Early Child Development and Care

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gecd20

The type of curriculum activities implemented in Jordanian preschools

Jamal Ahmad\textsuperscript{a}, Merfat Fayez\textsuperscript{a} & Eman Khleif Al-Zboon\textsuperscript{a}
\textsuperscript{a} Queen Rania Faculty for Early Childhood, The Hashemite University, PO Box 330055, Zarqa 13115, Jordan

Published online: 20 Nov 2014.

To cite this article: Jamal Ahmad, Merfat Fayez & Eman Khleif Al-Zboon (2014): The type of curriculum activities implemented in Jordanian preschools, Early Child Development and Care, DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2014.958482

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2014.958482

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
The type of curriculum activities implemented in Jordanian preschools

Jamal Ahmad*, Merfat Fayez and Eman Khleif Al-Zboon

Queen Rania Faculty for Early Childhood, The Hashemite University, PO Box 330055, Zarqa 13115, Jordan

(Received 5 July 2014; accepted 22 August 2014)

This study aimed to ascertain the nature of curriculum activities in Jordanian preschools. Fifteen preschools participated in the study. Data were collected by observing the children in their daily routines, as well as analysing their writings and drawings. Data were translated from Arabic to English before analysing it. Four main categories were identified from the data analysis process: academic learning experiences; daily routine; types of activities; children’s artefacts. Analyses revealed that preschool emphasised academic experiences rather than non-academic experiences, such as play time. Teachers focused on instructing children on the basics of reading, writing and math in addition to Islamic education. They considered the academic experiences most important for preparing children for success in school. Moreover, analysing the children’s samples of writings and drawings, results revealed that most of the children’s works was drawing. Writing was predominately in Arabic; however, children did use both languages simultaneously in their drawings and writings. The findings of this study can contribute to the existing literature about what curriculum activities exist in Jordanian preschools and add to the much needed early childhood research in Jordan.

Keywords: curriculum activities; children and learning experiences; early experiences of children; school readiness; preschool; Jordan

Definition of terms

Curriculum activities: academic learning experiences that help participating children learn and develop skills. These include writing, drawing, free play, and structured play.

Learning experiences: encompass all encounters in which children acquire new knowledge and develop skills in academic, social, and emotional realms.

Preschools in Jordan: formal scholastic instruction occurring at a designated location for children with ages ranging from three years eight months to five years eight months.

Academic experiences: encounters in which children acquire new knowledge and develop skills in traditional scholastic subject matters, for example, mathematics, literacy, science, Islam.

Learning environment: the place where learning occurs, the materials and support offered by teachers to enhance children’s learning.

*Corresponding author. Email: jamalf@hu.edu.jo

© 2014 Taylor & Francis
Daily routine: a consistent itinerary of planned activities for preschool children created by teachers and administrators.

Nature of Academic learning experience: what skills teachers emphasise in each subject, that is, for Mathematics, how to count, how to write numbers in Arabic and English. For Language, how to recognise letters and the sounds, how to write the letters in Arabic and English.

Learning activity: an exercise that helps children develop skills and knowledge, for example, writing letters, counting numbers.

Introduction

Researchers have already established that children acquire basic learning skills well before they enter school, and that the level of the basic skills is most largely determined by the children’s environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Piaget, 1970b; Rogoff, 1990; Saville-Troike, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986). Researchers have also found that the ease with which school-aged children acquire problem-solving skills, self-motivation, and social skills is partly determined by the child’s past experiences (Fabian, 2000; Margetts, 2009). Moreover, cognitive development may be hampered by the lack of early learning experiences (Hunt, 1961).

The basic skills children acquire before beginning school have long-term influence on the level of performance once the children are in the classroom (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2007) and researches from many countries have recognised the critical importance of learning during the preschool age (Broström & Wagner, 2003; Einarsdottir, 2011; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002).

Because of the importance of learning at this early stage, structured teaching environments have been established to provide children with the opportunity to acquire basic learning skills before entering the traditional school setting (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2012). The structured teaching environment, or preschool, has been found to influence how a child later performs both academically and socially (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Children who attend structured preschool classes have been found to perform better in kindergarten than children who do not attend preschool (e.g. NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000). Preschool readiness for the demands of school (Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Yangin, 2009). This is because children who attended preschool acquire higher cognitive skills than children who did not attend preschool (Barnett, 1995; Bassok, 2010; Currie, 2001). The children who do not attend preschool are then in the challenging position of trying to catch up with their peers (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993).

The positive influence of preschool has been found to extend beyond kindergarten (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994). Research has shown that the ease with which children transition into a formal school environment is a predictor of their academic performance throughout formal schooling years (Gormley, 2005; Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007; Lilles et al., 2009; Lonigan, 2006). This is because preschool prepares children for the demands of a structured and formal learning environment (Erkan & Kirca, 2010). These children earn higher grades and maintain a more positive attitude about attending school (Ladd, 1990). They are able to more quickly learn complex skills (Bowman, Donovan, Burns, & the Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy of the National Research Council, 2000).

One of these complex skills is literacy. A child’s literacy skills at the initial stages of learning serve as a predictor of performance throughout the child’s continued language
development (Bowman et al., 2000; Lonigan, 2006). Research has shown that children who attended preschool and kindergarten perform better in first-grade language courses than children who did not attend early education classes (Beller, 1983). Conversely, a child lacking essential literacy skills does not perform as well in school (Good, Simmons, & Smith, 1998). A child struggling to read may view it as an undesirable task to be avoided, thus further limiting the child’s literacy skill acquisition (Lonigan, 2006). This negative cycle is harder to reverse as the child ages (Entwisle & Alexander, 1999). Because of this, the preschool age is considered that much more critical for laying the foundation of positive learning experiences and essential literacy skills (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). What the child experiences from the very beginning holds tremendous influence on the person they become in the future (Fabian, 2000; Hunt, 1961; Margetts, 2009; Oktay, 2007; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2012).

The role of preschool

Preschool serves many functions. It touches on all aspects of a child’s development: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive (Morrison, 2011; Winter & Kelley, 2008). There is a massive body of research pointing to the positive influence (Blakemore & Frith, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sylva & Pugh, 2005). It readies the child for the forthcoming years spent in formal schooling (Farran, 2011), and sets the scene for how a child will develop (Oktay, 2007). The environment of a preschool stimulates the child physically and psychologically (Awoniyi, 1982; Fafunwa, 1967; Hunt, 1961; Wheeler, 1980).

Preschool gives children the first impression that school is fun and learning is enjoyable. It reinforces a positive attitude towards the hard work that is involved with learning new knowledge and mastering new skills (Lamy, 2013). These skills cover all areas, including language, mathematics, science, and social interaction (Sylva et al., 2006). It teaches children independence, respect for rules, and what behaviours are acceptable when interacting with both the teacher and peers (Margetts, 2003a). Problem-solving skills, social adjustment, and family interactions are also noted as improved by preschool attendance (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; UNESCO, 2007).

Preschool helps the child to transition to kindergarten as well as to adjust to the increased structure of first grade and beyond (Aboud & Hossain, 2011; Okon & Wilgocka-Okon, 1973; Wolf & Kessler, 1987). It has been found to have a particular positive benefit for children from low-income families as well (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004).

In addition to benefitting the child, preschool improves a school system as a whole. Kindergartners are better prepared for the classroom environment. Educators spend less time concerned with special services and disciplinary actions, and more concerned with how to provide their students with engaging and rewarding lessons. The school system can use funds towards activities that enrich learning experiences, rather than spending the money for remedial programmes for children whose performance is lagging (Reynolds, Magnuson, & Ou, 2009; Sadowski, 2006).

Not all preschools are created equal, however. The quality of a preschool experience also determines how successfully a child will transition to school (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Schweinhart, Weikart, & Larner, 1986). The physical environment in which a child learns affects their development (Niikko & Havu-Nuutinen, 2009).

With quality and effectiveness in mind, preschool formats have shifted from experience and play-based to an academic model (Hatcher, Nun, & Paulsel, 2012).
Increasingly, children entering kindergarten are expected to be familiar with fundamental letter and sound recognition and the basics of literacy (Goldstein, 2007).

**Jordanian education**

Jordan’s approach to education is shaped by the Jordanian constitution and implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE) (International Bureau of Education, 2010/11). The education system is divided into Preschool, Basic, Secondary, and Higher. Preschool education in Jordan includes children from ages three years eight months to five years eight months. Preschool is non-compulsory and offered by both private organisations and the state. Compulsory education begins at age 6. Tests are conducted from grades 8 to 10 in order to identify the type of secondary education for which a child can qualify. Secondary education is free and non-compulsory. Secondary education is divided into comprehensive or applied. Comprehensive secondary education encompasses traditional academic subjects such as science, language and literacy, and Islamic law, as well as vocational subjects such as industry, agriculture, hospitality, and home economics. Applied secondary education includes skilled labour pursuits and involves an apprenticeship. Higher education is also divided into two levels: two- or three-year programmes or four- to five-year bachelor programmes. Further study achieves Master’s and Doctorate degrees (International Bureau of Education, 2010/11).

In Jordan, preschool education for children ages three years eight months to five years eight months is designed to lay the basic foundation of knowledge and skills needed for entering basic education at age 6. It is also meant to foster the development of social relationships, and a positive attitude towards school. Preschool attendance is not required. Although primarily run by private institutions, in 1994, the MOE set up its own preschool sub-section to monitor the availability of preschools and encourage the development of preschools throughout the country. In 2000, the ministry set up its own preschool for girls and has since established over 1000 government-run preschools. The government-run preschools are free, while private preschools are not. The government-run preschools set out key categories—spirituality/religion, psychology, nationalism, social skills, physical-motor skills, cognitive development—by which to measure the children’s growth (UNICEF, 2009).

**Method**

While there is a great body of research supporting the positive influence of preschool in general, there is little research that focuses on describing preschool education in Jordan. This study has the potential to add to the much-needed early childhood research in Jordan by adding to the existing literature of preschools. It can specifically provide information to Jordanian educators and policy-makers about the learning experiences of children in Jordanian preschools. It will enable them to make more informed decisions about policy development or changes in the school system and what programmes may best benefit child learning.

The study is meant to identify the types of curriculum activities implemented in Jordanian preschools. Collecting samples of the children’s writing and drawings serves as a reflection of what those activities are and how effective they are in teaching children. The writings and drawings show what the children have practised and what skills they have developed while in preschool.

*This was accomplished by asking the following questions:*
(1) What types of academic learning experiences do Al-Zarqa preschools provide?
(2) How much time is allotted for each learning activity?
(3) What is the daily routine of activities in which children partake in Al-Zarqa preschools?
(4) What types of activities (e.g. writing, drawing, building, playing outdoors) do the children engage in?

Research method
A qualitative research methodology was used in the study to describe the type of curriculum activities used in Jordanian preschools. This methodology allowed observation of the preschool environment and close analysis of the daily activities of the preschool children in attendance.

Participants
The population of the study consists of all 128 private preschools in the city of Al-Zarqa. Using the simple random method, 562 four- and 5-year-old children in 15 preschools were selected from the population for this study. To achieve this, the name of each preschool was written on a piece of paper and the researcher and 2 assistants selected 10 preschools. More preschools than needed were chosen to ensure a broader sample selection in the event that any of the principals of the preschool refused to participate in the study. Then the preschools were assigned numbers from 1 to 30. The researcher called the principals in these preschools in numerical order and explained to them briefly the purpose of the study and asked them if they were willing to participate. The first 15 principals out of 30 who agreed to participate were selected.

Selecting only 15 preschools was beneficial because it allowed the researcher the opportunity to study the school setting in depth. The researcher could visit each preschool multiple times and spend more time observing and becoming familiar with the teachers, children, and environment in each school. This is in accordance with the recommendations of Creswell (2007).

Data collection methods
Two assistant researchers collected the data from the 15 preschools. They met with the principals to explain the study and procedures, observed the daily routine in the classrooms, and collected samples of the children’s writings and drawings. The researchers observed whatever activity happened to be occurring at the time, and did not wait for a specific exercise or activity to occur.

Study procedures
The principals in the 15 preschools were asked to allow the two assistant researchers to visit their schools for a series of six visits. Each visit lasted approximately 2–3 hours. The purpose of the study was explained to the principal and the teacher and they both signed consent forms. The principals were told that all documents would be stored safely and would only be viewed by the researcher and the two research assistants.

Additionally, the assistant researchers asked the teachers to provide them with several of their children’s artefacts – drawings and writings – and worksheets. The
assistant researchers made a copy of these samples and the originals were returned to
the children. The assistant researchers also requested a copy of the teacher’s daily sche-
dule or lesson plan.

Data analysis

The data were codified according to specific categories. Four main categories were
identified from the data analysis process.

The first category was Academic Learning Experiences. Under this category,
three sub-categories were identified: (1) the type of academic experiences, for
example, written text in Arabic or English, Numbers, Science, (2) the nature of
each learning experience, and (3) the time assigned for each experience in the
daily schedule.

The second category was daily routine, or the set of activities repeated every day.

The third category was types of activities, which included drawing, writing,
playing, singing, field trips, celebrations, meal/snack times, and so on.

The fourth category was Children’s Artefacts. Sub-categories were identified as:
drawing only; drawing with written text in Arabic; drawing with written text in
English; drawing with written text in Arabic and English; drawing with numbers in
Arabic; drawing with numbers in English.

Credibility of the analysis

According to Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, and Marteau (1997), and Creswell
(2007), coding themes using the intercoder agreement controls the subjective nature
of interpretation. To ensure credibility of analysis, the researcher and research assistants
independently read and coded the data. This helped to identify the main categories and
then make modifications in accordance with discussions of the data.

Research findings

The research findings were categorised as academic learning experiences (including
types of academic learning experiences, time assigned for each experience, and
nature of the experience), daily routine, types of activities, and children’s artefacts.

Academic learning experiences

Type of academic learning experiences

The types of academic learning experiences varied slightly among the 15 pre-
schools. The (Table 1 illustrates that all preschools teach the children Arabic,
math, and Islamic religion. Only some schools include science and English as
well (Table 1).

Time assigned for each academic experience

Examining the daily schedule in each preschool revealed that the time allotted for each
experience varied among the preschools. Below, a table shows the time (in minutes)
assigned for each experience in each preschool (Table 2).
Results show that overall, academic experiences took 70% of the day. Of that, the most time, 21%, was devoted to teaching Arabic, while the least time, only 10%, was devoted to teaching science.

The nature of academic learning experiences
Examinining the nature of academic learning experiences, results revealed that almost all preschools are similar in their approach to teaching Arabic. The teachers teach the name, sound, and look of each letter as well as how to read and write the letters and some small words. They teach Arabic by writing the letter on a chalkboard, using flashcards, and singing songs. The teachers also provide worksheets for the children to practise

Table 1. The types of academic learning experiences occurring in each preschool.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Math A&amp;E</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Islamic Edu.</th>
<th>Pre.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Pre.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Pre.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A&amp;E</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islamic Edu.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Pre.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre: preschool; A: Arabic; E: English; Edu.: Education

Table 2. The daily schedule and the time allotted in minutes for each academic learning experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Academic learning experiences</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Islamic Edu.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>205</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
writing and identifying the letters. In preschools where English is taught, the teachers show the upper and lower cases, the meanings of some words, and how to read and write the letters.

The teachers show the children how to count in Arabic, identify Arabic numbers, the addition and subtraction symbols, and shapes in both Arabic and English. Some preschools also teach children how to count, read, write, add, and subtract in English as well.

For Islamic religion education, teachers taught children to memorise short verses from the Quran. The teachers would also explain what these verses mean. The teachers would explain the five pillars of Islam, and the importance of cooperation, respect for family, friends, and neighbours. The children learned prayers for the morning, before eating meals, and before leaving school for the day.

Preschools that taught science included lessons on nature, geography, astronomy, and the seasons. The children were shown pictures and told stories on these subjects.

The table below summarises the nature of the six basic academic learning experiences (Table 3).

The daily routine
Assistant researchers gathered information about the daily routine in the preschools by observing and recording what activities took place in what order and for how long. Examining the daily routine in these preschools, results revealed that the schools share commonalities. For example, all teachers read short Quran verses, the children perform morning exercises, the class prays, and the children sing songs. Many preschools call the morning activities the ‘morning circle’. The children eat breakfast and play freely.

Only one preschool has a different daily routine in which the children go into the video room to watch a film with songs, a cartoon, or stories about animals. In another school, the children sing the national anthem every morning.

The types of activities, including teacher-led activities and free play
The research assistants gathered information about the types of activities by observation, and by asking the teachers what activities were planned for the day. Results

Table 3. The nature (i.e. skill sets taught) of academic learning experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The nature of the experiences</th>
<th>Types of academic experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning the sound, name, and look of a letter, how to read and write letters, how to spell and read words. Worksheets, clay, paint, scissor cut-outs used</td>
<td>Arabian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning the sound, name, and look of a letter in upper and lower case, how to read and write letters, how to spell and read words</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to count, read, write numbers, add and subtract, shapes. Sand and clay used</td>
<td>Math in Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to count, read, write numbers, add and subtract. Paint, clay, cutting and pasting used</td>
<td>Math in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to memorise Quran verses and prayers, learning the five pillars of Islam and the values of cooperation and respect</td>
<td>Islamic education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning basic phenomenon in nature, astronomy, colours, metals, geography</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
revealed that, on average, 16% of the day was devoted to teacher-guided activities, while 14% of the day was allotted for free play. In all preschools, the children engage in activities of drawing, sculpting with clay, painting, building with legos, and cutting and pasting. They are also allowed outdoors to play with balls, sand, and water. They have foot races, blow balloons, and play freely. Field trips to mosques, parks, or other schools are also common.

The most common activity observed in all preschools was drawing. Drawing was done more frequently than other activities. As such, drawing served as the most common opportunity for children to express what they knew and the skills they possessed. The drawings themselves were easy to obtain and review by the researchers. They were concrete evidence of the child's stage of development. For these reasons, this study focused on the character of the drawings and writings of the children as opposed to any other activity.

**Sample of the children's artefacts (writings and drawings)**

The samples collected from the children’s works varied. The table below shows the types and frequency of children’s artefacts, which includes writing and drawing, among the schools.

As shown in Table 4, 52% of the children’s works surveyed were of drawing only. This may be because children are more confident in their knowledge of how to make shapes than how to draw letters. For the drawing with text, it was notable that 21% wrote in Arabic, 7% wrote in English, and 10% used both. For the drawings with numbers, 8% used Arabic and 2% used English. The higher frequency of Arabic writing in letters and numbers is likely a reflection of the fact that Arabic is the native language and more time is devoted to teaching Arabic than English.

Examining the artefacts of drawings only revealed images of the sun, boys, girls, house, and modes of transportation, animals, trees, grass, clouds, children, father, mother, butterfly, heart, school, aeroplane, and happy faces. These images were mixed in combinations on the paper. For example, one child drew a house, with a sun above it, a flower beside it, and two boys, a car, and a tree. Another child drew a large red heart and small hearts around it along with a girl with a yellow crown, the sun, a house, and a butterfly. Another drawing showed a house, pool, two fish inside the pool, flowers, ducks, a tree, a red sun, and green clouds. In another one, a girl has a red skirt, small car, flowers, yellow sun, mountains, and three different coloured fish.

In the category of drawings with Arabic texts, most were pictures of a girl or boy with a mother or father and their names along with trees and houses. One child drew an airplane and wrote the first letter of the word for airplane in Arabic, the letter ﻣ (tah). Similarly, another drawing featured corn and the first letter of corn in Arabic, the letter ﻣ (the). A common theme was to draw a boy or girl and the name of the person it was supposed to represent beneath it. There was a drawing that a child did of himself and wrote his name beneath it. There were drawings of animals with the name of the animal below as well. It was notable that when drawing and writing were mixed, the majority of the writing was done in Arabic.

Like the drawings that included Arabic text, the drawings that included English text had the same images and themes. Children drew boys and girls, houses, trees, the sun, and the first letter, either in upper case or lower case, of these images. Children would write their name using a mix of upper and lower case letters, but not in a straight line.
For example, one child drew a tree, and wrote a capital ‘T’. When children wrote in English, they concentrated on writing letters, not their full names, as they did in the Arabic samples.

Examining the drawing with texts in Arabic and English, results showed that children tended to write their name in both English and Arabic. For instance, one child drew a house and flowers and wrote her name in English in all capital letters, and then again in Arabic. Another child drew a red and yellow apple, wrote his name in Arabic and English, but in the wrong order and spaced out. Another child drew a yellow car, his name above in Arabic and below that the last two letters of his name in Arabic, and two random letters in English. Another child drew the school with a flag on top, sun, stars, clouds, SpongeBob, a stop sign, and wrote ‘stop’ in English and his name in Arabic. In another example, a child drew the sun, clouds, and a tree and four boys playing outside with ropes. She wrote her name in Arabic and in English, capitalising her name in English. Another child drew the sun and a girl and wrote 19 capital letters in English, reversing the L, and 12 letters in Arabic without any mistakes.

Examining the drawings with numbers only in Arabic and English, it was notable that only four children drew pictures and wrote numbers in English. For instance, one child drew flowers and mountains and at the top wrote numbers 1–10 in English. Numbers 5 and 6 were reversed.

Another child drew a picture of a house, fish, and grass. He coloured the grass and the fish in grey and the house in grey and green. He wrote the numbers 1–20 in English, but started from the right and progressed to the left. He missed number 12 and wrote 17–19 in Arabic. He wrote 20 as 02. In another example, a girl drew a picture of a girl and under the picture she wrote the numbers 1, 7, and 3 correctly. Another child drew a picture of a heart with no colours and wrote numbers from 1 to 10 correctly.

Examining the children’s drawing with numbers only in Arabic, it was notable that only 21 children did so. One child drew a red hand and in each finger she correctly wrote numbers 1–5 in the fingers. Another child drew two girls and one flower and under the pictures she wrote 1, 1, 2, and 6. Another child drew a green and red house surrounded by blue, green, and red flowers and wrote the numbers 2, 3, 4, 4. Another example is that a child drew two flowers and the sun and wrote numbers from 1 to 7, but missed writing number 6. Another child used a pencil to draw nine apples, four sun, three flowers, two clouds, and one picture of a man, then he wrote the corresponding number under each set. In most cases, the children wrote the numbers with disproportionate spaces between them, or with numbers reading left to right instead of right to left.

Table 4. The types and numbers of children’s artefacts of the 15 preschools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drawing with numbers only in English</th>
<th>Drawing with numbers only in Arabic</th>
<th>Drawing with texts in Arabic and English (letters \ words)</th>
<th>Drawing with text in English (letters \ words)</th>
<th>Drawing with text in Arabic (letters \ words)</th>
<th>Drawing only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the types of Jordanian preschool curriculum activities. This was accomplished by observing their daily routine at the school, as well as studying the daily schedule, and children’s artefacts of writings and drawings.

Results revealed that preschools emphasise academic experiences such as teaching children skills for reading and writing letters and some words in Arabic and English, as well as counting, and basic tenants of Islam, and do not focus as much on play time.

The literacy practices in these preschools align with what other research has found to be most beneficial for children in order to have future success in school (Bowman et al., 2000; Farran, 2011; Goldstein, 2007; Lonigan, 2006; West, Germino-Hausken, & Collins, 1993). Research shows that children who do not know the basics of reading and writing before entering school will struggle (Good et al., 1998). The ability to identify letters early on has been linked to proficient reading skills as the child progresses through school. Specifically, it improves the child’s reading and writing (Yangin, 2009). Conversely, children who do not have a preschool experience prior to entering school tend to struggle (Jeon et al., 2010).

The question is raised as to why preschools spend time engaging children in these types of traditionally academic curriculum activities. It may be that the administrators believe the academic experiences best prepare children for future success in school. It could also be a marketing tool to convince parents to enrol their children in the school, promoting to parents the idea that if their children attend, then their children will perform better when they enter the traditional school system. A school may be deemed higher quality because it focuses on basics that may help a child perform in school, whereas playing freely without a structured lesson plan does not have the same benefit. Another reason may be a lack of space or money. None of the preschools visited was originally built as a preschool and thus is not large enough to accommodate many play activities. There may be a lack of funds to purchase toys or playground equipment, whereas an academic approach only requires small room and a white board.

Examining the types of academic learning experiences in these preschools, result revealed that all preschools teach Arabic, Islamic education and math. Probably, preschools and parents considered these academic experiences as the most important experiences children should learn. Arabic is the native language of Jordan, so the children need it to communicate with others on a daily basis. Arabic is also important for learning the Quran.

In the majority of Arabic countries, Islam is the main religion. Therefore, it is apparent that Muslim parents would prefer preschools where Islamic beliefs and values are taught (Abu-Laban, 1989 & Ajrouch, 1999).

Like literacy, math is a fundamental skill that children will need for the rest of their lives, so this too would be a preferred academic learning experience for children.

When examining the time devoted to each learning experience as reflected in the daily schedule, it is notable that the majority of time in the day was devoted to academic experiences. It may be that the daily schedule was written this way to serve as concrete proof for parents that their children are receiving exposure to literacy, math, and religion. Conversely, if the daily schedule did not include these items, it may lead parents to believe that the school does not teach these skills and cannot benefit their children.

Within the academic experience time, children spent the most time learning Arabic and the least time learning scientific concepts. It could be that preschools and the parents consider Arabic literacy the first step in the child learning.
Scrutiny of the nature of each academic learning experience revealed that most of the preschools teach both the Arabic and English alphabets. The reading and writing of an alphabet are what researchers have established as fundamental for literacy (Bowman et al., 2000; Goldstein, 2007; Lonigan, 2006). Most schools also teach the same basic math concepts – counting, reading, and writing numbers, and addition and subtraction symbols. The reason for a focus on basic math concepts is likely the same reason as the focus on teaching the alphabet – these are fundamental skills needed for success in school.

While most schools have an academic approach, results show that all preschools teach children Islamic religious values. Children memorise prayers and verses from the Quran and are taught the meaning of the verses. Teachers also give lessons on Islamic values. It could be that Islamic religion is taught because parents believe that it will build the character of their children and ensure good behaviour.

Unlike Islam, which is taught in all preschools, scientific concepts are taught in only some preschools. It may be that scientific themes are added to the curriculum to differentiate a school and make it appear more attractive for a parent considering several different preschool options.

Academic basics of literacy, math, and science are important and deciding how much time to devote to each discipline requires careful consideration of which skills will best serve the child when they enter school. On the other hand, the role of preschool is also to introduce the child to the learning environment in a positive way, so that the child will feel like learning is enjoyable. It is a place to meet peers and have time to play freely as well as learn new things (Lamy, 2013). In this way, the preschool develops the child both cognitively and socially. A holistic approach ensures that the child is best prepared for the academic demands of the traditional school environment (Blakemore & Frith, 2005; Halle, Hair, Wandner, & Chien, 2012; McTurk, Lea, Robinson, Nutton, & Carapetis, 2011; Morrison, 2011; Oktay, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sylva & Pugh, 2005; Winter & Kelley, 2008). A holistic approach stresses literacy, math, as well as social skills such as independence, respect, problem solving, and social interaction (Margetts, 2003a; Sylva et al., 2004; UNESCO, 2007).

Most preschools in the study approach the day in a similar fashion. Most schools have a ‘morning circle’ where teachers read short verses from the Quran, and the children sing songs and perform exercises. In all schools, there is a designated time to eat a lunch brought from home.

While a lot of time is devoted to academic lessons, only 14% of time is allotted for play. It is notable that there are very few toys and materials available for play. As mentioned earlier, this may be due to lack of physical space within the preschool itself. Many buildings in which preschools operate were not originally built to be used as a preschool. It may also be that parents do not want to enrol their child in a preschool where play dominates the daily schedule because they feel that academic experiences are more important than play time. Preschools have developed their daily schedules in response to what parents prefer because this ensures higher enrolment numbers and the school makes a higher profit.

The majority of the children’s artefacts were drawing only (52%). One possible explanation may be that there are less materials in the classrooms and it is less costly for the preschools to allow just enough materials for the children to draw. In instances where the children wrote as well as drew, the children most often used both Arabic and English letters on the same paper. The reason for this could be because the children do not recognise the difference between the two languages.
Children drew and wrote in Arabic in 21% of the samples, but only 7% of them drew and wrote in English. This is not surprising, given that the preschools and the children attending them are in a country where Arabic is the native language. Arabic is more frequently heard and seen outside the preschool so the children may be already comfortable with the sound and look of the Arabic alphabet. Moreover, the preschool devotes more time to teaching children Arabic letters than English letters. It appears that English was only used to write the child’s name or because the teacher required the children to draw after a lesson in English.

Similarly, in artefacts where children drew and wrote numbers, the majority were Arabic numbers. The children used Arabic numbers in 8% of the samples and English numbers in 2%. As discussed with English letters, it is likely that Arabic is used more often because the preschool spends the most time teaching Arabic. Moreover, children are more exposed to Arabic numbers in their daily lives. Therefore, they are more predisposed to remembering how to write Arabic numbers.

In sum, the sample works were age-appropriate and demonstrated that the children were in the initial stages of literacy skill development. The children were proactively practising their letters and numbers in both languages, reflecting their acquisition of new knowledge (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Conclusion
Examining the type of academic learning experiences, the daily schedule, the children’s sample works, and the daily routine of 15 preschools in the city of Al-Zarqa, Jordan, results revealed that the preschools predominantly focus on academic learning. More time is devoted to academic activities rather than to play activities. The academic learning is centred around learning the Arabic and English alphabets and numbers, how to read and write them and recognise their sounds. The goal of the preschools is to prepare the children for entering school.

While a focus on academics at the preschool level has been proved to effectively prepare children for school, a holistic approach has also been proved to be beneficial. Play activities can also prepare children to cope with the social, emotional, and physical demands of attending school (Butler, Gotts, & Quisenberry, 1978; Cass, 1971; Herron, & Sutton-Smith, 1971; Jenkinson, 2001; Weininger, 1979), and to that end, the preschools should consider more diverse activities that engage and challenge children in these ways. The point of preschool is to lay the groundwork for a positive school experience, so that children look forward to attending school and learning. Moreover, preschool sets the tone for how fun and interesting learning can be for learning’s sake and not just to pass a school examination (Kay, 2010).

The research conducted in this instance hopefully serves as a starting point for further studies on the type of curriculum activities available in Jordanian preschools. Most importantly, it can be used as evidence for educators when making decisions on what programmes or curriculum activities best serve preschool children, both for learning in school and beyond.

Limitations of the study
The study was limited to 15 preschools in the city of Al-Zarqa, Jordan, and may not be representative of all preschools in Al-Zarqa. Therefore, the results may not be generalised to other preschools in other cities in Jordan. Future research could add to the
sample size to observe the other preschools in Al-Zarqa, as well as other cities in Jordan in order to compare school and regional differences. The study was also limited by the time in which the data were collected.

**Funding**

This research was funded by the Deanship of Scientific Research and Graduate Studies at the Hashemite University, Jordan.

**Notes on contributors**

Jamal Ahmad is an assistant professor in the department of child education at the Hashemite University, Jordan. He earned his Ph.D. in Elementary and Early Childhood Education from the University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio, USA, in 2011. His research interests include school readiness, literacy development in the early years, the influence of immigration and culture on early childhood education, children’s rights and current issues in early childhood education. E-mail: JamalF@hu.edu.jo

Merfat Fayez is an associate professor in the department of child education at the Hashemite University, Jordan. She earned her Ph.D. in early childhood education from the State University of New York at Buffalo, USA, in 2007. Her research interests are focused on the professional development of pre-and in-service early childhood teachers, child abuse, parent and community involvement, and children’s readiness. E-mail: mfayez@hu.edu.jo

Eman Khleif Al-Zboon is an assistant professor at Queen Rania Faculty for Childhood. She received her Ph.D. in Special Education from the University of Jordan in 2012. Her research interests focus on children, women with disabilities, and current trends in special education. E-mail: EmanK@hu.edu.jo

**References**


