

Needs of Omani Children in First Grade during Their Transition from Kindergarten to Primary School: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract—The purpose of this paper is to shed light on how Omani children in the first grade experience their needs during their transition to primary school. Theoretically, the paper was built on two perspectives: Dewey's concept of continuity of experience and the boundary objects introduced by Vygotsky (CHAT). The methodology of the study is based on the crucial role of children's agency which is a very important activity as an educational tool to enhance the child's participation in the learning process and develop their ability to face various issues in their life. Thus, the data were obtained from 45 children in grade one from four different primary schools using drawing and visual narrative activities, in addition to researcher observations during the start of the first weeks of the academic year for the first grade. As the study dealt with children, all of the necessary ethical laws were followed. This paper is considered original since it seeks to deal with the issue of children's transition from kindergarten to primary school not only in Oman, but in the Arab region. Therefore, it is expected to fill an important gap in this field and present a proposal that will be a door for researchers to enter this research field later. The analysis of drawing and visual narrative was performed according to the social semiotics approach in two phases. The first is to read out the surface message "denotation," while the second is to go in-depth via the symbolism obtained from children while they talked and drew letters and signs. This stage is known as "signified"; a video was recorded of each child talking about their drawing and expressing themselves. Then, the data were organised and classified according to a cross-data network. Regarding the researcher observation analyses, the collected data were analysed according to the "grounded theory". It is based on comparing the recent data collected from observations with data previously encoded by other methods in which children were drawing alongside the visual narrative in the current study, in order to identify the similarities and differences, and also to clarify the meaning of the accessed categories and to identify sub-categories of them with a description of possible links between them. This is a kind of triangulation in data collection. The study came up with a set of findings, the most vital being that the children's greatest interest goes to their social and psychological needs, such as friends, their teacher, and playing. Also, their biggest fears are a new place, a new teacher, and not having friends, while they showed less concern for their need for educational knowledge and skills.

Keywords—Children's academic needs, children's social needs, children transition, primary school.

I. INTRODUCTION

DESPITE the concept vision of the agency for children as complex and intertwined between the legal educational

view, [1] sees from the educational point of view that agency is "a means to promote meaningful and fruitful educational participation, learning and identity building" (p.143). Reference [2] understands it legally as the capacities, competences, and energies that a person uses in their life and situations to which they are exposed. Reference [3] confirms that it is possible to strengthen a person's affiliation with a particular cause as a result of their exercise of agency and participation in the activities of that cause. There is a trend towards the use of educational environments as important sites for the exercise and development of children's agency [4]-[6], in addition to increasing research in preschools for children's exercise of agency during their transition to primary school in Western Countries [7], [1]. Unfortunately, however, there are no indications of Omani children practicing this agency. The current paper seeks to investigate the use of their agency as a kind of implementation based on two factors, the first of which is related to the legal framework. We can note that Oman's accession to the Convention on the Rights of the Child was achieved on December 9, 1996, by Royal Decree No. 54/96 and it entered into force on January 8, 1997 [8]. Based on this, the Omani Child Law was drawn up, and the National Childhood Strategy was attached to it. However, the issue needs to follow-up on the required progress in the implementation of the related ministries to support these issues, such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Social Development, for example. The second is related to the educational environments that were found to be an important arena for the exercise of agency for children, as mentioned above. This is what the current paper is trying to focus on and trying to implement in educational environments among Omani children in the first grade of primary education in an issue related to them, so that they feel that they belong and are involved.

Primary schools open their doors every year to welcome new first grade children, mostly from kindergarten and some from home. Each child carries different previous experiences, as well as diverse knowledge and skills. Reference [9] points out that: "The transition to a new school can set the tone for children's future school experiences". Reference [10] identified some of the demands that the child will face, such as new friends, new teachers, and a completely new school environment, in addition to the academic requirements. It must be noted that facilitating

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this transition process requires the concerted efforts of all the concerned educators, parents, and caregivers, not just kindergarten and first grade teachers [11]. This paper seeks to present global contexts in which the focus is on this issue of children's transition from kindergarten to primary school distributed across different regions of the world according to their cultural and geographical differences, including Western countries like United States, Europe (United Kingdom, Finland), Australia, East Asia (China), Arab countries (Jordan and Lebanon), and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Saudi Arabia and Qatar). Finally, Oman was placed in all these contexts.

We began with the experience of China, where a pre-primary class was established in public primary schools. It continues for half of the school day, in which children are prepared for the first grade academically, simulating the teaching methods that the child encounters in the first grade [12]. The results of a previous study [8] in Australia to evaluate the intervention program to facilitate the transitional period showed that the interaction of parents and caregivers in the education of their children increased because of their participation in the activities provided during the transitional period. Also, children achieve better academic growth. So, there are implementations, although not official or mandatory. As for the experience of the United States of America, the applications are not official, despite the interest of researchers and educators, as there are various practices related to parents [9].

In England, in the United Kingdom, there is a pilot experiment with children's transition from kindergarten to primary school, where a classroom (reception class) is allocated in the primary school, to which children move at the age of four. Then, they move together to the first grade in the same school so that the children are prepared for the first grade. This official program which was set in 1997-2010 is considered a precedent among countries worldwide [13]. Although this program is considered a precedent among certain countries, it drew some criticism because of the young age of the children. These four-year-olds may not be able to achieve the expected goals because they are too young. This is the age at which children learn in ways based on play and social interaction in the rest of European countries [14]. In addition, a new paediatric curriculum for children from birth to five years of age was developed in 2008. However, [15] argues that education is still concerned with academic development and neglects the psychological and social aspect of the child. On the contrary, Finland paid attention to facilitating this transition process for children from kindergarten to primary school. In 2000, an academic year was added to the system of primary education before the first grade; it is called the transitional year between kindergarten and primary school. Then, it was considered a compulsory year from 2015 for those who have reached the age of 6 years, where a special curriculum for this stage was launched as provided by the National Board of Education to form connected circles for educating children in their early stages in a systematic and organised manner. In addition, it relies on the children's agency to identify requirements from their point of view [16].

In the Arab region, Lebanon is an example. There are no data to indicate interest in this transition issue. However, currently the kindergartens in the capital, Beirut, are private as they provide better education. Nevertheless, the situation in the Lebanese countryside found that the number of children is higher in public kindergartens because it is the only option in their areas [17]. As for Jordan, there is a clear limitation in the services provided to children before the age of 4 years. Rather, most of what is provided to children at this stage is found in cities, and the children of high-income and middle-income families benefit from it [17].

The same is the case in countries of the GCC, where there are no signs of support for the transition of children from kindergarten to primary school. In Qatar, for example, although education is free for all children from kindergarten to grade 12 in the independent, private, and international school system, parents can choose any system that suits their children, and it is paid by the state, regardless of the type of school [18]. Despite the government's efforts to serve and develop kindergartens, it still suffers from problems that may affect the level of service it provides, including the fact that the teachers in kindergartens are not specialised [18]. What is strange is that only 3.2% of children in first grade have attended kindergarten [19]. As for the view of the issue in Saudi Arabia, [20] indicated the need for Saudi children to go to kindergarten so that they can acquire academic and social skills to prepare them for primary school. It is not possible to ignore the large expansion in Saudi Arabia in the number of public and private kindergartens as a result of the increasing number of young people [21], [22]. When we talk about the status of the transition issue for children from kindergarten to first grade in Oman, it is no different from the rest of the GCC countries, where attention is paid to expanding the number of kindergartens. However, it is not considered part of the formal educational system and is not compulsory. Although kindergartens are private and parents must pay to enrol their children, 81% of children who were in first grade in 2021 were enrolled in kindergarten in 2020 [23], [24].

It is clear from the above that the issue of the transition of children from kindergarten to primary school and the facilitation it requires has been highlighted in Western countries and some East Asian countries, with a great deal of implementation and activities. In contrast, it is almost negligible in the countries of the Middle East, rather, those countries are still in the process of developing the kindergarten stage.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is the norm that experiments in the processes of scientific research must be built according to reliable theory. Therefore, the current paper will conduct an executive experiment on children's transition from kindergarten to first grade to reveal their needs and requirements as well as their problems during that transition process. To understand this process and its intersections, the paper relied on two theories, the first of which is to understand boundary objects in the work of Vygotsky [25], which was explained more clearly later in the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) [26]. The second is the concept of

experience and continuity of experience in [27]. For Vygotsky [14], these boundary objects are tools and cues that can help children deal with situations and lead themselves in later circumstances. That is, it motivates them to build their experiences in new environments.

Dewey [28] emphasised that the new experience builds on previous accumulated experiences, which is also related to the practices of the people in society and the cultures from which they came, in addition to using the same things in different

places. This is exactly what children need as they transition from kindergarten to first grade. Whilst their move means that they are in a new environment, the various things provided to them financially, academically, and via teaching methods may confuse children in the absence of those continuous experiences and surrounding practices and activities. This is what this paper relied on to reveal the extent and continuity of those experiences and tools to help them facilitate that transition process, as shown in Fig. 1.

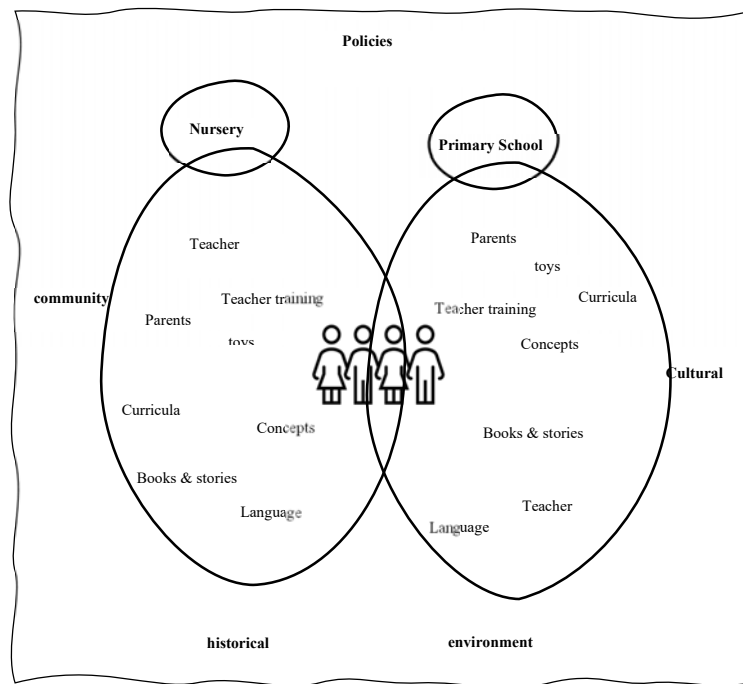


Fig. 1 Objects boundary or mediating artifacts in transition of children from nursery to 1st grade regarding continuity

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted the use of a visual narrative search based on its increased use in scientific research, especially regarding children's issues [29], [30]. Drawing is considered the best way for children to communicate their ideas and projects to others [31]. Therefore, the research field has seen a steady increase in the use of children's drawings as an effective tool for communication between those who draw and those around them [32]. An observation was implemented as a second tool so that their behaviours were observed during the transition as well as observing the circumstances surrounding the child, practices, and activities used, if any. That is as a kind of triangulation of tools to ascertain what the children describe themselves. Accordingly, the implementation was on 45 children in five different schools: a bilingual private (taught in English and Arabic), a monolingual private (Arabic only), an international (adopts international curricula in English), and two public (taught in Arabic, only there is a compulsory subject for learning English) schools. The implementation process took place after obtaining ethical approvals from the university to which we belong (University of Glasgow) and from the Ministry of Education in Oman. Then, the consent of the school

principals, and teachers in whose classes would be observed, parents, and, finally, the children themselves was obtained. The process was carried out according to the following steps by the main researcher:

- Communication with school principals: To present the official papers of ethical approvals and an explanation of the implementation process, its steps, and the time required.
- Initial visits to the children: To introduce the researcher and obtain the consent of the children to participate in the research by telling them that they are an important part of the study, and that the researcher is not able to complete it without themx.
- Observation Implementation Phase: the observation process was started on the first day of the academic year. As two schools were visited, the first half of the day was spent in one school and then the second half of the day in another. Then, the visits to other schools were continued. The whole school day was attended, morning assembly, all classes, break time, and home time, but in different schools during the day. The visits were continued until the third day. Then, they were stopped and continued in the second week for three days as well. In the third week, there is some

works done as well for three days, moving between the five schools. Some notes were taken remotely, except for some situations when the children would cry, and the teacher or school principal asked the researcher to help.

- After two weeks, several visits were made to each school, from 2-3, according to the needs of each group of children and the extent of their adaptation to the researcher. Each visit lasted for 30-45 minutes. The meetings were in an atmosphere of games and competition, after which prizes were distributed to the winners. The children also used the researcher mobile phone to record each other, so that they became familiar with it for later during the study.
- The implementation stage of drawings: Data were obtained from the sample through drawing and visual narration activities. These activities were implemented according to the steps followed by [33], which are as follows:
 - The children were given an A3 sheet of paper, a box of coloured pencils, pencils, a sharpener, and an eraser.
 - The children wrote their names and the names of their schools at the top of the paper. Then, each of them drew the thing that makes them happy, what they liked most in kindergarten and the first grade, and the thing that bothers them and makes them unhappy in both stages.
 - The children were helped by the researcher to write their names and motivated to draw without influencing their opinions. The teachers were helping me to make them draw their vision. While the usual class duration was 40 minutes, some kids finished in 30 minutes and others took the whole lesson to finish.
- Visual narration stage: On the day after the children's drawings were implemented in each school, the drawings were brought and distributed each one to its owner. Then we helped the children move from drawing to visual narration to understand children's experiences drawn on paper. It was arranged with the school administration to locate a room in the school building for the visual narration session. Some of them keep the researcher application in the same class as the children's sample. The visual narration was done according to the following steps:
 - Motivate the children to list their drawings to their peers and the researcher.
 - Form groups of 2-4 to do a narration session.
 - Encourage the children to freely disclose the meanings of their drawings. Ask them what they mean by this and point to the parts of the drawing, or comment on what they like and could not draw.
 - Encourage the calm child to express their feelings, for example by asking them, "What do you think of the pleasant/unpleasant things in preschool?" Is there anything pleasant/unpleasant in elementary school?
 - Teachers sometimes helped the researcher to stimulate the taciturn children because they are closer to the children than to me. They are more familiar with the nature of each child.
- Encoding and storage: each child had given a pseudonym, the first letter of their given name and the initials of the words that make up their school names. Then, their

drawings and visual narration videos had been scanned and stored.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

A. The First Stage: Analysing the Children's Visual Narration

The data collected from the children through their drawings and visual narration were analysed based on the social semiotic method in two stages [34]:

- Denotation: that is, the surface message of the drawing.
- Signified: The deeper symbolism that can be obtained through child's visual narration to describe what they drew, as well as the researcher notes as they work. This is in addition to the letters or signs that the children include in their drawing.

This analysis is based on children's agency in expressing themselves in variation of ways. Then, a grid was developed to organise the accessed data to make it more readable and tidier. Therefore, this network was developed based on the one developed by Deguara [35]. The data founded on "boundary objects", which represent children's needs and problems were divided. The continuity of experience, which signifies their presence in and outside school, was split into four main parts, including the sub-parts shown in Fig. 2. The grid consists of two horizontal and vertical intersecting lines dividing the data into four parts. To the right of the horizontal line represents the children's needs, while the left of it characterises their problems. As for the vertical line, cognition and skills were put at the top and the psychological and social aspects of the child at this stage at the bottom. Each of these four procedures was then divided into two parts, inside and outside of school. Therefore, the data were distributed according to four criteria as follows:

- Children's cognitive and skill needs inside and outside the school in the upper right part.
- Social and psychological needs inside and outside the school in the lower right.
- Cognitive and skill problems inside and outside school in the upper left part.
- Social and psychological problems inside and outside school in the lower left part.

The understanding of children's needs and problems for the analysis relied on procedural definitions based on the definitions of "boundary objects" as mentioned above. The definitions are shown in Table I.

TABLE I
 DEFINITIONS OF DATA ANALYSES CRITERIONS

The term	Description
Cognitive and skill needs.	Basic knowledge and skills that a child needs such as communication, writing, arithmetic and reading.
Social and psychological needs	The psychological and social skills that the child needs from the community around them, such as safety, stability, containment, and friendship
Cognitive and skill problems	The problems children face in understanding the skills and knowledge available to them.
Social and psychological problems	The problems that the child faces in his surroundings (school, home, community) to affect their proper psychological and social development.

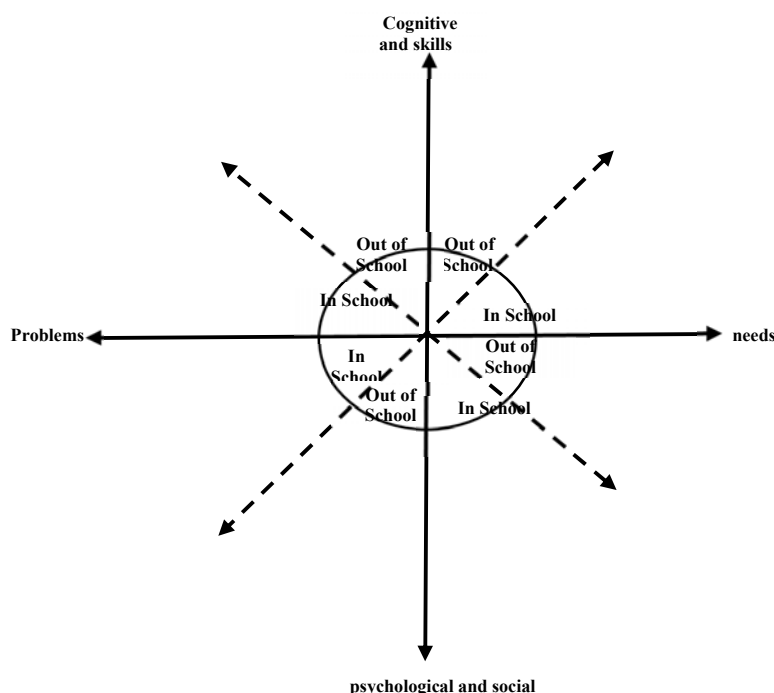


Fig. 2 The developed grid of data analyses

The First Phase Analysis “Denotation”

Fig. 3 was filled with the data of the 1st grade for the first phase.

The Second Phase “Signified”

Through the video-recorded visual narration of the children talking about their drawings, the drawings were analysed in a deeper way. It also relied on children's expressions, words, movements, and facial expressions while speaking, in addition to author's notes and talking to them while they are doing the drawing. This is the approach taken in semiotic analysis; richer, more detailed data had been obtained. Fig. 4 shows the most important data distributed according to the four criteria that they were analysed.

B. The Second: Observations Data Analysis

The data collected from observations were analysed based on “grounded theory” developed by Glaser and Strauss [36]. This method relies on comparing the data collected through the observation with the data that were collected using the visual narration method for children in addition to their drawings, which were previously analysed according to four codes. This was done by analysing the observation data based on the same four codes mentioned in Table I, to determine the similarities and differences between them and what the children expressed. It also shows the meaning of the main and sub-categories that have been reached and what links them or what is new that was not mentioned. This type of tool is considered the confirmation and clarification of other tools, in what is called triangulation in data collection.

V.RESULTS

It appears that children care about their social and psychological needs more than any other needs as seen in Fig. 5. Foremost among these needs was the need for friends; they love their friends, and they love to play with them. In the observations, those who were with their previous friends or siblings seemed more reassured and settled. They interact with each other and with others, while those who did not know anyone were closed and quiet and did not even interact with the teacher, who was also new to them. Reference [37] showed a strong relationship between friendship and happiness. This is confirmed by the British experience in England, where children move from kindergarten to the reception class in primary school. Then, they often move together to first grade in the same school [13]. Thus, friends stay together and achieve psychological stability in the first grade. Children's interest in friends is equal to their interest in the teacher; children need tenderness and containment, and they compensate for what they find at home. This is what our educational system did not take into account, as it focuses on the cognitive needs of the child; this is what we noticed about the children's attachment to one of the teachers because she is kind and affectionate, as well as the children's attachment to the researcher when she was kind to them, as they were playing and having fun together, and then prizes and gifts were distributed. What the children liked was similar to what appeared in the observations in this aspect. Children focused on playing with their friends in outdoor games, and they also loved learning outside. These things have not been applied to them by the observation; that is, its presence in their needs from their point of view, despite its absence, is

evidence of children's knowledge of appropriate ways to obtain information and learn in a way that makes them feel happy. Consequently, they were happy in the art class. In addition to the emergence of children's tendency towards reinforcement to push them to produce the correct behaviour. For example, they

would remain calm and participate in the class if the teacher promised them a sweet or a sticky note on his notebook at the end of the class. Here, it becomes clear that children do not reject kindergarten or school; however, they need an incentive to make them love it and be happy to go.

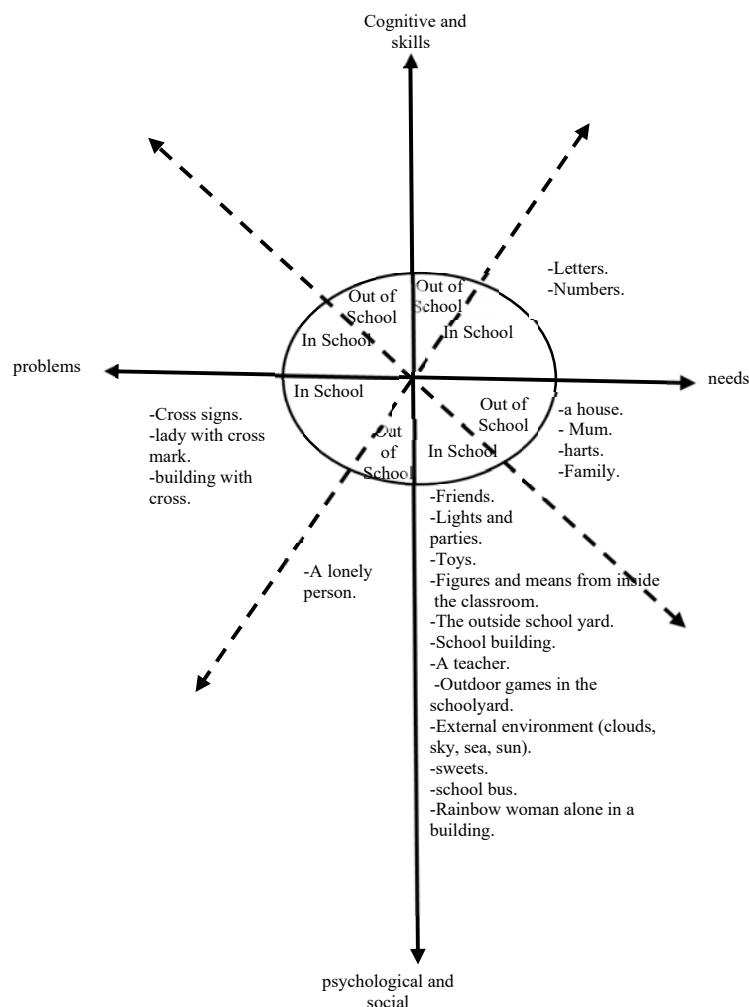


Fig. 3 The first phase analysis “denotation”

Children mentioned little cognitive and skill needs. However, some of them showed a trend towards learning numbers and letters. We noticed this in the situation that three girls were exposed to, as they began to become isolated and did not interact with the teachers or the rest of the children because they did not know letters and numbers; this was because they had not gone to kindergarten in the previous year due to COVID-19. The children drew the school building, as well as the shapes in the classroom and in the schoolyard, showing their influence and connection to it. Some kids liked some of the new experiences, like morning class and flag salutes, as well as

buying from the school canteen. However, not all children reacted well to these experiences as they were experiences that they were not familiar with from kindergarten. We noticed that the children did not get acquainted with the school’s facilities and services despite the teacher taking them on a quick tour. It is possible to implement some of the experiments pursued by Scotland towards facilitating the process of transition for children from nursery to first grade, represented in mutual visits between kindergartens and primary schools, and the sharing of child data and information with the elementary school to which he belongs.

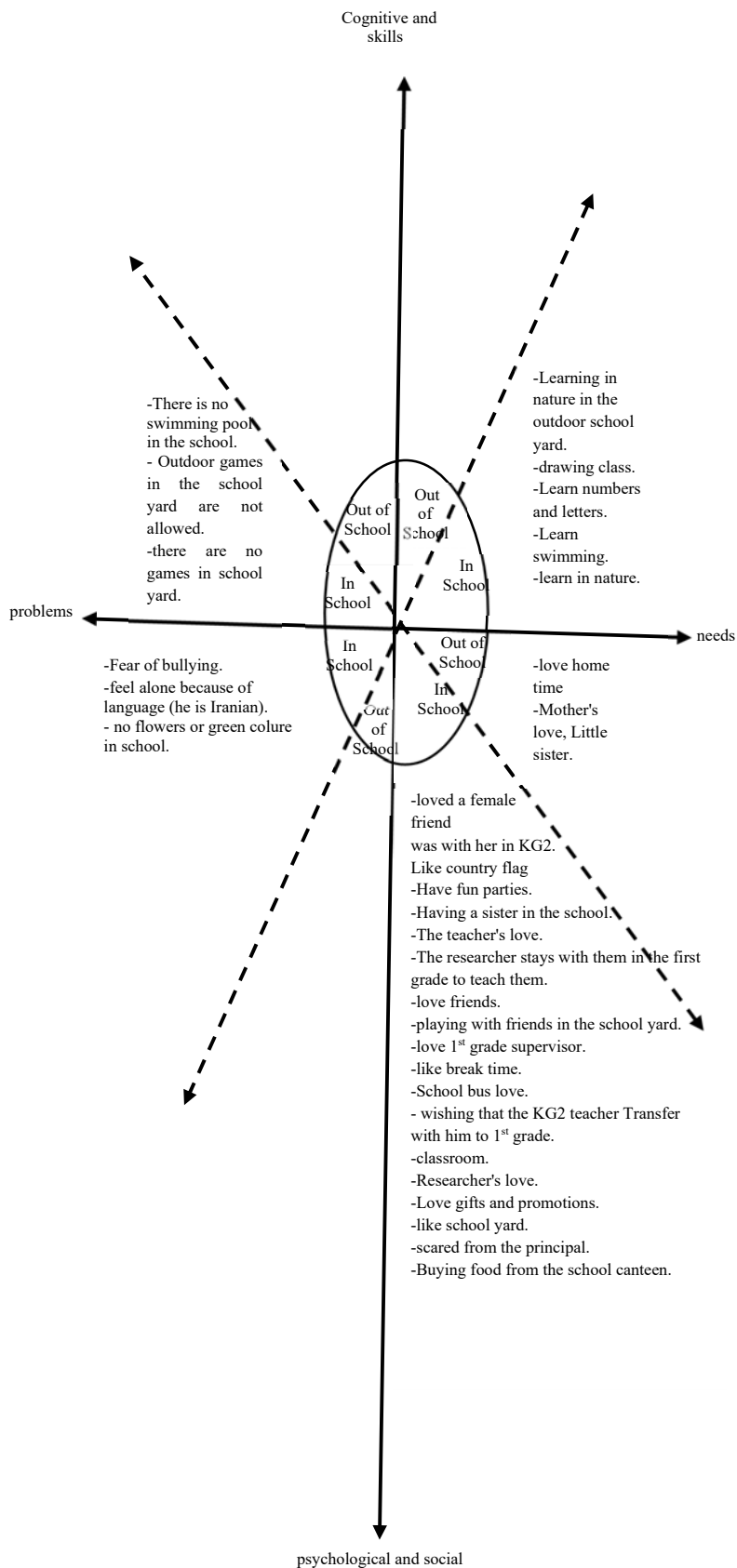


Fig. 4 The second phase "signified"

Teachers are also trained [38]. Others downplayed these fears and their impact on the children. As for their problems, they were the least frequently talked about by the children; they do not like studying in the classrooms and want to learn swimming which is not generally in the school system in Oman (only in international schools) and they are afraid of bullying. In addition to the presence of those who feel lonely because they have no friends at the beginning of the school year, there were no games in the public-school grounds, and they were not allowed to play in the games from private schools. It was noted that the places and nature of learning did not reach the level desired by the children, as there was not a single lesson in the open air or in a place other than the classroom. Even the drawing class, which the children loved, was presented in a traditional way. In addition to the disappointment of the children around not learning to swim or do other sports activities, there was no playroom, and not even any games in the outdoor school yard. Piaget [39] advocated that play is an integral part of the development of a child's intelligence and is a major factor in a child's cognitive development. Some of the differences were that swimming pools were present in international schools. In addition, there were several new issues from the observations that the children did not talk about, most notably their need for someone who cares about psychological and social issues, to be really close to them and to be specific to this stage. There is no unified program or clear plan for receiving children to the first grade. Each teacher worked with their own class only on the first day or two. First grade teachers were not aware of children's backgrounds and whether they passed kindergarten, whether they had academic skills and what their social or health backgrounds were.

VI. CONCLUSION

The issue of children moving from kindergarten to first grade is being focused on in Western countries and East Asian countries in terms of paying attention to it and finding ways and means to try to mitigate its effects. However, it is still in the embryonic stage in Middle Eastern region, especially if we consider the agency of children and their right to participate in a sensitive issue that concerns them. Here, we shed light on this issue to learn about practical and research applications around the world, using CHAT, which has its origins in Vygotsky [25] and the theory of experience and its continuity in Dewey [27] as a theoretical framework on which to build the current paper. Considering the agency of children as they are able to express their opinions on issues of interest to them, we used children's drawings and visual narration as the main tool for collecting the

required data which were analysed according to semiotic theory. This was in addition to the observations to confirm the correctness of the information, which were analysed according to the Ground theory that was referred to above, where the observation provided with a practical and applied scene of what the children drew and talked about. Their expressions touched on the fact that we have confirmed that children are really capable of expressing their opinions as well as what conveys their opinions to others. Through the children's responses, it was shown that they prefer the social and psychological aspects of their needs, especially their needs for friendship, play, and learning in nature and non-traditional ways. This is in addition to their need for the teacher and their tenderness and attention, as well as their need to continue the experience related to their surroundings to new situations that they can build on.

The needs or problems that children draw or talk about often originate within the school setting. This is possibly because the child is self-centred, and feels what is around them at that moment, only being able to express that. However, the influence of the surrounding environment, whether cultural or social, which appeared in children's responses must be balanced by the desire of some children to learn numbers and letters; this is imposed on them by home, society, and the school.

One of them even mentioned that it was his mother who told him that school is not for playing but for studying. Children's fear of bullying refers to the presence of behaviours due to the home environment and the parent's handling of the child at home. The importance of continuity of experience and its impact during the second phase of implementation may become apparent when they move into first grade, but there are some indications of its need, such as the children's willingness to take their friends and teachers with them, as well as some forms of the classroom in kindergarten. In addition, the observations were very helpful in identifying the children's needs and problems, which largely corresponded to the children's vision and showed the importance of the child's agency and the fact that they are already able to express their requirements and needs [1]. The context of social and psychological problems inside and outside the school was very clear; some were similar to the children's opinions while others were different. Moreover, we were able to observe several real-life situations as they usually happen in schools. Therefore, it can be built upon while looking at the needs of the child to achieve a kind of stability and peace for them. We reassured them as they moved to a new stage, in addition to paying attention to external characters and games to achieve continuity of experiences and build on them later, as stated by Dewey [28].



Fig. 5 Samples of children drawings

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