PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF GOVERNMENT & PRIVATE

KINDERGARTEN SYSTEMS IN KUWAIT

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Abstract

This comparative study was carried out between the government and private kindergarten (KG) sectors in Kuwait. The aim of this study is to develop government KGs in light of parents' needs by discovering their preference between the two sectors and the reasons behind their choice in terms of their satisfaction with different issues in the KG system. Additionally, teachers' views will be pointed out to examine issues related to parents' choice. The literature review assisted this study in identifying official evidence and statistics from the Kuwait Ministry of Education. A mixed approach was used, via a questionnaire, to collect data from parents and teachers in order to fulfill the research objectives. The results of the analysis suggest merits and demerits of both sectors in light of parents' satisfaction and teachers' views.

Keywords: *kindergarten* (KG), *private schools* (PS), *government schools* (GS), *teachers*, *curriculum*.

1. Introduction

This comparative research investigates the quality of the KG stage system in both the government and private sectors in Kuwait in light of parents' satisfaction and teachers' views. The rationale for this study is that it focuses on an important stage, which is 'kindergarten'. The rationality appears in the idea that it is the place in which

children receive their first formal education and exposure to knowledge, and it is a transition from home to school. The concept and name of kindergarten was first created by Friedrich Froebel (Almesad and Alhouli, 2002). Frobel believes that children deserve the best care and attention until they are fully-grown.

Frobel stressed that the appropriate curriculum for children should take into account their instincts and their interest in 'play'. He also believed strongly in learning by playing, "…he saw play as a means by which the child maintains the wholeness of his/her experiences" (Bruce, 2005, p.16), and he considered that the teacher's responsibility is to provide children with guidance and advice so that they can become more productive individuals in society.

1.1 Introduction of KG in Kuwait

At the beginning of the 1950s, Kuwait became one of the few countries in the Arab world to focus on early childhood education, establishing the first two kindergarten schools at Al-Mohalab and Tareq in 1954 (Abdulgafoor, 2004). The Kuwaiti KG system has experienced several changes since the 1950s, and the education provided has since been developed and improved. The Ministry of Education continues to make every effort to offer a better education to Kuwaiti children.

1.2 Government and Private KG Systems in Kuwait

The KGs in Kuwaiti government schools consist of two stages, KG1 and KG2, and the entry age is from four to six years old. The KG system is not compulsory and is free for all Kuwaiti citizens. The classroom consists of two teachers, a class teacher and an assistant teacher, and both should hold a bachelor' degree in the field of

education. Most teachers are specialists in KG education or psychology and social studies. The curriculum in Kuwait is also based on the scheme and philosophies of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which gives children more freedom in the classroom. The curriculum in Kuwait states that KGs should mainly focus on children's play, and be associated with philosophers' and psychologists' theories and studies such as Frobel's theory. It is the general belief that children can learn through play, and by observing different experiences, forming friendships and engaging in activities, which will mostly occur without adult or teacher interaction (Curtis and O'Hagan, 2003; Bruce, 2005). The Ministry of Education has arranged for plenty of time during the school day to provide children with long play periods. Thus, the curriculum seems to be informal because it includes no formal reading or writing activities (see appendix for the KG curriculum content for the state KG).

On the other hand, KGs in the private sector are part of inclusive schools and contain all age groups and classes from KG through to high school. The private sector in Kuwait is divided into Arabic and 'foreign' KGs; a foreign KG is further divided into foreign and foreign-bilingual KGs, which teach Arabic in addition to other languages. Each school system has its own structure, curriculum and policy, depending on the educational system it follows and the originating country. The private schools in Kuwait also consist of various regions and have been established to assist the children of different immigrant families who work in Kuwait (Management of private education in the Ministry of Education, 1989). In these schools, the Kuwaiti government's curriculum does not have to be adopted. Foreign schools are operated in different ways, but the Ministry requires certain obligatory subjects. However, it is not

associated with the KG stage, but rather starts from the primary stage. In addition, the Ministry of Education has power concerning private school tuition fees. However, a number of these schools are adopting a semi-formal curriculum in terms of children's reading and writing in both Arabic and English.

2. The Research Problem and Justification

This research has been stimulated by the author's own experience as a KG teacher in Kuwait for seven years and the insight this provided into the high levels of parental dissatisfaction with the curriculum and the other services being provided. Some parents asked teachers to make more of an effort with regard to teaching their children writing and reading basic Arabic and numeracy. Others argued that they were spending many hours a day during their children's first primary year teaching them how to hold a pen and write.

Although this initial view is a sign of parents' dissatisfaction, the Ministry of Education's statistical data emphasise that there is a clear difference between children from state KGs and private KGs. The Ministry of Education's Department of Private Education in Kuwait (2009) stated that the enrolment of Kuwaiti children in private KGs increased dramatically from 2005 to 2009 (Statistics Department, Kuwait Ministry of Education, 2009). The problem emphasises that even though the government spends a large amount of funds providing good quality KG education, an increasing amount of parents are switching to private sector KGs. Despite the fees at British and American private schools, they show the highest levels of enrolment of Kuwaiti children compared with other systems (see Table 1).

Table 1. Enrolment of Kuwaiti children in English and American schools in 2008-2009

System	Number of Kuwaiti children enrolled in 2008	Number of Kuwaiti children enrolled in 2009
English	2190	2021
American	1410	1479
Other Systems	6768	7215

Source: Kuwait Information Office and Statistics (2009)

This research is based on this statistic. The American schools in Kuwait have adopted the State of New York standards for early literacy, through using science and mathematics as the core modules, whereas the British schools have adopted the UK's national curriculum.

3. Key Research Question

Why are a larger number of parents in Kuwait enrolling their children in private KG schools than ever before? From the key question, some sub-questions were determined:

1. On what basis do parents select a KG school?
2. Is the quality of KG education provided in both sectors satisfactory to parents?
3. Does the quality and development of the teachers satisfy the parents and the teachers themselves?

4. Literature Review

4.1 General International Outlook on the Attitude of the Government and Private Sectors

Education systems around the world are generally considered to be well planned, and an educated populace is regarded as a benefit to society as a whole and is seen to provide all children with educational advantages in order to promote less crime with no doubts as to the "opportunities opened up by education" (UNESCO, 1998, p.19). Most governments regulate their educational systems and are the main providers of schooling. Governments are also expected to offer better equal educational opportunities, quality and outcomes to satisfy everyone. In this regard, governments have found that they are the only institution able to offer this type of education (Colclough, 1996). Governments have also discovered that it might be risky for education to be provided by the private sector, as they might be undersupplied and the market may be open to those simply wanting to earn financial profit from education (ibid).

Research conducted by Tooley and Dixon (2005) has also shown that private schools exist in the most unlikely places, for example, in the slum areas of Asia and Africa. Some parents are willing to pay to send their children to schools when a free government alternative exists. Even when the parents are very poor, some are willing to pay because they believe their children will benefit more from the education offered by private providers. In addition, Lewin (2008) found that the demand for private education is increasing across sub-Saharan Africa, which has been partly caused by increasing parental dissatisfaction with government schooling. Phillipson (2008) suggests that both parental choice and the quality of education are better in private

institutions, and he stresses several differences between government and private schools:

> Teacher absenteeism and low morale; Rigidities of centralised management system. Lack of professional support and in-service training for teachers; Irregular or corrupt inspection services; and political patronage as a factor behind weak school management. (p.19).

In this respect, the World Bank (2004) suggested that in some cases "…governments should give up and leave everything to the private sector" (p.10). The World Bank also found that government policies and service provisions face several limitations and problems within a range of countries. On the other hand, the organisation stated that the private sector has provided evidence that the standard it offers is considerably higher than what the government offers in some countries.

4.2 People's Attitude towards Government and Private Sectors in Kuwait

Turning to Kuwait, Burney and Mohammad (2002) conducted research concerning the efficiency of the public education system in Kuwait, with the following results:

> By international standards, the public education system in Kuwait is found to be relatively inefficient, which has resulted in a high cost per student. (p.285)

Statistics from the Kuwait Ministry of Education (2009) showed the number of Kuwaiti children enrolled in the KG private sector is at its highest level since 2005. According to the Kuwait Ministry of Education's Department of Private Education (2009), the enrolment data for Kuwaiti children in private KGs shows that the number of Kuwaiti children in private KGs increased from 2005 to 2009. Whilst 9,524 Kuwaiti children were enrolled in the year 2005/2006, this number had increased to

12,377 by 2008/2009. The statistics also show that the number of Kuwaiti children enrolled in private KGs has regularly increased (see Figure 1).
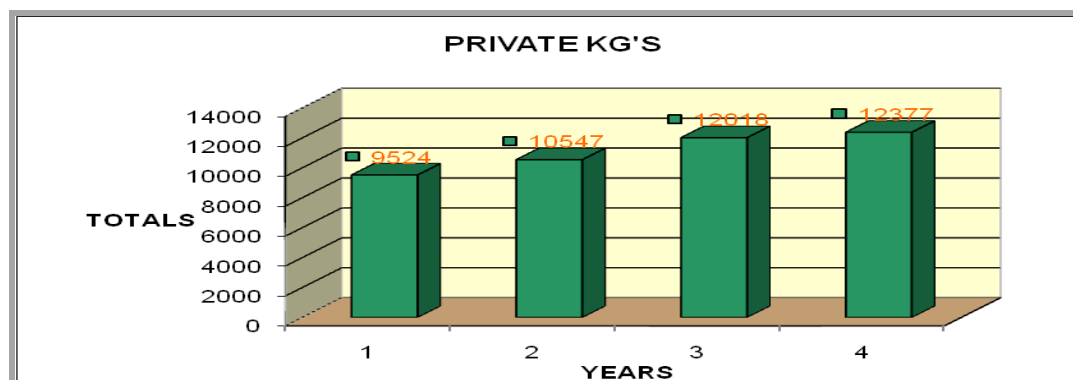

Figure 1. The Enrolment of Kuwaiti children in private KGs from 2005/2006 to 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 to 2008/2009

Figure 1 indicates that parents are keen to send their children to a private institution and seek alternative education opportunities for their children instead of relying on government schooling. This could provide insights into the more attractive offers the private sector seems to be providing.

4.3 The Importance of Parental Involvement in the KGs

Many pedagogical and psychological academics believe in the idea of parental involvement in KG education (Hoon, 1994; Al-Mosawy and Kanany, 1996; Almesad and Alhouli 2002; Curtis and O'Hagan, 2003; Daly and Byers, 2004; Bruce, 2005; Al-Yateem, 2005). Schools should make sure to build strong relationships with parents, and views of the parents' confidence levels can be obtained by regularly informing them of their child's individual development and improvement. Daly and Byers (2004) state:

> ... research has shown that working with parents has a positive effect on the child's early learning. A key function of any early years setting is to help parents to increase their understanding

and knowledge of their children's development and education.
(p.129)

4.4 International Views on Parental Desire and Curriculum Content

Although early childhood education focused on children's 'play', this can be carried out by employing academic learning styles. Children need to be motivated to read and write, and also to develop effective listening skills and learn the alphabet and different words. This can be achieved through several activities during play-time (Blenkin and Kelly, 1996). Dodge and Colker (2000) supported this view and established that children can start learning how to write from the age of two to four years old. As a result, they have to be offered relevant activities to develop their potential.

However, in the English system, Curtis and O'Hagan (2009) suggest that teachers must encourage children to write and adopt the skills to write independently, as well as prepare the class environment and different activities for this purpose.

The authors added that after KS1, individuals must be able to:

·Read simple text with understanding and general accuracy
·Use a variety of strategies such as phonics, graphic, syntactic and contextual in reading unfamiliar words and establishing meanings. (p.172)

In Singapore, Hoon (1994) attempted to measure parents' views and expectations of quality of the KG system, with the study focusing on both private and government KGs. Three different parents' socio-economic levels (high, medium and low) were considered in the research. The results identified that parents consider the curriculum an essential factor:

Three times the number of parents who chose private kindergarten considered this factor [academic curriculum] as important (61% compared to 24%). (Hoon, 1994, p.6)

The study generally identified that parents with different social levels expected their children in KGs to receive a semi–formal education, together with reading, writing, and counting skills. Moreover, the English language in the early stage was considered a common determining issue for parents' choice in several regions:

> ...Several countries such as Yemen and Egypt have decided to introduce English at a lower grade than had previously been the case... the parental preference of English is one of the leading reasons for choosing a private education. (Phillipson, 2008, pp.18-19)

This issue of preference for English was studied by Al-Jarf (2004), where research was adopted in Saudi Arabian (Gulf) countries. The research looked at children who were learning the English language before the age of six years and therefore at the KG level. Three hundred mothers participated in the research, all of whom preferred that their children learn English in KG. However, fifty percent of the participants also believed that being bilingual in Arabic and English is significant.

5. Research Methods

This comparative study utilised both qualitative and quantitative techniques to determine the differences between the government and private sectors in order to identify a sufficient answer as to what led Kuwaiti parents to apply for the private KG system for their children, and why this has increased in recent years.

5.1 Participants

Two government KGs and two private KGs were selected for this study. The schools that participated in this study were chosen opportunistically rather than on a random basis. Schools A and B were government KGs, whereas Schools C and D were private American and English system KGs. The respondents' population is made up of 34 parents and 16 teachers.

5.2 Sources of Evidence

Two sets of questionnaires were used in this research to analyse the role of parents in selecting their choice of the KG system. The quality of the teachers was also analysed on the basis of their responses to the questionnaires.

5.3 Ethics

Every effort was made to ensure that the questions used in the questionnaire were unambiguous, and that all ethical issues were considered in this research. Before conducting the study, permission was sought from the Ministry of Education in Kuwait to conduct research with the GS. Permission to access the PS was also sought through an official letter sent to the school managers. The rights of confidentiality and anonymity were addressed to ensure that the participants were aware of them (BERA, 2004).

5.4 Reliability and Validity

Reliability is considered as "the extent to which a measure, procedure, or instrument provides the same result on repeated trials" (O'Leary, 2004, p.59). Accordingly, the reliability issues were sought during the piloting stage and every effort was made to provide reliable information. Piloting the questionnaires was an

essential approach in this study and valid questions was the aim of piloting, followed by comparing the gathered responses and determining comments, then eliminating all the errors.

5.5 Analytical Techniques

This research study used two different analytical techniques for each type of data. Quantitative data was analysed through the nominal group test (NGT) (Delbecq et al., 1975), which is a technique based on representing the responses of participants by the number of votes to an answer in order to determine the degree of satisfaction. The qualitative data was analysed using grounded theory because it is "more inductive than content analysis as the theories emerge from, rather than exist before, the data" (Cohen et al., 2007, p.491). This technique builds theories that help to reach the research objectives.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are that the three-month duration is insufficient to access enough information from a larger number of respondents. The study would have been better developed if it had included more schools. Obtaining the approval from the Ministry of Education to access the schools also took longer than expected. In addition, the children's absence could be considered a limitation, which would prevent access to a larger number of parents. Furthermore, the number of intended parents was reduced from 40 to 34 respondents as not all parents returned the questionnaires.

6. Results

The questionnaires were completed by parents and teachers of both government schools (GS) and private schools (PS). Parents were asked about the learning principles they most wanted their children to benefit from in KGs. The respondents deferred from government to private, as parents in the private sector aimed their children to learn in more semi-formal and accomplished educational environments while in the government sector parents focused more on basic social and educational factors. In government KGs, a total of 12 out of 18 parents expected their children to receive a semi-formal education. However, parents at GS-A responded that they expected their children to "Read and write plus have self-dependence".

On the other hand, a total of 13 out of 16 parents in the private KG category replied that they expected their child to obtain a good ability to read and write in both English and Arabic. However, one PS-C parent had an expectation with regard to the following issues:

> The ability to write, know how to use a pencil confidently, know all the Arabic and English alphabets. Also, make friends, work in groups, share with others, get used to school, respect and discipline, and be able to listen to others.

Parents were also asked whether they wanted their children to graduate from the KG with the knowledge and ability to read and write in both Arabic and English. This question was used to decipher parents' reason(s) for switching to the private sector, as this opportunity was only provided in the private sector. Ninety-five percent of the parents in government KGs preferred that their children be able to read and write in both Arabic and English, as they believed a child should learn the basics of a

language at an early stage in order to be prepared for the next level. This gives an insight into parental choice and clarifies why they might have selected the private sector. However, in the private sector, all of the parent respondents agreed that they wanted their children to read and write in Arabic and English in KG (see Figure 2).
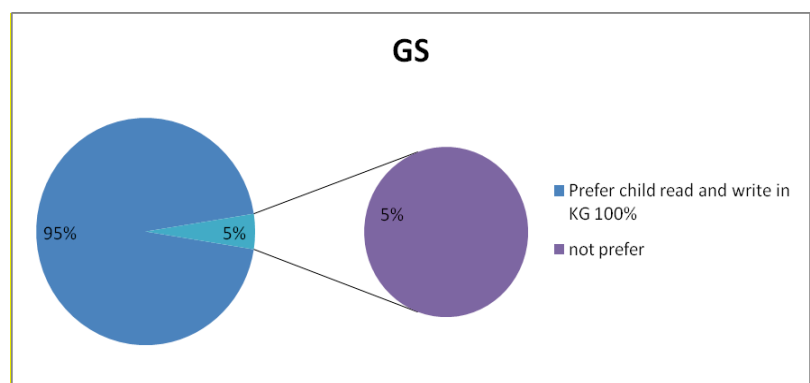

Figure 2. GS parental desire for children to read and write in both English and Arabic

One PS-D parent responded with the following:

> Yes, I prefer my child to be prepared in advance and have the basics of everything so that things become easier for him in the primary stage and he will not be shocked in the future.

In the GS, most of the parents believed that the KG did not meet their desires with regard to the curriculum content. In addition, parents in PS responded that their chosen KG perfectly met their demands. Most parents in the government sector found that the curriculum content was poorly designed, which was a major deficiency for the children. An NGT analysis revealed that 67 percent of the respondents agreed that the curriculum needed improvement (Figure 3).
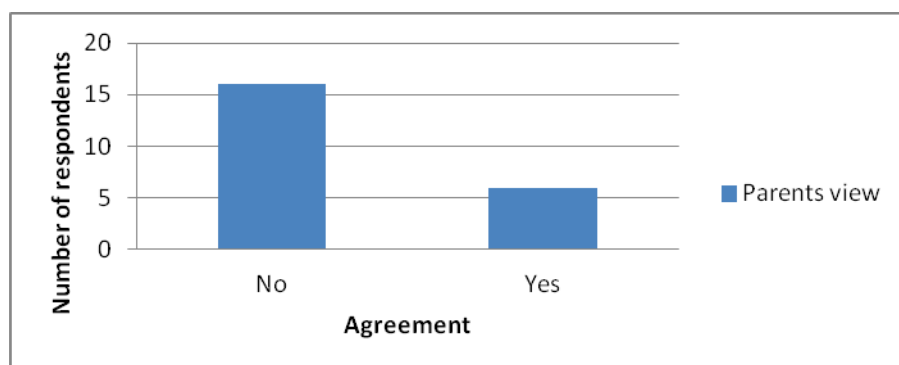
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Figure 3. Agreement of parents in the government sector on the curriculum efficiency

In this regard, one GS-A parent answered:

> Maths is poor and there is no English language learning, plus
> poor Arabic teaching. I think that KG run by the government is
> below the average.

The NGT analysis shows that 72% of parents in the GSs group seemed to believe that none of the factors they wanted actually existed in government KGs (Figure 4). However, in the PSs system, responses show that 88% of the parents found their requirements were met in the selected KG (Figure 5). From a comparison of the responses, it appears that private KGs provide more of what parents are seeking and better match their requirements than government KGs.
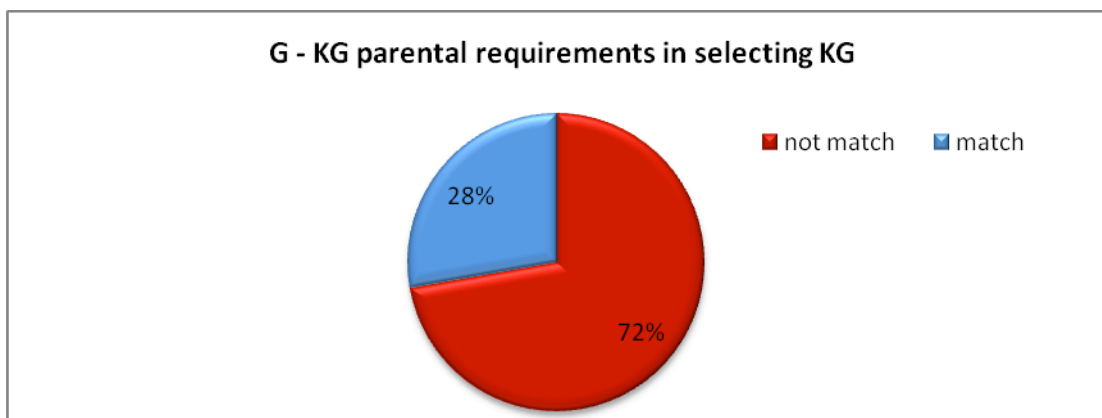

Figure 4. GSs parental satisfaction with the KG they selected and how it matches their requirements
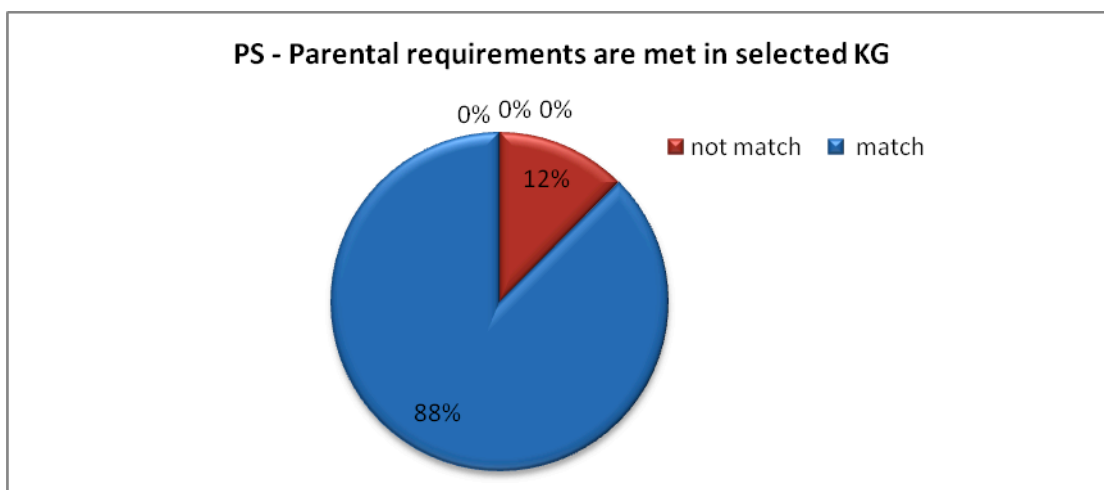
Figure 5. PSs parental satisfaction with the KG they selected and how it matches their requirements

Parents of children in private schools were asked why they spend money on school fees when government KGs are free. All 16 parents responded that they chose the PS because the overall education level in private KGs is better than in government ones. One PS-C parent also wrote:

> Government KGs focus on dancing and playing and no attention
> is given to writing and reading.

In terms of determined parents' preferences between the two sectors, they were asked about which sector they would prefer if offered a voucher or scholarship for a private KG. The majority answered that they would select a private KG if they were provided with a voucher to do so. From their response, it seems that parents are dissatisfied with government KGs, which means that the economic factor of high school fees plays a significant role in preventing parents from selecting a private KG.

One GS-A parent also indicated the following:

> I will definitely choose the private KG because there is more care
> about child development and they ensure that the child learns the
> basics in English and Arabic; while in the government KG, their
> priority is to celebrate and prepare children for festivals.

6.1 Teachers' Views Regarding the KGs' Curriculum and Teachers'

Development

Teachers' development was considered a significant issue to improving the quality of the teachers and attracting more parents to the school. The teachers were asked about the right to select their desired training course. All 8 teachers in government KGs replied that they do not have the right to choose training according to their needs. The school policy does not provide them with this opportunity, since the manager and the coordinators usually complete this procedure. However, in the private KGs, 7 teachers agreed that school policy and the principal allowed them the right to select the development programmes that would meet their needs. The analysis indicates that the motivation process and procedures to improve teachers in government KGs are relatively weak compared with private KGs.

The teachers were also asked about curriculum efficiency for children, and the results show that the majority of government KG teachers are not happy with the curriculum they are teaching, whereas the private KG teachers are mostly satisfied with the curriculum. Six government schoolteachers stated that the curriculum does not sufficiently prepare children for the primary stage because it simply focuses on social and psychological factors rather than educational ones, and it does not include any English language education. One GS-A teacher responded:

> The development issue incorporates more social and character
> growth.

However, 7 private KG teachers stated that the curriculum in their KG adequately prepares children for the primary stage. In general, it focuses on the main

development issues for children's progress and preparation. One PS-D teacher remarked:

> Mental maths and English developments are provided.

7. Conclusion

The conclusion revealed that the system in Kuwait government KGs is inferior to private KGs in terms of the curriculum, quality of the teachers, and school policies. This provides the answer to the key questions of the research regarding the increasing number of students enrolled in private KGs.

It also appears that the education offered by the private sector mostly meets parents' demands, as they seemed more satisfied with their children's education and achievements. Parents believed that the curriculum of government KGs is lacking in a number of areas, resulting in children being poorly prepared for primary school. Parents also expressed their desire for government KGs to teach English language and Arabic skills. Moreover, the quality of teachers at a KG influenced the overall value of the educational system. In government KGs, teachers felt that the schools did not provide them with adequate training to improve their attitude. Many teachers faced a lack of specialist development training that meets their needs. Conversely, the private KGs sought to fulfil the teachers' desires and needs. Teachers were provided with a development plan to improve their quality and enhance the degree of excellence at the schools.

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Appendix I

The government's kindergarten curriculum objectives

The general objectives of the KG system are stated in the teacher guidance book

provided by the Kuwait Ministry of Education (2001, p.18), with the idea of helping

children to:

> 1- Establish the Islamic religion in themselves.
> 2- Feel that they are a member of their family and of their country,
> Kuwait, a Gulf country and an Arab.
> 3- Make positive concepts about their ego.
> 4- Become positive in their relationships with friends and adults.
> 5- Feel that they are an independent and responsible individual
> 6- Obtain a positive direction to the environment around them and
> keep the area clean.
> 7- Realise what their body needs and protect themselves with healthy
> habits.
> 8- Develop all their senses.
> 9- Gain good basic skills that they will need to live in society.
> 10-Develop their knowledge about the natural environment around
> them and how to be effective within it.

The main features of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice curriculum context

are as follows:

1. It involves mental, emotional and social factors as part of one inclusive
   system.
2. The teacher organises and prepares the classroom by providing a range of
   activities and equipment that motivate children to learn and to discover the
   environment with their teacher.
3. Work in the classroom should provide experiences for the children, which will
   be tangible and perceptible.
4. The teacher should encourage creative thinking and allocate time for
   experiments.
5. The provision of outdoor games is essential.
6. The teacher should monitor the time throughout the day.

(Al-Musad and Al-Holly, 2002)

Appendix II

Kindergarten experience scheduleThe subjects and experience schedule taught in Kuwaiti Government KG schools, throughout the academic year in KG 1 and KG2, is set by the governors. This time schedule is provided from the Ministry of Education and starts from 7:30am until 12:20pm. Children experience several activities and lessons that engage them with the week's subjects (Ministry of Education, 2000; Al-Abdulgafoor, 2004).

Subjects taught in Kuwait's KGs, years 1 & 2

KG1	KG2	Duration	
Preparation week	Preparation week	1 week	
My school	Computers in my school	2 weeks	
Who I am	I am human	2 weeks	
My family my relatives and neighbours	People at work	2 weeks	
My health	My food	2 weeks	
Water and air	Water and air	2 weeks	
Animals and plants	Animals and plants	2 weeks	
Sounds, shapes and colours	Four seasons	2 weeks	
Supermarket	Islam is my religion	2 weeks	
Communications	Communications and telecommunications	2weeks	
Celebrate Kuwait national day	Celebrate Kuwait national day	1 week	
Kuwait is my country	Kuwait is my country	2 weeks	

The desert	The oil	2 weeks	
The sea	The sea	2 weeks	
Free learning	Primary school preparation	year end	

Source: Ministry of Education (2000) and Al-Abdulgafoor (2004).

In the school policies, a coordinator provides teachers with assistance, instruction, and all necessary information. It also evaluates the teacher's performance on a weekly basis. The Ministry assists in the provision of training programmes and observational lessons that are aimed towards developing teachers.

About the author

The author is a second-year PhD student at the School of Education and Communication, Education Department at Newcastle University, UK. The author has completed two Masters degrees: an MSC in Educational and Training Management (Portsmouth University) and an MA in Comparative Education (Newcastle University). Before enrolling at Newcastle University, she was a kindergarten teacher for the Ministry of Education in Kuwait.

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