 1994:38) the policy is providing some legitimacy to the minority of parents having already made the choice to send their children

[2] Expressed in the UNESCO Education 2030 strategy (2016) and in particular in target 4.2 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 which aims to "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education" (UN 2015).

to a preschool.

In this context, our research participants are typical figures of ideal parenting, making good use of the expanded educational opportunities made available to them and their children by the Kingdom. To some extent, they may feel empowered by the government's encouragements. Yet through its rhetoric of choice, the government transfers the responsibility of enrolling children onto parents, and pursues an agenda of early childhood education expansion without appearing to challenge local customs regarding roles and responsibilities in the education of young children. As we hope to show here, skills and predispositions to choice on the Saudi preschool market, particularly in cities with a conservative reputation, such as Al- Madinah where the research was conducted, do not attract *de facto* social approval and cultural legitimacy as observed elsewhere, in Europe for instance (Ball 1993 Van Zanten 2015).

Conceptual framework and methodology

What remains under-documented (and understandably so in context where the focus of both policy and research remains the availability of preschool opportunities) are the attitudes of those parents now increasingly facing a situation of choice with regard to early years education.

Parental choices are typically analysed in relation to dispositions found to be heavily influenced by class-related social and cultural capitals. But choices and their justification also vary across cultures (Imada and Kitayama 2010). The Middle East culture is for instance often associated with formulations of choice seeking approval and appreciation by others (Imada and Kitayama 2010). Living in a Muslim conservative society such as Saudi Arabia tends to exacerbate the weight of others on individual decisions, a potentially conflicting situation for the 'new' individualistic middle-classes of the current

"late modernity" (Okuma-Nyström 2009). Accordingly, choices in the context of this study are not only scrutinised by tight social control, they are judged by others in their conformity to the Islamic principles governing both the education of children and the role of women as mothers in society (Moghadam 2004). Our approach draws on both interpretations of the determinants of choice for a better contextualisation of our findings.

Hot knowledge and the embodied credentials of skilled choosers

The knowledge required to make good choices can be obtained from official sources and from the 'grapevine' where social networks and personal experience combine to provide immediately relevant information or 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998, 380).

Research shows that in contexts of absence or non-reliability of publicly available information, the power of hot knowledge increases as parents rely more on their social networks to obtain the required information (Ball and Vincent, 1998). This is certainly the case in Saudi Arabia where, although hot knowledge is subjective and solely stemmed from individuals' experiences, it is perceived as more reliable than official and publicly available information, particularly if produced by schools themselves.

Ball and Vincent (1998) grouped parents processing the information available to them into three groups: the 'skilled choosers' with high motivation and a capacity for choice; the 'semi-skilled choosers' who have a high motivation but low capacity for choice; the 'disconnected choosers' characterised by low motivation and low capacity for choice (Ball & Vincent 1998, 378). The Mothers who took part in this study share the social and cultural competences of skilled choosers. Their motivation is necessarily very high, bordering at times on the exhilaration of being pioneers in a context where enrolment at pre-primary level is one of the lowest in the world.

The drivers of mothers' decisions regarding early years education, are analysed in the paper using the concepts of cultural capital and social capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, and employed by authors such as Ball (2003), Reay (2004a) and Van Zanten (2015) to illuminate school choice processes. A particular attention is paid to the participants' qualifications and experiences of education as forms of sub capitals both embodied (long lasting dispositions towards "schooling" values) and institutionalised (educational qualifications as guaranties of ownership of cultural capital).

Social capital and women's agency in patriarchal societies

Bourdieu also states that "the economic and social yield of the educational qualification depends on the social capital, again inherited, which can be used to back it up" (1986, 244). He goes on to define social capital as:

> … the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition –or in other words, to membership in a group– which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital. (Bourdieu 1986, 248-249).

We contend that the backing in question becomes essential in uncertain contexts of still dominant but challenged patriarchal family and traditional kinship systems (Moghadam 2004). The accumulation of cultural capital and educational credentials by mothers' can only be translated into culturally acceptable choices with the support of a network of equally equipped trusted women capable of collectively validating choices made individually with or without family support. The social capital granted by membership of a supportive informal network of mothers engaged in a similar process, not only gives weight to individual decisions (in the form of collective approval), but also

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reinforces the agential capacities of mothers through sharing best practice and ideas.

Sample and data collection

This study reviews the discourses of 19 mothers on their decision to enrol their children at a private preschool in Al-Madinah. We do not claim that the attitudes and discourses reported in this paper speak for the entire middle classes of Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, the paper seeks to reveal how agencies have to be understood in contexts where local social orders and conditions (such as the availability of kindergartens or the conditions of women's' access to the labour market) define specific patterns of practice. Yet while emphasising specificities we are offering some interpretations in our conclusion that we feel our case study entitles us to make because they are corroborated by the empirically-based studies of Early Childhood Education in Saudi Arabia encountered in this research, and supported by other perspectives on Saudi women's agency, in labour market participation in particular.

The semi-structured interviews drawn upon were conducted face-to face in Arabic by one of the co-authors as part of a doctoral project on the status of English language in early childhood education (Alharthi 2014). The field research used a private Saudi-run preschool (we call it Rowad) as participant recruiting ground.

The sample of participants is essentially made of non-working mothers (at the point of being interviewed), a significant identity in a country where non-working mothers tend to either provide the early childhood education of their children themselves, or share it with their maid at home. They also share a number of social and cultural competences such as high level of education, with eighteen of them holding a first degree. Most of them also have some sort of international exposure, either through family linkages, or as a result of direct multiple experiences abroad for business, leisure or

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education purposes, and also for most of them through regular contact with international domestic staff (maids).

These mothers did not constitute an established group as such but showed strong signs of collectively-owned capital and shared credentials in addition to multiple criss-crossing pre-existing ties: some knew the researcher, others were old friends, former classmates, or related to each other. A snowball strategy facilitated by the preschool did the rest, and most participants ended up engaging with the research and the researcher well beyond the life of the project, particularly through the online forum initially established for data collection (Alharthi 2014). They also quickly seized the opportunity provided by the project, to exchange views about the preschool in question and about experiences and opportunities elsewhere in al Madinah, and to offer each other support and advice.

A distinctive group within the Saudi middle class

In Saudi Arabia as in most societies pre-school decisions are essentially a mother's responsibility (Van Zanten 2015; see also Reay 1998 and 2004b). Fathers and other family members also play an active role in these processes, but in the context analysed here, the mother is the outward-facing leading actor of the family as far as early childhood education is concerned. The women encountered in this article belong to the wealthy middle class of the city of Al-Madinah. But economic resources are not the only characterisation of this group. Pre-primary education is not common practice even among middle class parents in al Madinah, and these women therefore belongs to a minority in Saudi Arabia characterised by a belief in certain models of education, very much encouraged by the government nowadays, but still resisted or even disapproved of by many across the social spectrum. Definitions of middle class beyond western capitalist economies have tended to emphasise a lifestyle, characteristic of those expanding

educated, fairly affluent urban populations (Banerjee and Duflo 2008). In Saudi Arabia, this new "class" only began to exist as a group from the 1950s (Alnuaim 2013, 8) and does not exhibit that same homogeneity, because "a multiplicity of tribal, local, provincial, ethnic and sectarian, as well as economic factors" (Alnuaim 2013, 20) play significant structuring and stratifying roles (Alnuaim 2013; Kharas, 2010). For the purpose of this paper and drawing on Kharas (2010) and Banerjee and Duflo (2008), the concept refers to people who are able to live a comfortable life that provides them with healthcare, educational opportunities for their children and also an income that allows them to enjoy vacation and leisure quests. Alnuaim suggests that in the Saudi society, such broadly conceived "middle" class is the largest bloc and absorbs 67% in the Saudi social pyramid (Alnuaim 2013, 35). It is within this population that parents seeking pre-primary opportunities for their children are found. The mothers who took part in this study belong to the upper tiers privileged minority of this middle-class. They share many of the attributes of those "global middle classes" (Ball and Nikita 2014) characterised by their strong transnational capital and broad comparative abilities. But how valued and recognised is this in the Saudi society? As we will try to show now, the distinctiveness of being a skilled chooser in educational matters exposes mothers to contradictory normative discourses in Saudi Arabia regarding early childhood education, and to the risk of seeing their choices contested on prevailing cultural and religious grounds.

Skilled choosers on a quasi-market

A significant factor of change in attitudes to early childhood education in Saudi Arabia has been the remarkable rise of educational attainment of women. The Saudi government has been supporting women's education since the 1960s and has developed various strategies to raise the representation of Saudi women in higher education from a mere 5% of the total enrolment in 1960 to the current 60% (Al-Al-Alhareth, Al-Alhareth and Al-

Dighrir 2015 ; Jamjoom and Kelly 2013) . Hamdan points out that the Saudi women's level of education allows them to be more proactive in the education of their children and also on the employment market where their place is less and less perceived as being in contradiction with "the dignity and value of being a wife and a mother" (Hamdan 2005, 58). Although the Saudi society is said to be perpetuating a highly patriarchal interpretation of the Quranic principles with regard to women in the social and economic life (Syed 2010), women's agency has undoubtedly been boosted by their greater access to educational opportunities.

According to Almosaed (2008) women's employment is also empowering them in their households as they become less dependent on men as sole providers of economic stability. Almosaed utters that men widely retain control over the household finances, but that women tend to control the executive functions, including issues related to children where women are making decision more than men (Almosaed 2008, 83).

Equipped with university degrees in fields related to education, with linguistic multi-competence, past or current related professional experiences, and the necessary financial resources to afford the fees charged by private providers in Al Madinah, our research participants represent the most visible – and yet a small minority - subgroup of the new "skilled choosers" emerging out of the economic wealth and public policy investments of contemporary Saudi Arabia.

In the quote below, Hanen, who at the time of the interview was still a student and was planning a summer trip to the US for her children, draws on her personal linguistic competences to explain an individual decision.

> During the first term I was happy with my daughter's progress, but as the year went through, I was not as contented as before. She improved in some areas

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> but not in English, and for me English is very important. So by the end of the year I decided to change the school and move her to an international pre-school. (Hanen)

Changing provider appears to be an expected practice in that network of mothers, many of whom had some experience of providers in countries or -as in the case of Hanen arriving from Jeddah- in Saudi cities with a more established pre-primary market3.

As skilled choosers, they commonly invoke the rights of the child or their cognitive and social development, to justify their decision to enrol their children in a preschool and their choice of provider. The following example of Rania, a graduate from the local university, illustrates a common discourse among the participants on what to expect from a preschool and how to assess it:

> My son is an only child and there are few children of his age in my family, I thought a pre-school was the best place for him. There is no point in having him at home, even though he knows almost everything that are learned in preschool. yet He will benefit from being with peers of his age, he will interact with them, play with them and learn to share and respect the rules. (Rania)

As a mother looking herself after her child while her husband is studying abroad, Rania expects more from a preschool than just cognitive development, and this influences her consumer attitude. Before being enrolled in Rowad, her son had been at another place for two years, which she described as "more academic –oriented". With her son complaining

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[3] Drawing on personal experience or on relatives' accounts, a number of participants portrayed Al Madinah as lagging behind cities like Jeddah and Riyadh in the range of preschool opportunities available

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about workload, Rania looked for a place that would better meet his needs and tastes. She described Rowad as having a more explicit focus on social development alongside the more standard introduction to literacy and numeracy. She also praised Rowad's broader curriculum including introduction to ICT, English and Physical Education. Rania stated in her interview that with only one year separating her son from the start of formal education, it was important to prepare him with "positive attitude instead of letting him build negative views toward schooling".

Exhibiting advanced parenting knowledge to reject narrow conceptions of child development and the restricted curriculum of some of the providers was a common attitude among the interviewees, always on the lookout for a place in Al Madinah matching their expectations. With financial resources available and a local private education background, sisters Banan and Walaa identified a promising preschool in their neighbourhood, only to discover after a few days that Bayan's daughter who started first, did not enjoy herself. A decision was made immediately:

> So we started again to look for an alternative pre-school and this time we did not restrict ourselves to our area...We heard about Rowad and we went to see it. (Walaa)

What is emerging from our findings is a pattern of decisions made on a market targeting wealthy informed choosers of a particular type. While the admission priority in public preschools is given to children of working mothers (Al-Othman et al. 2015), who have little choice but to accept the nearest establishment to their workplace, the mothers investing in private pre-primary education mobilise far more symbolic and material resources in the formulation of choices for their children. We now turn to the most significant of these resources and to how they are conveyed in a cultural context where

dominant norms expect non-working mothers to take charge of early childhood education at home.

Cultural resources in legitimisation strategies

We have presented our specific group of mothers as being part of a privileged minority who have accumulated certain social and cultural dispositions that allow them to operate informed choices on the pre-primary market. They consider those choices as morally and educationally right for children, and as strategically important for their future. All three states of their cultural capital (incorporated, objectified and institutionalised) are being mobilised to deploy investment strategies (the choice of the best education for their child) and accompanying rationalisations.

Embodied and Institutionalised cultural capital: the expert discourse as a resource

Making "modern" educational choices endorsed by public policy discourses provides little legitimacy until the practice in question has become at least symbolically dominant in one's society or class.

Faced with regular reprobation glances and comments in their family, neighbourhood, or religious congregation, mothers draw skilfully on the developmental psychology and transition to school repertoires to reassure themselves and defend their decision in the language of the educational institution itself:

> Early years learning is the corner stone for lifelong learning journey, in this stage children start to adjust with the schooling environment and getting used to follow the rules and regulations they may not have in their homes. (Danyah)

Danyah's emphasis on the transition stage relates directly to her son's and her own

experience. He did not start preschool until he was nearly six years old, with less than a year to his first day in primary school. As a non-working mother, Danyah was always going to invoke the importance of that preparatory stage to justify her decision:

> This is the first time for him to be in kindergarten and my main target was to prepare him for school. I wanted him to understand the concept of learning, classrooms and obeying the rules (Danyah).

Danyah is also sufficiently skilled to quickly point to the signs of change confirming that her decision was the right one:

> His personality has changed slightly; he used to be introvert and scared, but now he is better, he is braver and even his speech has developed. (Danyah)

This notion of transition and of the importance of early childhood education as a preparatory stage for formal education is the most common repertoire drawn upon among our respondents, whether they are working or not. In doing so they echo the number one objective of the government's Nursery Education strategy (2018) to "Prepare enrolled children of (3-6) years old for Basic Education, Develop and Hone their Abilities and Skills".

Sammar goes even further with a commentary on the expected pedagogical orientation at pre-school level:

> Early Years Learning is a preparation phase, it is not appropriate to put a child immediately in Year One to study and do homework. To start with, children need to learn through playing.

Expressions like "it is not appropriate" or as she puts it elsewhere "the common sense

is to put children by the age of four" are largely relayed among mothers within the school and shared on social media. They express the embodied state of these mothers' cultural capital, nurtured in families with strong beliefs in, and long-standing experiences of education (some of the participants, like Sammar, had themselves experienced pre-primary education). Their discourse reveals competences e built upon personal or relative's experience, and expert knowledge acquisition through reading and the sharing of information with like-minded parents.

The other dimension of cultural capital expressed in the choice, and even more so in the justification of the choice of preschool education is its institutional form or "objectification in the form of academic qualifications" (Bourdieu 1986, 247). As highly educated young women, with degrees obtained in Saudi Universities, sometimes supplemented with international qualifications, our participants represent a cultivated elite that symbolises the efforts of the government to promote the education of women and more generally a 'modern' thinking about education. Their degrees and certificates, of less importance in discussions within their own socio-cultural milieu (where more embodied forms of cultural capital suffice to legitimatise choices), provide them in more public fora with the precious legitimacy and authority conferred by their status as heirs of the ruling elite's vision.

Facing criticism

Justifying the choice of pre-primary enrolment in Saudi Arabia when one is a mother who does not work regularly and has a (preferably well-educated English speaking) full-time maid at home, requires drawing on the intellectual and symbolic resources discussed above to confront three imbricated arguments often reported by our participants: the religious argument, the linguistic argument, the socio-cultural argument.

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Invoking religious principles to justify a controversial choice reveals a well-informed knowledge of societal boundaries in matters of education. In response to commonly heard views that "Islam says that children should stay with their mothers until they are seven" (reported by Mozon), mothers do not hesitate to use direct quotes from the Quran and turn - as they skilfully do with all areas of criticism - the argument on its head, making early childhood education a teleological commitment against traditional obscurantism:

> For us as Muslims, seeking knowledge is not questionable, as it is explicit in Quran that it is part of a Muslim's obligations and duties; you know what Allah says in Quran: Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endowed with understanding that receive admonition. (Qura'an, Surah 39/9) (Mozon)

As a non-working mother, Mozon is obviously used to facing those questions, and she has in her degree in Islamic studies, the legitimate capital to respond.
The religious argument is also drawn upon to distinguish private providers from one another, and to stress how on a market with loose curriculum regulation, a proper choice was made:

> I was impressed by the way children follow the Islamic values and apply them in their behaviour (Wijdan, preschool teacher herself)
> I think the problem that we have is not the environment but the carelessness of the private sector in establishing international schools which conflict with Islamic values and the Islamic society in Al-Madinah. (Bayan)

The linguistic argument about the risks of early exposure to English is not unrelated to the religious one, as the early introduction to the principles of Islam requires a good command of the Arabic language. But more commonly, it is the cultural and cognitive

risks that critics are throwing at mothers enrolling a child in a pre-school with significant exposure to a foreign language. The cognitive debate is not new and certainly not specific to Saudi Arabia. It is one that highly educated women have no problem facing off, drawing on well-rehearsed research-backed arguments on the developmental and social benefits of early childhood multi lingual education. Yet participants expressed different views on that point, often related to personal circumstances. Generally, the choice of Rowad, a preschool with significant introduction to English but where English is not a language of instruction, offered a more acceptable alternative to non-Saudi owned international schools and their English curriculum.

The cultural debate introduces the question of the values being channelled by languages, with common criticisms pointing to the inability of children to engage with entertainment and culture in Arabic once English becomes dominant. Mothers tend to respond to this argument by referring to their own trajectory: as well-travelled and well-educated women, they know how mastering languages is actually the best way to preserve their own cultural identity. They also made several references to the global economy and the danger of children being left behind by parents' inability to understand what is going on. For Zahra, a Syrian mother educated in a bilingual Christian school in Damascus, ensuring a child masters the world's dominant language becomes a moral duty:

> My sister and I were educated in a French school in Syria, so we speak French, English and Arabic. For my children I do not ask them to learn French but they have to learn English; they can go without French or any other languages, but not without English.(Zahra)

Finally, the question of control of what is learned is often raised: in most families of our sample, children have access to English language programmes on TV and video

games. Introducing them early enough to a classroom-based English learning helps controlling the mode of acquisition of a language they are continuously exposed to, whether we like it or not. In the example below, a mother with a degree in Arabic language draws on the same arguments often deployed to criticise early years English, to make Rowad exemplar of a school open to the world and yet unquestionably Saudi :

> I really wanted her to be in the International School, from all my heart, but that was carelessness, I could not continue there. I felt that to put my daughter in a kindergarten where the teachers are from my home country and they speak our language and are dedicated when they look after our daughters more relieving, her teachers here are really nice. (Samah)

All these arguments involve subtle recourse to the three states of cultural capital as well as a complex equilibrium between the need and desire to be seen as modern, a requirement to be recognised by their network, and the necessity to abide by religious and cultural dominant norms and patterns of authority.

The social Capital: confirmation and protection

The network of connections formed by our research participants is informal, built upon existing ties (relatives, former classmates, fellow parents of older children in a same school) coming into existence as a “group” through nursery parents’ events attendance, informal chats at pick up and drop off times, or even participation in this research.

As explained earlier, the two essential dimensions of the network of interest to this paper relate to information sharing (“hot knowledge”) and to a form of validation of choices made.

Hot knowledge sharing among competent choosers

Even if rankings and government brochures and assessment can provide useful information, they cannot give answers to all questions, and do not represent the most trusted sources of knowledge. According to Van Zanten, this is why parents "turn to other parents within their local networks, whose opinions of the schools they see as relevant in that they share the same 'interested' perspective" (Van Zanten 2015, 18). Trust is a key factor in this process of information sharing, particularly in circumstances where the social practice in question is not one widely shared in the society.

Most interviews revealed how mothers' decisions were directly affected by trusted friends or relatives. Many drew primarily on their own feelings and experience after visiting the place, but at some point or another, the information about the place originated from acquaintances whose judgement could be trusted rather than from material publicly available.

The case of Sammar is a good example of this. Dissatisfied with the international preschool her daughters used to attend, she hears about Rowad from friends who have who have just enrolled their daughters there:

> Bayan convinced me to put my daughter at Rowad, she is so happy with her daughters being there and never stops saying that it is the best. And because I was not happy with the kindergarten my daughter was in, I followed her advice…I asked the head teacher to put my daughter in the same class with Bayan's; if they manage to become friends, it will be brilliant. (Sammar)

Even though they only meet occasionally, Sammar and Bayan, who studied in the same private school and the same university, remain in touch through social media. Schooling

is one of the subjects that continue to animate their relationship.

In some cases, the choice made as a result of networking may contradict decisions made within the family. Samah had just enrolled her child at one place closer to home and recommended by the family when friends told her about Rowad:

> I preferred Rowad, it has a good reputation and I observed the teachers' way of dealing with the children myself.
>
> (Samah-Mother)

The decision did not come without reprobation from the family and also required an authorisation from her line manager (to accommodate pickup and drop off times). But despite such challenges and risks, the trust placed in like-minded choosers is often stronger than family ties as far as educational choices are concerned:

> Bayan expressed how her two daughters were enjoying their time at Rowad. I have asked her so many questions … It is not as if I am asking her for evidence but as mothers we were looking for the best for our children. I decided to visit the school and the school was up to Bayan's word. So I registered my daughter.
>
> (Sammar-Mother)

Exchanges of this kind contribute to the creation or reinforcement of networks which in turn strengthen the social capital of their members, and their level of competence in choice formation and justification. They form exclusive circles where information from outside (brochures, league tables, newspaper reports) are subject to some form of approval that minimise risks and increase benefits (Van Zanten 2015).

Mitigating risks: The network as collective response to "Social eyes"

As discussed earlier, preschool enrolment for children of non-working mothers,raises

questions and criticism drawing on the registers of social and cognitive skills development, as well as cultural and religious arguments. While most mothers interviewed felt they had the competences to make the relevant choices and justify them, membership of a network of skilled choosers (an English teacher, an Early Years professional, experts in Islamic studies and Arabic language) also provided a welcome shelter against actual or anticipated criticism. This was particularly clear in the online forum, where dialogues often took the form of rehearsals on difficult questions. The network also helps mitigating risks by providing evidence in the form of handy case studies of successful school trajectories having started in these preschools. Where questions are asked, success stories from friends and relatives of similar backgrounds come in handy to reassure a reluctant husband or worried acquaintances. And as suggested in the introduction, this dimension should not be underestimated in "interdependent" cultural contexts where State policies may praise individual consumer choice but where choice justification is only individually sanctioned if given "relational meanings" (Imada and Kitayama 2010). The social eyes (or impressions of others) are not the only motivation for women to join or reactivate networks in relation to educational choices. They are good opportunity to exchange information, experience and services. But in the context described in this paper, the social capital's most substantial support to choice formation lies in its legitimising effect because of the limits to women's individual rights, and of the competing dominant discourses on early childhood education.

Conclusion: distinctive marginality?

Contrary to Western societies where educational markets create a new cultural arbitrary (around choice) which produces "exclusion and disqualification through a language of empowerment" (Ball 1993, 13), there is no clear-cut pattern of association in the context described in this paper between class reproduction and the legitimation of

parental choices made in early years. This is because the legitimation of choices made by parents in Saudi Arabia is not subject to a cultural arbitrary shared or accepted by the entire "dominant" class. Therefore, even though they exhibit all the right forms of cultural and social capital typically valued elsewhere in educational choices, middle class mothers in Al Madinah need the umbrella of influent and trustworthy connections to guide and support the choices made. This is where the social capital comes into play: not only does it provide a networking tool that reinforces each mother's choice capacity, it also serves as a shield to a group of women whose values and attributes are neither widely shared nor fully accepted within the larger society.

There is an evident match between the values placed by mothers interviewed in this study in early multilingual education and the curriculum and pedagogy offered by private providers such as Rowad. To a large extent this replicates the trend observed at higher levels of the system where private schools have been favoured by the Saudi urban middle class for some time for offering a teaching style "in which critical thinking is encouraged, and European and North American curricula are followed" (Alqassem, Dashash, and Alzahrani 2016: 4). Private pre-primary education now offers that extra educational benefit, taking advantage of public policy support to allow parents who can afford it to exercise their informed choice capacity in a relatively protected space (shared only with like-minded high skilled choosers). The Saudi market as such does not legitimate differences between good and bad choosers as observed in western countries because the overall enrolment remains marginal, but accessing it is in itself a form of distinction. Some further legitimation is then offered by the discourse of modernisation conveyed by the government, which associates the overdue deployment of pre-primary education with recent measures to further reduce the country's unsustainable gender imbalance in labour force participation (Naseem and Dhruva 2017).

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But women know very well that the discourse associating early childhood education and modernity is not one shared across the segments competing in the country for religious and political authority. The illustrations in this paper of how mothers draw on religious, linguistic and cultural arguments to consolidate the legitimacy of their choice revealed how this legitimacy remains fragile, still challenged by conservative forces in the society. This paradoxical situation is also what defines the distinctiveness of these middle class educated mothers. With the pre-primary sector now growing at the fastest rate in the middle east, with the proportion of females among university graduates exceeding 50% , and with measures such as lifting the driving ban for women likely to enhance female participation in the labour market, sending a child to a preschool may soon become part of the Saudi cultural arbitrary.

The boundaries of this cultural arbitrary are already shifting and with them the strategies of distinction and their narrative repertoires. As we have seen in this paper, mothers are now beginning to stand clear off some of the international schools and their aggressive marketisation of English language education. A different form of modernity is sought, that does not hesitate to call on traditional values within transformative pedagogies. In the Saudi context , the understanding of cultural and social distinctions in educational choices cannot be separated from a reflexion on the status of women and their legitimacy as parental choosers in their household as well as in the public eye. Nowhere is it better illustrated than in the non-compulsory early years educational sector. Equipped as they are in terms of skills and connections, the women encountered in this study are still in search of some consolidation of their own position in society and of a safe and successful strategy for their children's future within fast changing and uncertain times.

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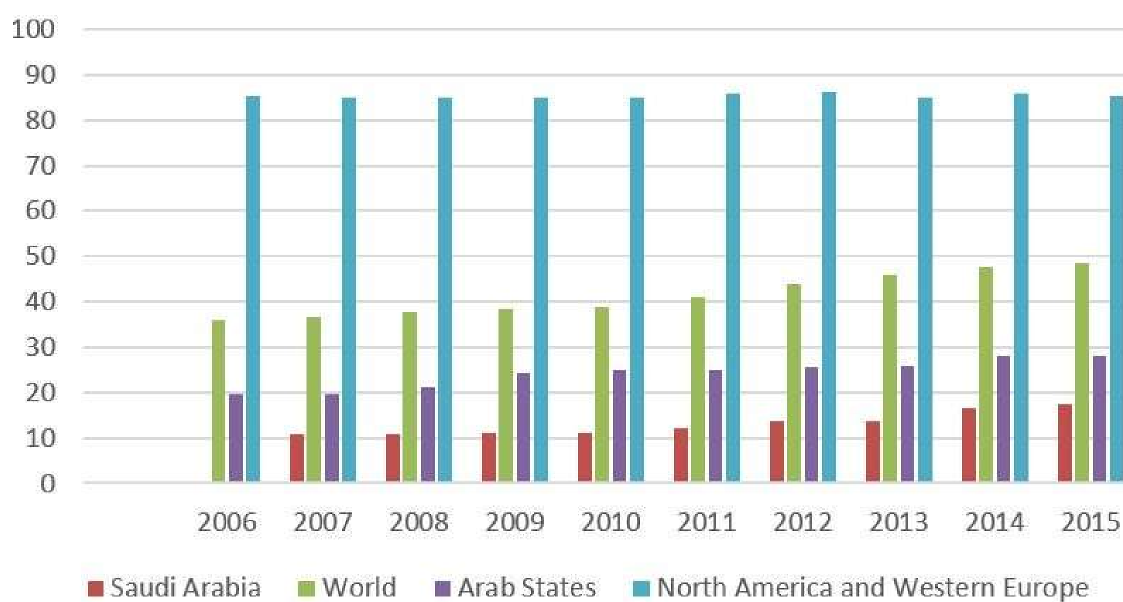

Source: UNESCO. Data extracted on 02 January 2018 from UIS.Stat

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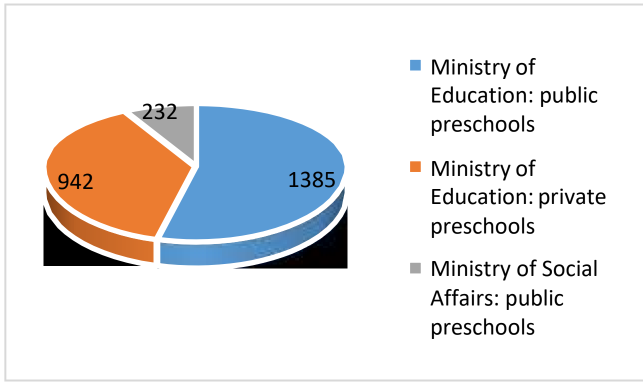
Figure 2 : Preschools in Saudi Arabia in 2015



Source: Alqassem, Dashash, and Alzahrani 2016, 5.