

Factors Influencing Parental Involvement on Saudi Students from Parents' Perspectives

Refah Ahmed Aldawsari, Ph.D.,
University of Hafr Al Batin, Saudi Arabia
E-mail: raldawsari@uhb.edu.sa

Abstract

Parental involvement has received a great deal of attention in educational research, practice, and policy. The study examines the influence of parental involvement on students as one of the main predictors of students' academic achievement and success. Data collection in this study involved interviewing 21 parents whose children study in primary schools in different locations in Saudi Arabia. This study considered the following research question: What are the perspectives of Saudi parents about barriers that hinder parental involvement at selected primary schools in Saudi Arabia? Findings of the study shows that lack of communication between families and school is one of the barriers that decreases the level of parental involvement and discourage parents to engage in schools' activities or attend parent-teacher conferences. Participants felt that they were not welcomed in schools when they wanted to ask about their children's educational progress or behavioral issues. Another concern is lack of time for working parents who are not able to attend schools' events. More research is needed to understand the influence of parental involvement for Saudi families.

Keywords: Parental involvement, academic achievement, students' success, children's education, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Parental involvement has received a great deal of attention in educational research, practice, and policy. For decades, research has been done to measure the relationship between parental involvement and children educational success, and achievement. According to Jowett and Baginsky (1988), parental involvement is defined as “the phrase which encompasses a broad spectrum of activities which have a common theme of seeking to bring together in some way the separate domains of home and school”. Parental involvement improves students’ outcomes in terms of attendance, behavior, and motivation. Students whose parents are involved in their education are more successful, have a positive attitude towards the school, and have better self-esteem and self-confidence. Lack of parental involvement can lead to poor students’ performance, violent behavior, high rates of suspension, and lower graduation rates (Balfanz, Herzog & Mac Iver, 2007).

In Saudi Arabia, educators, policymakers and researchers are more concerned of parental involvement for Saudi families as a key indicator of students’ success. In 2017, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has launched an Initiative called “Ertiqa”, in order to increase the level of positive parental involvement and help Saudi students to succeed. “Ertiqa” is one of the initiatives of the National Transformation Program (NTP) that tends to achieve Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. This initiative focused on strengthening a relationship between the school and family to improve the quality of education and enhance students’ performance (Ertiqa, 2019). The purpose of this initiative is to have 80 percent of Saudi families participate in the educational process of their children by 2030 (Ertiqa, 2019). This paper examines the influence of parental involvement on Saudi students as one of the main predictors of students’ academic achievement and success.

The Purpose of the Study:

Barriers to parental participation in the schools are discussed in this paper as well as how to eliminate these barriers from Saudi parents' perspective. The study tends to increase the awareness of the significant role of parents' involvement in school in order to enhance the educational experience of their children.

Theoretical Framework

Following Pierre Bourdieu's perspective of cultural capital theory, interviews with Saudi parents were conducted to identify and understand challenges they face when they engage and participate in their children' education.

Cultural capital referred to the resources, knowledge and skills that an individual acquired from his experience. It is a power resource and an indicator of one's social class. It refers to the knowledge that a person acquired from his family and cultural background. There are some signals that can show how much cultural capital an individual has such as the level of parental involvement, extracurricular activities, and participation in cultural activities.

Bourdieu argued that students come to school with various levels of cultural capital depending on their socioeconomic status and their background. Students from underrepresented groups face more barriers to adjust to school. There is a correlation between the cultural capital and students' success. The more students are aware of the dominant cultural capital, the more they will succeed academically. Using Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the researcher highlighted the barriers' Saudi parents face when they engage in their children's education. The awareness of cultural differences from both teachers and parents is important to help parents to involve effectively in schools.

Literature Summary

Parental engagement in schools is one of the important factors that help students to do better and achieve more in classrooms. Research has consistently shown that parental involvement in schools is correlated to students' success (Jeynes 2015; Graves & Wright, 2011; Mattingly,

Prislin, McKenzie, Rodrigues, & Kayzar (2002). According to previous studies, parental involvement in children's education is one of the significant factors for psychological and social development of children, and it helps students to achieve well and succeed academically (Epstein, 1995; Ritblatt, Beatty, Cronan, & Ochoa, 2002; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Wilder, 2014). Studies have shown that benefits' of parental involvement include better academic achievement, higher rates of attendance, improved behavior, and good relationship between parents and teachers (Jeynes, 2003, 2005; Machen, Wilson & Notar, 2005; Schaefer, 1972; Levenstein, 1974). Studies affirmed that parent involvement helps to reduce the dropout rates among students (Lareau, 1989). Therefore, students do better in schools when their parents or families engage more in schools' activities.

Parental involvement can be defined differently based on different perspectives of stakeholders (parents, students, community, or teachers). In their study "Emerging Issues in School, Family, & Community Connections: Annual Synthesis", Jordan, Orozco, and Averett (2001) defined parental involvement as "family and community involvement frequently means helping reach goal defined by the schools (administrators and teachers) that reflect only school values and priorities" (p.10). Parental involvement does not only include participating in schools' activities but also attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in the schools and helping students with homework. Parents view parental involvement differently; some parents may consider parental involvement as interference in teachers' job, while others think that parental involvement means helping children with their homework. According to Alba, Sloan, and Sperling (2011), the meaning of parental involvement varies from one country to another. In Germany, parents are involved in their children's education when they help their children in homework. In the United Kingdom, parent involvement is to help children to get admission in one of the best schools. In the United States, involvement includes participating in schools' activities or decision making.

School personnel have to make sure parents know the meaning of parental involvement because it varies among different countries. It is a significant issue for both parents and teachers to be aware of the differences between other cultures.

In the U.S., parents are expected to involve in their children's education. If they don't get involved, teachers may think that parents don't care of the education of their children.

Parents' support and encouragement play a significant role in students' academic achievement and facilitating their success (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). Studies show that many immigrants reported that "their parents were the most influential motivating factor, and continued to be the main impetus for succeeding in their undergraduate studies" (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). Since parental involvement is the key to student achievement, lack of parental involvement can lead to poor student performance, bad or violent behavior, high rates of suspension, lower grades and lower graduation rates (Balfanz et al., 2007).

Parental involvement is linked to social class of parents in society. Upper- and middle-class families engage in school more than lower- or working-class parents. Studies suggest that SES, race and ethnicity are significant predictors of the level of family engagement in schools (Coleman, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lareau, 1989). However, Epstein (1995) believed that parental involvement impacted students positively regardless of race, socio-economic status (SES), or parents' cultural background. In *Beyond Social Class: Cultural Resources and Educational Participation among Low-Income Black Parents*, Diamond (1999-2000) explained that the differences between the social class and the parent participation in schools is because that low-income families do not value education as families from upper or middle class, which led to an ineffective parental engagement in schools. Parents from low- or working-class family believe that teachers are responsible for the education of their children. They do not believe of the shared responsibility, and they know little information about curriculum and education system.

Parents from the working class believe that teachers and administrators are better in understanding what is better for the education of their children, which led to less participating in making decisions regarding their children' education (Lareau,1989). Parents from low or middle SES lack the skills, self-esteem, and confidence to support their children academically. Additionally, the lack of awareness about the important role that parents play in the education of their children lead them to less engage in school activities (Lareau, 2003).

On the other hand, families from upper and middle class are more connected to the school. They have more education and they know how the education systems work. They also believe in the shared responsibility as a factor of student success and to improve the school performance. They provide their children with all tools they want to succeed. They have the skills and knowledge to help their children to improve their performance and achievement.

Parents are able to develop good relationships with schools because of social capital they have. Social network is an important factor that helps to engage more in the school. Parents know from other parent about upcoming conferences, and they also know from each other their rights and responsibilities with regard to the education of their children (Lareau, 2003). Parents from middle class criticize amount of homework given for their children every day and in the weekends. They are aware that they influence decision making process in the school.

Families are more likely to be disconnected from the school system due to various factors, such as lack of understanding the significance of home-school involvement, lack of hostility on the part of school personnel (Bermúdez and Márquez, 1996). According to a study conducted by Kristin Turney & Grace Kao, (2009), barriers to parental involvement included parents' work schedule (51%), safety problems in getting to the school (2%), and problems with transportation (4%). Another reason that makes parents alienated from school is their low academic expectations.

Some parents are disconnected to school because they feel that some teachers focus on the negative aspects of students' learning, behavior or attitudes. Working- and low-class parents see teaching as a job, and teachers are doing their job. They believe that teachers know better than them because they lack confidence and knowledge. They do not understand how the education system works, so they tend to depend on teachers in all academic issues. Those parents are deferential more than demanding to teachers. The lack of awareness about the important role they play in the education of their children lead them to less engage in school activities (Lareau, 2003). Another reason that makes parents disconnected to school is their low academic expectations. Parents from lower class, have less education; they also don't value education.

Many parents want to participate in school activities and decision-making processes of the schools, but they don't know how to support their children and engage in the school. Other reasons that discourage parental involvement in schools is the lack of English proficiency, especially immigrant parents who speak English as a second language.

Methodology

Design

The present study employed a qualitative method, which is based on an interview design.

This qualitative method is appropriate because it is the best way to explore in-depth perspectives of lived experience of participants. According to Seng (1998), qualitative researchers “do not really discover “truth” ... rather we glean facts ... that contribute to socially situated, tentative, temporary understandings” (45). To shed light on the influence of parental involvement for Saudi families, semi-structured interviews with 21 parents were conducted to know more about their perspectives of parental involvement and the barriers that may hinder parents' participation in their children' educational process.

Based on the literature review and the theoretical framework, a set of interview questions were used to gather qualitative textual data. Sample of the study was randomly selected from three elementary public and private schools in three different geographical locations (eastern, central and western region) in Saudi Arabia. An invitation letter was sent via email to principals of selected schools to send it to parents to encourage them to participate in the study. Demographic data were collected on participants included age, gender, education level, employment status, income level, marital status, number of children, and age of children. The research was conducted during the 2018-2019 school year.

Participants

The sample consisted of 21 Saudi parents or guardians. The participants' age ranged between 27 and 65. Most of the participants were women, 14 participants have undergraduate degrees, 5 of them hold masters and Ph.D. degrees. The majority of the participants had an annual family income of US \$30,000 or less.

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews lasted between 40 and 60 min, based on participants' interests in the topic under discussion. Probe-questions were used to encourage participants to provide more information about their experiences and perspectives. The first part of the interviews focused on parents' perspectives of parental involvement in education. Then, participants were asked about barriers that impede parents from involving in school life. The third part of the interviews explored ways to increase parental involvement in school.

Procedures

Qualitative data were carefully read and systematically analyzed using a thematic analysis technique. Thematic analysis is one of the most widely used qualitative data analysis techniques developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interviews had been recorded with the parents' permission using a digital voice recorder. Interviews with participants were taped recorded, transcribed, and coded manually and electronically by using NVivo 9 (QSR International). Data saturation was reached when no new insights arise (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003). To ensure the ethical conduct of this study, participants' identities are not identified, their real names were not used to preserve their privacy, and their demographic data and answers were kept confidential. To increase trustworthiness, all qualitative data were coded by a colleague with a doctorate degree.

Research Questions

The study examined Saudi parental involvement in their children's' education. The purpose of the study is to explore potential barriers to parent involvement in their children's education. This study considered the following research question: What are the perspectives of Saudi parents about barriers that hinder parental involvement at selected primary schools in Saudi Arabia?

Findings

A. Collaboration

Participants of this study highlighted that collaboration between parents and teachers is a motivating factor that helps them as stakeholders to better understand and appreciate other

cultures and different background. According to the sample of the study, the concept of parental involvement in schools is relatively obvious. The majority of interviewees defined parental involvement as a collaboration between parents and schools' personnel in order to follow up with students' intellectual, and academic progress.

Parental involvement in children's education, according to the participants, builds bridges of appreciation between students, their parents and schools. Positive relation between family and school is multidimensional relationship; school and family complete each's other roles. Parental engagement in children' education helps both students to achieve to succeed, and it helps school to achieve their goals. One interviewee mentioned: "Parental engagement is a collaboration between parents and school to achieve the best possible results so that an interconnected environment is created that complements its core role". Another stated: "It is (parental involvement) a cooperation to achieve the goal. It is a positive step between teachers and parents for the good of children and to know about negative behaviors of the child in order to address them".

On the other hand, parental involvement is not limited to collaborating between schools and parents, but it includes an effective communication, participation in events and activities held inside and outside schools. Encouraging families' members to be part of their child's learning improves the quality of children's outcomes and achievement according to the study's interviewees. Most participants stressed that parental engagement in children's education does not improve students' academic progress, but also enhances their academic achievement and behaviors.

B. Barriers Impeding Parental Involvement

i- lack of communications

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is lack of communication between home and school, which is one of the barriers that decreases the level of parental involvement and discourage parents to engage in schools' activities or attend parent-teacher conferences.

Participants of this study believed that some teachers or school personnel require skills to effectively communicate with parents. Poor communication is a barrier that hinders good communication between teachers and parents' community. Interviewees affirmed that teachers are required to be skilled in communicating with parents from different educational and cultural background.

Interviewees suggested ways to enhance the level of parental engagement in school; 1) develop effective new ways of communication between parents and school. Using traditional methods are no longer effective to engage parents. Interviewees highlighted the importance of adapting schools' rules and policies with changing circumstances. Additionally, parents highlighted the importance of offering training or courses for both teachers and parents in order to enhance the communication skills for school personnel or community members.

ii- Not welcoming environment

Some participants felt that they were not welcomed in schools in some/few cases when they wanted to ask about their children's educational progress or behavioral issues. Parents interviewed in this study affirmed that they need to know that teachers value the sharing responsibility between home and school to help students learn and succeed.

Levels of parents' partnerships will reduce when families' members do not feel that they welcomed in schools. Role of schools, according to the participants of the study, is to make sure that parents feel welcomed and appreciated so they can affect positively in the educational process of their children.

iii- Lack of time

Another concern is lack of time for working parents who are not able to attend schools' events. Rigid work schedules for some participants impact the level of parental involvement because some parents prefer that schools ask them about their preference time to attend schools. One of the participants mentioned: "I think that time of work of the parent may interfere with the time of school activity or the parents' council. What if parents were consulted about the most appropriate times for them to be in school".

The majority of school's events occur in the official working hours from 9 am to 2 pm. Some schools may send invitations for parents to attend one or two days prior the event. From parents' perspective, school rules are rigid and should be more flexible to encourage more parents to engage in school. Changing time of schools' events to be in the evening or in the weekend will have a positive impact on increasing the attendance rate of parents according to the participants of the study.

Discussion

It is remarkable that the concept of parental involvement is obvious to Saudi parents who were interviewed in this study. The majority of them have defined it as "cooperation" between schools and parents to improve students academically and help schools to achieve their objectives. In Saudi Arabia, the concept of parental involvement may be relatively recent. However, parents were aware of its significant role in the educational process of their children regardless of the socioeconomic status of the participants in the study.

Schools have to do more efforts to engage hard to reach parents. Schools' administrators can enhance the effectiveness of parental involvement by implementing better ways to communicate with parents, for example, asking parents about their reasons of their less engagement with schools and implementing some of their suggestions. Parents and families should feel comfortable and welcomed. It is also important to involve parents in a decision-making process, especially in choosing the right time for parents to meet. Additionally, administrators of schools have to ask parents about issues they face while they engage in schools. Schools' personnel should make sure that parents' voice is heard especially in terms of finding new ways to foster parental engagement in school life, and make parents feel that they are included in the education system. Teachers have to be aware of other cultures because this will help better value differences between cultures. Understanding other cultures help teachers and parents to communicate effectively with each other.

Competitions among schools are high.

Therefore, schools should have an advertising platform to promote their goals and to attract the largest number of stakeholders, whether they are families or other institutions of society. Nowadays, parents prefer to communicate via social media. Other traditional ways of communications are no longer attracting parents and families. More schools have formal accounts on social media to promote their mission, vision, and to connect with families. New social media such as Instagram and Snapchat provide parents with a positive image of schools, and it breaks barriers that may impede families' engagement in schools.

Implications

More research is needed to understand the influence of parental involvement for Saudi families. Schools have to encourage parents to involve more effectively in their children's education by implementing more strategies that foster the parent involvement for families. To improve educational opportunities and outcomes of Saudi students and to increase the level of parental involvement, the researcher suggests providing parents with the needed guidance, resources and information. Saudi Parents often do not involve in the education of their children because they do not know much about the resources available for them in the school. Schools have to encourage parents to involve more effectively in their children's education by implementing more strategies that foster the parent involvement for families. For example, offering workshops for parents on how to communicate effectively in schools.

Conclusion

Educators are concerned about increasing the number of parents who engage in schools as a key predictor of students' academic success. Many parents pay attention to the importance of education in their children' life, however, the level of positive parental involvement varies from one family to another based on the family background and socioeconomic status. Some factors that affect the level of parental involvement include lack of communications, lack of time that does not permit working parents to participate in school, and parents' feeling that they are not welcomed in the school. Parents want to be involved in their children's learning,

But they don't know how to do so. Therefore, schools' role is to provide resources for both teachers and parents to increase the level and efficiency of parental engagement. The more educators know about the influence of parent involvement, the better schools can be for these students and their families, and the more students will succeed.

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