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JOURNAL OF
Educational &
Psychological
Sciences

Students' Perceptions of Parental Involvement in United Arab Emirates Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study explores students' perceptions of parental involvement in their education, forms of parental involvement, and barriers to parental involvement in secondary schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A total of 180 students from eighteen schools participated in eighteen focus group interviews from each of the nine educational zones in the UAE.

All participants agreed that parental involvement at the secondary school level is important as it motivates students to work hard. However, most of the students prefer that their parents participate in school activities rather than helping them with their studies at home. Barriers to parental involvement at this level include time commitment, level of students' achievement, poor communication skills, students' attitudes, boring activities, parents' attitudes, parents' characteristics, and parents' views of education for girls. Some implications for school administrators are presented to assist in involving more parents at the secondary school level.

Key words: parental involvement, academic achievement, secondary schools, educational policy.

آَراء طلاب المرحلة الثانوية حول مشاركة أولياء الأمور في تعليم أبنائهم في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة

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الملخص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى استقصاء آراء طلاب المرحلة الثانوية حول مشاركة أولياء الأمور في تعليم أبنائهم، وتحديد أنواع تلك المشاركات، والمعوقات التي تقف حائلاً دون مشاركاتهم وتحد منها. وتم استطلاع آراء ١٨٠ طالب وطالبة من خلال مقابلتهم في ١٨ جلسة جماعية، وينتمي هؤلاء الطلاب إلى ١٨ مدرسة في ثماني مناطق تعليمية بدولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة.

ولقد أسفرت نتائج الدراسة عن أهمية مشاركة أولياء الأمور في تعليم أبنائهم باعتبارها حافزاً للاجتهاد الدراسي. وانتهت إلى أن معظم أفراد العينة يفضلون مشاركة أولياء أمورهم في أنشطة المدرسة عن مساعدتهم دراسياً في المنزل.

وحددت الدراسة المعوقات التي تحد من مشاركة أولياء الأمور في تعليم أبنائهم في المرحلة الثانوية ومنها: ضيق الوقت، تدني مستوى انجاز الطالب في المدرسة، افتقار المعلمين لمهارة التواصل، اتجاهات الطلاب السلبية، عدم جاذبية الأنشطة المدرسية، خصائص أولياء الأمور، رأي أولياء الأمور في تعليم الإناث. ولقد خلصت الدراسة إلى التوصيات والمقترحات التي من شأنها تفعيل مشاركة أولياء الأمور في تعليم أبنائهم في المرحلة الثانوية.

الكلمة المفتاحية: مشاركة أولياء الأمور، التحصيل الأكاديمي، المرحلة الثانوية، السياسة التعليمية.

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Introduction

Parents' involvement with their children's education usually decreases as their children grow older and particularly when they enter secondary school (Epstein, 1995; Street, 1998). However, research has shown that parental involvement at the secondary school level is just as essential for student success as it is at the elementary level (Simon, 2000). Further, parental involvement in secondary schools tends to be less frequent with higher achieving students (Crosnoe, 2001). While secondary school students often welcome their parents' support and encouragement in their school activities, they also prefer to be autonomous in their studies (Spera, 2005).

Parental involvement can improve communication between parents and their children and enhance student achievement, attendance, and study habits while decreasing the number of behavioral problems (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems & Doan Holbein, 2005). In addition, students often look forward to continuing their higher education because of their parents' high expectations for their academic success (Miller, 1999). Indeed, school / community involvement - with parents as the main partner - can lead to noteworthy improvements in student achievement and school quality (Sanders & Lewis, 2005). Based on a national education longitudinal study in the USA, Fan (2001) found that parental involvement was comparable across four ethnic groups: Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. Further, the study confirmed that parents' expectations for their children's education play an important role in students' academic achievement.

Nowadays, more than 1,000 schools, 100 districts, and 17 State Departments of Education in the USA are involved in parental and

community involvement programs because of their positive outcomes (Epstein, 2005).

School practices and the attitudes of parents and students could promote or hinder a successful partnership between the school and the parents. Parents complain that they are not informed by the school about their children's progress and that their roles are not clearly defined. As well, teachers complain that parents are not interested in school activities and that it is difficult to get in touch with working parents (Tatto, Rodriguez, Gonzalez-Lantz, Miller, Busscher, Trumble, 2001). On the other hand, teachers do not want to initiate communication with parents, but they do want parents to contact them regularly at school (Barge & Loges, 2003).

In a study of parental involvement in West Texas, teachers, parents, and students believed that parental involvement is important in education but problems arose from unclear roles for parents and ineffective communication and misperceptions among teachers, parents, and students. For example, teachers thought that parents were not interested in school activities and that students did not want their parents to be involved in their education. Conversely, parents thought that teachers wanted limited participation from parents, and students said that they wanted their parents to be involved in school activities. Indeed, parents prefer to be involved in schools for reasons other than academic ones, and they favor personal communications (Halsey, 2005).

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Darabool (1994) explored the factors that influence student achievement. She found that parental involvement, as well as the home environment and family structure, influence student achievement. In fact, parents in the UAE are mostly involved in parenting at home, and only a few parents are involved in school activities. Most parents who contact teachers to learn how they can help their children at home are parents of elementary students. On the other hand, few teachers communicate with parents and then it is usually to report children's low achievement or their behavior (Al-Taneiji, 2001).

Statement of the problem

Researchers and practitioners agree that parental involvement in elementary schools is useful and easy to observe, but that its impact at

the secondary school level is unclear (Baker, 1997; Street, 1998). Many studies have examined the perspectives of principals, teachers, and parents on parental involvement, (Baker, 1999; Bauch, 2000; Giles, 2006; Sheldon, 2002), but few have focused on the perspectives of secondary school students. In UAE schools, parental involvement has been relatively unexplored. Therefore this study was conducted to explore students' perceptions of parental involvement, forms of parental involvement, and the obstacles to parental involvement in secondary schools in the UAE.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do secondary school students perceive their parents' involvement in their school?
2. What forms of parental involvement (if any) would students like to see in their school?
3. What hinders parental involvement at the secondary school level?

Significance

The present study explores students' perceptions of parental involvement, forms of parental involvement, and the obstacles to parental involvement in secondary schools in the UAE. The findings will help school administrators consider strategies, based on what students suggest and prefer, to foster active partnerships and develop relationships with parents. Also, this study will help school administration to learn about obstacles to parental involvement and what they should do to overcome them. Further, this study will provide support and ideas for policy makers wishing to actively involve parents in the secondary school education of their children.

Limitations of the study

The semi-structured interview format of the focus groups provided valuable information through participant interaction, but individuals who were less verbal and less able to share their perspectives may have felt unable to participate. Moreover, the study did not include the perspectives of parents or teachers, which would generate a more complete picture of parents' involvement in secondary schools. Lastly, these study findings are limited to

the United Arab Emirates and Gulf countries with similar cultures.

Methodology and Procedures

This is a qualitative study in which focus group interviews were used to address the study questions. A focus group approach is designed to gather data based on questions for several individuals at the same time in small groups (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This study was conducted during November and December 2005 to generate in-depth information about students' perceptions of parental involvement at the secondary level.

Participants

Ten students from two schools (one school for boys and one school for girls), from each of the nine educational zones in the UAE (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, Al-Ain, and the Western zone) took part in the focus groups. The ten students (five from the art track and five from the science track) were randomly selected from 11 and 12 grades to participate from each school. Thus a total of 180 students, representing the eighteen schools, comprised this sample.

The students within each focus group had different demographic backgrounds. Each group had parents who had not completed the secondary school education, some parents with university level education, and some illiterate parents. Dubai and Abu Dhabi focus groups had families of sibling numbers ranging from 7 to 10, while members of the other focus groups had families of 7 to15 siblings. Two to three in each focus group had parents ranging in age from 51-60, while the age of the rest of the parents was younger than 50. Most of the focus group members lived with both parents, but three members from different focus groups lived with their mothers only.

Instrument

The interview questions were developed based on the study questions such as: How often do your parents visit your school? If your parents visit the school, what do they do? How does the school staff welcome your parents? How does the school communicate with your parents? Why does

your school contact your parents? Who, if anyone, helps you study at home? Why do your parents do attend (or not attend) school activities?

Two professors from the College of Education reviewed the interview questions to determine if they would answer the study questions. As a result, a slight modification on the interview questions was made regarding the language.

Procedures

Each school principal received an envelope from the researcher which included a letter that explained the study purpose, the interview protocol, demographic details for each student, and one blank cassette tape to be handed to the facilitator. The facilitator was instructed to ask questions for clarification.

The facilitators met with the students in the school's meeting room to explain the process of the interview. Fourteen out of the eighteen focus groups agreed to have the interviews audio taped; the remaining four did not wish to have their responses taped but, at the request of their facilitators, had their responses recorded in writing.

At the beginning of the interview, the facilitator distributed a sheet of paper seeking demographic information from each group member, including: parents' levels of education, sibling numbers and ages; the range of parents' ages, parents' marital status, and the range of parents' monthly incomes. Facilitators began each focus group interview with an introduction to the research project. The interview was conducted in the Arabic language and translated into English. On average, each focus group interview lasted about one hour.

Data Analysis

The interviews obtained from the focus groups were transcribed during the months of January, February, and March 2006. The data were examined for recurring key words and concept codes, which were grouped into categories representing central themes (Creswell, 2003). Each question was analyzed separately by one researcher, and the responses from all eighteen focus groups were then compiled together when developing the themes. The number of commonly agreed comments was calculated

using percentages. A second researcher independently read and coded the raw data to validate the initial results and to check the consistency of the emerging themes. Interpretive differences led to re-analysis by both researchers until agreement was reached.

Results

Students from the eighteen focus groups responded to each of the research questions as outlined below.

Question 1: How do secondary school students perceive their parents' involvement in their school?

After examining the students' perceptions of their parents' involvement, two main themes emerged from the focus group responses: parents' involvement as a motivation, and improving relationships with their teachers and their parents.

All eighteen focus groups agreed that their parents' involvement is essential for them to excel at school. A large majority (90 percent of all participants) said that their parents' involvement motivated them to work harder. A student from ABB said, "When my father attends school activities, I feel proud of him, and this pushes me to work harder to meet his expectations of me" Another student from FG stated, "When I see my mother in the school, I want the teachers to tell her how good I am".

Parental involvement in schools appears to improve the relationship between students and teachers and between parents and their children. As one student from UB indicated, "It could also improve the relationship with our teachers when parents come to solve problems that we cannot solve on our own with the teachers" Also, a student from ALB asserted, "Parents' visits to the school could improve the relationship between parents and us because it gives us the feeling that our parents care about us"

On the other hand, students who do not do well might not want their parents to participate in school activities as their parents' involvement might expose their poor performance in school. As one student from RB explained, "High achieving students like their parents' participation in the school because these students will be rewarded, but low achieving students will be punished."

Question 2: What forms of parental involvement (if any) would students

like to see in their school?

For the forms of parental involvement, two main themes emerged from the focus group responses: supportive environment at home and school activities.

Most of these students (90 percent of focus group members) did not need help with their studies. They all reported that all they wanted was a comfortable and supportive study environment at home. As a student from ALG said, "I want my parents to support me at home by providing a quiet environment and to participate in school activities so that my teachers and friends can get to know them" What this age group wanted most is independence, as reflected by one student from SG: "I can study without my parents' help; I am older now".

The school students in the present study preferred to have their parents take a more active part in school activities rather than being involved with their studies at home. As one student from UB asserted, "I do not need my father to study with me at home, but I do want him to participate in the school activities" A student from WB group suggested, "Why does not the school recognize those parents who are involved in school activities or who visit the school with a certificate or gift so that other parents get jealous and participate too?"

Question 3: What hinders parental involvement at the secondary school level?

Eight barriers to parental involvement recurred in the focus groups. They were: time commitment, level of students' achievement, poor communication skills, students' attitudes, uninteresting activities, parents' attitudes, parents' characteristics, and parents' views of education for girls.

The vast majority of students (90 percent) across the eighteen focus groups reported parents' tight schedules as an obstacle to parental involvement in school activities. According to the students, their fathers were usually busy at work while their mothers have to attend to the needs of the younger children. One student from ABG lamented, "My father's business takes up most of his time, and my mother is busy with my younger brothers and sisters" Furthermore, one member from UG suggested, "Schools should notify parents in advance about school activities so parents can put them

on their calendar. Why do not they invite parents on the weekend as they are working during the week?" Another suggestion came from a student from the SG group: "Parents should have the right to take time off from their work to visit and participate in our school activities".

Parents' participation in school activities seems to be dictated by their children's achievement in school. Parents of high achieving students tend to skip school activities because they believe that their children do not need any support. As one focus group member from AB put it, "Because of my high scores, my parents feel that they do not need to get involved in school activities" This was echoed by another student from FG who seemed to sympathize with her mother's lack of involvement: "My mother trusts me, so she doesn't visit the school"

Poor communication between teachers and parents also can hamper parents' efforts to get involved with their children's school. In certain cases, teachers were reported to have poor communication and interpersonal skills. For example, a focus group member from ALG commented, "My teachers do not know how to talk with my parents, maybe because the teachers are young and shy" Besides, many teachers appear to focus on the negative side of things when they talk with parents about their children. More often than not, this practice can prevent parents from visiting the school as it can cause them embarrassment. As a student from FG mentioned, "Some teachers put so much focus on the negative side that parents' motivation (if any) to participate in school activities becomes seriously affected. Also, I do not want my teachers to complain about me because this causes a lot of friction at home".

These students want the school to treat their parents as friends and to encourage them to build strong relationships with their children. A student from AB said, "I do not want the school to talk about my achievements. I want the school to welcome my parents and let them participate in different school activities, not to treat them like strangers."

Students' concerns form yet another barrier that stands in the way of parental involvement. Many students do not bother to show their parents the progress reports that the school sends home with them. One focus group member from SB noted, "Some students, and low achievers in particular, do not give their parents their school reports because they do not want

problems with their parents." On the other hand, some students (30 percent of total number of focus group members) do not want their parents to come to the school because they feel that they are mature enough to take care of themselves. What they need instead is independence - with some guidance from their parents. One student from ABB was unequivocal about this: "Parental involvement in the education of their children is no doubt important, but I don't want my parents to interfere in my affairs. All I want from them is supervision and guidance." Another student from DB said, "I don't want my parents to come to my school. They can show their interest in my education at home."

The overwhelming majority of students (90 percent) across the eighteen focus groups reported that some schools lack interesting activities that might attract parents to school. This was expressed bluntly by one student from WG: "Most of their activities are boring, and they are the same every year." From the students' perspective, schools need to create interesting activities for parents and use different ways to reach parents. One focus group member from SG suggested the use of mobile messages, emails, and telephone calls.

Another suggestion came from a member of ABG group: "Schools should ask parents what they want from the schools; if they do this, parents will feel that the schools want them to be involved, and they will go to the schools."

Many students (70 percent of all participants) reported that some parents are old, sick or uneducated. One student from SB said that "My father is old and sick, so he cannot attend the school or talk with me about my education." Another student from WB revealed that "My mother is not well educated and does not understand what the school requires from me and what she should do to help me." Parents' level of income or freedom to travel could also affect visits to their children's school. A member of the focus group from FG reported that "Many mothers do not have transportation to the school, and, therefore, find it difficult to attend school activities. One of these mothers is my mother."

Further, some students (30 percent of all participants) felt that their parents do not care about their children's education. This was articulated by one student from WB who said, "My fathers' only concern is that I

attend school every morning; what I do there is not his business." Further, a student from ALB said, "My father cares more about his business and his camels." Moreover, a student from ALB responded, "Our parents need to know that their participation in our schools is important for us and them."

Another important factor that prevents some parents from visiting their children's school pertains to their views of education for girls. They believe that education for girls is not essential because their daughters will eventually get married and be supported by their husbands. One female student from UG summed it up well, "On the whole, my parents are only concerned about my brothers' education; they hardly give any notice to my progress in school because I will eventually get married and my husband will take over from my parents."

Discussion

All participants in the eighteen focus groups agreed that their parents' involvement at the secondary school level was important in order to motivate them to work hard and to feel that their parents still care about them. Indeed, the great majority (90 percent) of these students preferred that their parents participate in school activities, and they wanted the schools to specify parents' roles in these activities. These views differ from findings in the USA that secondary school students do not wish their parents to attend school activities (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002).

The secondary school students thought that parental participation in school activities improved the relationship between students and teachers and between parents and their children. Students indicated that they wanted to have positive reports, so they would work hard to please their teachers. In addition, students would then feel that their parents care about them and their parents would want to share with them some of their school activities. These findings mirror those of Barge and Loges (2003), Cordry and Wilson (2004), and Gonzalez (2002) for USA students.

Further, the participants in the study did not like their parents studying with them because they feel that they are old enough to work independently. Besides, almost all participants (90 percent) believe that their parents cannot help them with their studies because they are busy or they are insufficiently educated. These students call on their parents to provide a

supportive environment, conducive to self-study at home. Parents' high educational expectations inspire their children to succeed in their studies (Catsambis, 1998; Fan, 2001). In addition, parents' support at home plays a vital role in their children's study habits (Xu, 2004).

Students reported many barriers that hinder parental involvement at the secondary school level, such as the time commitment for parents who are also committed to their jobs. Another barrier is that some parents consider that their children are able to handle their academic matters without their help. This study demonstrated that children of all ages and achievements levels value parental involvement.

The poor communication skills of teachers were another barrier that students reported. Almost all participants (90 percent) stated that they want their parents to feel comfortable at schools, a finding supported by Nichols-Solomon (2001). Often, parents hesitate to communicate with the teachers when they feel that the school does not care about their needs (Ramirez, 2003).

In addition, boring activities may discourage parents from being involved in school activities. Having extracurricular activities that might motivate parents to get involved at the school was suggested by participants and is reflected in the findings of Sanders, Epstein and Connors-Tadros (1999) and Gbadamosi and Lin (2003) for students in the USA. It also echoes the work of Halsey (2005) who found that parents would rather be involved in school for reasons other than academic ones.

Schools should consider the fact that not all parents feel able to participate in school activities. There are a number of reasons for this, including parents who perceive that their own lack of education means that they may not be helpful in a school, or that they are embarrassed because of it. Other parents may be too old or too ill to travel, or unable to travel for other reasons such as being unwilling to travel on their own. It also seems that parents of lower social class and economic status have extra reasons for not being involved in their children's education. These reasons include lack of transportation, or being busy with work at home or having many children at home. Finally, some female participants reported that, due to the beliefs and traditions of their families, and to the levels of parents' education in some areas of UAE, the education of girls is not valued.

Conclusion and Implications

In this study, the secondary school students believed that parental involvement in their schools and at home are essential to helping them achieve well. They felt that parents should know that they valued their involvement, and called on schools to address the barriers to parental involvement in school activities.

Parents need to know that their children in secondary schools want their support and their involvement in their school activities both at home and at school. Schools can play an important role in fostering active partnerships and developing relationships with their families and communities. They should, therefore, consider their student's strong opinions on the subject of parental involvement, and do serious work to include parents in schools so that they feel welcome and their roles are clear and well defined. Further, schools need support from policy makers to prompt parents to take an active role in their children's education. More research is needed to observe how effective schools involve parents, especially in secondary schools. Based on the results of the study, the following implications should be considered to involve more parents at the secondary school level.

1-Investigating current practices

Parents need to feel that they are welcome in school because their contributions in schools are important to enable schools and families to work together to manage school and societal changes. School principals should care about and show concern for others, demonstrating what the culture of the school should be. If, on the other hand, principals do not model care and do not show concern for others, teachers are unlikely to care and show concern for students or students' parents.

It is important that schools investigate their current relationships with parents. The principals should examine the school atmosphere to see if it is a comfortable one where parents feel that they are welcome. After identifying teachers' practices, the teachers themselves could then determine which of their practices is positive or negative and could reinforce the positive practices and avoid the negative ones. For example, one way to make parents feel welcome is to provide them with a special room at school where they can get together with teachers, and where they can find books and videos on how they can support their children.

2-Scheduling attractive activities

School activities also need to be of interest to the parents. To this end, schools could survey parents, asking them about their needs and welcoming their suggestions. Schools could notify parents in advance about school activities and hold the activities at a weekend or at a time that would be convenient for parents.

3-Recognizing involved parents

Schools can recognize parents who participate in school activities and in their children's education - it is human nature that people want to be appreciated for what they do. Schools might, for example provide certificates of participation, recognize contributing parents in school newsletters or on notice boards have parents' pictures hung on a school wall, or hold meetings at which parents are recognized for their contributions.

4-Communication skills for teachers: In-service training

The lack of communication skills noted by participants in this study suggests that in-service training might assist in enabling teachers to communicate more effectively with parents. In-service training may help teachers build competencies in developing partnership programs with parents. In-service preparation could also be designed to help teachers appreciate that parents come from different backgrounds and have different experiences from each other and from the teachers. These factors should also be taken into consideration in structuring meetings with parents and encouraging them to contribute to their children's education.

Face-to-face communication is still considered the best medium, and school principals could provide lunch or dinner to bring parents together to discuss the importance of parental involvement in their children's education. In addition, schools could develop and distribute brochures that answer commonly asked questions and direct individuals to helpful resources.

5-Supportive parents

Parents need to provide their children with a supportive and comfortable study environment. Parents can be helped through school newsletters, workshops, and by teachers, to understand how to support their children at home while affording them some levels of independence.

6-Descriptive reports

Schools could send home reports that have, in addition to the student's grades, a description of the student's strengths so that parents can reinforce the achievement. According to the participants in this study, parental interest and support, and building on positive aspects of children's education is more likely to encourage students than punishing them for poor grades.

7-Girls' education

Parents need to be aware that being involved in their daughters' education is important in assisting them to succeed. Success in the education field is likely to enhance their girls' skills in managing their homes and in educating the next generation, as well as helping them to participate in working to improve life in the UAE. Helping parents to understand the value of education for girls could be enhanced by schools working with media and talking with parents in interviews and workshops.

8- Support needed from policy makers

Parental involvement in schools requires the support of policy makers in allowing parents to take time off from work to visit their children's schools and to attend their activities. School principals can make available a schedule of anticipated activities for parents to give to their employers when requesting time off to attend their children's activities.

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