Peer-Reviewed Article

Middle Eastern parents' involvement with their children's early childhood centres in New Zealand

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This article provides insights into Middle Eastern parents' involvement in their children's early education services in New Zealand and outlines the factors that influence the extent and nature of this involvement. The findings showed that teachers generally had positive perceptions of working with Middle Eastern families and the comments mainly revolved around parents' willingness to share their culture and get involved with the centre. As will be discussed throughout the paper, several factors inhibited parents' involvement within the centres, including unfamiliarity with the New Zealand education system and trust issues rooted in past experience. However, the main barrier seems to be a lack of effective communication between parents and teachers. These findings have important implications for early childhood teachers in New Zealand and beyond.

Introduction

A core principle of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) is "family and community/whānau tangata", which emphasises the importance of parents' participation in children's early childhood experiences. This principle also highlights teachers' responsibility to develop such relationships:

> It is important that kaiako develop meaningful relationships with whānau and that they respect their aspirations for their children ... All cultural groups have beliefs, traditions, and child-rearing practices that place value on specific knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions. (MoE, 2017, p. 20)

This principle has clear pedagogical implications for early childhood teachers. Research has shown that parents and teachers can develop a better understanding of children's needs when they form a true partnership with one another (De Gioia, 2013). Moreover,

parent–teacher collaboration allows children to experience a continuity between home and centre and make the most out of their early childhood experience. Parental involvement can also benefit parents, particularly migrant parents, by helping them expand their social networks and hence experience a sense of community (Ward, 2013).

Over the years, some researchers have paid attention to immigrant parents'—mainly Chinese parents—involvement with teachers in New Zealand (e.g., Chan, 2014; Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Guo, 2005a; Wu, 2009; Zhang, 2012). A notable finding of these studies is the view of teachers as authority figures. In this context, "authority figure" refers to a person who holds a position of respect and power, often expected to be unquestioned by others, particularly by parents, in educational matters. This perception, common in many collectivist cultures like China, contrasts with New Zealand's more collaborative approach between parents and educators. Holding this view leads some immigrant parents to disengage from the centres and instead actively engage in their children's learning at home. Also, the studies show that parental involvement is negatively affected by language and cultural barriers, unfamiliarity with the New Zealand education system, lack of perceived opportunities to participate in centre activities, clashing expectations, and teachers' unpreparedness to adjust their practices. These studies also highlight the importance of teachers' openness to initiating conversations with families, building genuine relationships with them, and finally revising their practices to incorporate parents' knowledge into the curriculum.

The literature provides invaluable information about the studied populations, but it also lays bare the scarcity of research on other ethnic populations such as Middle Easterners, a gap to which this paper speaks. The focus of the present article is therefore Middle Eastern parents' involvement with their children's early learning services in Aotearoa New Zealand and factors that influence their involvement.

Mixed methods research design

The PhD research underpinning this paper employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a national survey of Middle Eastern parents, parent/teacher interviews, and observations of Middle Eastern children at selected centres. However, this paper primarily focuses on data from interviews with four case study teachers. References to the survey data are limited and are included only when necessary to provide additional context to the findings on parents' involvement behaviour.

I conducted semi-structured individual interviews (n = 4) with teachers after I had observed case study children. A consideration of the rights of the participants to "be heard, to participate, to have control of their lives" (Brooker, 2001, p.163) was an important part of the ethical practice of this research. Accordingly, participants were given the freedom to choose the time and setting of the interview, as well as control over its duration. In all cases the teachers chose to have the interview at their office and each interview lasted for about an hour. Confidentiality issues were also acknowledged and reflected in the decision to use pseudonyms for the participants and the centres.

Teachers' perspective on Middle Eastern families' involvement

When I asked teachers about working with Middle Eastern families, three of them described their experiences as generally positive and indicated that Middle Eastern parents were involved in the programme through participating in the centres' cultural events, volunteering to help, and communicating with teachers. The teachers' views are in line with parents' views as indicated in the survey findings. One of the close-ended survey items asked parents to rate their agreement with the following statement related to their involvement: *I like to get involved at my child's centre*. This item received almost 90% agreement from Middle Eastern parents across the country.

The following comments from two of the interviewed teachers, Joe and Mia, embody this positive perception:

> I've worked with 17 Middle Eastern families and my experience has been really positive. The families are so open and have really wanted to share their culture. I've invited them into cultural events, and they've been really keen to jump in and support the team.

> Working with Middle Eastern families is quite easy overall. Just the fact that they are open to share information about their child. It helps us understand what their needs are. They open the conversation and are happy to share. The parents also like to be involved and help us with activities. I think they just offer that voluntarily.

Sally explained how working with Middle Eastern families, including refugee families, had changed her stereotypic perception of this cultural group for the better:

> I've worked with more than 20 Middle Eastern families. To be honest, they are my favourite to work with. I come from New Zealand and working with refugee families has taught me a lot. The stories they bring are incredible and it has shifted my perception. Because on the news you see Taliban, ISIS and without being fully aware, you have them all in the same box. Working with these families in the real world, seeing how they live their life and learning about them challenges my perception and makes me realise they are not all ISIS or Taliban, they are just like other people. I love them and I feel a real sense of warmth from them. Before working with them, I thought I would find it hard to build a relationship with them, but I now have these Middle Eastern refugee families who have nothing, but they would come in and have a cup of tea with you. They would make you food even though they have nothing themselves.

Sally describes how she had formed her perception of Middle Eastern families based on media narratives. Her comment indicates the role of the media in spreading negative stereotypes and ultimately shaping public attitudes towards ethnic groups (see Castaneda, 2018). The first half of Sally's comment reflects the literature (see Amin, 2015; Badiee, 2004) on teachers' stereotypical assumptions about Middle Easterners, which can lead to discriminatory acts against Middle Eastern children. In the same vein, Chan's (2011) review of the literature on immigrant families revealed that early childhood teachers are prone to adopting stereotypical attitudes towards parents and children from certain ethnic groups.

Sally noted that working closely with Middle Eastern families and observing "how they live their life" led her to notice the ill-informed stereotypes and correct her misperceptions. This highlights the significance of the funds of knowledge approach (González et al., 2006) in helping teachers put aside damaging stereotypes about certain cultural groups. It also highlights the significance of a critical multicultural approach in diverse classrooms as it requires teachers to "engage critically with all ethnic and cultural backgrounds" (May, 1999, p. 33). If teachers disregard the fluidity of culture and identity, and in doing that maintain the status quo, they are indirectly supporting the marginalisation of minorities.

A shared aspect of the three comments above is the interviewed teachers' acknowledgement of different forms of parental involvement. Sally, for example, recounted refugee parents' genuine efforts to contribute to the centre using whatever was at their disposal. This contribution took different forms, such as making food for teachers, taking the time to talk to the centre staff, and catching up on what had been happening at the centre. Joe and Mia shared Sally's perspective. The key words in the above comments are volunteering, involvement, and helping.

By contrast, Kelly described Middle Eastern parental involvement as minimal:

> I've worked with a few Middle Eastern families. In general, their involvement I would say was minimal. They don't volunteer a lot of information. They don't share a lot of their culture with us. We do have quite a high expectation in this regard.

This comment shows how the interpretation of individual experiences is key to forming one's perception of a particular group. Whereas Joe, Mia, and Sally pointed to the open communication style of Middle Eastern parents, Kelly provided a very different perspective. Data triangulation can help in cases where points are made about a specific aspect of a cultural or ethnic group. This triangulation can take place not only with the opinion of several teachers, but also using other forms of data including parent interviews. Following up on Kelly's statement ("we do have quite a high expectation in this regard") I asked if this expectation had been communicated to Middle Eastern parents. Kelly responded:

> I think we might have tried subtly so without being like "we need you to come into the centre," it was more like a "oh, we've got something for you to sign, come on in," but that didn't help. We don't know all the questions and all the answers, so it's nice to have open communication so then they can come to you and share openly. For example, Samar's [the case study child in Kelly's centre] drop offs were fast. It was like "oh, you're here, hello," so Reyhan [Samar's mother] wouldn't come in or … Quite fast drop-offs and pick-ups. She seemed very busy.

Kelly admitted the centre's expectations were probably not fully and clearly communicated to Middle Eastern parents. Paradoxically, she did expect Middle Eastern parents to come forward and openly share their expectations. Kelly was not certain if

parents' low involvement emerged from their unwillingness, busy schedule, or perhaps lack of effective communication between centre and parents.

In my observations of the four case study parents, Reyhan was the only parent who rushed out (after dropping Samar off). During my observations, I did not see teachers and Reyhan communicate about Samar. In almost all the observational sessions, Samar was crying at drop-off. The interaction between the teachers and Reyhan was usually a smile, a mere "bye" or "hi" or a hand gesture from teachers to indicate that Reyhan could leave while they were hugging Samar. In my interview with Reyhan, we unearthed a potential source of this problem. Reyhan commented:

> Samar usually cries at drop-off times, but the teachers grab her from me and just give me a sign that I must leave now without talking to me, just with their hands, like a wave. I didn't know that the teachers will just take Samar while she's crying. I assumed that they would give me that responsibility to let my child settle, calm her down, and then leave. This was my idea of drop-off. But it's their field and they know better. Even when they ask me to do something with Samar, I do it without negotiation. It's not appropriate to ask questions or suggest things to teachers … So, they just grab her and do their job I think. So, I leave the centre to stay out of their way. And sometimes other teachers followed me and said, "Don't worry, she will stop crying in a minute, go to your class." That's why I just give her to one of the teachers and leave.

Reyhan's lack of awareness of the procedures and what was expected of her in the context of New Zealand ECE is evident in the above comment. Reyhan's unfamiliarity could partly explain her limited engagement with teachers during arrival times, and a lack of effective communication led Reyhan to believe that she was doing the right thing by quickly dropping Samar off to "stay out of teachers' way." From Reyhan's perspective, the teachers' behaviours and gestures at her arrival were a signal to depart, while from the teachers' perspective, Reyhan seemed to be busy and eager to leave quickly. Reyhan also expressed an attitude of compliance and put huge trust in teachers by emphasising that she follows their instructions without question. The above statements by Reyhan are reminiscent of Middle Eastern parents' tendency to view teachers as authority figures, which is one reason why the idea of questioning teachers is usually considered disrespectful and interfering (Moosa et al., 2001). For Reyhan, operating with this cultural attitude toward teachers also affected her level of involvement with the centre. The following comment once again signals the lack of effective communication between her and the teachers:

> I didn't know if there was anything I could be involved in … there was only Father's Day that I knew about and as Samar's father is not here in New Zealand, we didn't go. They had a party for Samar, we went to that, and I provided them with cupcakes. Sometimes, I wanted to be more helpful, but I didn't know how.

As indicated, Reyhan was willing to engage more in centre activities if she knew more about them. Cultural barriers, unfamiliarity with the New Zealand education system, and lack of perceived opportunities to engage were also mentioned by Guo (2005b) and Zhang (2012) as the contributing factors to Chinese immigrant parents' low involvement in early childhood settings.

Barriers to Middle Eastern parental involvement

Joe and Sally, unlike Kelly, could articulate the barriers affecting some Middle Eastern families' active involvement in the programme, including issues related to culture, trust, and language—all of which have been documented as barriers to parental engagement in other studies (Chan, 2014; Guo, 2010; Wu, 2011; Zhang, 2012). Talking about his interactions with Middle Eastern families, Joe explained his view as follows:

> There are barriers for some Middle Eastern families, specifically our refugee families, engaging in early learning services. There is a cultural barrier, there is a barrier of trust and when I say barrier, I mean it exists but it's *our* responsibility to remedy it. It's *our* responsibility to go a little bit beyond what we normally would do to make sure that we are engaging them.

When I asked Joe's opinion about the possible reasons for families' trust issue, he explained that after engaging in multiple dialogues with Middle Eastern families, he realised the mistrust mainly came from their transition and settlement experiences in New Zealand. He further elaborated that the government's support of refugee families is limited to a short period after their arrival and ends quite abruptly, which can leave families feeling abandoned and confused. This finding is in line with Mitchell and Kamenarac's (2021) analysis of the place of young refugee children and their families in Aotearoa New Zealand's resettlement policies.

To understand *why* some refugee parents choose to be less involved with the centre, Joe made a deliberate attempt to learn about their everyday living conditions and hardships. He shared that once the centre had identified the reasons behind some

Middle Eastern families' low engagement, teachers took the initiative to create a "community navigator role" within their centre. As described by Joe, the community navigator was responsible for bridging the language and cultural barriers, advocating for Middle Eastern refugee families, helping them communicate with government agencies, and linking families with community-based organisations. He also recounted designing a workshop for Middle Eastern families through the community navigator to address some of their concerns and questions about their children's early education in New Zealand.

As Joe stated, "It's *our* responsibility to go a little bit beyond what we normally would do to make sure that we are engaging them." This attitude explains the actions taken by the centre to proactively promote Middle Eastern families' involvement, reduce the existing barriers, and create a more trusting parent-teacher relationship along the way. According to McLaren (1995), critical multicultural educators need to connect with people who are oppressed by issues of power and make sure appropriate supports are in place. Similarly, Chan (2020) highlights the role of teachers in providing extra support for immigrant families and children. "It is the teachers' responsibility to find ways to resolve language barriers and to be equitable and inclusive …" (p. 15).

Another interviewed teacher, Sally, attributed Middle Eastern parents' low involvement in "certain celebrations" to language and cultural barriers:

> In terms of certain celebrations, we find it really hard getting some Middle Eastern families here. Some of them show interest, but then they don't show up. We had an Arab teacher and she told me that often Middle Easterners do not attend an event when they are not personally invited. I really wanted them to come to one of our cultural events, so I google translated the invitation in Arabic, put them in the parent pockets and talked to parents one by one. Two of the three parents came, but the other one didn't. That particular parent does not like to attend the Halloween party. I feel like she might be afraid that she will not be able to communicate with people so that's a bit of a barrier.

The "Arab teacher" mentioned the importance of personal invitation for Middle Eastern families. This might be true for some Middle Eastern families as they tend to view the practice of delivering or receiving personal invitation as a sign of respect. After learning about this practice, Sally made a conscious effort to help Middle Eastern families take part in centre activities: she prepared hand-written invitations and personally gave them

to the parents. Sally's explanation for the parent who did not attend revolved around the parent's limited English language fluency. An alternative explanation, however, might be the parent's cultural or religious values, among other things. Previous research indicates that some Middle Eastern families have reservations around exposing their children to holiday celebrations of other cultures or religions due to the pagan origins of certain celebrations (Alkharusi, 2013). As stated by Bisson (2016), "we cannot create approaches to holidays that work for everyone in our programmes unless we open our hearts and our minds and commit to discovering the values, opinions, beliefs, and convictions that can only be uncovered and understood through dialogue" (p. 25).

Conclusion

Overall, according to the teachers interviewed, most Middle Eastern parents are willing to be involved in their children's early education. This perception differs from earlier studies (e.g., Faour, 2012; Moosa et al., 2001) and challenges some of the assumptions held by the teachers themselves. These results highlight the need to focus on identifying and removing barriers to parental involvement, while also promoting clearer communication between parents and educators.

As discussed throughout the paper, factors inhibiting parents' involvement include unfamiliarity with the New Zealand education system, lack of perceived opportunities, parents' cultural attitude toward teachers as authority figures, and language and cultural barriers. However, the main barrier identified is the lack of effective communication between parents and teachers. While some teachers fulfil their professional responsibility to identify and remove the barriers to Middle Eastern parents' involvement, others stick to their regular practices and wait for parents to approach them. These two different approaches by the case-study teachers have important implications for teacher practices. Teachers need to uncover what underlies some families' disengagement, so they know where to begin and how to establish reciprocal and respectful relationships.

Author Notes

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