



Addressing the Stigma: The Unvoiced Barriers to Muslim Arab Families' Engagement in Their Children's Education

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ABSTRACT

The present phenomenological study examined the engagement experiences of five Muslim Arab parents in their children's education and uncovered the current stigma against Muslim families, which negatively impacts their engagement in their children's education. Identifying these needs and satisfying them will improve the educational experience for students of this minority and will ultimately lead to effective engagement with their families. Five emerging themes support this finding: neglecting to accommodate for religious sacraments, unmet hygienic jurisprudence needs, unsatisfied dietary needs, feeling unequal, and failed preparation for academic success. Based on these findings, this research calls for action agendas for reform and change by training school personnel to understand diverse students; adopting anti-bullying policies to counteract stereotyping; allowing students to perform their individual religious duties, which are well within their constitutional rights; and making dietary considerations and personal hygienic accommodations for Muslim children as a matter of social justice before we can even address their families' engagement.

Keywords: Muslim Arab families, engagement, stereotyping, stigma

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that Arabs living in the United States continue to experience negative stereotypes and racism (Meymand, 2018; Shaheen, 2001), with American high school students' perceptions of Arabs and the Middle East as "overwhelmingly negative" (Kamalipour, 2000, p. 58). According to Suleiman (1996), "Given the alarming impact of cultural conditioning in the American Society, the invisible Arab Americans and their children have become more visible in a negative way" (p. 8).

Although most teachers reported having had numerous experiences with Arab students, many appeared to lack relevant religious and cultural information about communication styles necessary for effective interaction with Arab families (Moosa et al., 2001). The perceptions and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families matter and should be considered when planning and implementing engagement approaches. In other words, Muslim Arab families' feelings and needs must be addressed to ensure appropriate implementation of plans intended to increase their participation in the education of their children.

A useful conceptual framework for examining such aspects of society is critical race theory (CRT) in education, which Yosso (2005) defines as, "a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses" (p. 74). CRT emphasizes the fact that race is a social construct that is not exclusively the result of the bias of people, but embedded in and likely stemming from legal systems and regulations. Educators and other school personnel can leverage CRT to create an educational environment of equity for all students by avoiding the often unconscious segregation of minority students and English Learners, ensuring that they are represented in the content and material presented in the classroom, and counteracting stereotypes against them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Matuszny et al., (2007), changing student demographics continue to create challenges to the current education system. The difference in demographics between student and teacher populations mean that educational professionals "may not be familiar with culturally embedded student behaviors, may not speak a student's or parent's language and, as a result, may not fully interpret all students' needs" (Matuszny et al., 2007, p. 24). Teachers will need guidance and additional resources to meet the unique needs of students and parents with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Delpit, 1995; Turnbull et al., 2006). Teacher preparation programs must produce culturally competent teachers (McHatton, 2007), who

are able to work effectively and collaboratively with culturally and linguistically diverse families and their children.

Specific needs, cultural characteristics, and social characteristics differentiate the Arab American population from other ethnic minority groups in the United States (Goforth, 2011). There is a distinct lack of published literature on this minority group (Al Khateeb et al., 2015; Goforth, 2011; Haboush, 2007), which requires the need for school districts to research and increase their cultural knowledge and competency as it pertains to Arab Americans. Recent demographics reports show an approximate population of 3.7 million Arab Americans (Arab American Institute, 2017), most of whom reside in one of ten states: California, Michigan, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

Islamophobia in Education

For the past two decades, the term “Islamophobia” has been used to describe an irrational fear of the Islamic faith that leads to prejudiced, targeted attacks against people and expressions perceived to be Muslim (Mir et al., 2019). It materializes as vandalism, violence, hate speech, surveillance, and scrutiny against Muslims (Rowe, 2019), particularly post the September 11 attacks and supercharged by the rise of radical groups, immigration crises from Muslim-majority countries to the West, and the demonization of Muslims by Western media outlets (Hankir et al., 2017). This gives Muslims “a hyper visibility whilst simultaneously suppressing them” (Akel, 2021, p. 15) and perpetuates their marginalization from academic life in the West.

A recent poll showed that 54 percent of Americans do not want to accept refugees from countries such as Syria due to concerns about potential terrorists (Mir et al., 2019). As Mir & Sarroub (2019) explain, an ignorant politics that topples democracy and pluralism inevitably emanates into school classrooms. Roughly half of the Syrian refugees who have relocated to the United States since 2012 are under 14 years old and enrolled in school (Mir & Sarroub, 2019). These students continue to be discriminated against and targeted; in fact, Muslim students are at least twice as likely to be bullied at school, with verbal harassment, including bomb and terrorism references, being the most common (CAIR, 2019). As a result, students experience depression, anxiety, and paranoia, among other issues (Irshad, 2015). Still, U.S. public schools are generally neither aware of Islamophobia nor how to appropriately respond to it (Mir et al., 2019). Mir and Sarroub (2019) call on schools to bring attention to and stop Islamophobia by fundamentally reforming the texts and conversations that shape the thoughts and actions of

students, teachers, and administrators while countering any pervasive actions taken against them.

Educators' Bias

Historically, the teaching profession has been predominantly populated by white, middle class teachers (Goldring et al., 2013; Sleeter, 2001). Accordingly, there is a history of cultural and linguistic misperceptions that have created hurdles to effective communication and successful collaboration between culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families and U.S. schools (Brooks et al., 2010; Good et al., 2010; Steeley & Lukacs, 2015). This history includes a cultural divide in which educators hold deficit views and generally set lower expectations for CLD students (Castro, 2010; Sleeter et al., 2011). In their study, Lin & Bates (2014) conclude that “there is a long way to go for many teachers to become culturally responsive” (p. 38) and that teachers “may not be fully prepared to handle the diverse classrooms that they are currently or soon will be facing” (p. 37). School personnel often misinterpret CLD families’ lack of partnership with their children’s schools (Steeley et al., 2015) and attribute it to indifference, low levels of education, and lack of support (Good et al., 2010; Banks et al., 2007; Mapp, 2003; Valenzuela, 2004). Teacher preparation programs need to immerse the fundamentals of diversity and inclusion in all capacities (Lin et al., 2014).

Research on predispositions of teacher candidates indicates that they often “seem to enter teacher preparation programs with negative or deficit attitudes and beliefs about those different from themselves” (Hollins et al., 2005, p. 511). As explained by McHatton (2007),

Unaware of their own power and privilege, and lacking first-hand experiences with discrimination, teacher candidates through their own unexamined biases and beliefs, may unknowingly respond to parents from diverse backgrounds in such a way that furthers the schism that may already exist in the parent-school relationship. (p. 238)

To avoid these unintentional reactions, McHatton (2007) suggests that educators actively explore the experiences of diverse families and understand how these experiences may affect their involvement and interactions with school professionals.

The Impact of Culturally Responsive Services

Common themes in the literature highlight the positive correlation associated with student outcomes, school culture, community-school partnerships, and strong parent-school relationships (Conroy, 2012; Jeynes,

2011). In this support, Jones et al., (1997) reported better academic achievement for children whose parents are highly involved in their education. West (2000) concluded that the higher the parental involvement was, the higher the level of children's motivation in their education. A growing body of research (Henderson et al., 1994; Griffith, 1999; Mattingly et al., 2002) indicates a positive correlation between parental involvement and student success.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to voice the barriers to Muslim Arab parents' engagement in their children's education. This was accomplished through the perspectives of five Muslim Arab parents at the Ally School District (pseudonym), focusing on their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). The study was aimed at recording and analyzing *what* Muslim Arab families experienced with regard to their engagement in their children's education and *how* these experiences developed and impacted future ones (Moustakas, 1994).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will help identify the unvoiced barriers to Muslim Arab families' engagement in their children education. The study will also recognize the strategic approaches needed for their successful engagement. It is hoped that these suggestions will be a resource for decision-makers in implementing and evaluating engagement strategies as they pertain to parents of this minority. It is also important to regard the overcoming of the obstacles these parents will raise as a matter of social justice.

The study aims to create a school environment where all children are valued and given equitable opportunities to develop a cohesive future generation and build effective family-school partnerships.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Through the experiences of five culturally and linguistically diverse Muslim parents, this study explores the following research question: What are the unvoiced barriers to Muslim Arab parents' engagement in their children's education?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study follows a qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenology allows us to understand an experience at a deeper level of consciousness, while also helping us explore our own nature and reflect at a

personal level (Qutoshi, 2018). It is a “way of thinking about knowledge – a philosophical and theoretical viewpoint – how do we know what we know” (Bozzi, 1990; Mortari et al., n.d., p. 5). The researcher selected this approach for the present study in order to clearly present the participants and effectively describe their realities and wisdom, for which phenomenology is best suited (Plummer 1983; Stanley et al., 1993; Husserl, 1977).

As defined by Teherani et al. (2015), phenomenology describes the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it. This requires the researcher to suspend her own attitudes, beliefs, and suppositions in order to focus on the participants’ experience of the phenomenon and identify the essences of the phenomenon through epoche, also called the process of bracketing, to ensure that the researcher’s individual subjectivity does not bias data analysis and interpretations (Creswell, 2007).

Data collection

The researcher collected the data through (a) a questionnaire with Muslim Arab parents and (b) an interview with the parents who responded to the questionnaire and agreed to be interviewed. This allows parents to engage in conversations, discussions, and give the researcher windows for questioning (Creswell, 2013; Newton, 2010). Rivano et al., (2017) recommend the use of qualitative questionnaires to generate informative data on the respondents’ everyday life. This triangulation helped the researcher validate findings and enrich the trustworthiness of the qualitative inquiry (Hays et al., 2012). To assess the accuracy of the findings, several internal validation strategies, including member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation, were used to authenticate the findings (Gibbs, 2007).

Data analysis

Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen’s modified method for analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994) was applied to analyze the collected information from participants. Meaningful statements taken from transcribed interviews were clustered into larger emerging themes. Further analysis of the data included generating a textural description (i.e., “what” they experienced) and included structural description (i.e., “how” they experienced) from the transcripts, and includes verbatim examples.

Participants

The researcher partnered with the Ally School District, a Midwestern and urban school district, to conduct this study. To participate in the study,

the participants had to be Muslim Arab parents with children enrolled at a school within the Ally District. Table 1 lists participants' demographic information and their relationship to their child. It should be noted that the participants were all, coincidentally, mothers of elementary, middle, and high school students. All names used are pseudonyms.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Parent	Relationship to child	Country of origin
Eman	Mother	Syria
Sabah	Mother	Sudan
Donia	Mother	Syria
Asmaa	Mother	Sudan
Razan	Mother	Sudan

RESEARCH ETHICS

Prior to the initiation of any research activities, the researcher obtained approval for human subject research from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This required the submission of a complete protocol to accompany any application for review.

To ensure participants' confidentiality, invitations were sent and collected by the school. No identifying information about participants, including names, addresses, and phone numbers, was shared with the researcher. During the data collection portion, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants and referred to them as such throughout the entire process to guarantee their anonymity (Sieber, 1998).

FINDINGS

An analysis of the questionnaire and interview portions revealed primary descriptions and major themes encompassing the barriers to Muslim Arab parents' engagement in their children's education. The following sections explain the development of each theme from participants' responses through horizontalization, a phenomenological approach in which the researcher gives equal value to all the participants' statements (Moustakas, 1994).

First theme: Neglecting to accommodate for religious sacraments. Two of the three parents with high school daughters reported

significant prejudice towards their daughters' hijabs (headscarf) and a general lack of acceptance towards their culture and religion, as stated by Eman and Asmaa. Both parents had experienced incidents during which their daughters' hijabs were mocked or removed by force with little to no reaction or reprimand from their schools. Asmaa added that when she informed the school that her children would be absent for a religious celebration, her children's absences were marked as unexcused. Asmaa believes that if the teachers and administration were more aware of other cultures and religions, they would have been more accommodating. In a similar manner, Sabah and Donia stated that their children "aren't even given five minutes to perform the required noon prayer." Sabah added that respecting their children's religion by educating staff and students on Islamic practices, marking absences due to religious celebrations, and designating a space for Muslim students to perform their noon prayer would be a tremendous step in making parents feel respected and more engaged at their children's schools.

Second theme: Unmet hygienic jurisprudence needs. Several participants reported the lack of school consideration towards their religious and cultural customs. Sabah added that the school did not make any effort to understand or accommodate for Islamic toilet etiquette, which mandates the use of a handheld water sprayer after urination/defecation. When Asmaa and Razan requested a small watering cup to be placed in their children's schools, they were met with refusal and ridicule; one administrator responded to Razan with, "We usually take a shower at the end of the day. Don't you?" Sabah added, "When these tools are not available, it makes it difficult for us to stay at the school longer" because basic hygienic needs are not met.

Third theme: Unsatisfied dietary needs. Parents reported an evident lack of consideration towards their children's dietary needs despite initiating conversation about it. Razan specifically stated that she did not find that her children's schools were concerned about her children's dietary restrictions even after she explained its significance. Asmaa explains that her heart aches for her children who have little to no non-meat options during school lunch, particularly her youngest son, who is often turned away from the lunch line without a lunch on *Pizza Fridays* because the cheese pizza is the first to run out. Eman also recalls when her child unknowingly ate pork during lunch, which is not religiously permissible to eat, and got very ill from the food. Eman and Asmaa explain that this could be avoided if the school were more cautious of Muslim students' dietary needs. The choices for meat- and gelatin-free cafeteria foods are often limited to fruits, vegetables, and dairy, which do not constitute healthy, well-balanced meals for children and deprives them from their needed nutrients.

Fourth theme: Feeling unequal. Responses echoed parents' feeling that their children are treated unequally compared to their non-Muslim peers. Razan, Asmaa, and Donia all stated that their children were at a disadvantage due to their cultural and religious obligations that were unaccommodated for, which discouraged their engagement as they felt unwelcome and misunderstood at their children's schools.

The mothers, who are all wearing Hijabs, reported their uncomfortable feelings when school staff and administration treat them differently especially when they cannot help staring at them for wearing Hijabs and modest clothing. This attitude creates barrier to their engagement as it constantly remind them of their differences. Asmaa posed, "Why do my children have to eat apples for lunch while their peers ate chicken?" This speaks to another inequality between Muslim students and their peers when it comes to their diet.

Fifth theme: Failed preparation. Participants' responses revealed a failure to appropriately prepare staff, teachers, and the existing students to understand a new culture and how this failure is a primary obstacle to parents' full engagement in their children's education. As explained by Asmaa, "A lack of knowledge about [a group's] cultures and religion can lead to serious problems." Razan, Eman, and Asmaa all emphasize the importance of schools preparing personnel and students to accept a new culture, respect different traditions and religions, and encourage them to sympathize with this minority. Parents explain that these are the most significant steps in ensuring their children's psychological well-being in their new environment. Asmaa adds that this kind of preparation can be part of a social skills or social studies class. Similarly, Razan suggests engaging parents and their children by having them participate in "class/school events, especially to present cultural occasions, cloth, folkloric dance, or religious traditions such as Ramadan, that would to bridge the cultural gap between children and make parents feel engaged and valued."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We now have a better understanding of the barriers to the engagement experiences of Muslim Arab parents in their children's education. This validation allowed the researcher to delve into the "how" and "why" as they relate to the participants' engagement experiences (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

What comes first? Although this study's intent was to investigate Muslim Arab families' perceptions on their engagement in their children's education, it was discovered that their physiological needs take precedence and must be addressed first, as explained by Maslow (1943), and are likely a

barrier to their engagement in their children's education. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states that only when one's physical and emotional needs are satisfied can they be concerned with their needs for influence and personal development (Maslow, 1943). Aligning with this structure, this study brought these resilient experiences to focus: noting Sabah's discomfort about staying in the school with inaccessible hygienic toilets based on her beliefs; understanding Asmaa's worries about her child's hunger at lunch as he waits in line for the only type of pizza he can eat and ending up with nothing when it runs out just because he follows religious practices that are not accommodated for; seeing Eman and Asmaa's grievance about the lack of acceptance toward their daughters' religious customs; and catching the voice of bothersome when Eman explains that her son ate pork unintentionally as he was left to battle the right choice based on his beliefs. These observations, in addition to participants' feelings of being unequally treated and that their children being at disadvantage compared to their non-Muslim peers, contributed to the researcher's confidence in determining that *satisfying Muslim Arab parents' religious and cultural needs are key components to engaging them as learning partners in children's education*. The data analysis revealed how much the cultural barrier that emerged from the collected data informed the researcher's choice and guided to the needs of minority parents for their successful engagement in their children's education. Based on the emerged themes, an underlying analysis is discussed to shed light on immigrants' lives in the United States. The following is an elaboration on the main hardships that Muslim Arab families experience and some insights on how to breakdown such barriers.

Cultural barriers. As the number of Arab students in U.S. public schools increases, so do the approaches that are available for their successful integration; however, Suleiman (1996) predicts that schools will continue to lack the acknowledgement of Arab culture and history or even attempt to counteract Arab stereotyping, as previously discussed, and this was indeed confirmed almost 25 years later by Rowe (2019) and Mir and Sarroub (2019). Vincent and Marie (2005) found that a 'one size fits all' approach is still prevalent in various educational establishments. CLD parents in particular are disadvantaged by the assumption that every parent has the same needs, which leads schools to marginalize parents of ethnic backgrounds. It is important to understand these perceptions when building a relationship with minority families, as they may be cautious when engaging with formal service delivery systems because of previous experiences with discrimination (Magaña, 2000). Accordingly, providing culturally sensitive services to Muslim Arab parents in addition to making efforts to counteract Arab stereotyping, would

make them feel more appreciated and lead them to become more engaged in their children's education.

Addressing the stigma. As discussed in the literature review, Arabs living in the United States regularly experience negative stereotypes (Shaheen, 2001), especially at school (Kamalipour, 2000). McHatton (2007) found that the majority of CLD families are exposed to discrimination while obtaining educational services. Studies have found that Muslims experience racist incidents and marginalization as a result of their religious beliefs (Edge, Newbold, & McKeary, 2014; Berns-McGown, 2013; Hanniman, 2008) and that these racist incidents have a negative effect on the mental health of young refugees (Correa-Velez et al., 2010). In this study, Eman shared, "There was a clear lack of acceptance towards us. There had been several altercations in which other students mocked my daughter for her limited English and for wearing a hijab (headscarf)." Asmaa also shared that a student on the bus pulled her daughter's Hijab from the back and showed her hair; she then added, "Students' lack of knowledge about our cultures and religion can lead to serious problems." Reflecting back on the conceptual framework of this study, which is based on the Critical Race Theory, should we hold school personnel responsible for meeting the basic needs of this population or are they unknowingly perpetuating the bias and prejudice embedded in the educational system? Many minority students are bullied by their peers due to their race or peripheral status in their new country (Closs et al., 2001). Hek (2005) recommends that schools adopt anti-bullying programs to promote a healthy environment of inclusive education that respects all students and does not eliminate a specific group.

The right to pray at school. Sabah stated, "My children aren't even given five minutes to perform our required noon prayer... I believe that respecting our children's religion will really help with making parents feel respected and more engaged with the school." The relationship between religion and public schools in the United States is mainly governed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states in part: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." (U.S. Constitution, Amendment I). A public school's standing as a secular establishment does not mean that it is anti-religious; rather, public schools are typically filled with students and teachers with a variety of religious beliefs (Moore, 2007). In this study, many parents indicated that if efforts were made for their children to practice their religious beliefs, then this would help in removing the barriers to engagement in their children's schools. Students have the right to pray individually, read religious texts, and discuss religion in their free time as long as it is neither disruptive

nor coercive (Wallace v. Jaffree, 1985). It is important for schools to comply with these freedoms so that Muslim students and families do not feel the need to be invisible in order to conform or exist within a U.S. educational institution.

Toilet etiquette. Razan also explained that although the school did not show much tolerance or understanding towards her children's religious and cultural practices. For example, when Razan requested a small watering cup next to the toilets at the school to comply with her religion's toilet etiquette, an administrator at the school responded with, "We usually take a shower at the end of the day, don't you?" These types of insensitive responses appear to neglect the individualized needs of Muslim students and families. How can we ask engagement of parents whose basic hygienic needs are unfulfilled at schools? What about their children who are spending 7+ hour days at school?

Dietary needs. Asmaa emphasized the deficiency in the nutrition that her children receive compared to their peers. She also referred to her children's disappointment on Fridays when the cheese pizza would run out, leaving them with no other dietary options. Research discusses the need to provide Halal meals or alternatives at schools with escalating Muslim student populations rather than limiting these children's access to equitable meals and putting their minds and bodies at a disadvantage simply because of their religion. "Schools with large populations of Muslim and Jewish children have placed halal and kosher items on their daily lunch menus, thereby supporting the contention that if Ethical Veganism is protected under freedom of religion, perhaps vegan lunches will become more accessible as well." (Sabry & Bruna, 2007, p. 31). Per Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act,

No individual, on the basis of race, sex, color, national origin, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation, or status as a parent, shall be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination in, a Federally conducted education or training program or activity.

Yet, Muslim students are not provided with appropriate food options during school lunches. This malnutrition should not be the price that young Muslims have to pay for wanting to follow the rules of their religion simply because it does not conform to the dominant culture.

In diverse classrooms, Hossain (2013) recommends creating teachable moments that start the conversation around questions students may have about the Islamic faith (while also respecting the needs and privacy of all students). Implementing this practice can help remove many of the obstacles that Muslim families experience in the American education system.

The findings of this study agree with those of Matuszny et al. (2007), who stated that educators can develop collaborative partnerships with CLD parents and families by breaking down the barriers preventing their engagement. In order to do so, these barriers must first be identified and addressed. This research uncovered the culturally insensitive practices at schools serving Muslim Arab families that create barriers to their engagement.

CONCLUSION

The five themes that emerged answered the research question, concluding that there is an evident cultural gap that needs to be bridged before Muslim Arab families are fully engaged in their children's education. Schools can help accommodate families by training school personnel to become culturally literate in order to effectively handle diverse classrooms; benefiting from teachable moments in the classroom; and preparing existing students to accept a new culture while rewarding those who provide help and support, creating a model for others to follow. Schools should also learn to recognize Islamophobic and anti-Arab sentiments and adopt effective anti-bullying policies that counteract Muslim and Arab stereotyping while making an active effort to foster students' successful adaptation and accommodate them in their environment. School systems should put on a CRT-inspired lens as they problematize objectivity and interrogate the systemic and institutionalized racism permeating into U.S. schools. One way to start is to thoroughly revise the texts and conversations being brought into the classroom and ensure that they are not perpetuating a monolithic culture of ignorance and bigotry. It is also important to consider students' religious needs and required religious practices that fall within their school day. It is within students' constitutional right to pray individually, discuss religion, and read religious texts in their free time as long as they are not disruptive or forcing others to participate.

Satisfying Muslim Arab parents' religious and cultural needs are key components to engaging them as learning partners. Applying a theoretical lens, this research calls for action agendas for reform and change by allowing Muslim students their legal rights of free exercise of their religion as long as it is not interruptive nor coercive, as well as making dietary considerations and personal hygienic accommodations for Muslim children as a matter of social justice before we can even address their families' engagement.

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