
WHY DO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ENROLMENT RATES APPEAR TO REMAIN STAGNANT IN SAUDI ARABIA?

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ABSTRACT: *This report aims to analyze the importance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Saudi Arabia and why the enrolment rates of children at this age have not been growing and remain significantly low as opposed to other countries around the world. This report discusses why Saudi Arabia continues to struggle with and has not been able to recognize and encompass ECE as a vital stage to begin learning. I looked into Saudi Arabia's ECE past and present enrolment rates and the current vision for ECE based on the Saudi Vision 2030. In addition, I compared Saudi Arabia's governance and access to ECE and pre-service education and recruitment policies for ECE educators with the UK. Furthermore, I highlighted the implications of not taking advantage of ECE services on global assessments at later stages of learning based on secondary source data from these internationally recognized assessments - Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS), The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The evidence gathered in this report portrays that Saudi Arabia should modify their ECE policies and framework to achieve its Saudi Vision 2030 goals. It also reviews the UK's ECE policies, which Saudi Arabia can consider using as a model to reform its policies and increase their enrolment rate at this stage.*

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education, preschool education, Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia, enrolment, teaching

INTRODUCTION

The Dakar Framework for Action in 2000 laid emphasis on very young children, making them a priority of a global agenda for Education for All (EFA) (UNESCO,2000). The objectives of EFA intensively focused on the improvement and expansion of Early Childhood Education (ECE). Since then, ECE has been a priority agenda and has attained significant recognition around the world. Like most countries, Saudi Arabia has also identified ECE as one of its developmental priorities and has consistently been improvising their education policies to cater to the ECE service in Saudi Arabia. Despite rigorous efforts, the enrolment rate in the country remains lower than the world average (Faour and Suwaigh, 2010). It is also evident from the Figure below, that how most OECD countries have a much higher enrolment rate as compared to Saudi Arabia in ECE.

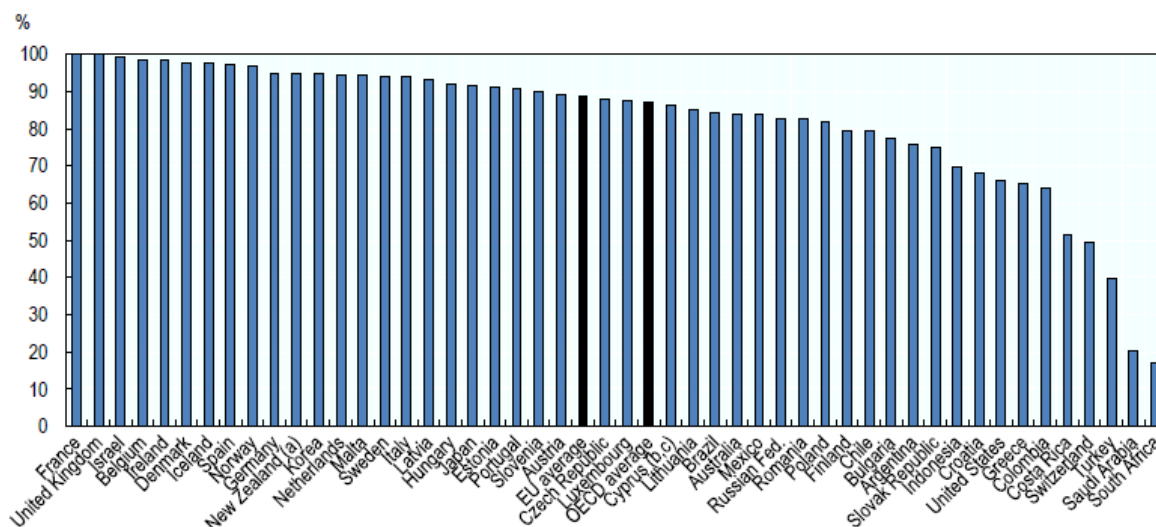


Figure 1: Enrolment rates in ECE 3- to 5-year-olds, 2017. Source: (OECD,2019b)

Furthermore, despite noticeable achievements by the Ministry of Education with this age cohort of 3-5-year olds, the enrolment rates and development of ECE is still relatively low within Saudi Arabia, as compared to other counterparts (Rabaah, Doaa and Asma, 2016).

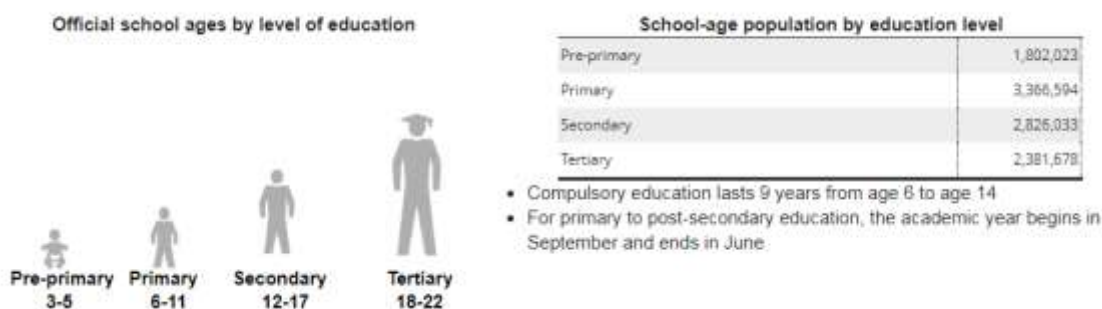


Figure 2: Age-wise school population in Saudi Arabia. Source: (UNESCO,2019)

As indicated in Figure 1 above, the enrolment rate in the United Kingdom (UK) is 100% in contrast to Saudi Arabia reporting to have the lowest rates. In this report, I will attempt to conduct a competitive study by evaluating and discussing the educational policies adopted in both countries. My research will reflect how the ECE policies adopted by the UK can help improve the ECE enrolment rate if applied in Saudi Arabia. I will be exploring in-depth, Saudi Arabia's historical context, and its way forward under their national development plan, as defined in their Vision 2030. I will also draw evidence from organisations like OECD and UNESCO to present a critical evaluation of past and current changes in ECE policies and practices and highlight potential implications in the long run of not availing ECE services for students.

Past and Present Enrolment rates in ECE in Saudi Arabia

Pre-primary education has been an essential part of the Saudi education system for more than 40 years. The importance of ECE is rooted back to historic thinkers such as El Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and other scholars who were involved and concerned with a child's educational approach (El- Beblawi,1988). ECE is not compulsory in Saudi Arabia, unlike most countries around the world now. Despite this, the first preschool classes officially began in 1975 in general

education schools. Consequently, leading to the opening of pre-primary schools (Aljabreen and Lash,2016). The enrolment ratio in preschools was around 11% in 2008 that kept increasing with time, and by 2009/2010, there were 1521 kindergartens (UNESCO,2012). The growth rate of preschools in Saudi Arabia is elaborated in the table below:

Year of institution	Number of pre-primary classes	Number of children enrolled	Number of teachers	Students: Teacher ratio
1975	1	200	14	14.3:1
1980	19	2067	166	12.5:1
2014	2559	182,556	22,819	8:1

Table 1: The development of pre-primary schools in Saudi Arabia

Source: (King Khalid Database,2015, cited in Rabaah, Doaa and Asma, 2016)

The table above shows phenomenal growth in the enrolment rate of early education in Saudi Arabia from the time it began, which continued to grow in the following years. However, on the other hand, the enrolment rate of Saudi Arabia in ECE remains quite low in comparison to other countries around the world (Al-Qasabi,2012). Besides, in 2019, the enrolment was mostly amongst 5-year olds, and only ‘3% of 3-year olds enrolled’ (OECD,2019a). It suggests that the enrolment rates of children falling in this age group of 3-5 year olds remain the lowest amongst other countries and the OECD average, as shown in the Figure below.

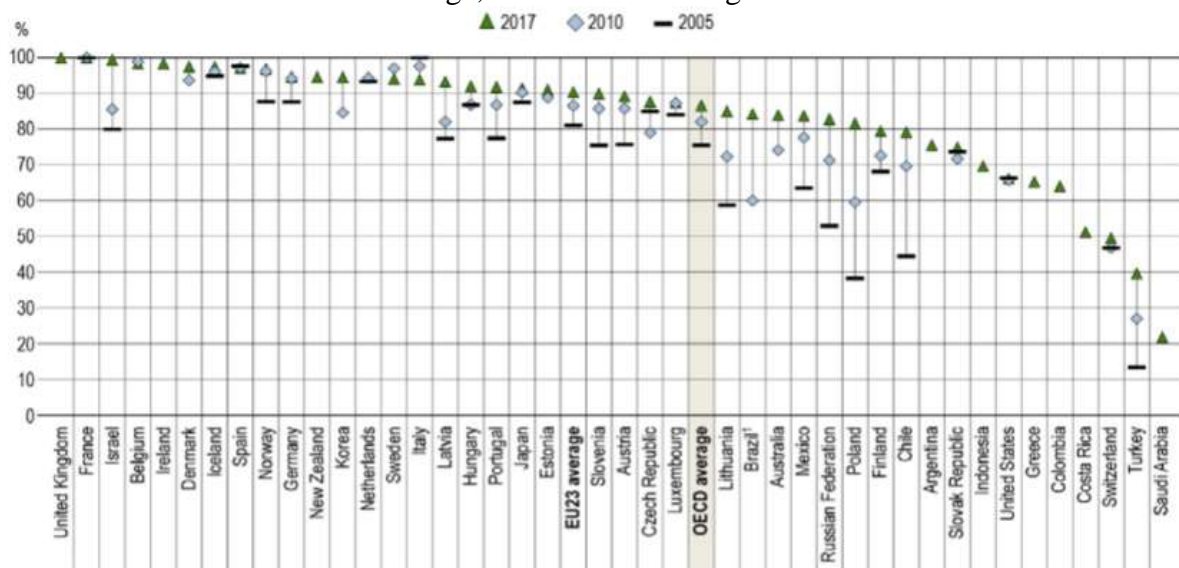


Figure 3: Countries ranking in ‘descending order of enrolment rates of 3-5 year-olds in 2017’

Source: (OECD,2019a, p.164)

The statistics above clearly depict the position of UK ranked first much above the OECD average value ranking with a 100% enrolment rate. Conversely, Saudi Arabia ranks last with the enrolment rates ranging around 20%, clearly stating the need for better education policy in ECE.

Current Vision for ECE in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Vision 2030 is the leading force behind the development and improvement of the education system in Saudi Arabia. A significant objective and one of the main priorities of it is

the inflation of the Kingdom's education sector (MOE,2019b). In line with the aims of the Vision 2030, in 2018, the Education Minister of Saudi Arabia proposed abandoning the present education system and described it as a 'product of the past, not an enabler of the future' (Oxford Business Group,2019) and considering a modernised education system. It includes an action plan towards ECE that includes initiatives for the progress and growth of kindergartens and connecting it to the reformed education system. The prime target of this scheme is to boost ECE enrolment 'from 17% to 95% by 2030' (MOE,2019a). It should be noted that for comprehensive improvement and advancement in the enrolment of ECE, Saudi Arabia could adapt strategies from the UK where enrolment of 3- and 4-year olds is universal. This, in turn, could foster the enhancement of ECE enrolment that remains to be a stumbling block in attaining the set goals of the Vision 2030.

Governance and Access to ECE

Over the past 15 years, the UK has paid great attention to the development of the early years to maximise their ECE services to match up to the needs of both children and parents. The Department for Education (DfE) in the UK, which is solely responsible for the education system in England, has been working towards providing services that help families with the 'cost and hours of eligible ECE provision' (Department for Education, 2016, cited in OECD,2020, p.28). Based on Figure 2 below, all children under 5 are sanctioned to receive free education for 570 hours per year through the publicly funded pre-primary schools and child centres in the UK.

Age	ECEC entitlement	Eligibility
2-year-olds	15 hours free (since September 2013; further extended in 2014)	Low-income families where parents earn GBP 15 400 or less (Universal Credit) or GBP 16 190 or less (Working Tax Credit) Children looked after by the LA Children from families in receipt of specified benefits
3- and 4- year-olds	Universal 15 hours free (since September 2010 – up from 12.5 hours)	All three and four year-old children
3- and 4- year-olds	Extended 30 hours free (since September 2017)	Children of parents/sole parent earning the equivalent of 16 hours a week at (or above) the national minimum or living wage, and each earning less than GBP 100 000 per year

Figure 4: Entitlement of free ECEC in England. Source: (OECD,2020)

The local authorities (LAs) are required to give ECE services for free, according to the Childcare Act 2006. The objective behind this is to eliminate inequalities and promote well-being amongst young children. Moreover, additional measures are taken by the LAs to liaise with parents the places available for funded early years in their areas and how to avail them (OECD,2020). In my opinion, this pre-primary education fund -'Universal Entitlement' (Eurydice,2019) and its management is the most notable aspect of the education system in the UK. The outcome of which has led to the 100% enrolment rate.

Alternatively, in Saudi Arabia, access to ECE services is also free like the UK, but it has no defined structure in terms of hours, days or weeks that children can avail despite being an optional part of the Saudi education system. Moreover, there is a lack of preschools in all areas for families to avail conveniently. The management and supervision of ECE are administered by three organisations: The Ministry of Education, The Ministry of Social Affairs, and the private sector (Aljabreen & Lash,2016).

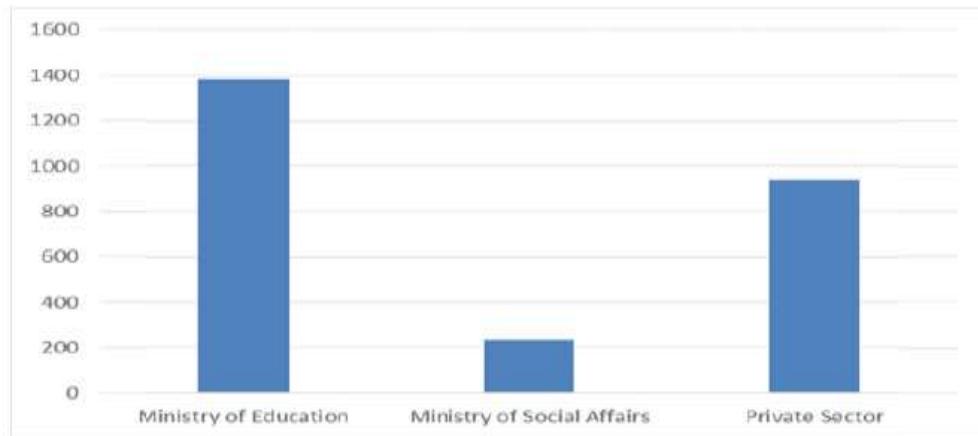


Figure 5: Number of preschools in Saudi Arabia 2013-2014 (Source: Rabaah, Doaa and Asma, 2016)

Although the private sector runs fewer preschools than the Ministry of Education, ECE services are primarily provided and supported by them, and most of the enrolment is done in private institutions (OECD,2019a). One of the reasons being that admissions to public preschools are prioritised for female workers and mostly for staff employed under their Ministry (Al-Othman et al., 2015). Furthermore, most preschool teachers are not specialised in ECE and lack the qualifications in the public sector (Hamdan, 2005). It should also be noted that the tuition of most of these private pre-primary schools is high, and it is not affordable by most families that further widens the enrolment rate gap. It can be argued that part of the reason for this gap could be due to the split system of governance of the private and public pre-primary schools that leads to different standards being set for different ECE settings. Saudi Arabia has set up a complicated picture of ECE, and these discrepancies between the two entities do not emphasise the need for preschool education (Aljabreen & Lash, 2016). It is highly probable that the provisions for entitlement and monitoring might digress as ECE is optional and lacks an organised and clearly defined structure. However, on the face of it, the main thing lacking is the country's attitude to fully embrace their ECE setups as it has been seen that management and funding can affect the quality (Belfield,2006) and proficiency levels of students of ECE programmes simultaneously. Link to quality and proficiency will become apparent in latter part of the report.

It has been claimed that in fully integrated preschools children make greater intellectual progress. Therefore, many countries are moving away from the split system and opting for an integrated ECE system like the UK to be under the governance of one entity to standardise their ECE settings (OECD,2017b). Hence, Saudi Arabia could take inspiration from developed models like the UK to modify its ECE governance. On the other hand, if Saudi Arabia takes initiatives to improve with their current governance system, another policy reform option could be the decentralisation of their ECE system. Dividing tasks could attain better results, for example, better coordination with parents to be done by LAs as in the UK and a national approach to address the nitty-gritty of the programme. However, the implications of this could broaden the gap between regions. Another proposal can be defining a criterion to maintain a certain level of standardisation between different settings and keep track of their practices. It could ensure a level of uniformity in the provision of ECE amongst all settings. However, this would need to be directed towards monitoring the process quality and not an assessment of facilities and monetary situations (OECD, 2017a).

Pre-service education and recruitment policy for ECE Educators

The increased awareness and importance of the provision of ECE has also elevated the need for trained and qualified teachers in Saudi Arabia. Although there are programmes for ECE in several colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia, it has been noted that there is still a significant gap in the qualifications of preschool teachers. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that 56% of the ECE teachers are college graduates and 76% of them have no academic qualifications or professional accreditation in the public preschools. Conversely, in private preschools, 78% of them have a high school diploma only, and 56% have bachelor's degrees (Gahwaji,2013). The Figure below also explains the recruitment of engrossed

Qualifications required for teaching (1996)

Level of education	Institutes and colleges	Admission requirements	Length of studies	Qualification upon graduation
Kindergarten	Female teachers secondary institute	Intermediate school certificate or equivalent	Three years	Secondary Institute Diploma
Elementary education	Girls intermediate education colleges	General secondary school certificate or equivalent	Four years	Intermediate College Diploma
	Girls developed education colleges	General secondary school certificate or equivalent	Four years	Bachelor degree
	Colleges of education	General secondary school certificate or equivalent	Four years	Bachelor degree
	Teacher colleges	General secondary school certificate or equivalent	Four years	Bachelor degree
Intermediate education	Colleges of education	General secondary school certificate or equivalent	Four years	Bachelor degree
Secondary education	Girls university colleges	General secondary school certificate or equivalent	Four years	Bachelor degree in any subject
Technical secondary education	Other university colleges	General secondary school certificate or equivalent	Four years	Bachelor degree in any subject

Figure 6: Recruitment Criteria for Teachers in Saudi Arabia. Source: (UNESCO, 2012)

As a consequence, teachers have their own beliefs regarding their roles in the classroom and this, in turn, influences the way they see what is appropriate or not in the preschool setting. I would claim this as well because I have taught for over a decade in Saudi Arabia in preschools, and there is a lack of qualified teachers for this age group. Another example, on this need, is that research studies have also explored this issue of teachers' training and educational qualifications and highlighted that there is a substantial need for pre-service and in-service training programmes for ECE teachers (Al-Ameel, 2002; Al-Noaim, 1996; Mahdly, 2001, cited in Gahwaji,2013). It has also had an impact on ECE providers to appoint qualified staff (Otaibi and Swailm, 2002). This gap also validates the ambiguous and contradictory status of ECE providers and justifies parents reluctance to enrol their children in preschools. The quality of teachers has hindered the billion-dollar investment in Saudi ECE and general education

programs (Howell,2014). This has led to noteworthy re-evaluation and redefinition of the status and role of ECE educators, along with the qualification framework to strengthen this area in Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, in the UK qualified teacher status (QTS) is mandatory to teach in preschools and teachers have to meet the standards as outlined by DfE to attain this status. It involves holding a professional accreditation – either a Bachelor of Education or postgraduate certificate of education and minimal early years qualification to be an ECE educator (OECD,2020). It enables preschool teachers to apply appropriate practices (Faour and Suwaigh,2010) and assists in promoting the children's learning and development in various dimensions.

Hence, this proposes that in the movement towards implementing set objectives for ECE, the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia could adopt policies related to the recruitment of ECE practitioners from the UK to address the knowledge gap and build an appropriate workforce. Improving the workforce and enhancing the quality could build a positive impression towards parents and raise the low status of ECE in Saudi Arabia.

Transitions from pre-primary to primary school

The main objective of preschool education in Saudi Arabia is the preparation of children for primary school (MOE,2019c). In order to achieve this objective, the primary focus and initial step should be to align the transition from preschool to primary school systematically. If we look at UK's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, it fosters learning and teaching to make sure very young children are ready for this transition (Callanan et al.,2017). This framework prepares children intellectually and emotionally, enabling them to be ready for the next phase of life. Furthermore, it is integrated into their national curriculum, enabling a smooth transition between levels of education. Adversely, this lacks in the Saudi education system as there seems to be no rational bridge between past and future education levels. It also consolidates the fact that Saudi Arabia needs to reform its policy of keeping ECE optional and integrate it with compulsory education to set the ground for future development and learning. In addition, designing an early years framework that links to its national curriculum and facilitates transition would show parents the relevance of ECE. Additionally, it has been noted that when educators apply practices that facilitate children to evolve and learn to their maximum abilities, then ECE is rated to be successful. Hence, if the in-service training programmes can be directed towards preparing their staff to incorporate practices to make the transition more comfortable and to support their understanding and use of successful practices could help address this gap in ECE schools (OECD,2019c). These considerations can guide policymakers who are seeking to ensure that there is a flow in transitions. It lays focus on getting 'schools ready for children' (OECD, 2017c, p.14) and not the other way around.

Implications on global assessments at later stages of learning

It has been claimed that the number of years and time spent in the participation of ECE holds significant value, and it is a significant indicator of positive learning outcomes at later stages. For example, Saudi Arabia and England have participated in global assessments, such as Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMMS) and The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and Saudi students have scored relatively weaker than England and most countries in these assessments. Moreover, TIMMS scores for Saudi Arabia went down by '7% in maths and 10% in science' at both grade levels – fourth and eighth grade between 2011 and 2015 (Oxford Business Group,2019).

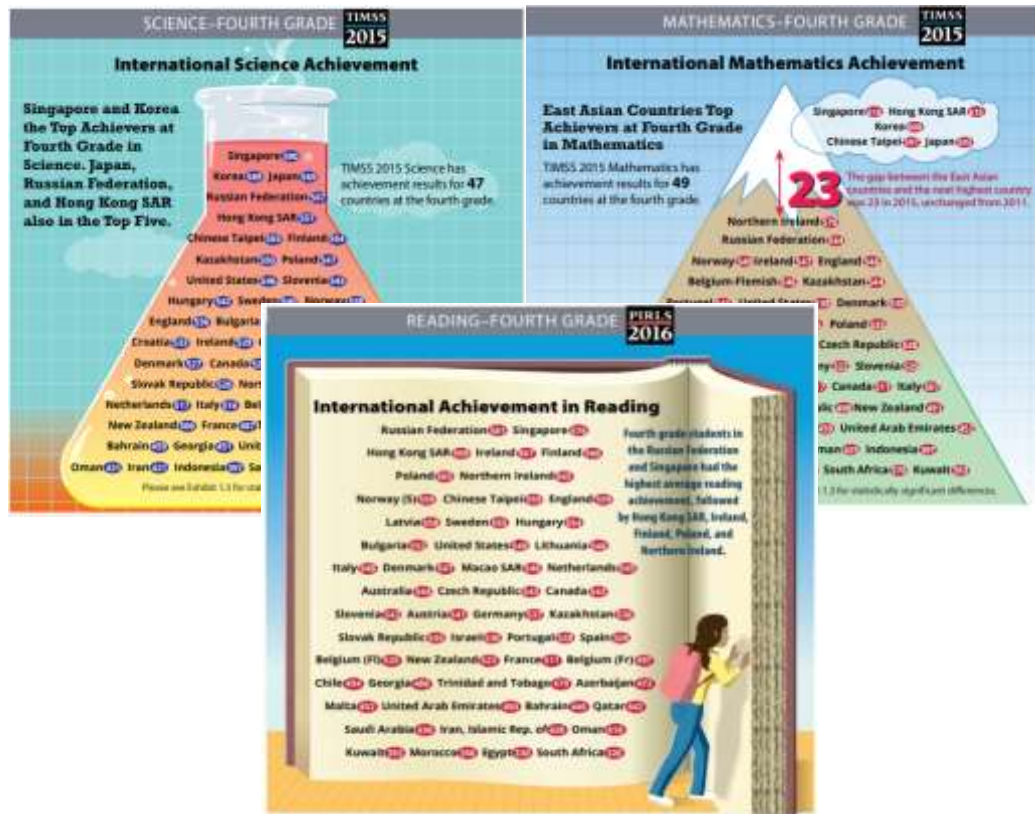


Figure 7: An overview of student achievements in TIMSS 2015 & PIRLS 2016

Source: (IEA, TIMSS and PIRLS, 2019; TIMSS and PIRLS, 2015; TIMSS and PIRLS, 2016)

Another example - In 2018, Saudi Arabia participated for the first time in the OECD's education test, known as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and yet again, Saudi Arabia's outcome was lower than the OECD average:

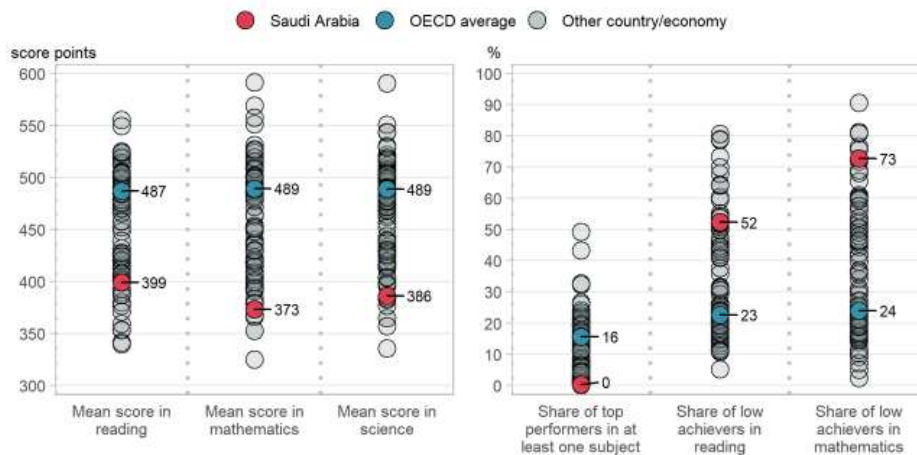


Figure 8: A snapshot of Saudi Arabia's performance

Source: PISA 2018 Database (OECD, 2018b)

The analysis of PISA results has highlighted that high-grade quality ECE leads to more successful results in the future. It has been argued that the advantages mostly rely on the standards of ECE services and if quality lacks attention the desired outcomes for students and long- term benefits will not be achieved (OECD, 2018; Shuey and Kankaraš, 2018). For example, the study carried by British Effective Provision of Preschool (EPPE) identified that long-lasting benefits continued for the children who attended good quality preschools as compared to the ones who came from underprivileged backgrounds (Sylva et al.,2011). Given this, many countries have increased the focus and attention to ECE services, and this has remarkably boosted their enrolment rates and performance in global assessments, respectively (OECD,2010). Additionally, the age of entry is another crucial factor, which is evident from the Figure below, that shows how the age of entry is related to intellectual growth. The outcomes consolidate that children who begin their education journey at 3-years old produce much better results than the ones starting at the age of 5 -6 years.

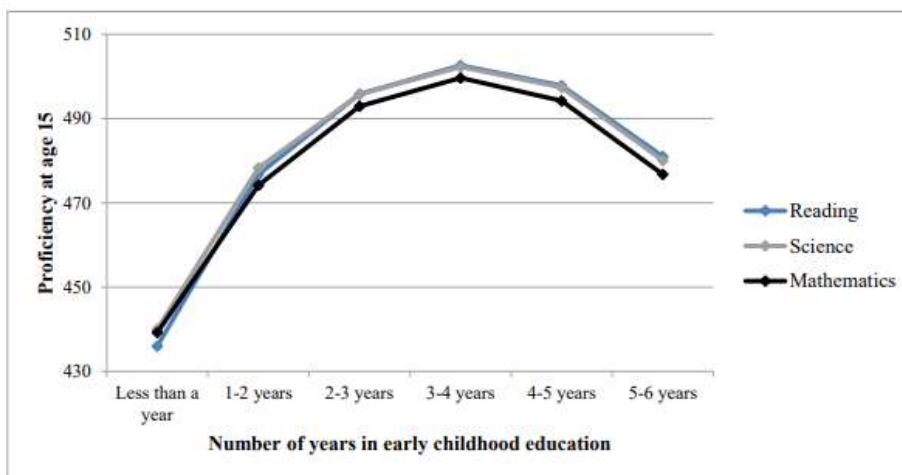


Figure 9: Link between time spent in the participation of ECE and proficiency at age 15
Source: PISA 2015 Database (OECD, 2015)

Figure 10 below shows that funding and management of ECE also has an impact on the students' proficiency. For example, children coming from publicly run preschools score relatively lower than the privately managed ones. This fact reflects that the private sector has a better and efficient ECE system as compared to the publicly run systems and mostly children from privileged backgrounds enrol in private schools (Balladares and Kankaraš, 2020).

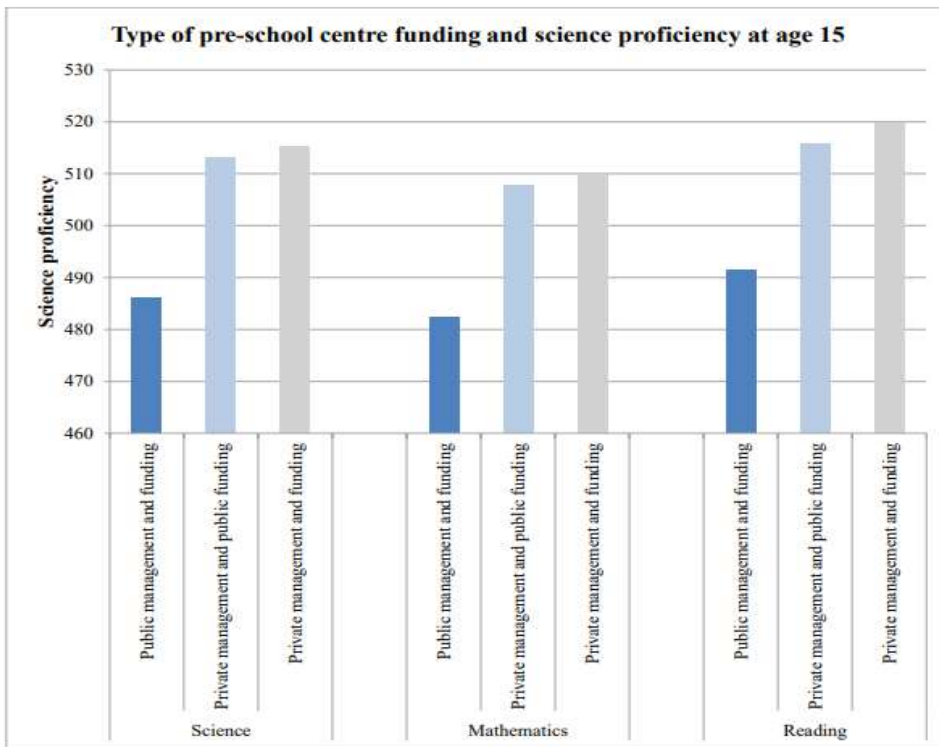


Figure 10: Differences in the type of funding, science proficiency and their ECE schools
Source: PISA 2015 Database (OECD, 2015)

In addition, Figure 11 below claims that proficiency results also depend on the supervision of a trained and qualified educator in an ECE setting. Results below point out that students scored higher points that were managed by trained staff. Moreover, it reemphasises the point made earlier that quality programmes administered by trained educators produce better results than the ones supervised by untrained staff.

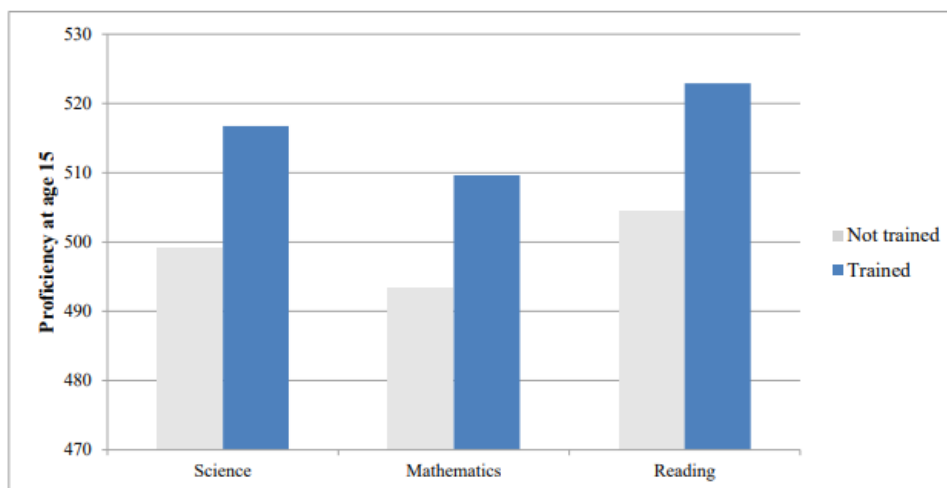


Figure 11: Differences in proficiency scores based on staff training
Source: PISA 2015 Database (OECD,2015)

The Saudi government has acknowledged the weakness of its education system through the global assessment results. Based on these facts, the Minister of Education in Saudi Arabia declared amending their current education system and restructuring it from preschool. Consequently, they have liaised with OECD to define strategies to strengthen the planning and execution of education refinement in Saudi Arabia (Oxford Business Group, 2019).

To counter these issues, countries are offering free ECE services to specific age groups before compulsory school begins to ensure that children spend a specific duration of participation in these programmes (OECD,2013). In light of this, an alternative policy option for Saudi Arabia could be the extension of the time spent in ECE by moving down the age of compulsory education. It has been noted from an equity point of view, it is a successful option, as it facilitates the reduction of inequalities that tend to rise when school is not mandatory (OECD,2013).

CONCLUSION

On the analysis of the review of the education systems both in the UK and Saudi Arabia and insights from OECD suggest that the education policies in the UK could guide supervisors to make beneficial choices and take decisions for the refinement of their ECE services to minimise the identified gaps. OECD (2011) claims that a child's intellectual growth and independence is resiliently determined by the type of early education he/she is subjected to. Therefore, it seems evident from this report that the literacy rate at age 15 directly connects with the participation opportunities in preschool, the quality of the preschool setup and the time spent in preschool education. Furthermore, the inference of OCED suggests that amplified access to high-quality, independent and interactive preschool learning could reduce the social disparities among young children: enabling them to attain their full cognitive potential during teenage years. A growing young mind fine-tuned and astute understanding of the undertakings of the world could benefit the economic and social status of the nation inevitably.

Moreover, the evidence shown in this report gives reliance on the speculations presented by my research query. I hope that as Saudi Arabia has already set objectives to modify its education system for ECE, they pay attention to the outcomes put forward by OECD based on their agreement with them and react with a more robust sturdy policy now. Additionally, Saudi Arabia should consider using UK's ECE education policies and framework to enrich its policy analysis and not as a source of rapid solutions. It should enlighten an investigation to improve their current policies based on their needs, governmental goals, state of affairs and culture. It is an excellent model to recognise different options for their policies, considering variables to predict impacts and issues that may arise (Raffe,2011). Thus, comparative analysis amongst UK and Saudi has rendered useful insights to remedy the drawbacks of the Saudi Arabian ECE policies to benefit children to attain first-rate overall education and increase ECE enrolment rate.

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