

# Teacher Perceptions of Arab Parent Involvement in Elementary Schools

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**Editor's note:** Although the survey return rate in the present study was low, the editors felt that the information contained within the article was significant and would be a good starting place to call for further study in this area. Ironically, this decision to publish was made on September 10, 2001. The events of the following day and the weeks beyond confirmed that Arab parent involvement was indeed a timely topic. We invited the authors to write an addendum reflecting the situation after September 11, 2001 (see Authors' Note at the end of the article). We hope that school communities will act with increased sensitivity to the needs of Arab families, and indeed all families, in the days ahead. We also hope researchers will work quickly to add to our current knowledge resulting in better service to Arab American families.

## Abstract

This study examined five areas of Arab parent involvement in elementary schools in an urban Midwestern district using structured surveys of Arab ( $n = 45$ ) and non-Arab ( $n = 87$ ) teachers and interviews of 39 first-generation Arab mothers. Factor analysis, a statistical approach used to analyze and explain the interrelationships among a large number of variables, was used on each area and yielded descriptions of 12 facets of parent involvement. Results suggest the following teacher perceptions of Arab parents and their families: a) most view the school as the authority; b) most believe that education is important; c) parents can assist their children with school if given guidance; d) English language skills are important; and e) school-parent communication is tradition bound, with parents reluctant to ask questions. Teachers considered themselves efficacious in teaching Arab students and indicated they received high levels of administrative support

and culturally-relevant resources. Arab teachers, most of whom had been in the U.S. for many years, were quite similar to non-Arab teachers in how they viewed Arab parent involvement. Arab mothers favored more personal forms of parental involvement and education programs, more so than teachers. The discussion section suggests ways that districts could increase Arab parent involvement, including Arab parents' preference for non-public forms of parental involvement.

## Introduction

Educators and researchers repeatedly stress that parent and family involvement is a crucial contributor to student success in school (e.g., Bempechat, 1992; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1991, 1994; Reynolds, 1992; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Most studies of involvement have focused either on Caucasian or African American students. Whereas some have also examined immigrant communities, such as those of Chinese and Mexicans (e.g. Keith & Lichtman, 1994; Kim et al., 1996; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Okagaki, Frensch, & Gorden, 1995; Sanchez & Lopez, 1999), there is little information available on Arab Americans' involvement in the educational process of their children. This is despite the fact that Arabs constitute a growing community in the United States, especially in 10 states and the metropolitan areas of Detroit, New York, Los Angeles-Long Beach, San Diego, Texas, Northern Ohio, and Chicago, which account for over one-third of the Arab population in the United States.

Cultural factors may be especially important determinants of Arab parent involvement, primarily to its detriment. According to Yap and Enoki (1995), for example, many obstacles can impede parent involvement, such as negative attitudes of school staff toward parents, a lack of teacher preparation, occupational demands that limit parent participation, and parents' insecurities concerning schools. Although culturally-induced misconceptions of one another by both teachers and parents are important, those of teachers are crucial (Epstein in Lockwood, 1998). This is important because Arabs and Arab Muslims are especially burdened by many detrimental negative cultural stereotypes held by members of their host countries, including the US. Such stereotypic characteristics include one or more of the following: terrorists, religious fanatics, and greedy sheiks. Many factors have contributed to these stereotypes such as the Arab-Israeli conflicts, the Arab oil embargo, the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini to power in Iran, the Gulf war, and other issues that have exacerbated anti-Arab sentiment in the United States. [See author's note.] 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). Accordingly, the present study examined teachers' beliefs about their Arab students and parents to

determine whether and what types of beliefs and misconceptions exist in order to better serve that community. Specifically, we focused on teachers' beliefs about how Arab parents construe their relationship with the schools, communication styles and preferences, teacher efficacy with Arab students and their families, and the perceived importance of parent education programs.

Communication is an area in which culture can have significant impact, and it is important for teachers and counselors to understand the Arab families' communication styles. Jackson (1995), for example, suggests that Arab clients are comfortable sitting close to a counselor and with a person of the same sex. However, very conservative Arab men and women will not even shake hands with members of the opposite sex. With respect to cultural communication, Wilson (1996) proposed that unrecognized cultural differences could interfere with meeting the needs of Arab families and affect their ability to communicate effectively. Wilson adds that in conversations Arabs find it impolite to use the word "no" even when they actually disagree with others, and their body language is characterized by repeated assent-indicating head nodding. Having apparently acquiesced, Arab parents may then be perceived as unreliable when they fail to act as teachers had expected. The potential for misinterpretation of Arabs' verbal and nonverbal expressions may be particularly likely if teachers are not aware of the mismatched hidden dimension in the message, as well as in the style of communication. The present study, therefore, examined teachers' beliefs about Arab parents' communication styles and preferences.

In addition to cultural stereotypes and communication problems, teachers may not have the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively interact with Arab students or their parents. In addition to the skills themselves, how efficacious teachers believe themselves to be in these areas is important because it can affect teachers' motivation toward members of the Arab community. It would be expected that teachers who believe they are contributing to the academic progress of their immigrant Arab students would be more inclined to involve those students' families. Furthermore, it would be expected (Epstein, 1987) that teachers who indicate that they receive more administrative support to successfully implement parent involvement would believe themselves more efficacious.

The importance teachers place on parent education programs for immigrant families is another factor that could affect parental involvement. Such programs include workshops administered at the school to provide parents with specific information on selected topics, parenting skills, and ways for parents to help their children with school. However, Arab immigrant families may require assistance that is culturally relevant to their situation in addition to the traditional workshops, such as more personal student-teacher contact. The importance of communication techniques other than workshops may, in fact, be preferred by Arab parents due to

their discomfort participating in settings that exacerbate cultural differences or that potentially reveal Arab parents' lack of skills. Information about preferred modes of communication could make the difference between the success or failure of such programs. Because Arab as well as non-Arab teachers were included in the present study, how they differed in their beliefs could also be examined.

Thus far, the focus has been on teachers. However, a comprehensive picture requires that we examine involvement from the parents' perspectives as well. It is crucial to study mothers because of their role as the primary caregiver for children in the Arab culture. In particular, the present study examined: effective ways for teachers to communicate with parents, where parents obtain information about the schools and their children, their reactions to parent educational workshops, perceived support from school and their habit of attendance, and the degree they assist in the schools. In addition to information from mothers and teachers separately, comparisons were made between these groups to determine areas of agreement and areas in which they differed.

## Method

### Teacher Population, Sample, and Survey Procedure

The population for the study consisted of teachers at nine elementary schools in a large urban area in a predominantly lower-middle class, largely Arab (80%) school district in the Midwestern United States. A total of 132 surveys (33%) of those distributed to teachers were completed and returned. Of those who completed the survey, 118 (90%) were female, 12 (9%) were male and 2 (1%) did not reveal their gender. Forty-one (31%) of the respondents were of Arab origin and 4 (3%) were second generation Arab Americans, whereas 87 (66%) were non-Arabs. The first generation immigrants ranged from recent arrivals of a year to 30 years. Only 38 (29%) of the Arab teachers were fluent in Arabic, and 27 (21%) of all other teachers had acquired a few words. Sixty-five (49%) of the teachers were unable to speak the Arabic language. Seventy-one (61%) of the respondents had more than five years of teaching experience, with 69 (52%) having earned a master's degree or more. Table 1 shows the degree of experience that teachers had with various cultural groups. Clearly, most (87%) of the respondents had extensive experience working with Arab students and a smaller proportion with Caucasian (52%), and African American (12%) students.

**Table 1.** Teachers Degree of Experience with Students of Different Ethnic Groups

Degree of Experience	Student Ethnic Group					
	African American	Asian/Pacific American	Native American	Latino	Arab American	Caucasian
None	13.5*	45.5	59.0	40.5	.8	9.6
Limited	53.2	40.5	35.2	39.7	.8	10.4
Moderate	20.6	12.4	4.9	14.9	10.7	27.2
Extensive	12.7	1.7	.8	5.0	87.8	52.8

\*Percent of teachers indicating a given level of experience

**Table 2.** Arab Mothers' Characteristics (Means)

Family Origin	N	Mean Age	No. of Children	Speaking Prof. <sup>a</sup>	Writing Prof. <sup>b</sup>	Reading Prof. <sup>c</sup>	Education (Yrs.)
Yemenis	13	33.0	4.6	2.3	1.8	2.1	6.8
Iraqis	13	34.0	4.4	1.9	2.2	2.3	9.8
Lebanese	13	32.0	3.7	2.9	2.8	3.2	10.8

<sup>a</sup>Speaking proficiency <sup>b</sup>Writing proficiency <sup>c</sup>Reading proficiency

### Arab Parent Sample and Procedure

The study also included 39 mothers who were drawn from the same school district as the teachers. Parents were interviewed individually either in person or by telephone. The interviews were conducted either in Arabic or in English depending on the preference of the interviewee. The mothers were from Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, all countries from which there is an increasing influx of immigrants due to the political situations they are facing. Characteristics of the 39 Arab mothers of elementary school children who were interviewed are shown in Table 2. The average age of the mothers was 33, 34, and 32 respectively, with the Yemenis having the highest average number of children. The Lebanese were the most proficient in English and more educated on the average than the other two groups.

### Teacher Survey Design

The teacher survey was developed through an extensive review of the literature on school, family, and community partnerships. Some items were taken from the survey for teachers and parents in elementary and middle grades created by Epstein

and Salinas (1993). In addition to the literature pertaining to Arab Americans (e.g., American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee [ADC], 1993; ADC, 1997; Al-Qazzaz, Afifi, & Shabbas, 1978; Aswad, 1974; Jackson, 1995, 1997; Schwartz, 1999; Suleiman, 1996; Wingfield & Karaman, 1995), interviews were conducted with Arab American leaders in the community in order to include culturally appropriate behaviors and to ensure the cultural sensitivity of the instrument.

The survey was approved according to the human subjects review procedures at both the researchers' university and the participating school district. Each survey included a cover letter that assured the teachers of the confidentiality of the research and anonymity of all survey participants. Before distributing the teacher surveys, principals were contacted to clarify the intent and the value of the study for the school and the Arab community. Teachers were asked to return the surveys within three weeks by means of a slotted sealed box at each school.

The 67-item survey was divided into five sections. The first section contained 16 items that assessed teachers' perceptions of family involvement, some adapted from Epstein and Salinas (1993). The second section, which consisted of 15 items created for the present study, examined two aspects of Arab parents communication styles. One set of eight items used a 5-point Likert scale and was designed to determine whether teachers were aware of the Arab communication style at various levels of interaction. The second set consisted of seven items asking teachers how effective they considered various methods of communicating with both Arab and non-Arab parents. A 4-point response scale (1 = not at all effective, 2 = somewhat effective, 3 = very effective or 4 = extremely effective) was used for this part of section two. The third section, which consisted of 12 items (Likert-scales) created for the present study, assessed how efficacious teachers believed themselves to be when teaching/interacting with Arab and non-Arab students and their families. It also included items asking to what extent teachers included culturally relevant material in their classrooms. The fourth section contained 11 items, some adapted from Epstein's survey, to assess teachers' perceived support from the school administration/district and from Arab families using a 5-point Likert format. In the last section, which consisted of 13 items, teachers rated the importance of several school parent involvement programs using items taken from Epstein's survey, with additional items created for the present study to determine the specific needs of Arab immigrant parents. This section used a 4-point response scale (1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = very important or 4 = extremely important). The survey also included an open-ended section for teachers' comments. It should be noted that most of the items used in the survey are listed in the tables in the results section; however, only items that had salient loadings based on the results of factor analyses appear there.

### Arab Mothers Survey

The survey for Arab mothers provided information on date and place of birth, country of origin, year and reason of immigration to the United States, level of education, as well as level of English language proficiency, occupational status, and number and grade of children attending elementary school. The interviews were conducted around five main topics: parent educational workshops, communication methods, sources of information, perceived support from school, and how frequently they attended school functions and assisted in the school.

The items that assessed the importance of various educational workshops (13 items) and ways for teachers to communicate with parents (seven items) were the same as those on the teacher survey to facilitate comparison of teacher and parent beliefs. The seven items concerning sources of information indicated where and to whom parents turned for information when they wanted to learn how to help their children with school, rated on a 4-point scale (1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = very important or 4 = extremely important). There were four items in the perceived support section followed by additional follow-up questions for clarification depending on the responses. The last section asked parents about the ways they helped their children succeed at school and about difficulties they had in helping their children.

## Results

### Teachers' Perceptions of Arab Family Involvement

Parent involvement items were factor analyzed to determine their underlying dimensionality and to more parsimoniously report broad areas of involvement in addition to citing the results of specific items for illustrative purposes. Using a principal components extraction procedure with varimax rotation, four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 emerged, which accounted for 58% of the total variance. The scree plot was consistent in suggesting the adequacy of a four-factor structure. After rotation to simple structure, items with loadings  $> .40$  were used to define a factor. Items that loaded on each factor and summary scores of means and standard deviation are presented in Table 3. Based on the factor structure, four subscales were constructed by averaging (i.e., unit weighting) responses to the items with salient loadings ( $> .40$ ). Items with negative loading were reverse scored. Since the items were averaged, higher means represent greater agreement, and means close to 3 indicate neither agreement nor disagreement in the aggregate. Cronbach alpha internal consistency estimates of the derived subscales were .63, .58, .52, and .37, respectively. The consequence of this analysis thus identified four areas upon which to focus our analysis.



**Table 3.** Factor Analysis of Teachers' Perceptions of Arab Family Involvement

Items	Factor				M	SD
	1	2	3	4		
Parent partnership with the school is traditional in Arab culture.	-.53				2.8	1.1
Most Arab parents believe that education is the responsibility of the school alone.	.59				3.5	1.1
Most Arab parents recognize the school as the sole authority on their children's education.	.64				3.6	.9
Some Arab parents do not get involved because they feel alienated from the school.	.71				3.6	1.0
Most Arab parents are interested in attending parent conferences.		.57			3.9	.9
Education is important to most Arab families.		.80			4.2	.9
Financial and time constraints may limit parents' availability for school conferences and parent meetings.		.70			3.6	1.1
Every family, regardless of its background and ethnicity, has some strength that could be tapped to increase student's success in school.			.87		3.6	.6
All parents could learn ways to assist their children with schoolwork at home, if shown how.			.75		4.6	.9
Our school climate makes Arab families feel welcome.				.72	4.5	.6
I believe the lack of skills in English can make it difficult for parents to help their children with homework.				.46	4.2	.9
Immersion in English is the best way for Arab students to succeed in school.				.69	3.4	1.1

Note: Loadings > .40 are shown. Factor 1: School is authority for Arab parents; Factor 2: Arab families consider education important; Factor 3: Parent are capable of providing assistance; Factor 4: English language skills are important

The first factor can be interpreted as defining the perceived relationship between Arab parents and the school, specifically, the degree to which teachers believed that Arab parents view the school as the authority. Two of the items shown in Table 3 state that explicitly. A third item is that parent partnership with the school is traditional in Arab culture, which is the opposite of school authority and, appropriately, loaded negatively. The other item stated that uninvolved parents feel alienated from the school, which suggests that the more teachers believe that Arab parents consider the school as the authority, the more teachers attribute lack of involvement to the alienation that results from that relationship. As indicated by the item means and the overall subscale mean (3.4), teachers tend to agree more



than disagree with these statements. However, there is considerable variation.

The items of Factor 2 indicate Arab parents' interest in school, as conveyed explicitly by two of the items. It is also quite clear that teachers are substantially in agreement that education is important to Arab families. As with Factor 1, one of the items also indicates teachers' attributions for lack of involvement. That is, the more teachers believe that Arab parents are interested in participating in school, the more they believe that parents' lack of involvement is due to the lack of financial resources and time. The third factor has only two items, both of which convey teachers' beliefs in the importance of parents to the school, especially that parents could assist their children if provided with the appropriate skills. There was general agreement on this point, as most (87%) of the teachers believed that all parents could learn ways to assist their children with schoolwork at home if shown how, and most (85%) believed every family, regardless of its background, has some kind of strengths to help children succeed at school. Two of the items that define Factor 4 are concerned with language skills: that language is a barrier to Arab parents helping their children, and that English immersion is the best way for Arab students to succeed in school. Once again, one of the items refers more directly to a condition that affects involvement—that most teachers judged their school climate as welcoming.

The correlations among the subscales indicate that the more teachers believed Arab parents consider schools as the authority the more they believed that the lack of parent involvement was due to Arab parents' low English language skills ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, the more teachers believed Arab parents considered schools as the authority, the less teachers believed that education was important to Arab families and the less interested they were in attending school functions ( $r = -.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Importantly, there were no significant differences between Arab and non-Arab teachers on any of the four subscales.

### Communication Styles

Factor analysis of the communication items yielded two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, which explained 54% of the total variance. The items that loaded on each factor, and their means and standard deviation, are displayed in Table 4. The first factor can be interpreted as the mode of interaction, or "formality," and the second factor with two items indicates "questioning" on the part of Arab parents. We also examined relationships between the two communication style factors and the four parent involvement dimensions. Questioning was significantly related to language skills and with parent school involvement ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .05$ , and  $r = .31$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). That is, according to teachers, parents who possessed better

English language skills tended to ask more questions and get more involved in the school.

Tests of significance within subject factors and between subject factors indicated no significant differences between Arab and non-Arab teachers regarding the several ways of communication with Arab parents. There was also no significant difference apparent in communicating with Arab and non-Arab parents with the exception of Arab teachers finding that communicating with non-Arab parents through letters or memos was thought to be slightly more effective than with Arab parents. To determine whether there were differences between teachers and parents preferences for modes of communication, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. Although there was no statistical difference between the teachers and the parents as far as the methods of communication are concerned, the researcher was told by parents that they prefer the written letters translated into Arabic. This might explain why Arab teachers thought that letters and memos were more effective with non-Arab parents than with Arab parents, especially if those written communications were written in English only.

Mothers were asked which way was the most effective for teachers to communicate with them. They were then asked to rate the effectiveness of several modes

**Table 4.** Factor Analysis of Teachers' Perceptions of Arab Communication Styles and Questioning Tendencies

Items	Factor		M	SD
	1	2		
Arab children regard direct eye contact with adults as a sign of disrespect.	.66		2.9	1.2
An Arab may look upon rushing through a parent meeting as a sign of disrespect.	.72		3.3	.9
Most Arab parents prefer to communicate with other adults of the same sex.	.68		3.4	1.0
During meetings, Arab parents are more comfortable sitting very close to the teacher/counselor than are non-Arab parents.	.59		2.9	.8
Arab parents tend to ask fewer questions at parent meetings than do non-Arab parent.		.83	3.1	1.0
Most Arab parents do not question a teacher's expertise or decisions.		.78	3.5	1.0

Note: Factor loadings > .50 are shown. Factor 1: Arab communication style (formal, tradition bound); Factor 2: Arab questioning (reluctance)

of communication. More than half of the parents (65%;  $n=28$ ) preferred to be contacted by telephone, followed by meetings at the school. They found it easier to interact with teachers in that manner in order to convey their point of view. It seems Arabs, in general, prefer personal contact.

### Teacher Efficacy and Approach to Culture

Factor analysis performed on teacher efficacy and cultural relevancy items produced two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, which explained 53% of the total variance. Items with loadings  $>.5$  were used to define a factor. As shown in Table 5, the teacher efficacy items that load on the first factor are clearly differentiated from items that indicate the extent that teachers use culturally relevant material in their classes. Scales based on the items with salient loading were created, which had satisfactory estimates of internal consistency of .75 and .62, respectively. Despite the differentiation into separate factors, the scales based on these factors were highly correlated ( $r = .50, p < .01$ ), which indicates that teachers who included more culturally relevant material believed they were more capable of teaching an ethnically diverse school population.

We also wanted to determine the association between efficacy and cultural relevance and the dimensions discerned in section one. Teacher efficacy was significantly correlated with teacher's perception of parents' interest ( $r = .19, p < .05$ ) and importance ( $r = .25, p < .01$ ). Thus, the more that teachers believed they were capable of teaching and interacting with the Arab population, the more they believed that Arab parents were interested in their children's education and the more important they considered Arab parent involvement in the schools. Teachers' use of culturally relevant material was similarly related to their perceptions of how interested Arab parents were in their children's school ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ) and school involvement ( $r = .22, p < .05$ ).

### Perceived Support from School Administration/ District and Arab Families

Factor analysis was performed on perceived support items, and two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 emerged that explained 45% of total variance. The items with salient loadings on the factors ( $> .50$ ) are shown in Table 6. The first factor includes the four items representing the perceived "cultural support" from school administration, whereas the second factor was composed of the three items representing the "cultural resources" that teachers perceived and were available to them. Scales based on items with salient loadings had acceptable levels of internal consistency (Cronbach alphas of .63 and .70). Although factorially discriminable, perceived cultural support and perceived cultural resources were highly correlated ( $r = .53, p < .01$ ). Thus it could be inferred that teachers who perceive themselves

proficient also perceive their school administration/district to be culturally supportive and resourceful.

When we examined relationships between these subscales and other aspects of teacher perceptions and beliefs, few were statistically significant. There was a negative correlation between parents' reluctance to ask questions and both perceived cultural support ( $r = -.24, p < .01$ ) and perceived cultural resources ( $r = -.19, p < .05$ ). In other words, the more that teachers perceived that Arab parents don't question teachers, the less support and resources they perceive are available from their schools. While those same teachers perceive the parents as being passive, 55% of the teachers tend to believe that Arab parents ask fewer questions than do non-Arab parents and 79% believe that most Arab parents do not question a teacher's expertise or decisions.

**Table 5.** Results of Factor Analysis of Teacher Efficacy and Inclusion of Culture in Teaching

Items	Factor		M	SD
	1	2		
I am well prepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students in my classroom.	.69		4.3	.8
I can adapt my instruction so that even those students with limited English proficiency can master the materials.	.84		4.3	.7
I am confident that I can work with students from different ethnic groups.	.41		4.6	.5
I am able to help students who have limited English proficiency succeed in my classroom.	.75		4.4	.7
I make a special effort to give my students work that has importance in their culture.		.47	3.4	1.0
In my classroom I incorporate material that recognizes various cultures.		.85	4.2	.7
I encourage my immigrant students to share their culture and background.		.79	4.4	.7
I encourage parents to work with their children in their native language.		.45	4.0	.9

Note: Factor loadings > .40 are shown. Factor 1: Teacher efficacy; Factor 2: cultural inclusion

**Table 6.** Results of Factor Analysis of Perceived Administrative Support and Available Resources

Items	Factor		M	SD
	1	2		
There has been enough administrative support for me to successfully involve Arab parents in our school.	.56		4.1	1.0
This school has accommodated the customs of the native culture and religion of Arab families.	.70		4.2	.9
My district provides me with relevant cultural information about Arabs.	.59		4.0	.9
My school fosters a positive learning environment in culturally diverse setting.	.57		4.4	.6
This school has resources available to help Arab families with their children.		.67	4.3	.7
This school considers Arab parents as partners in the educational process.		.72	4.3	.8
This school helps me to create an environment conducive to the academic, social, linguistic and cultural growth of Arab children.		.69	4.2	.7

Note: Factor loadings > .50 are shown. Factor 1: Administrative support for Arab students and family involvement; Factor 2: Cultural resources are available

### Parent Education Programs

Factor analysis of the parent education program items produced two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, which accounted for 59% of the variance. Items with loadings > .5 were used to define a factor, and scales were created with acceptable internal consistency estimates of .90 and .81 for factors 1 and 2, respectively, as shown in Table 7. The first factor includes nine items, most of which focused directly on helping students, whereas the second factor focused more on assistance to parents. Inspection of the average importance of the education programs in Factor 1 indicates relatively little differentiation, although teachers considered somewhat less important the involvement by families in committees and decision making, as well as after school activities for students. There was much greater differentiation of the activities listed in Factor 2, with ESL classes for parents believed by teachers to be much more important than providing parents with information on citizenship, job training, and events.

Since the mothers responded to the same items as the teachers, we were able to compare the level of importance ascribed to each. Means based on ratings by the mothers interviewed are shown in Table 7 along with those of the teachers. Although the overall subscale means based on the factors were not statistically different, several individual items were. Importantly, teachers considered after school programs more important ( $M = 3.1$ ) than did mothers ( $M = 2.3$ ),  $F(1, 169) = 89.06$ ,  $p < .001$ . Information on becoming US citizens was also considered more important by mothers ( $M = 4.1$ ) than by teachers ( $M = 2.6$ ),  $F(1, 170) = 30.24$ ,  $p < .001$ . In fact, most mothers (86%) indicated such information, in addition to U.S. laws and ESL classes, to be of importance. Finally, teachers considered information about community events more important ( $M = 2.9$ ) than did the mothers ( $M = 2.3$ ),  $F(1, 168) = 15.33$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Table 7.** Results of Factor Analysis of Importance of Parent Education Programs for Teachers and Arab Mothers

Items	Factor		M	SD
	1	2		
Workshops to build skills in parenting and understanding their children at each grade level	.87		3.3	3.8
Workshops on creating home conditions for learning	.81		3.3	3.0
Written communications from the school to the home that all families can understand and use	.64		3.3	3.3
Communications about report cards so that parents understand student progress and needs	.67		3.5	3.6
Parent-teacher conferences	.69		3.5	3.6
Information on how to monitor homework	.72		3.4	3.3
Information for parents on how to help their children with specific skills and subjects	.69		3.4	3.2
Involvement by families in PTA/PTO leadership, other committees, or other decisions-making roles	.65		3.1	2.7
Programs for after-school activities for students	.63		3.1	2.3
Information on becoming U.S citizens		.80	2.6	4.1
ESL classes for parents		.63	3.4	3.3
Information on job training for families		.82	2.8	2.7
Information on community services and events		.76	2.9	2.3

Note: Items with loadings  $> .50$  are shown. Factor 1: Programs providing direct student help; Factor 2: Programs for parents and families

<sup>a</sup>Mean importance level for teachers; <sup>b</sup>Mean importance level for mothers

## Discussion

The present study examined first generation Arab parent involvement at the elementary school level. The results reveal a set of beliefs held by many teachers about Arab parents' lack of involvement in their children's education. Teachers apparently conclude that parent partnership with schools is not traditional in Arab culture based on their own observations that only a handful of mothers assist in classrooms and/or other areas of the school. However, teachers are aware of other possible reasons for the lack of involvement, especially language barriers. As one teacher noted, "I feel that most parents want to be involved in their child's education; however, many ESL parents don't feel confident or have the English skills to feel comfortable in the school setting." Similar statements were: "I feel some parents are reluctant to offer their time because of language barriers," and "I have found families to be supportive and involved to the best of their abilities. Time constraints and language barriers are often difficult." Among the other causes of lack of involvement, teachers understood that most of the mothers had younger children at home who required their presence. In addition, teachers believe that Arab parents consider the school the sole authority governing their children's education, further inhibiting participation.

Without taking such factors into consideration, an inference might be made that low parent participation in public school activities is a function of the low value Arab parents place on their children's education. This inference may have the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as teachers respond to parents (who are considered unresponsive) in ways that confirm those expectations. Subsequent absences then reinforce the beliefs that teachers helped to create. According to Chavkin and Williams (1987), when administrators [and presumably teachers] define parent involvement from a narrow perspective, for example, basing their beliefs regarding parental values on events that require public behaviors, they limit the ways that parents can participate in the education of their children. As documented in the present study, such public behaviors are what Arab parents are more likely to find distressing, contrasted with relatively private activities. For example, most (81%) of them attended parent-teacher conferences on a regular basis. Furthermore, virtually all (97%) of the Arab mothers expressed willingness to participate if they were requested to do so. The mothers also created a home environment conducive to learning and assisted with homework. Such findings are contrary to the belief that immigrant parents are hesitant to get involved in their children's schooling if they are not English speakers and have limited education (Rumbaut & Cornelius, 1995). This gap between definitions of parental involvement is consistent with Dauber and Epstein's (1989) finding that although teachers in Chapter 1 schools felt most parents were not involved and did not want to be, parents reported that



they were involved with their children and wanted more advice from teachers about how to help their children. By understanding and examining their beliefs, teachers and administrators may prevent barriers from forming between parents and educators. Also, teachers need to capitalize on the willingness of mothers to take part and initiate a wider range of involvement activities with which parents are comfortable.

Significantly, although most teachers reported having had extensive experience with Arab students, many appeared to lack relevant cultural information about communication styles necessary for effective interaction with Arab families. For example, almost 40% were unable to give definitive answers about Arabs' communication styles, including not recognizing mothers' preferences for personal contact, which includes face-to-face interaction and phone calls. Another example is the mothers who often acquiesce to a teacher's request out of politeness rather than agreement, ultimately fail to comply, and end up being judged unreliable when they fail to deliver as promised. The relationship between teacher efficacy and parent involvement suggests that teachers who believe they are competent and perceive their school administration/district to be culturally supportive and resourceful are also the ones who value parents' participation in the schools and find them to be more interested in their children's schooling. These results suggest that schools need to provide teachers with opportunities for professional enrichment including the necessary culturally relevant skills and information. Teachers who are equipped and skillful will feel more efficacious about their roles as teachers and subsequently establish a more positive and cooperative relationship with parents.

The results that compared the importance of various parent involvement activities clearly indicated that most workshops related to helping parents with their children are considered very important by parents and teachers. It would be beneficial for parents to help select the workshop topics, and programs should be tailored to the individual needs of each family. Iglesias (1992) argues that it is essential to provide families with what they want instead of offering them only those services that are immediately plausible. Opinions differed about the importance of after school activities, as most of parents viewed them as less important than did teachers. The reasons cited were mostly pragmatic, including their inability (transportation, finance) to participate, or the need for their children to spend more time on their studies. One obvious disagreement between mothers and teachers was on the necessity of providing information regarding becoming U.S. citizens, U.S. laws, and ESL classes. Most mothers considered this information important, whereas teachers did not think that parents placed high value on receiving this type of communication.

While recognizing that teachers are submerged and overloaded in daily affairs, they do need to be sensitive to aspects beyond the traditional needs of their students

and acquire more sensitivity to the concerns of these parents. The present findings support research indicating that parent involvement in schools suffers because educators do not understand different family cultures. Teachers describe situations in which poor communication with the schools is not caused by lack of parental interest, as many educators believe, but rather by parental feelings of alienation from the schools (Lewis, 1992). Moreover, communication and cultural awareness must be reciprocal, that is, parents also have a responsibility to understand their host culture. This can be best accomplished by activities such as roundtable discussions, during which both teachers' and parents' assumptions and values are examined. Such reciprocal sensitivity will help ensure quality education for Arab American children.

A number of limitations of this study are worth consideration. Most notable are the unique characteristics of the parent sample limited to first generation Arab mothers of low to low-middle income. Second, not all types of involvement were taken into consideration. Third, due to the fact that teachers were not interviewed, the researchers were unable to obtain more in-depth information regarding Arab parent involvement. Additionally, some of the items used in the study were seen as pejorative to Arabs. Despite these limitations, this study represents a contribution to the Arab parent involvement literature by providing an understanding of teachers' perceptions and Arab American parents' educational beliefs and practices that will assist educators by providing a point of departure from which to approach Arab community.

Further research should investigate the involvement behaviors of both mothers and fathers, and research should include an even more comprehensive assessment of parent involvement activities. Intergenerational research should also be considered. Finally, it should be noted that the Arab world is diverse and that Arab Americans from various countries differ from each other in culture and in social background. Thus, it is important for teachers to expand their knowledge and understanding to become more effective and to accommodate the individuality of Arab families. Since most first-generation Arab parents' value systems are different from that of American parents, the Arab community ought to be approached with sensitivity and intelligence derived from comparative cultural knowledge and understanding. Whereas this can be a daunting task, the results of the present study yielded a number of suggestions that should make that task more manageable.

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### Authors' Note

The immigrant's problem does not end with cultural and linguistic adjustment. Whenever there are political upheavals in the Middle East and the Muslim world that have perceived negative consequences on the United States, the Arab immigrants, regardless of their religious affiliation – and there are many Arab Christians in the United States – find themselves in a conundrum and a quagmire. Many Arab immigrants left the troubled home of their ancestors in the hope of settling in a

place where peace, justice, and freedom prevail. The aftermath of the horrendous events of 11 September 2001 demonstrated in unmistakable terms the prejudices these immigrants have to endure. The world has become so interdependent that no country can live in isolation and whatever ill happens to a population anywhere in the world will have some impact on the whole of civilization. In light of the atrocious events that took place recently in New York and Washington, this modest study has become even more relevant than the authors had anticipated.

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