

Uninvolved? A Closer Look at Syrian Parental Involvement

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ABSTRACT

The recent influx of Syrian families into Canada draws attention to the supports required for student success. Parental involvement is one of the key components in securing students' academic achievement. Parents connect with their child's school differently depending on where they live. This paper will analyze the factors which influence parental involvement for Syrian parents. Interviews with two Syrian families provide voice and a new perspective on what can be done to improve programs and practices for Syrian students in our schools.

INTRODUCTION

The home is the first institution of learning and parents are children's first educators and remain their lifelong teachers. Children and schools benefit from policies which support parental involvement (Huat See & Gorard, 2015). Administrators struggle in promoting the involvement of newcomer and refugee parents, especially when linguistic, cultural, or socioeconomic challenges exist between the school and its community (Glogowski & Ferreira, 2015).

The goal of many parental involvement studies is to establish the extent to which the involvement of families in the education of their children can contribute to improving the educational outcomes of all students. Refugee parents are not a homogenous group; therefore, they face multiple unique, and intersecting challenges that can impact involvement in their children's education (Weine, 2008; Georgis et al., 2014). According to Saskatchewan Immigration and Labor (2015) the number of Syrian refugee families entering Saskatchewan jumped from 48 to 1,105 between 2014 and 2016. This number continues to rise. School leaders must make every effort to understand the challenges of one of the fastest growing groups of refugees to ensure these families feel valued, heard, and included. Scholarly suggestions and a word from Syrian parents of elementary-aged refugee students provides a better picture of the factors which affect parent involvement and how educators can best connect for student benefit.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Numerous studies conclude that parental involvement benefits children's learning and school success (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Educators have increasingly identified parental involvement as the primary vehicle by which to elevate academic achievement (Hara, 1998). *Parental involvement* is defined as the active participation of parents in educational processes and experiences (Epstein, 2010).

When looking at parental involvement, there are several models which can be used to develop school and family partnership programs to promote success in youth. Epstein's (2010) model provides the most comprehensive and widely accepted framework and is the only one that has undergone extensive review by the research community (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001). The types of involvement recommended by Epstein (2010) include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (see Appendix A). These recommendations act as a manual for practitioners and are highly regarded and cited throughout the sea of literature on parental involvement.

Several models exist for developing school and family partnership programs to promote success in youth. Educators can implement programs, new policies, strong leadership practices, and additional supports. Georgis et al. (2014) suggested bringing in cultural brokers who could help school staff understand and adapt programming to the social, economic, and cultural realities of the families. King and Goodwin (2002) recommended facilitating culturally responsive parental involvement by encouraging teachers to develop the knowledge, skills, and predispositions to effectively communicate and work with parents from diverse racial, ethnic, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Further, Gay and Kirkland (2003) stated that culturally responsive schools should honor parents' diverse cultural and ethnic experiences, contributions, and identities.

Policymakers must become more responsive to the unique challenges involved in educating refugee students and supporting their families. Kanu (2008) suggested they implement professional development for school administrators and teachers to support the adjustment and academic success of refugee students. Stewart (2012) suggested the role of the school leader influences the overall culture of the school and is the driving force behind school reform. The

findings suggested school leaders must establish partnerships with refugee community groups to: support mentoring and tutoring programs, connect with school-community liaison workers, and to increase opportunities for students to take part in sport and recreation. Ennab (2017) recommends increasing access to after-school programs for Syrian refugees who are looking for ways to be involved in their child's education.

Another way to help families is through language supports. Immigrant parents tend to struggle with their children's schooling due to language barriers. The acquisition of another language can mean the loss of one's first language and identity. Furthermore, language loss is accelerated when the home language and culture take a back seat within the dominant culture (Guardado, 2002). According to Statistics Canada (2016), 80% of government-assisted refugees who entered the country lacked strong English-speaking skills. This deficit coupled with cultural differences and discrimination means more specific, systematic supports are required (Sohn & Wang, 2006).

A brief look at the history of power in Syria provides cultural context (Masud, 2018). Syrian leaders have used education to exploit citizens and boast their authority. Authoritarian regimes rely on educational centralization, which allows for tight control over the country's school, curriculum, and future of their citizens. In this way, parents have no part to play in the education of their children. Citizens fear the ruling power, and therefore, the idea that parents would have any say in their child's education in Syria is preposterous. Consequently, due to historical cultural factors and a highly centralized government, parental involvement is discouraged.

Many Arabic parents regard interfering with a teacher's work as shameful (Vincent, 1996). Arab parents are inclined to delegate the education of their children entirely to the teacher. Consequently, Syrian refugee parents often do not regard themselves as equal partners with teachers in their children's education, and once they have moved to Canada, they also lack the language skills required to confidently speak to their children's teachers. After my sixth home visit with a Syrian family, I realized our schools are not doing enough to make families feel welcome and safe. I turned to interviewing two Syrian families in Canada with translators to uncover the factors which affect parental involvement.

FINDINGS

The families interviewed were grateful and appreciative of the opportunities for their children, had a positive perception about Canadian schools, and were generally satisfied with their child's schooling. When reflecting on their younger years, they mirrored Masud's (2018) discussion of the disconnect between school and home in Syria. Syrian parents only entered the school twice a year, to register the children and to pick up their report cards at the end of the year. That's it. They felt there was no reason to meet regularly with the teacher or school. The interference was unnecessary, even detrimental.

In Canada, attending school functions outside the first and last day of school demonstrated heavy involvement. Through hours of conversations, families provided suggestions and insight which provided three main ways schools can improve for our refugee families. The families interviewed felt educators must work to (a) become culturally competent teachers; (b) ensure the community is culturally inclusive; and (c) provide adequate community supports based on the educational needs of all groups in the school.

Culturally Competent Teachers

The families interviewed wanted a learning environment which increased the connection between the home and school culture so they could be more involved in their child's education. Culturally competent teachers accept and respect students' different cultural backgrounds and customs, alternative ways of communicating, and various traditions and values (Diller & Moule, 2005). They spoke positively of the teachers who provided strong personal outreach, warm and nonjudgmental communication, and conveyed respect for Syrian refugee parents' concerns.

As educators, we must examine our own attitudes and behaviors so we can ensure we are not imposing any undue hardship or judgement on a different style of parenting or way of being. Honoring diversity is a commitment laid out in Canadian school's strategic plans. Therefore, teachers owe it to their students to support every family regardless of background.

Inclusive School Community

The Syrian families represented believed an open and receptive school and staff would allow Syrian families to approach the school without reservation. Syrian parents suggested

offering more community events to help families mingle and meet one another. They exemplified cultural events and activities where students and families can gather to enjoy cuisine from different countries. One family suggested an art night where each family member creates and contributes a piece of art work for the school community. Two special requests were made for these events: the absence of alcohol and presence of non-pork food options.

They wished for a night to hear about community programs for their families, held in Arabic. In an inclusive school environment free from judgment or bias, the parents could comfortably seek help from the school and ask teachers and counselors questions about their children's social development and psychological well-being.

Community Supports

The families interviewed felt isolated from community events. They did not feel they were being intentionally excluded; however, they were not aware of many of the events taking place around them. My discussions with a local city counselor provided suggestions such as attending the local coffee-with-a-counselor to discuss issues of interest to them. The language barriers complicate solutions like these; however, providing families with an easy-to-access list of places to find activities for their children will ensure families feel connected to their communities.

Syrian community organizations or other local organizations should raise parents' awareness of their rights to be involved in their children's education, the potential problems that may arise if they are not involved, and the potential benefits if they become involved. For example, community support programs may include (a) holding parenting workshops and seminars to empower parents to become involved in their children's schooling; and (b) developing a parent resource website in both Arabic and English that educates and disseminates reliable information sources about the Canadian education system to promote Syrian refugee's parental school involvement.

CONCLUSION

When parents and teachers work together, they will have a positive impact on a child's development and learning. Therefore, each school should seek to develop an effective partnership with parents (Macleod-Brudenell, 2004). According to Weine (2008), having refugee

families involved in their children's education acts as a protective factor against cumulative risks and helps ensure success. This study provides more context for these families and allows teachers to understand the first steps to support Syrian families.

My research project looked only at involvement for Syrian families; therefore, it is impossible to generalize findings to all refugee or newcomer families. This study took place in an elementary setting which differs from secondary school. Since the sample size is small (one urban school), future users of the findings must be careful when applying these findings to a different context (e.g. rural setting).

Looking forward, spending more time collecting qualitative data from Syrian families and narrowing in on the different definitions of parenting would help schools understand how to connect more effectively. More voices will help fill the gap in research for Syrian families and support an increasingly significant group in our school system. Syrian families do not seek to alienate themselves from schools. They crave the same connection other families experience. Understanding the factors which affect parental involvement for Syrian families promotes and maintains strong relationships. This helps all stakeholders align their priorities for the benefit of student learning.

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APPENDIX A

Epstein's (2010) Model of Parental Involvement

1. **Parenting:** Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.
 - Parent education and other courses
 - Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services.
 - Home visits at transition points to elementary, middle, and high school
2. **Communicating:** Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress
 - Language translators
 - Conferences at least once a year
 - Regular schedule of useful notices, phone calls and newsletters
3. **Volunteering:** Recruit and organize parent help and support
 - School and classroom volunteer programs
 - Parent room for volunteer work and meetings
 - Annual survey to identify talents of volunteers
4. **Learning at Home:** Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning
 - Information for families with skills required for students in all subjects at each grade
 - Information on homework policies
5. **Decision-making:** Include families as participants in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives
 - Active parent organization
 - District-level advisory councils
6. **Collaborating with Community:** Coordinate resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school, and provide services to the community
 - Provide information for families on community health
 - Provide information for the community on community activities