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Young children and their mothers' early literacy practices: a case study from Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study reports the findings of extensive ethnographic research in which six preschoolers were observed for 2 years at a preschool in Saudi Arabia. Drawing on the sociocultural perspectives of literacy learning, this study focuses on the early literacy practices in the Saudi home context of two preschoolers and their mothers. The data described in this study were derived from mind maps created with the children and interviews with their mothers. Several sociocultural concepts were used as analytical frameworks following a thematic approach. This study suggests that early literacy is a social and cultural practice embedded and constructed in a sociocultural context. Moreover, the findings indicate how children's early literacy practices at home occur within a social process through interactions with adults and siblings and how these practices reflect Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity. Furthermore, the findings highlight the significance of using participatory techniques (mind maps) to hear children's voices in research.

Keywords Early literacy practices · Children's perspectives · Participatory research methods · Home context

1 Introduction

Early literacy experiences significantly influence children's confidence, independence, and other fundamental skills throughout life (Lonigan et al., 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2011). Early literacy development in Arabic is a significant study area for several reasons. For example, Arabic is one of the most widespread languages in the world, and it has special characteristics in terms of diglossia and complex orthography (Hassunah-Arafat et al., 2021).

Sociocultural perspective research demonstrates the crucial role of informal educational settings, such as home and community schools, in children's literacy development; children become literacy learners by engaging in literacy activities valued by their own culture and society (Tolentino & Lawson, 2017). It has been argued that children's early literacy learning

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is influenced by the "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) that they gained from the surrounding sociocultural. Furthermore, home literacy practices are diverse and complex, relying on various literacy resources (Nichols & Nixon, 2013). Kelly (2010) argued that children's literacy learning at home is influenced by parents' educational and economic backgrounds, language(s), and religion. However, there has been relatively little literature published, informed by sociocultural perspectives, on early literacy practices in the home context of Arabic-speaking children (Aram et al., 2013a, 2013b; Hassunah-Arafat et al., 2021; Korat et al., 2014; Tibi & McLeod, 2014).

Parents from different cultures have varied beliefs about their children's learning (Khoja, 2015). Rowe (2013) found that parents from similar sociocultural backgrounds may have different beliefs about learning; children from different cultural contexts have different views on literacy (Gillen & Hall, 2013). Although there are numerous studies on early literacy development from different perspectives, studies on children's views on literacy learning are limited (Bradford & Wyse, 2022; Harris, 2015).

Several studies have emphasized the relationship between children's culture, identity, and literacy growth (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Korat, 2001; Kuby & Vaughn, 2015; Li et al., 2011; Rao et al., 2010; Tobin et al., 1989), and revealed that literacy practices represent specific aspects of identity. However, early Arabic literacy and cultural identity has received less attention (Tibi & McLeod, 2014).

This study aims to understand literacy practices within the home context of Saudi preschoolers from the perspectives of children and their mothers, given the limited research on early literacy practices among Arabic-speaking children in home contexts. This study aims to answer the following questions: (a) What literacy practices occur in the Saudi home context of the participating children? (b) How do these early literacy practices link Saudi Arabian Islamic culture to identity?

2 Context of the study

Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Middle East, with Muslim or ethnic Arabs as the majority. Islamic principles drive the ideology of its society, and its culture and society have been described as homogeneous, with its citizens sharing a common ethnicity, religion, and heritage (Al-Khateeb, 2012).

Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia, with various local dialects having slight variations among regions. Although Arabic is highly respected by Saudi society, the use of English has increased owing to globalization and economic evolution (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). A critical linguistic feature of Arabic is diglossia. Arabic has two forms: the spoken form (vernacular), used in daily informal communication with different dialects with no formal written form; and the literary form (Modern Standard Arabic), used in education, books, media, formal speech, and religious practices (Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2014). Children in Saudi Arabia are raised in diglossic linguistic contexts. Saudi Arabians are exposed to Standard Arabic through reading, media, and religious practices.

3 Theoretical perspectives

This study is based on the views of research in two areas: (a) sociocultural perspectives on literacy learning and (b) listening to and hearing children's voices in educational research.

3.1 Sociocultural perspectives on literacy learning

Sociocultural perspectives on literacy often link individuals' cognition with the sociocultural context of literacy practice. Literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984) is a significant perspective in sociocultural theories of literacy. Scribner and Cole (1981), Heath (1983), Street (1984), Gee (1990), and Barton and Hamilton (1998) developed this theoretical perspective in which the researchers emphasize the links between literacy and orality and provide valuable insights into how literacy practices vary across communities and contexts (Perry, 2012). The traditional view of literacy (as a set of skills) has been challenged by sociocultural perspectives introducing an ideological model (i.e., literacy is connected to its social and cultural context). This literacy model "offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another" (Street, 2003, p. 77). Although earlier work was conducted on older children and adults, Heath (1983) paved the way for several researchers to investigate literacy practices among young children (Bakar, 2012; Kenner et al., 2007; Ruby, 2017). Studies from this theoretical perspective have underscored the links between culture, identity, and literacy development (Kuby & Vaughn, 2015; Li et al., 2011).

There exist limited studies in the field of Arabic early literacy informed by sociocultural perspectives (Aram et al., 2013a, 2013b; Hassunah-Arafat et al., 2021; Korat et al., 2014; Tibi & McLeod, 2014). Aram et al. (2013a, 2013b) studied Arabic-speaking kindergarteners' early literacy within their home context in Israel, focusing on mother-child joint writing, and stressed the importance of family context and maternal mediation in Arabic-speaking children's literacy development. Moreover, the difficulty in developing literacy in Arabic results from the gap between the standard and vernacular forms of Arabic. Korat et al. (2014) examined Arabic language and literacy development for Arabic-speaking Israeli kindergarteners at home, by focusing on two literacy practices, namely, storybook reading and joint writing, and found parental mediation, home literacy environment, and the family's socioeconomic status influenced children's early literacy development at home. Hassunah-Arafat et al. (2021) investigated Arab families in Israel to examine mothers' beliefs about early literacy and revealed that although the mothers were aware of their children's early literacy, they overestimated them. Furthermore, Tibi and McLeod (2014) studied children's emergent literacy in Arabic in kindergarten and at home in the United Arab of Emirates, and observed limited literacy practices within the context of children's families. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of maintaining the vernacular Arabic for Emirati children as it reflects their cultural identity and stresses the need for further research on the impact of diglossia on children's Arabic literacy; they suggest that issues for diglossia need to be considered when planning for Arabic early literacy. Arabic language and early literacy, and the practice and promotion of literacy in the Saudi home context have received little attention. The present study delves into how early Arabic literacy is promoted in the Saudi home context and how it links to children's cultural identities.

Based on this theoretical context, studies have been conducted and investigated literacy practices among migrant families. Moraru (2019) investigated the literacy practices of second-generation British-Arab/Muslim immigrants in Cardiff, UK, and revealed the fundamental role of Islam in reproducing Arabic linguistic practices for immigrant families. Another study highlighted the importance of home literacy practices in shaping immigrants' transnationalism (Taylor-Leech, 2022).

In this paper, I contend that a number of sociocultural factors, which vary from one context to another, play a role in how children develop their cultural identities. Children's cultural identities develop and transform through their interactions with various mediators, including adults. The present study was conducted from the theoretical perspective of literacy as a social

practice. The research on early literacy in children with Arabic as their first language from a sociocultural perspective is scarce. This motivated the current study to investigate early literacy practices among Saudi Arabian pre-schoolers by hypothesizing that adopting sociocultural perspectives can produce significant insights into early literacy practices and help link the investigated early literacy practices to their sociocultural context. This study considers early literacy as a social practice and meaning-making activity in which children develop early literacy using various communication tools in their sociocultural contexts.

A sociocultural perspective considers different concepts, such as "mediation" (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990), that help analyze and understand early literacy as a social practice. In this study, the term "mediator" refers primarily to the means that facilitate children's early literacy learning, such as mothers, siblings, language, numbers, drawings, culture, play, and digital tools. Family members and friends play a crucial role as social mediators of children's literacy growth (Gregory et al., 2010; Kenner et al., 2007; Stockall & Dennis, 2013).

The second theoretical concept is "funds of knowledge" developed by Moll et al. (1992), which refers to how children's learning at school is affected by the knowledge they gain from broader sociocultural contexts and the cultural knowledge that mediates their literacy learning. Several researchers investigated children's literacy learning in informal settings across different communities (Gregory et al., 2015; Kenner et al., 2007). By applying this term as an analytical concept, the present study obtains significant insights into how Saudi preschoolers develop their early literacy within the sociocultural context of the home.

3.2 Listening to and hearing children's voices in educational research

With the emergence of the children's rights movement, calls increased to consider children as participants in the research as they are viewed as competent constructors of their own lives. Involving children as research participants provides opportunities for listening to children's voices and helps construct a comprehensive picture of the studied topic, increasing the validity of the research (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta, 2011).

The literature suggests considering several issues while involving children in the research. These issues include respecting children's desire to participate in research, obtaining their acceptance through appropriate consent forms (Mayne et al., 2016), building good relationships with them, considering different perspectives of children in addition to those of adults (Palaiologou, 2014), and selecting research methods appropriate for children's abilities (Gunson et al., 2016).

Research involving children faces several challenges, such as parents denying their children's participation in research despite their children's agreement (Hadley et al., 2008), resistance from traditional early childhood researchers (MacNaughton et al., 2007), and methodological challenges in striking a balance between methods that are most appropriate for children and those that are aligned with the research design (Palaiologou, 2014). Contemporary research involves children as active participants (Clark & Moss, 2001; Koch, 2019; Lipponen et al., 2016). The key message from this line of research is that children can express their perceptions of learning when researchers employ appropriate research methods such as photographs, videos, and drawings.

The present study was conducted from a rights-based perspective (Coppock & Phillips, 2013) that views children as socially competent. Children's voices were heard using mind maps where they could express their views through drawings and writing.

4 Present study

4.1 Methodology

This study draws on an extensive ethnographic study that investigates the early literacy practices of Saudi Arabian preschoolers. The author engaged in field visits for 2 years (38 weeks involving 61 visits). Determining the role of the author in the setting was the key issue considered at the beginning of the research. The author's identity as a researcher was disclosed and the research aims were explained to all the participants. The author's role was that of an observer as participant. Indeed, adopting an immersive approach with the participant children for a long time and being a participant observer not only strengthened my relationship as a researcher with the children's mothers, but also raised my curiosity to investigate their home literacy practices by interviewing the children's mothers.

Ethnographers tend to be reactive rather than proactive; they aim to understand the studied phenomenon by balancing the participants' perspective (emic; "insiders") and the researchers' point of view (etic; "outsiders") (Cohen et al., 2017). The author shares the same social, cultural, and religious background as the research participants; thus, the author considers herself an "insider." However, as the author was not a member of the research setting as an academic researcher, she considers herself an "outsider." Gregory and Ruby (2011) argued that it is a dilemma to be an insider and an outsider simultaneously because entering the setting as a researcher, despite cultural similarities, makes the researcher different from insiders. Therefore, I gradually built the ability to make the *familiar strange* by looking at the situation through an outsider's lens instead of through an insider's lens.

4.2 Methods

The data considered in this study were collected from a large repository comprising the following:

1. Participant observation in the preschool classroom (216 observational hours, recorded in field notes (54 sets); visual data (507 photographs and 94 short-clip videos))
2. Semi-structured interviews (six interviews with two classroom teachers, one with the preschool director, and six with the mothers of the participating children)
3. Documents (children's work, such as drawings and writing/mark-making, teaching guides, teachers' weekly plans, and children's literature)
4. Artifacts (e.g., classroom equipment, displayed pictures, materials, learning tools, and toys)
5. A participatory research method (mind maps) was created with the child participants (six sessions)

This study focuses on a particular aspect of a comprehensive study. The data described in this study were derived from mind maps created with the child participants and their mothers' interviews.

4.3 Listening to and hearing to children's voices through mind maps

Mind maps were created for each participant. Drawing is considered an effective research tool for young children (Mukherji & Albon, 2018); thus, various crayons and coloring pencils were

Fig. 1 An example of a mind map created with the child participants (the name of the child is blurred)

provided in the mind-map sessions to encourage children to express their feelings and ideas through drawing. In every session, the children were asked questions, I noted them down on a mind map, listened to their answers, and encouraged them to participate by drawing or writing anything related to the subject (Fig. 1). All six sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed.

4.4 Data analysis

A thematic approach was employed to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research questions and key concepts from a sociocultural perspective were used for the data analysis, which was conducted nonlinearly (reflective cycles). These cycles were as follows: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes (inductive approach), (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing potential themes (six themes), (5) defining and naming themes (four themes), and (6) writing and interpreting the findings. This study adopted the "reflexive thematic analysis" approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), highlighting the researcher's vital role in producing the knowledge and interpreting the data. The author agrees that "there should be no expectations that codes or themes interpreted by one researcher may be reproduced by another" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1393). In other words, although I consider subjectivity in expressing my participants' perspectives, I account for the reflexive influence of my own interpretation as a researcher.

Transcriptions were prepared for all interviews and mind-map sessions. The translation was one of the significant issues in this study, as the language of the participants (Arabic) differed from that of this study (English). Interviews and mind map sessions were conducted using a combination of the two forms of Arabic. Subsequently, all transcriptions were noted in Arabic using the words

used in interviews. Data were analyzed using the original language (Arabic). To create credibility and trustworthiness, "back translation" (Al-Amer et al., 2015) from English to Arabic was applied again by another bilingual Arabic/English speaker to ensure that the translations were valid.

4.5 Participants

The extensive study from which these data were obtained involved six preschoolers aged 4 to 6 years, their mothers, two teachers, and the preschool director. All the child participants were Saudi Arabians and from moderate socioeconomic statuses.

Furthermore, the study involved the mothers of six children through individual semi-structured interviews. Mothers were recruited through a mobile call, and after obtaining their consent, information about the study and informed consent was sent via email. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the participants (children and their mothers).

The data considered in this article were drawn from only two child participants and their mothers to obtain deep insights into Saudi children's and their mothers' perspectives on early literacy learning and practices in the Saudi home context. Brief details of participating families:

- Ahmad's family
  Ahmad is the fifth among the six children in his family. He enrolled in this preschool when he was 3 years old. His mother is in her mid-40 s and holds a postgraduate degree.

- Sara's family
  Sara was fourth among the five children in her family. She was enrolled in this preschool when she was 4 years old. Sara's mother is in her late 40 s and holds a postgraduate degree.

4.6 Ethics

This study was conducted at a preschool, and permission was obtained from the relevant parties. Consent letters were sent to the parents of all the children. Subsequently, the author sought the children's consent to participate in the research. A child-friendly consent letter was prepared and verbally explained to the children, asking them to write their names on the letter if they agreed to participate. The author believes obtaining consent from young children is an ongoing process (Mukherji & Albon, 2018); therefore, the author respects children's rights if they show any rejection.

5 Findings and discussion

5.1 Early literacy practices in the Saudi home context

The data described in this section were obtained from children's mind maps and interviews with their mothers. The findings are discussed in terms of four themes: (1) reading practices; (2) oral communication; (3) religious literacy; and (4) bi-literacy practices.

5.1.1 Reading practices

The following representative excerpts are from Ahmad's mind map and his mother's interview, depicting early reading practices that occur in the home context.

Excerpt 1
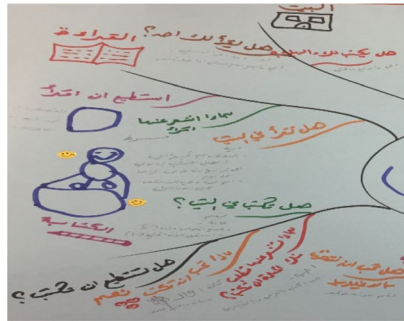
R: Do you read at home?
Ahmad: Yes.
R: What do you read?
Ahmad: The stories that mother brings, Pinocchio story, I read it and I got to memorize it, and read it every day.

R: What's the name of the story?
Ahmad: Pinocchio, the woody child.
R: In Arabic or in English?
Ahmad: In Arabic.
R: Your mother reads it?
Ahmad: She read once and after that I learned it and got to read it every day.
R: Can you bring it to the school?
Ahmad: But it is lost. Mother says to me I'll bring you many stories, you and your sister.

Excerpt 2

R: Do you read to your child?

Ahmad's mother: Sometimes I do a bedtime story in Arabic. At times, he tells me a story, in his own way, bedtime is the most beautiful time I spend with him.

The following examples indicate early literacy practices occur at Sara's home.

Excerpt 3

R: Do you read to your child?

Sara's mother: No, bedtime stories, no. However, when the primary school (Qur'anic) told me that they will interview my child, I started to do some reading.

R: I mean reading for pleasure, not only for learning and school.

Sara's mother: No, rarely.

Excerpt 4

R: Do your parents read to you at home?
Sara: We do not have stories.
R: Do you see your parents write at home?

Sara:	My mum writes with my sister, she helps my sister with her homework.
R:	Can you read?
Sara:	Yes.
R:	What do you like to read?
Sara:	Stories and Qur'an.

The abovementioned data indicate how literacy practices vary among children's homes. For instance, although reading stories, including bedtime stories, was common in Ahmad's home (excerpts 1 and 2), it was much less frequent in Sara's home. Data from Sara's mind map (excerpt 4) also confirmed what her mother said in excerpt 3. Despite Sara's preference for reading stories and the *Qur'an*, she said they had no storytelling at home, however, her mother helped Sara's sister with her homework. While Ahmad's mother emphasized motivating her child to read, Sara's mother was only concerned with reading for school purposes. Similar research findings have indicated that mothers' literacy practices were formed by their previous experiences and cultural beliefs about parents' role in children's learning (Korat et al., 2014). This finding also shows how children's preferences to read Arabic stories and Qur'an, appeared to be impacted by home reading experiences "funds of knowledge."

The abovementioned findings indicate mothers are role models in literacy practices, such as reading for pleasure or school purposes. Through maternal mediation, a key concept in sociocultural theories, children develop early literacy within the context of their families. This finding adds to the literature indicating that parents play a crucial role as social mediators in children's literacy growth (Aram et al., 2013a, 2013b; Gregory et al., 2010; Korat et al., 2014; Stockall & Dennis, 2013).

5.1.2 Religious literacy

Interviews with the participant mothers revealed that religious literacy and learning to recite parts of the *Qur'an* were common practices in their families. Examples of religious literacy practices that occur in families are as follows.

Excerpt 5

R:	Do you recite the Qur'an with your child at home?
Ahmad's mother:	Yes, he asks about the meaning of some words and I explain it in the vernacular until he understands the meaning. I wish that he could memorize the Qur'an, learning the Qur'an by heart strengthens Standard Arabic.

Excerpt 6

R:	Do you recite the Qur'an with your child at home?
Sara's mother:	Indeed, sometimes I read the Qur'an, but usually my children listen to the Qur'an daily through the record.

Excerpt 5 illustrates Ahmad's mother's belief that learning the *Qur'an* by heart significantly promotes Standard Arabic as it develops vocabulary and articulation. In addition, children's preferences for reading the *Qur'an* (excerpt 4) are affected by their home reading experiences (excerpt 6).

The data described here support the findings of Tibi and McLeod (2014), who showed that reading the *Qur'an* is one of the literacy practices of Emirati families and that parents serve as role models for reading the *Qur'an*. The abovementioned examples also support the view of literacy as a sociocultural practice, as faith is a cultural practice (Gregory et al., 2015). This is consistent with Street's (2003) view that children's literacy learning is embedded in social and cultural contexts; and the findings of Moraru (2019) on the fundamental role of Islam in reproducing Arabic linguistic practices for immigrant families.

The author argues that religious literacy activities, such as reading the *Qur'an*, have sociocultural significance for Saudi children. This supports the argument that cultural interest is a crucial motivation for reading and that children become literacy learners by engaging in literacy activities valued by their own culture and society (Rowe, 2013; Tolentino & Lawson, 2017).

5.1.3 Oral communication

Saudi children, similar to other Arabic-speaking children, develop their spoken language within a dual linguistic context because of the diglossic nature of Arabic. The following excerpts from interviews with mothers illustrate how children are exposed to Standard Arabic at home.

Excerpt 7

R:	To what extent is your child exposed to Standard Arabic at home?
Ahmad's mother:	From the television, Arabic children's channel. When I read a story, I read it in the vernacular to simplify it to him, and when he retells the story, he uses some words in Standard Arabic.

Excerpt 8

R:	To what extent is your child exposed to Standard Arabic at home?
Sara's mother:	From the television. From hearing the Qur'an.
R:	I have noticed that your child uses Standard Arabic when speaking to the Arabic teacher.
Sara's mother:	Yes, I think this is the impact of home. My child listens to the Qur'an daily, and the Qur'an is a rich source for Standard Arabic.

The abovementioned excerpts indicate that in the home context, both child participants were exposed to the standard form of Arabic by watching children's channels on television. Moreover, these excerpts highlight another source: mothers reading stories (Ahmad) and listening to the *Qur'an* (Sara). Excerpt 7 illustrates that Ahmad's mother recites stories in the vernacular to make them easier to understand; thus, Ahmad can use words in Standard Arabic when retelling the story. This may imply that Ahmad learned Standard Arabic from preschool, where the teacher read stories in Standard Arabic and from watching television at home. This finding supports earlier studies that parents tend to use vernacular Arabic for more explanations while reading stories to their children (Korat et al., 2014; Tibi & McLeod, 2014). In some oral activities and genres, parents and children combine standard and vernacular forms of language, which is consistent with that of Taylor-Leech (2022), who emphasized the importance of home literacy practices in shaping immigrants' transnationalism.

These findings support sociocultural theories that emphasize the role of culture and media in promoting children's literacy acquisition (Kennedy et al., 2012; Tibi & McLeod,

2014). Moreover, the participant children developed their Standard Arabic through several "mediational tools" within their families: Arabic stories, television programs for children, and the *Qur'an*.

The abovementioned findings reveal that early literacy learning is linked to Saudi Arabian Islamic culture. The child participants and their mothers indicated that their preferences for reading the *Qur'an* and Arabic stories were common literacy practices at home.

Thus, the present study confirms the previous research that espoused the value of preserving vernacular forms of Arabic. Tibi and McLeod (2014) argued that in Emirati society, which is influenced by globalization and language diversity, it is crucial to maintain Arabic in various forms to sustain national identity and culture. Hence, the abovementioned findings support the existing literature that literacy learning is strongly linked to children's identities and cultures. The present study provides further insights into the rarely discussed topic of how early Arabic literacy development is linked to children's cultural identities.

5.1.4 Bi-literacy practices

This section discusses participants' views on literacy practices in Arabic and English. The data presented in Table 1 are sourced from the children's mind maps.

Table 1 indicates that both child participants liked the Arabic stories. Although Ahmad enjoyed listening to stories in both languages, Sara preferred Arabic only; they had different perspectives on reading and writing in Arabic and English. For example, although Ahmad was willing to read and write in both languages, Sara preferred to read and write in Arabic and only read and wrote her name in English.

Moreover, the child participants had different perspectives on learning English as a foreign language. For instance, Ahmad expressed his belief in the importance of learning English (column 2). However, Sara, believed that learning English was unimportant for her age. Lindgren and Muñoz (2013) indicate that the disparity in children's learning of a foreign language refers to their motivations, parental attitudes toward teaching their children a foreign language, and parental home literacy practices.

The home context plays a significant role in learning a new language (Chan & Sylva, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to determine what mothers think about learning English early and how often their children are exposed to English at home. The following extracts are the mothers' views on learning English as a foreign language.

Table 2 indicates that the mothers have different views on learning English at an early age. Particularly, Ahmad's mother valued learning English because of the current

Table 1 Children's perspectives on literacy practices in two languages

Participant	*Which do you like more, Arabic or English stories?*	*Do you like to read and write in Arabic or in English?*	*Do you think it is important to learn English? Why?*
Ahmad	Arabic and English	Both	Yes. So we can speak with English people.
Sara	Arabic	Arabic. In English, only my name	No. It is not important. When we grow up we learn both Arabic and English.

Table 2 Learning English as a foreign language at home

Participants	What is your opinion about learning English at an early age?	Is your child being exposed to English at home?
Ahmad's mother	Important. We live in a digital era; it is crucial to learn English.	Yes, from his older sisters. On television, we do not watch English channels. Sometimes I talk with him in English.
Sara's mother	I do not know. I think it is a good idea to learn English at preschool age; however, I think it might interfere with learning the first language. For example, I noticed that my child is confused about the directionality of Arabic and English. I think learning English in primary school is more appropriate.	Yes, but very rarely, through using some English words with her sisters. I prefer focusing on Arabic as it reflects where we belong.

technological era. However, Sara's mother was worried that it might confuse her daughter and adversely affect her Arabic. She believed that focusing on Arabic at home strengthened Sara's cultural identity. This finding aligns with Al-Mansour's (2009) argument that in Saudi families where parents are monolingual (i.e., only using Arabic), children have limited exposure to English. Findings about children's bi-literacy learning can be interpreted using data from the mothers' interviews (Table 2). In particular, the mother who emphasised the importance of learning English at an early age, her child (Ahmad) also expressed his belief on learning English. In contrast, in the case of the mother who expressed reservations about learning English in early years, her child (Sara) also showed a lack of interest in learning English.

The abovementioned analysis provide further evidence of how the "funds of knowledge" influence children's attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language. This finding supports earlier studies, which indicate that introducing English as a foreign language in the early years of education is controversial among parents and educators in Saudi Arabia (Aljohani, 2016). Another study found that Saudi mothers are positive toward learning English in their early years and that cultural and social contexts shaped their views (Al-Harthi, 2014).

6 Concluding discussion

This study explored early literacy practices in the Saudi home context and how they are linked to Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity. This ethnographic study was conducted in a preschool setting. Children's voices were heard using mind maps, and their mothers' perspectives through interviews.

This study indicated that early literacy is a social and cultural practice embedded and constructed in a sociocultural context. Moreover, it illustrated how mothers serve as social mediators of their children's early literacy development; and how their perspectives on

early literacy are determined by their social and cultural contexts. This study explained how children's early literacy practices at home occur within a social process through interaction with adults and siblings and reflect Saudi Arabian Islamic culture and identity.

The analysis revealed that through maternal mediation, children develop early literacy in the context of their families. The mothers served as role models in literacy practices such as reading Arabic stories and reciting the *Qur'an*. This finding adds further evidence from the Saudi cultural context to the existing literature on early Arabic literacy from a sociocultural perspective, which stressed the important role of maternal mediation in early literacy development for Arabic-speaking children (Aram et al., 2013a, 2013b; Korat et al., 2014; Tibi & McLeod, 2014).

Furthermore, the findings showed how child participants' early literacy learning was influenced by the term "funds of knowledge." For example, home reading experiences impact children's preferences to read Arabic stories and the *Qur'an*, as this study reveals that such reading practices are common maternal literacy practices in the participants' homes. The participants' attitudes toward learning English as a foreign language were influenced by the knowledge they obtained from a broader sociocultural context. Moreover, the findings illustrate how the mothers' beliefs about learning a foreign language influence their children's views. This contributes to the literature (Harris, 2015; Pahl & Allan, 2011) on children's literacy perspectives; additionally, these findings extend the findings of studies that have explored children's perspectives on learning in the Middle East. For example, Khoja (2015) found that Saudi preschoolers' views of gender and learner identities were determined by the Saudi context.

This study has another significant theoretical contribution, extending the application of the funds of knowledge as a theoretical construct to the Saudi sociocultural context. Although past research investigated the funds of knowledge through visiting children's homes (Moll et al., 1992; Cremin et al., 2012), this research adds new ways of exploring children's funds of knowledge through carrying out mind-map sessions with the participant children and interviews with their mothers. Additionally, the current study investigates the relationship between literacy, culture, and identity and how early literacy learning in Arabic is linked to Saudi preschoolers' Islamic culture and identity, a topic, that currently does not feature highly in the research.

Finally, this study makes significant methodological contributions to early Arabic literacy research using an ethnographic approach that enables a comprehensive understanding of the topic and explores the cultural explanations of the studied phenomenon from an insider's perspective. This is also one of the few studies in the Middle East that involve children actively, and hearing their voices through participatory research techniques such as mind maps.

The findings of this study have significant implications for future research. First, the findings illustrated how mothers and siblings are social mediators of children's early literacy in Saudi homes. The findings might potentially inform Saudi mothers' understanding of the effects of maternal mediation and sibling interactions on children's early literacy and school learning. Second, the present findings might encourage other researchers to investigate Saudi fathers' home literacy practices. Third, the findings also might help teachers in Australian classrooms and other countries with Saudi children to understand what literacy practices these children may engage in at home. Particularly, findings related to oral communication and bi-literacy learning might help Australian teachers gain insights into Saudi children's funds of knowledge and how to consider that in planning for literacy learning in the Australian context. Fourth, the findings provide insights for immigrant families

regarding the significance of mothers and siblings' involvement in home literacy activities in promoting children's literacy and preserving their cultural identities.

Data availability The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval Ethical considerations have been taken into account in the light of the code of ethical principles that is stated in the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association (BERA). Since this article comes from the author's PhD thesis, the study was approved by the relevant authorities (Ethics committee, Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London) and the higher authority of the preschool where the study was conducted.

Human ethics and consent to participate Consent letters were obtained from all participants in this study.

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