Home-School Communications: Multicultural Parents of Children with Disabilities.

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The primary goal of this study was to examine the role of communication between parents of children with special needs and schools. As the multicultural population in United States' schools continues to increase, the need to help teachers understand what parents expect in terms of being able to communicate effectively grows in importance. Understanding cultural expectations of parents is important for teachers to communicate effectively. Parents of children with disabilities may be unsure of their role in their children's education, especially if they were educated in schools outside of the United States. By designing and implementing effective communication programs for parents of students with disabilities, conflict that may arise between parents and school officials can be avoided.

Keywords: parents, home-school communications, multicultural.

Introduction

The rapidly changing demographics of the United States indicate that the number of children from diverse cultural groups who are receiving services through the special education system is increasing. Professionals can expect that families of these children have beliefs and practices that differ from those of the majority of American families in substantial ways (The Center for Public Education, 2012).

In the past few years, special education literature on culturally diverse issues has increased. The majority of this literature has focused on African American and Hispanic families, with a small, but growing body of literature also providing insight into interactions with diverse groups (e.g., Asian Indians, Southeast Asians, and Native Americans; The Center for Public Education, 2012). However, few studies have examined Arab American parents of children with special needs regarding communication with the school and educational professionals who work with their children.

The exact number of Arab Americans (approximately 200,000) living in the Detroit area is unknown due to limitations in ethnic reporting (The Arab American Institute, 2012). Census figures are inaccurate and tend to underestimate the number of Arab immigrants. Arab immigrants in the Detroit metropolitan area came primarily from Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, and Iraq, with smaller numbers from other Arab countries. Iraqi refugees from the Gulf War of 1991 are the latest cultural group to arrive from the Middle East.

Many Arab immigrants have children who will be entering the public education systems. Teachers working with these diverse student populations need to be sensitive to cultural differences that children bring to the classroom. Major differences between Arab and Western families exist in childrearing practices associated with parent-child attachment and separation/individuation (Dwairy, Achoui, Abouserie, & Farah, 2006). For example, parents in the United States place emphasis on early individuation and independence from parents (Hofstede, 2001). Kagan (1984) argued that Americans tend to view children as dependent and undifferentiated from others. In contrast, many Eastern cultures value close interdependence among family members, although this lack of

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autonomy should not be interpreted as a deficiency in the child, but as differences in parental attitudes toward the child's independence (Dwairy, 2004; Trinadis, 1990, 1996). They want their children to be somewhat dependent as a means of encouraging mutual bonding as adults. However, many Arabic parents may view the emphasis on early separation and individuation as lack of adequate love and neglect in parental duty and feel their long-term responsibility for child rearing can enable the future success of their children. These differences, however, can be a source of confusion and misunderstanding between Arabic parents and American educators. For example, when teachers and Arabic parents meet for conferences, misunderstandings resulting from cultural differences may ensue. The teacher may describe the child's performance positively, indicating that he/she participates in class discussions, expresses him/herself, and takes an active leadership role in the classrooms. The Arabic parent may not condone this type of behavior as the child has been taught to be respectful and not stand out in class.

Arabic families value education, with many immigrants stressing the importance of education as part of their children's social growth and have similar aspirations for their sons and daughters (Elkholy, 1976; Suleiman, 1996). Parents encourage their children to become educated for education's sake rather than for utilitarian purposes. Children are expected to study and succeed in school. This expectation, however, differs between boys and girls. High achievement is normal for boys, while girls are expected to get only a modest education. Attitudes toward girls' education vary according to the family's educational standards and values. The differential treatment of boys and girls in terms of education often is associated with concerns for girls' modesty and safety.

Many teachers have not had opportunities to interact with Arab Americans and may not understand differences among immigrant and first-generation parents and children. They lack knowledge of how Arab Americans from different Middle Eastern countries vary in their cultural dispositions. Most teachers and educators tend to think of Arab Americans as a homogeneous culture, although each country has at least one unique culture. Many Arab countries have several ethnic groups (e.g., Iraq has Iraqis, Chaldeans, Kurds) and each ethnic group has a separate culture. Language is a defining indicator of a common culture. Teachers may consider all people from Middle Eastern countries as Arabs because Arabic is the official language of 237 million Arabs living in Middle East countries (Harp, 1998). Researchers (Al-Ani, 1995; Johnson, 1997) suggested that the Arabic language is the language of the Islamic civilization. However, Middle Eastern people from Turkey, Iran, and Israel, as well as Kurds from Northern Iraq do not speak Arabic and are not considered Arabs. Teachers need to be aware of these differences instead of grouping all people from Middle Eastern countries as a single cultural group.

Cultural factors may be important determinants of Arab parent involvement in their children's schools (Moosa, Karabenick, & Adams, 2001). Many parents become involved in formal and informal school activities by spending time with educators, assisting in classrooms, and becoming active members in Parent and Teacher Associations. However, teachers who are unaware of the cultural values of Arabic parents may have difficulty working with Arabic parents who may appear to be reticent about participating in their children's school. Some factors that may impede effective parent-teacher relations include: poor communications between parents and teachers, teachers' use of jargon in communicating with parents, lack of time to get to know parents in informal, nonstressful, nonbureaucratic meetings, and appropriate roles of teachers and parents in educating children (Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005). Instead, educators need to extend invitations to Arab American parents to visit their classroom and understand their sense of concern for all of their children, especially those with special needs. Learning about the Arabic culture could help teachers improve relationships and communication with these parents that could result in greater parent involvement in their children's education. For example, Arabic parents expect teachers to be the authority in the classroom and children to be the passive receivers of knowledge. The parents may appear to be uninvolved in their children's school, because their primary involvement with their children is in the home.

The lack of accurate, unbiased information about Arabic culture has helped create negative stereotypes (Wingfield & Karaman, 2001). Schools in America have been ineffective in reducing negative stereotypes (Suleiman, 1996) and students whose cultures are not valued in schools may feel alienated. Furthermore, students feel that whatever the school does not teach is not

worth learning. As the Arabic culture typically is "referred to in only negative ways . . . all students are miseducated to the extent that they receive only a partial and biased education" (Nieto, 1996, p. 137).

Parental Communication and School Involvement

A common theme that applies to culturally diverse families and their children with disabilities is the need for communication with their children's teachers. Communication between parents of children with disabilities and educational professionals has been mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and is considered a best practice. IDEA's principle of parental participation gives parents the right to obtain access and to control other's access to their children's school records, participate on special education advisory committees, and exercise all the rights and privileges of IDEA to benefit their children (Kroth & Edge, 1997; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). The intent of IDEA was to create an environment of mutual concern through open communication between educators and parents of children with disabilities.

Parents' Role in Special Education

Parents of children with disabilities are expected to be active participants in their children's education by working with school staff to review, revise, and develop their children's individual education plans (IEP). As active participants, parents can provide information regarding their children's abilities, interests, performances, and history. They also are involved in team discussions about their children's needs for special education and related services, as well as supplementary aids and services. According to researchers (e.g., Dwairy, 2010; Joshi et al., 2005; Lake & Billingsley, 2000), parents are encouraged to provide input regarding their children's involvement and progress in general curriculum, participation in state and district-wide assessments, and determination of settings where children can be participate in programs and services offered by appropriate agencies.

As part of the special education process, parental involvement can help hold schools accountable to ensure that students with special needs receive appropriate public education to meet their needs. The proposed outcome of IDEA 2004 provides greater opportunities for parents to participate in IEP's to determine eligibility and placement decisions about their child. The new law requirements, including: (a) participation in the placement decision, (b) input during the evaluation, (c) consent for the evaluation, (d) participation in the eligibility decision, (e) receipt of progress reports, and (f) participation in meetings, offers increased opportunities for parents to be involved in their children's education. Amendments to the 2004 IDEA address school suspension issues when negative behaviors are a result of the child's disability. Students with disabilities are allowed to remain in their placement while awaiting a disciplinary decision from a hearing officer.

Parenting a child with special needs can be both challenging and rewarding. Parents need support from the school, the extended family, and other professionals, although difficulties with the English language can result in problems associated with maintaining contact with teachers. Some Arab American parents may be unfamiliar with procedures that are used to discuss school-related issues. Through routine meetings and face-to-face interactions, parents have opportunities to stay informed. Parents who are aware of predictable procedures and routines are more willing to participate in their children's education. This awareness could enhance their participation, while minimizing misunderstandings. Parent's needs and concerns about their children's education must be addressed if educators want to avoid conflicts.

Parents of children with special needs face many of the same problems as teachers, but with greater intensity. Children are in school for a few hours a day in a limited, controlled situation. However, parents are responsible for their children 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with no vacations, in all kinds of situations, and with all types of demands. School personnel need to consider family strengths. Involvement of parents and families through family-school collaboration is encouraged through informal communication (e.g., written notes between school and home, parent involvement in the classroom and in extracurricular activities, conferences, telephone contact, and technology options, such as email and the Internet; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Parents' cultural diversity can create a complex environment for educators who experience difficulty when attempting to communicate with parents. Effective two-way communication between parents and teachers requires

collaborative relationships that can assist children to function successfully in school. According to Epstein (2001), parents' self-images improve when a collaborative relationship is developed between school and home. School professionals who continue to attempt to contact parents to develop positive communication are usually successful in obtaining resources needed to optimize their student's learning environment.

According to Joshi et al. (2005), topics that parents want to discuss with teachers also are important to teachers. Teachers often communicate to parents in an authoritarian manner, with parents often not reacting because they are made to feel that they lack the knowledge to respond appropriately. One-way communication used by teachers can cause parents to become passive listeners. Some Arab American parents, who have been in the United States longer than recent immigrants, have become acculturated into the mainstream population and have become active participants when communicating with teachers instead of being passive listeners. When parents fail to respond effectively with teachers, effective two-way communications can become difficult.

Joshi et al. (2005) discussed issues (e.g., school policies and discipline) that often require parent-teacher interactions that involve the development of good relations and open communication. Their study was focused on improving teachers' understandings of family values, beliefs, and practices to develop a school environment that recognizes and celebrates cultural diversity. Based on their findings, they concluded that parents from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds were interested in communicating with educators during parent-teacher conferences or open house activities. However, Joshi et al. (2005) suggested that instead of developing two-way communications during these activities, teachers often use parent-teacher conferences as a form of one-way communication, providing information to the parents. These two formal school events often provided the only parent-teacher interactions during the school year. Although some parents indicated they were interested in assisting during school activities, they may have been unable to participate because of time constraints. According to Joshi et al. (2005), many parents indicated that they would have liked to be more involved. As parents share their expertise with the school, receive support and encouragement from teachers

and administrators, their children can complete their education and become intellectually, emotionally, and socially prepared for adulthood.

The primary goal of the present study was to examine perceptions of Arab American parents of children with special needs regarding communication with their children's schools and the professionals who work with their children. As the population of Arab Americans in schools continues to increase, the need to help teachers understand what these parents expect in terms of being able to communicate effectively grows in importance. Children can benefit when their teachers and parents work together collaboratively to support and appreciate each other's efforts in the classroom and at home (Joshi et al., 2005). For example, parents who attend conferences for their children can learn strategies to help them succeed in completing homework and behaving appropriately. Teachers also can learn to be more sensitive to cultural differences that students bring to the classroom. Educators need to understand parent's perceptions regarding the nature, causation, and treatment of their children's disabilities. Parent's perception often affect their behaviors such as seeking help, setting goals, and cooperating with the professionals regarding programs affecting their children (Diken, 2006).

The primary research question for this study was:

To what extent do Arab American parents of children receiving special education services differ in their perceptions of home school communications between those who were born in the United States and those born outside of the United States?

Methods

The school district in which this study was conducted had an enrollment of 17,470 students, ranging from preschool to 12th grade. The school district provided a list of all Arab American students who were receiving special education services in the 19 elementary schools. The criteria for inclusion in the sample was that at least one parent in the family had to be Arab American, one or more of their children had to be receiving special education services, and the responding parent had to be able to read and write either English or Arabic. A random sample of 100 parents was selected from the 350 parents who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Seventy-seven

parents completed and returned their surveys for a response rate of 77%.

Participants

The participants in the study were Arab American, generally between 25 and 45 years of age (*n* = 64, 83.1%), and female. Most of the participating parents had either less than high school (*n* = 28, 36.4%) or a high school diploma (*n* = 26, 33.7%). The majority of the parents were born outside of the United States (*n* = 68, 88.3%), with most indicating that Lebanon was the country of their birth (*n* = 33, 42.8%). The parents had lived in the United States for a mean of 15.20 (*sd* = 7.25) years, with a range from 3 to 33 years. Most of the parents had attended school outside of the United States (*n* = 61, 79.2%). Five (6.5%) parents reported that their child with disabilities had been born outside of the United States. When asked about the parents' fluency with the English language, 31 (40.3%) indicated they were fluent, while 11 (14.3%) reported they did not speak English. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Description of Parents in the Study (N = 77)

Parent Demographic Characteristics	N	%		N	%
Age			*Born in the United States*		
25 or under	3	3.9	Yes	41	60.3
26 to 35	36	46.7	No	27	39.7
36 to 45	28	36.4			
46 to 55	10	13.0	*Parent attended school outside of the United States*		
			Yes	61	79.2
Educational Level			No	16	20.8
Less than high school	28	36.4			
High school graduate/GED	26	33.7	*Child was born outside of the United States*	5	6.5
Some college	16	20.8	Yes	72	93.5
Associate's degree/Technical school	4	5.2	No		
Bachelor's degree	1	1.3			
Graduate degree	2	2.6	*Self-reported Fluency*		
			Fluent	31	40.3
			Somewhat fluent	22	28.6
			Not fluent, but understand English	13	16.9
			Do not speak English	11	14.3

Instrumentation

The survey that was used in this study was adapted from a dissertation by Windsor (1999). The survey was divided into five sections: (a) information and issues communicated between school and home, (b) parents ways of communication with their child's teacher, (c) teacher communications, (d) communications specific for parents of children receiving special education services, and (e) demographic survey. As many of the parents had difficulty in reading and understanding English, the survey was translated into Arabic. The researcher completed the translation and then had it verified by an independent source who was fluent both in English and formal Arabic.

The original instrument was tested for face validity by having three teachers and six parents review the instrument for readability (Windsor, 1999). He also asked the teachers and parents to identify any ambiguous questions that could result in erroneous responses. The participants provided feedback and the instrument was changed to reflect their suggestions.

A factor analysis was used to confirm the subscales defined by Windsor (1999) and determine its usability with an Arabic sample. Four factors emerged from the factor analysis that were similar to those defined by Windsor. The four factors explained 51.5% of the variance in home-school communications. The associated eigenvalues were greater than 1.00, indicating that the amount of variance explained by each of the subscales was statistically significant. Table 2 presents results of this factor analysis.

Cronbach alpha coefficients were obtained for each of the four scales. The results indicated good internal consistency with alpha coefficients ranging from .70 for parents' ways of communicating with their child's teacher to .93 for information and issues communicated between home and school.

Table 2. Factor Analysis: Home-School Communications

Survey Item	F.1	F. 2	F. 3	F. 4
Factor 1: Information and issues communicated between home and school				
Information about the goals or objectives for my child to reach by the end of the school year	.89			
Information about my child's homework and how I can help my child at home	.88			
When my child does something well or improves	.86			
Providing information on school policies and rules as they affect my child	.84			
Information about report cards and how grades are earned	.80			
My child's progress in school	.80			
Social skills (how you child gets along with others	.76			
Upcoming school events	.70			
A discipline problem with my child	.64			
News about things happening at school	.55			
Factor 2: Parent's ways of communicating				
By home visits		.85		
Interacting at regular school meetings or activities		.85		
By communicating through a diary system or homework folder		.80		
Talking to my child's teacher briefly when dropping my child off or picking them up from school		.80		
By attending parent-teacher conferences		.75		
Interacting at Back-to-School Nights and Open Houses		.73		
By e-mail		.72		
By making an appointment with my child's teacher		.65		
By sending a note or message with my child		.65		
By telephone		.63		
I am invited to participate in IEP meetings		.53		
By letter		.46		
I feel I am an important part of the IEP team		.40		
Factor 3: Communication specific for parents of children receiving special education services				
The teacher contacts me on a regular basis to inform me of my child's academic progress			.84	
The teacher works with me to help my child be academically successfully			.81	
It is important for me to attend my child's IEP meetings			.73	
The IDEA law has been explained to me by the special education staff			.69	
My ideas are included in helping determine special services that are provided for my child			.63	
I feel welcome in my child's special education classroom			.62	

Factor 4: Teacher communications

I volunteer for school events (e.g., sports day, concerts, open houses, etc.)	.78
The teacher makes home visits	.76
I help out in the classroom	.74
The teacher contacts me when my child is absent	.61
I can call the teacher at home	.58
I can use e-mail to contact the teacher	.49
The teacher is willing to discuss strategies to improve social behavior in both general and special education classes	.39
My rights as a parent of a child with special needs has been explained	.38
I meet the teacher at parent-teacher conferences	.38

Eigenvalues	9.56	4.75	3.74	3.58
Percent of explained variance	22.75	11.30	8.89	8.51

Findings

The mean scores for the four scales measuring Arab American parents of children receiving special education services were compared by the place of the mother's birth. Most of the parents (*n* = 41, 60.3%) were born in the United States, with 27 (39.3%) reporting a country outside of the United States as their place of birth. Because the mean scores for the dependent variables were skewed, the Mann-Whitney test for independent variables was used to test these comparisons (See Table 3). The results of these analyses indicated that two of the subscales, communication specific for parents of children receiving special education services and teacher communications differed significantly between mothers born in the United States and those born outside of the United States. Parents who were born outside of the United States (*M* = 3.21, *SD* = .44) had significantly higher scores for the subscale measuring communication specific for parents of children receiving special education services than parents who were born in the United States (*M* = 2.82, *SD* = .53), *Z* = -3.05, *p* = .002.

In contrast, parents born in the United States (*M* = 2.12, *SD* = .69) had more positive perceptions of teacher communications than parents who were born outside of the United States (*M* = 1.69, *SD* = .68), Z = -2.43, *p* = .015. No statistically significant differences were found for information and issues between home and school and parents' ways of communicating.

Discussion

Language and religion are two important defining indicators of culture. While religious practices may differ among Arab Americans, Modern Standard Arabic serves as a unifying factor for people in 22 Arabic countries. Although many Arabs who have immigrated to United States have adjusted linguistically, socially, and emotionally, lack of accurate, unbiased information about Arabic culture has resulted in negative stereotypes.

According to Diken (2006), effective interactions between professionals and parents require knowledge of, and respect for families' cultural beliefs to find common ground to help the child. Professional interactions between teachers and families from diverse cultural groups require educators to be responsive to individual cultural perceptions, expectations, and practices (Diken, 2006). The majority of parents in this study was born outside of the United States and had less than a high school diploma. Most participants were female, between the ages of 25 and 45 years. These parents often have difficulty in communicating with their children's teachers because of a lack of fluency in English. Because of their difficulties with the English language, they are reticent about becoming involved in their child's school. Teachers have to reach out to the parents to encourage them to attend school conferences or participate in other parent-teacher programs.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney Test for Two Independent Variables – Arab American Parent Perceptions of Home-School Communication by Country of Birth (N = 67)

Subscale	M	SD	Mean Rank	Z	Sig
Information and issues between home and school					
Born in the United States	3.83	.32	37.77	-1.88	.060
Born outside of the United States	3.72	.46	29.54		
Parents' ways of communicating					
Born in the United States	3.73	.34	37.51	-1.58	.115
Born outside of the United States	3.56	.49	29.93		
Communication specific for parents of children receiving special education services					
Born in the United States					
Born outside of the United States	2.82	.53	28.60	-3.05	.002
	3.21	.44	43.46		
Teacher communication					
Born in the United States	2.12	.78	39.20	-2.43	.015
Born outside of the United States	1.69	.68	27.37		

However, the educational system in the United States differs substantially from that in other countries. For example, in United States schools, parents are welcome in the schools, children with disabilities are included in the schools to the greatest extent possible, and diversity within the student body is celebrated. Schools in Arab countries are not as welcoming to parents and typically do not provide special education services to all children (Schaedel, Hertz-Lararowitz, & Azaiza, 2007). Parents who are immigrants or first-generation may find it difficult to understand the openness of the educational system.

Educators' success in communicating with parents depends on establishing mutual understanding, respect, and sensitivity to the cultural context of children with disabilities. If parents view the development of their children differently from the schools, misunderstandings and negative perceptions of services being provided to their children can arise. Educators must respect Arab American parents' perceptions regarding the nature, causation, and treatment of their children's disabilities, as these perceptions shape parent's attitudes toward learning to bridge the gap and build positive interactions.

In an attempt to reduce expenses by minimizing the use of paper, schools are using technology to communicate with parents. Information about homework, progress reports, and school calendars is being provided over the Internet. One problem associated the use of this technology is the inability of Arabic parents, especially those who are immigrants, to use computers to retrieve this information. Given problems with understanding the language and difficulty in accessing information on the Internet, much of the school communication may go unread and unanswered. Teachers may interpret this lack of communication as parents choosing to be uninvolved with their children's education.

This study was conducted in a single school district with parents of elementary children with special needs who were primarily Lebanese. Further study is needed to determine how a broad cross-section of Arab American parents whose children have special needs perceive home-school communication. As the Arab American community continues to grow in the United States, their children are expected to become a greater presence in the schools. Educators need to make an effort to improve communications as a means to make their educational experiences more productive.

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