

Parental Involvement in United States of America's Schools from the Perspective of Parents from Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The more a teacher knows about the students in his or her classroom, the more likely he or she will be able to relate to the student and facilitate a positive learning experience. When teachers have students from foreign countries, it becomes even more important for teachers to know something about the country of the student's origin, composition of the family, the values of the family, and other relevant components of the student's culture. The purpose of the present study is to learn how parents from Saudi who have children attending schools in the United States of America perceive the school experiences of their children, and to learn how they might become involved to support the teacher and help them better understand Saudi culture. a focus group was conducted to learn more about how much involvement the parents have and what kind of barriers they face to get involved in U.S. schools. The main purpose for this study was to answer the question "What are the parental involvement strategies that can be used by Saudi parents to introduce Saudi culture into the US elementary schools?". The main goal was to know how Saudi students get more involved in American schools. A focus group was conducted with Saudi students' is weak, and they don't prefer to impose it. Also due to the religion factor associated to Saudi culture it is hard for them get involved in American school's culture. mothers who live in the US to answer this question from their perspective. Mothers agreed that the involvement of Saudi culture in American school

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1. Introduction

As migration and immigration escalates (Wong-Lo & Moreno, 2014), schools invariably represent the diversity of the people who live in a particular country. Teachers often have one or more students in their classrooms who are new to the country in which they reside. Students from families who have cultural values and traditions different from the norm including language, religious practices, food choices and other defining cultural distinctions. It is common that teachers do not have sufficient information about the various cultures (e.g., Bullock et al., 2014; Elhoweris, Whitaker, & Salend, 2007; Obiakor, Algozzine, & Bakken, 2007).

Working with families and parental involvement is an extremely important element in the academic life of a student. In reviewing the literature, the role of parents was often highlighted, which is stimulating to try, and find how Saudi parents can become involved in their children's academic life in the USA. The purpose of the present study is to learn how parents from Saudi who have children attending schools in the United States of America perceive the school experiences of their children, and to learn how they might become involved to support the teacher and help them better understand Saudi culture.

According to Reuda, Limn, and Velasco (2007), it is not uncommon that teachers make judgments regarding their international students based on surface characteristics of the culture (e.g., dress, greeting style, accent, facial and body expressions) without having sufficient information about the students' culture and considering group differences and family traditions. Understanding a student's culture may help teachers understand different behaviors that students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds may exhibit in the classroom. For example, according to Ash, Rice, and Radmond (2014), a student may exhibit unsociable behavior during interactions with native speakers' peers, compared with the non-native speakers or peers from the same language. Furthermore, this understanding may help minimize differences between the culture at home and the culture at school.

According to Crozier & Davis (2007), when parents were asked about school expectations regarding their participation in the academic life of their children, the parents indicated there were none, other than bringing them to school every day and making sure they did their homework. Although it is important for schools to be clear as possible for their expectations about all parental involvement, it is especially important to international parents because they may be unfamiliar with local school customs.

Teacher Preparation

Teachers need to be prepared to teach in classrooms that have students from different cultures (Bullock et al, 2014; Bullock & Gable, 2014). For example, one teacher recently reported that out of the 25 students in her class, only 12 were from the USA, and 6 other different countries were represented. Robinson and Clardy (2011) suggested the need to have teachers and professors from diverse backgrounds. Having field experiences in schools that are highly culturally diverse was suggested.

If teachers understand more about cultural diversity, it may help reduce the number of referrals for English Language Learners (ELL) to special education programs. It may also help in the screening and evaluation process for the placement in special education programs (Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, & Roach-Scott, 2009), because according to IDEA, we need to provide appropriate education for all students. (Uhara, 2005).

Behaviors have an effect on social relationship, because the way a person behaves affects the relationship with the family at home, friends and teachers at schools, and colleagues at work. People from a specific culture may behave differently from individuals from other cultures in different social situations. There is insufficient research relative to behavioral intervention in specific cultures (Kauffman , Conroy, Gardner, & Oswald, 2008). Recently, everyone is calling for equality in both society and in schools; therefore, teachers need to instill confidence by acknowledging and respecting each student's culture in the best way possible (Taras & Rowney, 2007).

Parents and Schools

One of the roles of schools is to ensure that students receive appropriate instruction in academic and social skills to help them to be successful. As teachers and administrators, we need to be more knowledgeable about the barriers that prevent parents from becoming involved in their children's education, and address them in a meaningful manner. As schools become more diverse, it becomes more difficult for schools to provide and manage appropriate services (Lacroque, 2011; Ramirez & Soto-Hinman, 2009; Singh, Curtis, Wechsler, Ellis, & Cohen, 1997).

Parental involvement is one of the most effective elements to ensure academic achievement (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004; Trainor 2010).

Schools cannot work in isolation; there must be a strong collaborative connection and understanding between the school and the parents (Robinson, 2004). It should be kept in mind that various cultures view education in different ways- some highly respect and value teachers and schools, while others place little emphasis on education. For example, the Chinese consider academic achievement as successful proof of their parenting style; therefore, they prefer home-based involvement rather than school-based involvement due to their high appreciation and trust of their teacher's decision and they do not want to interfere with the teacher's teaching style (Wong & Bai, 2013).

Educators and administrators should think about parents as a main resource for collecting data as well as for planning services. They should also consider parents as partners in the educational process. One well documented way to include parents is by creating a parent-community advisory group representative of all the families from different backgrounds to work together in planning and establishing a community-based school services (Cheney & Osher, 1997; Klopvic, Vasu, & Yearwood, 2003). The advisory group ensures that parents have a role in the decision-making relative to school matters.

After an extensive search, there is insufficient literature pertaining to the Arabic culture in American schools and specifically, the Saudi culture and how Saudi students adapt to the American culture in U.S. schools. For this reason, we conducted a focus group to learn more about how parents from Saudi who have children attending schools in the USA perceive the school experiences of their children and to learn how they might become involved to support the teacher and help them better understand Saudi culture.

1.1. Statement of the Problem and Research Question

Elementary and Secondary Schools in the USA have numerous students from Saudi, which grow with each passing year. Many Saudi Arabian parents are unfamiliar with the education system of the USA and, therefore, feel they are not fully involved in their child's education. Therefore, a focus group was conducted to learn more about how much involvement the parents have and what kind of barriers they face to get involved in U.S. schools. The main purpose for this study was to answer the question "What are the parental involvement strategies that can be used by Saudi parents to introduce Saudi culture into the US elementary schools?"

This focus group may help teachers understand Saudi culture and how they can support the teacher and the school program.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Selection of participants depended on specific criteria: (a) be a mother of an elementary level child or children, (b) have English language proficiency, (c) be enrolled or graduated from a U.S. institution (i.e., Undergraduate, Masters, Doctoral), and (d) have spent more than one year in the USA. The rationale for selecting these specific criteria depended on the aim of the study, which was to learn how to enhance parental involvement of Saudis in elementary schools in the U.S.. We wanted mothers only, because as a Saudi cultural factor, mothers are more involved in their children's academic life than the fathers. As for the language proficiency, the aim was to make certain the mothers are able to communicate with the teachers and schools in English. As for time, we wanted to make certain those mothers were familiar with the U.S. school system and American culture, as well as to be able to think how they could integrate their Saudi culture into the American school system.

Recruitment for participants was through contact with the Saudi Students' organization at a local university located in the southwest USA. After identification of participants, invitations were sent by text messaging and emails. A total of 7 participants agreed to join the focus group.

2.2. Assistant Selection

The assistant was a Saudi doctoral student who attended the College of Education at a local university. She was chosen specifically because of her familiarity with education in USA and fluency in English. She would be able to help to facilitate the discussion and take notes.

2.3. Logistical Procedures

Location. The meeting was held at the home of the researcher, in order to respect Saudi culture privacy issues. The direction for the house was clearly provided to the participants.

Time. The length of the meeting was planned to be one hour and a half to two hours. The first 20 minutes was spent welcoming the participants, getting them comfortable, and waiting for others to arrive.

Identification of group member. Members were identified by their first name during the meeting and by numbers for recording purposes.

Recording. Two recorders were used to record the meeting. Notes during the meeting were taken by the researcher and the assistant to be compared later.

2.4. Questioning Route

At the beginning, each participant was given a short questionnaire. The questionnaire asked for information about the participant, including first name, number assigned, age, education level, number of children, age of children, years lived in USA, and if the child attends English as a Second Language (ELS) program.

The questioning route began with the parents' experiences with American schools and their familiarity with school regulations. Then, they discussed their child's contradicting cultural values and how they adapted. Finally, they were encouraged to create parental involvement strategies that integrate Saudi culture in American schools.

(See Table 1 for the Questioning Route).

Table 1

Questioning Route

Questions
1. Can each person share their first impression of American schools and how they saw them as being different from the schools in Saudi Arabia?
2. How did the procedure of the registration go for your child's enrollment in the school? And was anyone able to explain it to you, as well as explain the school regulations? Were you able to communicate in English or were there translating services?
3. What kind of experiences have you had with schools regarding school services, curriculum, teachers, and administrators?
4. In what way were your children adapting to the American culture, and how do the children deal with cultural contradiction?

5. What are the largest barriers you find when you try to get involved in your child's education?
6. What are the solutions from your point of view to break these barriers?
7. What are the Saudi cultural principles that you would like to be integrated in American schools?
8. Can you think of some strategies that can be used by schools and teachers that make the Saudi parents more involved using their cultural factor?

Information gleaned from the meeting was transcribed from the recorder. First, it was transcribed in Arabic (the language of the participants) and then translated to English by the researcher. Once the information was transcribed, it was sorted in patterns and themes. The analysis depended on the question provided and the topics that emerged during the discussion.

3. Result

The participants began by sharing their experiences when they first came to the USA and how they saw the difference between schools in Saudi Arabia and the schools in the USA. There was greater satisfaction with the schools and the services provided in the USA than in Saudi Arabia.

“Well, my daughter was in second grade in Saudi Arabia and came to second grade in the USA so I think I could give a good comparison.”

“But the public schools in the USA and Saudi Arabia is not even comparable.”

“The public schools in USA are much more advanced than Saudi schools.”

The participants, when examining American schools and Saudi schools, made comparisons from different aspects (e.g., teachers' enthusiasm, teachers' passion to teach). These aspects were higher in America than in Saudi.

“I also noticed difference in teachers' passion.; Sometimes you feel that teachers are forced to work as teachers “because it is the most popular job that suits Saudi women

because of the cultural issues” , but in the USA teachers love teaching, they love what they do.”

“The teacher basically was very supportive; Well, I think the main difference is the teacher.”

“Here teachers believe that their responsibility is not only to be a teacher, but also to be an educator.”

“Teachers here love what they do.”

Some of the participants shared their own elementary education experiences from when they were children in Saudi Arabia. There are two reasons for comparing their own experiences. First, they might see there is a slight improvement in the education in Saudi Arabia; secondly, their children did not enter elementary school in Saudi Arabia. The age for the students in this study was elementary school ,so they were in preschool before they moved to USA. They could not compare the education for their children because all the children’s ages were between 5 and 9 when they started their elementary schools in the USA.

“Well, I can’t compare, because my son was born here and he never attended school in Saudi Arabia. I can compare with my own experience at Saudi elementary schools. I noticed the difference in children’s passion. When he gets out of school, how he loves school; not having the negative attitude in school (School is bad or school is painful); not it is fun.”

“When I was in the intermediate school I can still remember how bad principal we had she was so scary.”

“Me too. I can remember one of the principals we had would shout at the teacher in front of the students”

Participants related to their own experiences and the experiences they have had with school principals in the USA, Most participants agreed that the principals in the USA are more involved in the school activities. Involvement was viewed as a demonstration of positive leadership.

“I have a lot of experience with the principal because I am involved in ELS program as a volunteer.”

“Yes, she seemed that she really cares because this year they do not send the flyer electronically only but she sometimes send some educational and parenting article that she feels it is going to benefit the parents.”

“The pervious school the principal was involved with my daughter when my husband came to visit.”

“I had a good experience with the principal in school one, because they helped me. I had some issues with the children.”

When the participants were asked if any were explanations provided during the registration process, there was total agreement that no help was provided except for a flyer, which was in English. Participants thought it be would a good idea if they had provided important information in multiple languages. The participants argued that the school should provide translation services. Some of the participants thought that it is the schools' responsibility, and others thought if the school did not provide translation services, it is the parents who should bring someone to help and translate for them “if they cared about their children.”

“By a chance last year, the time I was entering the school and because I was wearing my hijab a father noticed me while he was exiting the school and he came back and talked to one of the staff. The staff came to me and asked if I can help with translating some stuff for him. The ESL were explaining to him the ESL program that his son will be enrolled in and he did not understood what they were trying to say. I translated everything and he understood the program but it was difficult for him to understand without an interpreter and they did not have one in Arabic language.”

“But when the schools do not provide and the parent really care they can find a way to have a translator.”

“Yes, I agree if the school couldn't find one the parent should bring someone who can translate if they care about their child.”

When the participants were asked if they felt they were involved or if the schools invited them to be involved, most of the participants responded negatively. Some parents volunteered for schools trips or simple activities, but as for collaboration between the parents and the teacher regarding the academic aspects, parents felt they were not welcomed. Most of them agreed that they needed to offer their help to the school, unless the schools don't allow them to become involved.

"There is no good communication between the school and me but in my opinion it is the school fault. My son has been in this school for 3 years now they have not contacted me except for the first parent conference. After that they have not call me at all unless something bad happen to my child."

"The school called me once last year when my son had an accident at school."

"For volunteering, I posed my question and offered them to volunteer but they don't ask. For knowing what's going on it depends on the teacher and how she deliver the information."

"One of my problems with my son's teacher was when I asked the teacher for the material they used in the class but she did not let me know or show me what kind of the material she used."

"My son is doing great at school now, but I think if he had some academic problem they will notify me. But I am the one who is going you to spend more effort that the school to get more information about what he is exactly doing and how we can improve his skills and how I can help him at home. All these stuff I think I will be doing it and I'll not get help from school."

Participants were asked about what could be a barrier inhibiting Saudi parents' involvement. Most of them suggested the educational level of the parent could highly affect their involvement in their child's education. The higher level of education the parent has, the greater the involvement. Besides the language and academic level of the parents, some participants suggested that the culture of the parent might play role.

Saudi has different geographic areas and each area has a subculture that is different from others, thus, some involvement in their students' education is not a priority. Some Saudis think that American schools are doing a great job and they don't need to get involved.

"In the preschool, one of the teachers was complaining about ~~the~~ some Saudi parents who don't understand English. And their kids were at risk. She could not communicate with them and they seemed they don't care."

"It is going to be difficult if the parent came from a culture that they are not used to being involved in their child's education and they don't care what's going on in the school."

"I think Saudi parents' educational level effects their involvement in the schools. There is a difference when the parents are educated."

The surprising thing about this focus group was that no one felt they needed to enter the Saudi culture into the school. They felt that by insuring that they foster their own culture at home it would be sufficient for the children to maintain their identity. They did not want their children to be recognized and classified regarding their nationality. As having a large support group of friends, they believe the child will feel more accepted in this way than by integrating the Saudi Culture in the school, where it might make them feel segregated.

"I don't know if bringing the Saudi culture to the school and having the kids identified, as a Saudi will benefit them. This will segregate them and add stereotyping to their identity and we don't need that."

"I am trying to make sure that they have their Saudi identity at home and they realize that they are Saudis and they are proud of themselves because they talk two languages. As long as we make sure that we are holding our believes at home the kids are going to be fine."

4. Discussion

A focus group was conducted to gain knowledge on the perceptions of Saudi parents on parental involvement in the USA schools. Selected criteria consisted of Saudi parents, specifically moms, who have children enrolled at the elementary school level in the USA. Participants were Saudi graduate and undergraduate students in USA institutions.

Five participants were enrolled in PhD programs; one participant had already graduated from a master's degree program; one was enrolled in a master's program, and one was an undergraduate student. Most of them had 2-3 children. They had been living in the USA for an average of three years, and their ages were between 25 and 32.

The focus group was led by the researcher as the moderator with the help of an assistant moderator. A recorder and an iPhone were used to record the meeting. The discussion lasted for an hour and focused on comparing experiences between Saudi schools and American schools, and the parental involvement of Saudi Arabian parents in schools in the USA. At the beginning of the meeting each participant was given a small sheet of paper where they filled out basic information about themselves: name, age, number of children, years spent in USA, and their educational level. The questionnaire helped the moderator to recall the information about each participant.

The discussion began by posing the first question about how they perceive the differences between schools in Saudi Arabia and schools in the USA. The majority of the participants agreed that USA public schools are much better than the ones in Saudi Arabia regarding curriculum, teachers, staff, administration, and facilities. They all agreed the only schools considered to be good in Saudi Arabia are private schools, but they are costly. They all had negative experiences related to their education in Saudi Arabia. They compared the Saudi schools and the curriculum, the teacher preparation, and homework loads. Homework loads are among the main differences, where in Saudi Arabia the students are required to complete more homework.

When the participants were asked to share their personal experiences with the schools in the USA, they shared different experiences related to dealing with school administration and teachers. Most of them were impressed with how some schools take care of small details regarding the child's life. Overall, they agreed that schools in the USA do not promote parent involvement. They think that if the parent did not offer to volunteer and impose themselves, the school would not encourage them to get involved. Most of them had volunteered in different activities and all the volunteering experiences were not by invitation from schools.

According to the participants, they received no help when they registered their children for school. There was agreement that there was no help, except the flyers that explained the procedure of registration in the English language only.

They thought it would be more helpful to make parents who do not have proficiency of the English language understand the registration procedure in American schools.

Regarding the barriers, there were different points-of-view regarding the barriers that prevent Saudi parents from getting involved. Some mothers related the main barrier was the language when the family first arrived in the USA. They agreed that having a translator provided through the schools would be beneficial.

Others related to barriers of the academic level of the parent. With some low educated parents, especially when it is the mother with no higher education, parental involvement will be lower. If the mother is the one who came to the U.S. to study, parental involvement will be higher because she socializes more than mothers who come as independents with their husbands and do not study. They are usually stay-at-home mothers and do not go out a lot; their English Language proficiency is low so they cannot communicate efficiently with school personal.

Finally, when the participants were asked about their children's adaptation to the American culture, and if there were any contradictions, most of them said the children are adapting to American culture very well and very quickly, so they are making certain that they hold onto Saudi cultural beliefs at home and make certain they speak their mother tongue at home. Surprisingly, when asked if they want to integrate Saudi culture into American schools, all of them refused to bring the Saudi cultural to the school. Their answer came from not believing in segregating by their culture. All the mothers assured that their children are adapting very well and they have no problems regarding the contradiction between two cultures.

Conducting this focus group brought up different interesting issues related to Saudi parents and their children's education in the USA. One of the important things obtained from this focus group was the refusal of involving Saudi culture in American schools. According to the parent responses, they believed in fostering the Saudi culture at home and among close friends. They did not feel like bringing the Saudi culture to the school, for fear of portraying stereotypes.

The other issue is that Saudi culture is complicated due to the large role that religion plays. It is difficult to separate the traditions and culture from the religion. The participants were knowledgeable about the effect of the integration of Saudi culture in the American schools. Thus, they refused to introduce the Saudi Culture to the American schools.

At the same time, it gave evidence that Saudi parents may not realize the positive effect of integrating Saudi Culture in American school, which will make the teacher understand the Saudi culture and design their instructions based on the student culture especially for the students who are at risk.

It was helpful to see the comparison between American schools and Saudis schools which will allow us to find the weaknesses of the Saudi education system and help to develop improvement plans for public schools in Saudi Arabia. It also helped to see what kind of services needed to be implement in Saudi, how much which professional development is needed, and how administrators should be dealing with students.

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