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From Their Perspective: Parental Involvement in the UAE

Jase Moussa-Inaty¹, Esperanza De La Vega²

1) Zayed University. United Arab Emirates

2) Portland State University. United States of America

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From Their Perspective: Parental Involvement in the UAE

Jase Moussa-Inaty
Zayed University

Esperanza De La Vega
Portland State University

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share findings from a mixed-method study that explores, from the perspective of Emirati parents, what it means to be involved in their children's education. The study is built upon the idea that in order to provide culturally responsive family-school involvement practices and recommendations, it would serve us, as educators and researchers to investigate and understand Emirati parents' beliefs about the educational choices they have for their children and their "involvement" in this process. The instrument used for data collection was a survey and included open-ended questions. Generally, the results suggest that parents viewed involvement as important, but that they also heavily relied on school staff and teachers for this involvement. This important first step of understanding parents' beliefs will enable us to better support collaborative partnerships between schools and families in the education of children in the UAE.

Keywords: parental views, parental involvement, United Arab Emirates

Desde su Perspectiva: La Implicación Parental en los Emiratos Árabes Unidos

Jase Moussa-Inaty
Zayed University

Esperanza De La Vega
Portland State University

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Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es compartir los resultados de un estudio de metodología mixta que explora, desde la perspectiva de los padres de los Emiratos, lo que significa estar involucrados en la educación de sus hijos. El estudio se basa en la idea de que, con el fin de proporcionar recomendaciones y prácticas de participación familia-escuela culturalmente sensibles, que nos servirá como educadores e investigadores para investigar y entender las creencias de los padres emiratíes acerca de las opciones educativas que tienen para sus hijos y su "participación" en este proceso. El instrumento utilizado para la recolección de datos fue una encuesta e incluyó preguntas abiertas. Por lo general, los resultados sugieren que los padres consideraban importante la participación, pero también que dependían fuertemente del personal de la escuela y de los profesores para esta participación. Este primer paso importante de las creencias de los padres entendimiento permitirá apoyar mejor a las alianzas de colaboración entre las escuelas y las familias en la educación de los niños en los Emiratos Árabes Unidos.

Palabras clave: perspectiva parental, implicación parental, Emiratos Árabes Unidos

For quite some time now, researchers have sought ways of improving children's education. There has been much focus on external factors such as teacher characteristics and instructional methods - to name a few. For example, research has indicated significant relations between teacher feedback, teaching style, instructional quality, and student achievement (see [Hattie, 2005](#)). Over the past two decades researches have further shown an increased interest in other external factors but at a more social level and even though the results are promising for both educators, parents, and students in that increased parental involvement may increase student achievement, most of the research has been conducted in Western countries and may not necessarily apply in countries with different parenting styles and varying ethnicities ([Gonzalez, Holbein, & Quilter, 2002](#)) such as those in Middle Eastern countries. In spite of the tremendous progress that has been made in the area of parent involvement, some of the more specific questions concerning parental views on involvement have remained relatively unexamined. There has been little to no literature demonstrating the impact of parent involvement on education in the Middle East and particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Though attempts have been made to determine whether relationships exist between parental involvement and achievement ([Midraj & Midraj, 2011](#)), no attempt has been made to better understand the views of parents on parent involvement. This mixed-study built upon the idea that in order to provide culturally responsive parent school engagement practices, it would serve us, as teacher educators and researchers to investigate what Emirati parents believe about educational involvement. In addition, it was equally important to explore, from the parents perspective, the perceived responsibilities of the schools, teachers, and parents themselves. This important first step of understanding parents beliefs and perceived teacher and parent responsibilities will allow the researchers to provide culturally responsive guidelines, that could be better tailored to meet the needs of parents and schools in general and specifically for the UAE context. It is posited that positive interactions between parents and schools create an overlapping environment conducive to learning and growth.

Education in the UAE

Prior to the discovery of oil, the UAE was merely a desert oasis. In just over four decades, the UAE's tribal culture has been transformed from a tribal culture to an entrepreneurial country with world-class infrastructure and facilities. The UAE has become a country of vibrant cities with skyscrapers, landscaped parks, beautiful beaches and mega malls (Sowa & De La Vega, 2008). This transformation has had a direct impact on the improvement of education – strongly eliminating illiteracy (Thomas, 2012). In fact, as indicated in a 2011 report by the Statistic Center Abu Dhabi (SCAD), the estimated rate of illiteracy of the population aged 10 years and above in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi declined from 12.6% in 2005 to 7.9% in 2010. The same report also stated that the total number of schools in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi was 480 (181 private and 299 public) for the academic year 2010-2011. Of the 480 schools, 53 schools were kindergartens, 90 cycle 1 (primary) schools, 54 cycle 2 (middle) schools, 46 secondary schools, and 237 multi-stage schools. Until recently, traditional government schools began English instruction in sixth grade. Today not only is English taught across the levels, all primary schools in Abu Dhabi teach most of the domain specific subjects such as literacy, numeracy, and science in English. Besides private schools, the UAE has several public school choices for the education of Emirati children today. Unlike more conventional schools, some schools known as “Model” schools are said to have more innovative pedagogy. Other schools like Madares Al Ghad or “future” schools begin English instruction in kindergarten in all domain specific subjects except for Islamic and Social Studies. In addition, PPP schools, have one of three outside agencies (from Singapore, Canada, and England) managing the school, its curriculum, and also overseeing professional development for teachers. Again, English is the main language of instruction in these PPP schools. The Ministry of Education instituted the different types of schools in an effort to reform an educational system that to date, had not prepared its Emirati citizens effectively (Al Najami, 2007; 2008). Along with the development of the infrastructure of the country, much of the country's efforts is exerted on continually developing and enhancing its educational system through reforms. In fact, the government of Abu Dhabi has published a long-term plan (2030 vision) for the transformation of the Emirate's

economy in order to reduce dependency on the oil sector and focus more on knowledge-based industries in the future. The “2030 vision” is currently guiding the educational reform movement in the country and stresses the need for a premium, high-quality education system (The Abu Dhabi Economic Vision, 2008).

The government of Abu Dhabi also recognizes the need for competent Emirati citizens who can compete in today’s global market place (The Abu Dhabi Economic Vision, 2008), still some Emirati parents are neither literate in English or Arabic. Though illiteracy continues to decrease in the UAE, there remain a number of illiterate parents who may be unprepared for the choices they will have to make for the education of their own children. While this research is only a glimpse of a particular time and space, it attempts to understand the complex ecologies of the lives of Emirati parents/families. This study specifically aims to explore Emirati parents views about what it means to be “involved” in their children’s education. Emirati parents views on teachers, schools’, and their own responsibilities toward their children’s education are also investigated.

Theoretical Framework

The framework brought forth by Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) identifies various systems where each of these systems differs in proximity to the child. Parents being among the closest of these systems, may in fact be considered the most direct influence on the child. A notable strength of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) ecological theory is that it recognizes various interrelations within systems. Of particular relevance to this study is at the microsystem level where parent involvement with the school represents the interrelation between family and school. When parents partner with the multiple aspects and institutions (such as schools, religious centers, neighborhoods, etc.) where their child has experiences, the interconnectedness and power of the child’s learning experience is more meaningful and affirming. Using a socio-cultural perspective to frame this study allows the researchers to better understand Emirati parent views on what it means to be “involved” in their children’s educational experiences. The power of using a socio-cultural perspective is that it allows the researchers to view both the macro and micro systems to better understand

the interactions that underlie the parents views of schools and parents engagement.

Further, multiculturalism is something relatively newfangled. Cultural awareness, cultural understanding and cultural competence have become essential outcomes especially for English speakers of other languages (Araluce, 2008). The field of multicultural education is also fused into the research framework presented in this study, where culture is seen as an ever-changing, dynamic and multifaceted construct that should take into consideration the context and influences of social, economic, and political factors and approach understanding culture as an organic process that is created and socially constructed; learned and dialectical (Kachru & Smith, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2008). In a multilingual environment such as the UAE, the English language as a means of communication has become the dominant language and the language of instruction in most universities. As previously mentioned, English as a medium of instruction is evident in the educational system and in some schools, beginning in kindergarten. This trend has direct implications for the UAE bilingual society and the identity development in general of the Emirati people. Therefore, this research also draws from the field of bilingual education, which allows for the viewing of the social, political, and linguistic issues surrounding the development of two languages. Language is central to culture, literacy and educational practices (Clayton, Barnhardt, & Brisk, 2008, Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2000). It is through language that humans construct meaning and are socialized into particular cultures and communities. This becomes a tool for expression of ideas, thoughts and dialogue with others. A socio-cultural perspective is fundamentally grounded in the belief that learning (and teaching) emerges through social interaction (Dyson, 1989; Meier, 1995; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Central to this research, the field of parent involvement and engagement is incorporated into the framework. More specifically, culturally responsive approaches to parent engagement were sought.

We posit that a mainstream or Western view of parent involvement, cannot be applied to the context of the UAE because doing so, would dismiss the unique characteristics, resources, and knowledge that linguistically and culturally diverse parents utilize when participating in their child's educational process (De La Vega, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991,

2001; Valdés, 1996). In this study, we seek to understand the perspectives of Emirati parents and the complexities of their lives in a way that honors and respects the cultural and linguistic resources.

Methodology

This study utilizes a mixed methods exploratory approach to understand the perspectives of Emirati parents/families. The purpose of this study was twofold.

1. To better understand Emirati parents views on parental involvement in their children’s education, and
2. To provide guidelines that will assist Emirati parents, teachers and schools in building positive relationships that allow for a more enriching learning experience of children.

Though the UAE is a fascinating and relatively new country, its cultural roots have been quite long-standing. The UAE is an extremely fast-growing country with inherent tensions and these tensions make using a mixed-methods approach ideal for this study because qualitative research techniques may provide tools to understand the ways in which parents make sense of and construct meaning from their experiences in the world (Creswell, 2003). A mixed method approach was also adopted as it may provide more rigorous data and better understanding of the research question than either method by itself (Creswell, 2012). In addition, a qualitative approach, in particular, gives us a lens through which Emirati parents’ understanding of what it means to be involved in ones’ children’s education can be viewed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 1998). The open-ended questions provided an opportunity to gain insight into the participants’ cultural perspectives on parenting, as well as their views and beliefs about the responsibilities in the education of their children for themselves, teachers, and schools. On the other hand, the quantitative methods used in a mixed-methods study allow the researchers to confirm and/or disconfirm assertions and findings that emerged from the qualitative data. This is an important consideration, given that a survey research design is used to “describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviors or characteristics of the population” (Creswell, 2008, p. 388). Thus the combination of the two methods in this study led to a robust design and a holistic profile of Emirati

parent views on parental involvement in their children's educational experiences.

Participants

The participants in this study were Emirati parents who were representative of a larger sample of Emirati parents living in the region of Abu Dhabi. By completing and returning a confidential survey, they consented to take part in this study. The participants had at least one child attending one of six primary schools. A convenient sample of the six participating schools was identified because of their willingness to participate in the study, their location in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and the fact that they reflected a variety of school types (Model, Public-Private Partnership (PPP), and Traditional Government). Three of the schools were all-girl schools and three were identified as all-boy schools and either instructed in Arabic or in both Arabic and English. 2412 surveys were distributed, 1159 surveys were collected and 887 surveys were completed. Of the 887 participants who completed the survey, a larger portion were mothers (53%) followed by fathers (41%). The remaining noted as other, and could have been a nanny, caregiver, or another family member (4%). In addition, 78% of the participants identified themselves as Emirati. Regarding employment, 58% were employed full time and only a small percentage (5%) were employed on a part-time basis. The type of employment included areas such as medical (4%), education (12%), business (12%) and the remaining were unidentifiable. A little over a quarter of the participants were unemployed (35%). For more than nine tenths of the participants, Arabic was the mother language used at home (91%) and a very small number of parents used two languages (Arabic and English) at home (5%).

Data Collection and Procedure

The research team set out to explore parents' perspectives through a quantitative survey design. A bilingual (Arabic and English) survey was created to explore Emirati parents' views on what it meant to be involved in their child's education. There were twenty-eight self-constructed statements with a Likert-scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An

additional section included open-ended questions at the end of the survey where participants wrote what they believed were the responsibilities of teachers, schools and of themselves, as parents. The survey was piloted and edited to focus on several parent involvement constructs:

- The perceived social/cultural capital (resources) that contributed to or inhibited being involved in their child's education (Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Hargot, 1999; Turney & Kao, 2009; Downey, 1995),
- The parents' perceptions of opportunities to be involved (De La Vega, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997), and
- Home/School communication and activities that originated at home and at school (Epstein, 1995).

The researchers obtained ethical clearance from Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC) to solicit consent and participation from schools in the region. For clarity purposes, a cover sheet with bilingual step-by-step instructions on how to complete the survey was created and researcher contact information was also provided if additional clarification was required prior to, during, or after the completion of the survey. This cover sheet was glued onto an A-4 sized sealed envelope, which included the survey and a return-envelope for purposes of confidentiality. The researchers coordinated with the participating schools to deliver and collect the survey material through the classroom teachers. The sealed envelopes were sent home with the school children who had been instructed by their teachers to ask their parents to complete and return the survey within a week in the return-envelope provided. Figure 1 demonstrates the number of surveys distributed and collected at each school. The survey was distributed to 2412 families during early spring of 2010. The overall rate of response was 887 or approximately 27%.

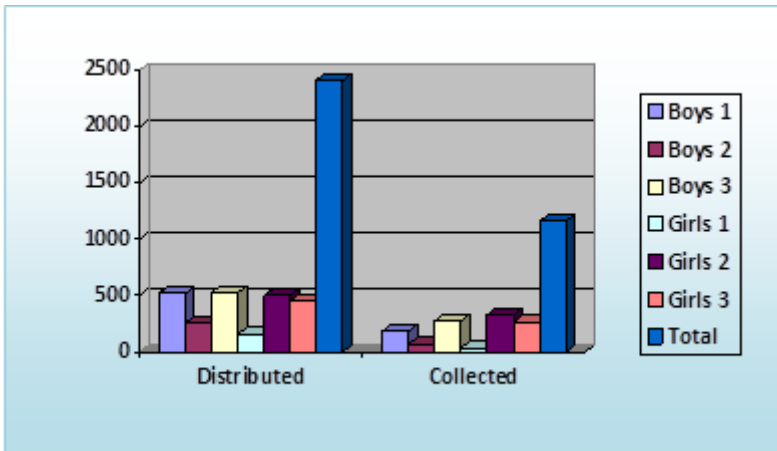


Figure 1.
Survey

Distribution/Collection Numbers

Findings and Data Analysis

Part one of the survey asked for general demographic information such as nationality, employment, type of work, mother language used at home, type of school they send their children to, language of instruction and number of children in school. The 28-item statements, as the second part of the survey, were designed to determine parents views on involvement in education. Respondents selected their responses on a 5-point Likert scale that best reflected their agreement or disagreement with each of the statements (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree). The final part of the survey consisted of open-ended questions which allowed parents' voices to be heard as the questions specifically asked parents to write what they believed should teachers, schools and their own responsibilities be towards their child's education. The parents were also given an opportunity to provide any other comment. As demonstrated in the Figure 2, responses were predominately geared towards agree and strongly agree scales. This pattern can be interpreted in a positive manner as the responses reflected parents views on parental involvement in education.

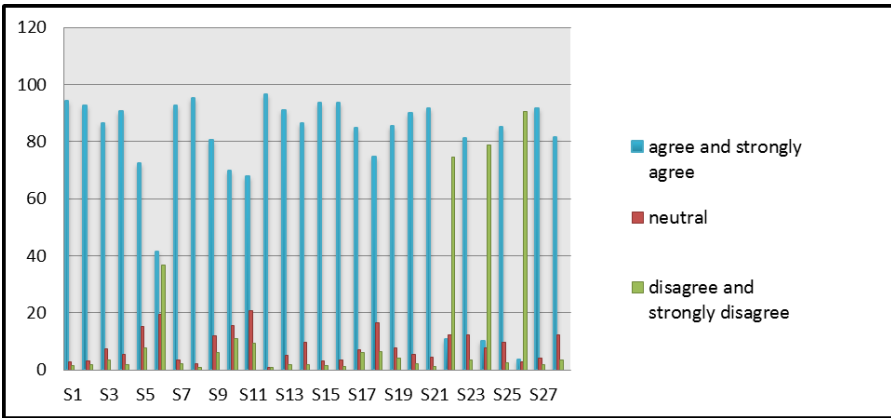


Figure 2. Parents responses to survey statements

A substantial number of parents reported that it is important for teachers to be honest and open (97%); parent involvement in their child’s education is important (94%); and that the school administration should communicate with parents about changes related to the school and/or the child (95%). The majority of the parents agreed and strongly agreed that teachers should communicate with parents on a regular basis (94%).

Though some parents felt they could rely on other family members to be involved in their child’s education (41%), others either disagreed or strongly disagreed (37%) while some were neutral (19%). There was disagreement and strong disagreement about parents asking a nanny or housemaid to be involved in their child’s education when they were unable to (75%) or to help with homework (79%). More than three quarters of the sample reported that they agreed and strongly agreed that parents who help their child with homework are involved with their child’s education (85%). Further, nine tenths of parents disagreed and strongly disagreed about relying on a nanny or housemaid to be involved in school related issues (90%).

A small number of parents neither agreed or disagreed about whether or not a parent who is involved with their child’s education encourages their child to read at home (in English) (20%) and 85% agreed and strongly agreed that a parent who is involved with their child’s education encourages their child to read at home (in mother language). Similarly a large number

of parents agreed and strongly agreed that reading to their child at home in their mother language (Arabic) is important (93%), but slightly fewer parents felt that reading to their child at home (in English) is important (80%) though it was still a significant number.

More than one tenth of parents felt that meeting with teachers on a regular basis is a parents responsibility (11%) and a handful of parents disagreed that attending parent-teacher conferences is important (2%) whereas 85% felt that it is important to attend an event at their child's school. Given that 63% of the parents were employed, either full or part time, it is not unexpected that a large number of parents agreed and strongly agreed that working parents can find time to be involved in their child's education (81%).

Fifteen percent of parents neither agreed or disagreed that parents who are involved with their child's education volunteer their time and services at the school (15%). When asked, 87% agreed and strongly agreed that parents who contact their teacher by phone, email or in person are involved in their child's education. A significant amount of parents felt that school staff and teachers should welcome visits or calls from parents (93%) and should also encourage parents to be involved in their child's education (90%). Parents felt that it is important that teachers or principals make it easy for parents to make appointments to discuss issues concerning their child (92%). These results indicate that even though parents felt that their child's education and their involvement was crucial, they voiced that they also relied on support from school staff and teachers for this involvement to occur.

The open-ended question yielded insights into how parents' viewed the idea of responsibility. The question was phrased in the following way and provided three table cells for parents to fill in their thoughts/views about each person's responsibility (Table 1). In addition, at the end of the survey, was an open ended space where participants could write "additional comments" should they wish to add other thoughts and ideas.

Table 1
Parents responses to survey

<p>Instruction Fill in the table below by writing what you believe <u>your responsibilities</u> should be, what you believe <u>the teacher’s responsibility</u> should be, and what you believe <u>the school’s responsibilities</u> should be towards your child education.</p>		
1. My responsibilities should be	2. The teacher’s responsibilities should be	3. The school’s responsibilities should be

These open-ended questions provided a place for parents to actively share their beliefs. The act of writing them, gave voice to issues related to the expectations and relationships between schools/teachers and the home. Data obtained from the open-ended questions were reviewed, coded, and transcribed. The data was used for analysis and interpretation of the central practice under study. Three themes emerged from this set of data. The first theme related to the beliefs parents held about what “teaching” should look like and should be experienced by their child – thus the responsibility of the teacher. The second related to their expectations about the classroom climate – again another responsibility of the teacher. And finally, the parents shared their ideas about the responsibilities of the schools.

Theme 1:Teaching

The initial findings of the open-ended question on the survey revealed parents had a strong reaction about the desired teaching for their children. They made comments such as: “use new and interesting ways to teach”; “teach in a different method”; “consider different teaching styles”; and “explain the lesson with passion and honesty (not just quick teaching)”. The use of rote memorization and disconnect between the content and their lives was a common experience for this generation of Emirati individuals.

The parents desire to have a different and a more powerful educational experience for their own children was evident in their written comments.

Theme 2: Classroom Climate

Comments from the open-ended question revealed that the participants also wanted the teachers to exhibit caring attributes. This was revealed by the use of words such as: “patient”, “fair”, “kind”, “trustworthy”, “encouraging”. Although this theme is yet to be examined more closely, the research team believes that this revelation is also related to the negative experiences that the parents may have had in their own schooling experiences. As teacher-educators and researchers at a major federal university in the UAE, the research team has often had discussions with pre-service teachers about the humiliation, corporal punishment, and demeaning acts they suffered under Arabic speaking public school teachers, who made their lives and learning experiences unpleasant. This then leads to the next major theme, which points to the school’s responsibility.

Theme 3: School’s Responsibility

The findings from this open-ended question point to the need for schools to hire “effective” teachers who are well trained, and are capable of refraining from using violence and do not threaten the students. For example, one parent wrote “ Teachers don’t care much for their students... They should respect students, be patient, should not shout or insult them”. Providing safety for their child not only extended to hiring teachers who would not use violence, parents also wanted the schools to be welcoming. One participant wrote “Welcome parents anytime they want and allow them to attend classes to see how it is going in there”, “Facilitate the meetings with parents”. This further demonstrates that many parents want to be informed and involved if given the chance and opportunity to do so.

On a general note, we found that the additional space provided was further utilized for parents to share additional thoughts and concerns. Parents were eager to be heard and were not afraid to express their feelings and perspectives. In fact, one researcher was contacted by some parents via phone to express their concern about their child’s negative schooling

experience. It is also important to note that many parents shared concerns or negative experiences or concerns and only a few parents provided positive feedback regarding their child's schooling experience.

Educational Implications

The main argument of this research was that in order to provide culturally responsive family-school involvement practices, it was crucial, as teacher educators and researchers to investigate what Emirati parents believe about the educational choices they have for their children and to explore, from their perspective, what it means to be involved in their children's education, their perceived responsibilities, and their day-to-day experiences parenting children. It was further suggested that essentially understanding parent views will provide an effective platform enabling the preparation of collaborative partnerships in the education of children in the UAE.

Practically, our results have at least two implications. First the instrument used might be used to include a more widespread population of similar characteristics such as ethnicity (i.e., other Emirates). Second, in light of recent developments in parent involvement research (see [Lindstrom Bremer, 2012](#); [Bouffard & Weiss, 2008](#)) which have raised questions about how parents can be more efficiently involved, understanding parental views on parental involvement is arguably of equal if not increasing importance. Our research identifies potential guidelines for assisting parents in terms of being more efficiently involved. Due to its pioneer character, our instrument may not be suitable for use in contexts that are evidently different from the context used in the current study. However, given the fact that seven Emirates make up the United Arab Emirates, the instrument may be used to collect data from the remaining six Emirates. We do not know whether similar results will be drawn, but addressing these questions would be an important objective for our ongoing research agenda and in trying to gain a better understanding of how Emirati parents view parent involvement.

Limitations

The study presented is not exempt from a certain number of limitations. This study has provided the researchers with an in-depth insight on Emirati parent's views on their children's educational experiences. The results have shown consistencies in how parents view responsibilities. Since the focus of this paper is on understanding the parents views, the lack of insight into how school personnel view parental involvement does not distract from the voices of parents and their views. It is a limitation of the study to not view both side of the dyad, however, it is the belief of the researchers that in order to encourage parental involvement, the first step is to hear from the parents first hand. For some form of partnership to emerge, the entity holding the "power" must take the first step in understanding the others' view. In this case, the institution of schools, must be willing to look closely and to hear what parents are saying or have yet to say. It is for this reason that the study sought to understand parents view prior to understanding the schools views on parental involvement

Future Research

This study provides valuable insights into a new line of research in the UAE. It will serve educators and parents with information on knowing how Emirati parents view parental involvement, teachers responsibilities, and parents responsibility. This knowledge can be embedded and delivered through instruction at all levels including tertiary and professional development at the tertiary and social level. This can be done through means of collaboration with the appropriate officials such as ADEC and the Ministry of Education. An interesting future investigation could focus on how Emirati teachers as well as principals view parental involvement. In particular, a closer examination of the interplay between – and causal direction of- parental views and school views on parental involvement. Selecting the same schools targeted in this research would be necessary for validity and reliability purposes.

Parental Involvement Guidelines

In attempting to allow Emirati parents to be involved or more effectively involved:

1. Acknowledge parents views on parental involvement.
2. Provide opportunities for parents to be involved.
3. Provide parents access to resources (e.g. workshops, leaflets, school-parent compact, etc.) that can help foster positive relationship between parents and schools.
4. Provide opportunities for parents to build their trust in the school, its staff and teachers decision making in relation to parent involvement.
5. Provide opportunities for schools, staff, and teachers to also build their trust in parents decision making in relation to parent involvement.
6. For parent involvement to be successfully adopted and implemented, specific strategies will need to be formulated that will help in overcoming any tensions that may arise or stand in the way of a parent involvement plan.
7. Provide schools, staff, teachers and parents ongoing consistent and supportive follow-up as well. (We strongly feel that parents and schools strengths lie in their focus on monitoring the development of the children in their care be it socio-emotionally, physically or intellectually).

Conclusion

This research provides a glimpse of a particular time and space and attempts to understand the complex ecologies of Emirati parents' lives in order to trace how their past learning and educational experiences have influenced how they view parenting today. Findings point to tensions related to parents 'views about their own, teachers' and schools' responsibilities. These tensions are inextricably connected to larger contextual factors of a historical and cultural, nature, as the nation of the UAE is fast changing to keep up with the global arena. This study examined the perspectives of Emirati parents towards parental involvement Our findings add to the limited knowledge base on the issues of parent involvement. This is crucial in the UAE because these issues along with the fast-forward movement into modernization and globalization, emphasize

the need for Emiratis to understand the long-range linguistic and cultural implications of the educational choices they are making for their children. In addition, the inclusion of parents' voices about their children's educational experiences points to a need to open up spaces for dialogue and collaborative action that respects and builds upon the parents' views in order to develop positive home/school relationships.

The research presented has uncovered some of the views Emirati parents have on parental involvement. Researchers, educators, schools, and communities should now be better equipped to be able to provide the necessary support Emirati parents are in need of in order to become involved or more effectively involved in their children's education. It is hoped that this type of support will have direct positive implications on student learning experiences and outcomes. Even though the current educational system may seem immersed in an entrenched culture with strong traditional roots, there is much room parental involvement.

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Jase Moussa-Inaty is Assistant Professor in the College Education at Zayed University.

Esperanza De La Vega is Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Education at University of Portland.

Contact Address: Direct correspondence to Jase Moussa-Inaty at Zayed University, P.O. Box 144534, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. E-mail: jase.inaty@zu.ac.ae