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Research Article

Exploring Assistant Principals' Views on Parental Involvement in Bahraini Primary Education

استطلاع آراء المدراء المساعدين حول مشاركة أولياء الأمور في التعليم الابتدائي في البحرين

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Abstract

This study explores assistant principals' views on parental involvement in Bahraini primary education. Through a qualitative approach and interpretive case-study design, this study aims to achieve better understanding of school assistant principals' experiences and their role in facilitating parental involvement in children's schooling through exploring potential benefits, challenges, and issues concerning home–school relations. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the model used by (Epstein, 2011). Data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with eight female Bahraini public school assistant principals who served as key informants. The findings demonstrate the importance of home–school relations and provide examples of how different approaches to home–school relations are used in various schools. The study discusses some of the challenges that impede the involvement of parents in schools and suggests strategies to improve policies and practices related to home–school relations.

الملخص

تستطلع الدراسة آراء المدراء المساعدين حول مشاركة أولياء الأمور في التعليم الابتدائي في البحرين. توظف الدراسة المنهجية النوعية معتمدة على تصميم دراسة الحالة، وتهدف إلى الوصول لفهم أفضل حول خبرات المدراء المساعدين وتصوراتهم لأدوارهم في تشجيع مشاركة أولياء الأمور في تعليم أبنائهم. وذلك من خلال استكشاف الفوائد المحتملة، التحديات، والقضايا ذات الصلة بالعلاقة بين الأسرة والمدرسة. اعتمدت الدراسة على الإطار النظري المقدم من (Epstein, ٢٠١١)، وتم جمع البيانات من خلال إجراء مقابلات شبه منظمة مع ثمان من المديرات المساعدات العاملات في المدارس البحرينية الحكومية. كشفت نتائُج الدراسة عن مدى أهمية العلاقات بين الأسرة والمدرسة، وقدمت أمثلة حول تنوع الاتجاهات المستخدمة من قبل المدارس المختلفة في مجال العلاقة بين الأسرة والمدرسة. كما ناقشت الدراسة عددا من التحديات التي تقلل من مشاركة أولياء الأمور في تعليم أبنائهم وقدمت مقترحات لتطوير السياسات والممارسات المتعلقة بالعلاقات بين الأسرة والمدرسة.

Keywords: *Parental involvement, Home–school relations, School principals, Views, Qualitative, Bahrain*

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم، مشاركة أولياء الأمور، المشاركة الأسرية، المدراء، آراء، دراسة نوعية، البحرين

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1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, there has been a significant interest in researching home and school relations and investigating their effect on students' overall performance in different academic, personal, and social dimensions (Brown et al., 2020; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Ginsburg-Block et al. 2010). Several studies suggest that when parents are actively engaged in their children's education this may lead to better behavior, higher achievement in literacy and numeracy, and better emotional well-being (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Therefore, many educational systems around the world are introducing legislation and initiating schemes to support a stronger partnership between home and school (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Epstein, 2011; Epstein et al., 2018). Many studies suggest that understanding parents' and teachers' views on key issues related to home–school relations is important, as this would help guide policies and improve practices (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008; Anastasiou & Papagianni, 2020; Auerbach, 2009; Bertrand et al., 2018; DeMatthews, 2018; Erdener, 2016).

There is a wealth of research on the topic of parental involvement in Western countries, as the vast majority of the existing literature is Western-centric. In contrast, there is limited research on parental involvement in Arabian Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar). The literature suggests that Gulf countries share many religious and cultural values (such as extended family, mother and fathers specific gender roles, and aunts and uncles helping in childcare) as well as educational policies and legislations that may vary from what is assumed in the Western (e.g., US and UK) literature (Al-Harrasi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014; Al-Hassan, 2020; [Al-Mahdi & Bailey, 2022; Ridge & Soohyun, 2020). Through a revision of the existing literature, it is evident that parental involvement in education is significantly under-researched in Bahrain (AlHashmi, 2019; Al-Hassan, 2020; Moussa-Inaty & De La Vega, 2013).

In recent years, and as part of the strategic plans of the Ministry of Education in Bahrain, the educational system has emphasized on promoting effective relationships between educators and families. The Bahrain Education and Training Quality Authority considers the relationship between educators and families to be one of the school's achievements in establishing a constructive learning environment. This area has been highlighted in the school review framework under the "students' support and guidance" component (Education and Training Quality Assurance Authority, 2015). Understanding and promoting different forms of parental involvement in schools is an important element in educational reforms. There is a need for this research as there is limited research

into parental involvement in children's education in Bahrain, and most of the available literature is conducted in Western educational organizations. The Bahraini political system, religion, culture, and other social and economic factors are significantly different from the Western organizations. Local educational policies and programs have been changing over the last several years. In order to examine how parental involvement is conceptualized in the Bahraini context and to examine the similarities and differences with international literature on parental involvement, the current study explores assistant principals' opinions on parental involvement in Bahraini public primary education.

Of note, this study is part of a wider project initiated by the researcher to explore parental involvement in Bahraini schools from the perspectives of different stakeholders. This project consists of three studies: the first study focuses on parental involvement from the perspective of parents (N = 154)(Al-Mahdi & Bailey, 2022). The second study (the study at hand) focuses on the qualitative aspect of the views of assistant principals (N = 8). The third study will focus on the quantitative results based on surveys completed by teachers and principals (N = 118) regarding their views on parental involvement.

1.1. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the research on parental involvement in the Gulf in response to the current lack of research (AlHashmi, 2019; Al-Hassan, 2020; Baker & Blaik Hourani, 2014; Blaik Hourani et al., 2012; Stringer & Blaik Hourani, 2013).

The study attempts to answer the following main question: How do school assistant principals perceive parental involvement and how does their school facilitate home–school relations? This question is divided into the following sub-questions which will be used to frame the data collection and data analysis:

1. How do schools facilitate parental involvement and what do parents do to get involved in their children's schooling?

2. What are the benefits of home–school cooperation?

3. When do teachers call parents? When do parents call teachers?

4. How does parents' behaviors and roles contribute to a child's academic success?

5. What are the main challenges or barriers of home–school relations?

6. What is assistant principals' role in supporting parental involvement?

1.2. Literature review

A recent review conducted by Addi-Raccah et al. (2021) of current research on parental involvement presents a continuing growth in the amount of research that supports the following conceptions: parental involvement is a multidimensional concept; the term parental involvement has different definitions; schools have a major role in involving families in the partnership; and teachers require support to establish effective relations with parents. Their findings indicate that home–school relationships are influenced by several factors such as parents' age, socioeconomic levels, and ethnicity. Addi-Raccah et al. (2021) suggest that parents are generally committed to their involvement in their children's education, however, schools should be doing more to meet the parents' knowledge and competencies such as utilizing the social and cultural resources available to the learners' communities as suggested by Moll et al. (1992) and DeMatthews (2018). Similarly, Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) argue that parental involvement is a value-laden concept and suggest that there is a need for more understanding of how home and school connections are conceptualized by the different stakeholders. They also noted that there is considerable inconsistency in how schools organize their relationships with parents, as well as differences in families' perception toward their roles and responsibilities within their child's education.

Brown et al. (2020) indicate that the literature made a distinction between two commonly used concepts: (a) involvement, which implies relatively one-way action from the parent to meet requests introduced by the school, such as helping children with homework or volunteering in school activities and (b) engagement, which in contrast is regarded as an active, two-way exchange of information between home and school, where parents are seen as partners in education.

Parental involvement in schooling has been investigated in many Western and non-Western countries. The below subsection presents a selection of recent studies that have been conducted internationally with a focus on principals' views regarding home–school relations, followed by a subsection that explores recent studies on parental involvement in the Gulf countries specifically.

1.3. Principals' views regarding home–school relations

Auerbach (2009) investigated principals' views of home–school relations in under-achieving schools in the United States. The interviews with the principals indicated that they actively encouraged parental involvement as part of a wider ethical responsibility

to social and educational equity for families particularly those who come from ethnic minority backgrounds. The school principals tried new models of parental involvement, moved away from traditional parent involvement structures and initiated innovative activities that fit the needs of their particular communities. They also pointed out the need for more practical experience in working with parents. Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) explored school principals' role in supporting parent–school relations in Australia. The findings of their focus group with parents indicated that parents considered school principals' communication styles and leadership practices to play a major role in encouraging and sustaining parents and school relations. Parents reported that the attitude of the principals toward them would encourage them to feel allowed to be involved more or to be reluctant to participate in school activities. Erdener (2016) used a mixed methods design that included surveys and interviews to explore school principals' and teachers' views of parent involvement in Turkish schools. The study found that the participants had positive attitudes toward increasing parent involvement. They also found that principals' attitudes were the most significant indicator of the success of parental involvement efforts in schools. The study indicated that when principals schedule a time for parent–teacher meetings, parent involvement significantly increases. DeMatthews (2018) conducted a case study that showed how a Mexican school principal had invested in the social capital found in parents' community. Parents and teachers explored ways to invest in the cultural and social resources available in their community and build mutual trust with each other. The findings of the study showed the importance of context, and the potential challenges school principals can face in providing support and services to marginalized communities. Bertrand et al. (2018) explored two common portrayals of parents in the United States: As authentic partners to schools or as just "supporters." The findings indicated that principals often viewed parents from a deficit perspective and as required to support school approaches. The findings indicated that understanding principals' mindsets about parents and their sense of the parents' contributions are important.

Anastasiou and Papagianni (2020) explored parents' and school staff's views on parental involvement in secondary schools in Greece. Their results indicated that school staff agreed with parents that teachers' expertise and parents' unwillingness to communicate with them can reduce parental involvement in schools. School principals were expected to facilitate home and school communication and promote the positive outcomes of shared activities. The participants held positive perspectives toward parental involvement and indicated that school leadership is important in setting policies that promote parental involvement and in conducting teachers' professional development

activities to increase their knowledge and skills in home–school relations. Addi-Raccah et al. (2021) suggest that there are recurrent barriers to parental involvement and there is a need to move from a deficit view of parents to one of partnership between home and school. Continuous professional development for school staff can help in reducing barriers to families from multicultural environments and improve communication with all families. Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) examined how home–school relations can be influenced by parents' empowerment. Their interviews with primary teachers indicated that they supported parental involvement but were also concerned about the increasing influence of parents who interfered with their professional activities. To overcome this difficulty, they promoted open communication to increase parents' trust in their teaching competencies and improved cooperation to avoid disagreements. The results suggested that parent empowerment can be challenging to teachers but can also offer a possibility to establish new ways for partnership based on mutual trust. Parental involvement in children's schooling can differ according to culture and ethnicity. For example, Huntsinger and Jose (2008) found that due to cultural factors Chinese–American and European American families differed in their involvement in their children's education. In addition, Denessen et al. (2007) indicated that school administrators in the Netherlands recognize difficulties in involving immigrant parents in school. They found that language problems and cultural differences hindered the relations between the schools and families.

1.4. Parental involvement in the Gulf countries

Several studies indicated that there are contextual differences across countries in terms of home–school relations with consideration to cultural differences across Middle Eastern and Western societies (Baker & Blaik Hourani, 2014; Blaik Hourani et al., 2012; Stringer & Blaik Hourani, 2013). In a recent study, Al-Hassan (2020) suggested that despite the growing interest in parental involvement and its impact on education in the international literature, there is limited related research in the Gulf region. Al-Hassan (2020) reported that "understanding the relations between family involvement and school success in the Gulf region represents a pressing and critical dimension to reform educational policies and practices in these fast-growing societies" (p. 110).

Gulf countries share cultural, social, and political elements that allow for a valid generalization of findings across these countries. Amongst the recent studies related to parental involvement conducted in the Gulf, Al-Mahrooqi et al., (2016) have explored the parental involvement practices of Omani parents in English education. The research data

were collected through a questionnaire given to Omani parents. The findings indicated that the parents appreciate the importance of their involvement in the education of their children and believed that they should have more opportunities to engage in various home and school learning activities. Nevertheless, the results also revealed that their actual involvement in their children's English language learning was below expectations. In a similar study, Al-Harrasi and Al-Mahrooqi (2014) studied parental involvement of Omani parents through a questionnaire. The data indicated a lack of parental involvement and suggested this was due to factors such as lack of time and resources. Al-Qaryouti and Kilani (2013) focused on the role of Omani parents in supporting literacy skills. The research included parents of kindergarten children and used a questionnaire as the measure for the degree of parental involvement. Contrary to other findings, the results indicated that the role of parents ranged from average to high in all practice areas included in the questionnaire.

In the United Arab Emirates, Al-Sumaiti (2012) wrote a literature review that examined the impact of increased parental involvement on children's development and schooling, with a particular focus on Dubai where many international schools with a range of foreign curricula are used by many citizens. The study concluded with the following policy recommendation:

Raise awareness of the role of parents, encourage parents to take an active interest in the education of their children, encourage schools to increase their engagement with parents, improve access to information about schools and their quality, and establish an intergovernmental task force to take a leadership role in promoting the interests of parents at schools. (p. 11)

Al-Taneiji (2013) explored school leadership role in involving parents in UAE schools. The findings of the teachers' questionnaire revealed that school principals in UAE have good communication with parents and they frequently involve parents in school's decision-making, in areas related to students' activities and behavior.

Al-Daihani (2005) investigated school supervisors' attitudes toward parental involvement in Kuwait through a survey. The results indicated that school principals and families were perceived as more responsible for supporting parental involvement. School supervisors, teachers, and students were given less responsibility. The participants indicated that all six types of parental involvement suggested by Epstein's (2011) model (parenting, communication, helping the child at home, volunteering, decision-making, and collaborating with the community) were seen as important. The most important barrier to parental involvement for both teachers and parents was their lack of time. The study concluded that offering positive home conditions that promote learning,

consistent two-way communication with school and supporting children at home were of significant importance.

Ridge and Jeon (2020) explored father involvement by surveying a sample of 1684 respondents in 10 Middle Eastern countries. They found that fathers are viewed to be more involved in their daughters' education than their sons'; that younger fathers are perceived to be more involved in their children's education than older ones; and that fathers are viewed as less involved in their children's education. They also found that children who perceived their fathers as supporters and good providers have higher educational attainment.

AlHashmi (2019) compared parent involvement and student achievement in the Gulf countries using PIRLS 2016 Data. The findings give positive indications about parental involvement practices in Bahrain in comparison to other Gulf states. For example, a higher level in the index of early literacy achievement is found in Bahrain and UAE. The level of parental help is the highest in Bahrain and Oman. Reading time outside of school is the highest in the UAE and Bahrain. Parents have higher expectations of educational achievements for female students in Bahrain and Oman.

In sum, the literature highlights the importance of parental involvement as an area that has gained attention in many educational systems in recent years across Western and non-Western countries. The literature suggests that parental involvement has different models and various definitions reflecting different sociocultural backgrounds of families and schools. Research from various countries point toward the schools' important role and responsibility toward involving parents and understanding their needs and circumstances despite the social and cultural differences. The research also indicates that teachers and administrators' attitudes, as well as other factors, can have an impact on the level of parental involvement. Parental involvement was also suggested to be vital to students' performance and academic success, thus, highlighting the need for educators to gain professional development in this area which would allow them to improve school practices and strategies. Identifying the general views of teachers and parents toward home–school relations can help improve the schools' performance and allow educational systems to invest in cultural and social resources in their communities.

1.5. Theoretical framework

The study drew on Epstein's (2011) model, which is widely referenced as a framework for researching parental involvement (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Yamauchi et al., 2017).

Figure 1

Epstein's (2011) model of overlapping family and school spheres.
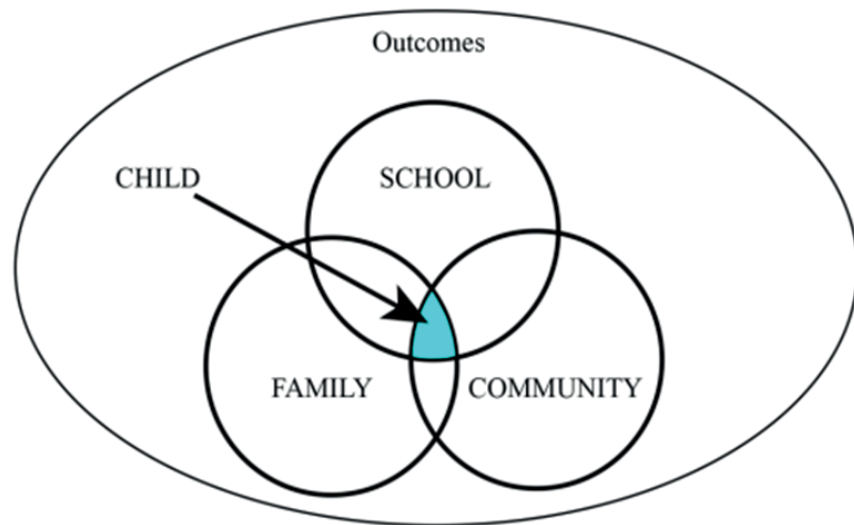
Epstein (2011) discussed three perspectives that guided researchers and practition-ers in their thinking about family and school relations: (1) Separate responsibilities of families and schools, which assumes that schools and families have isolated roles. Under this perspective, teachers maintain their professional educational roles in the classrooms and parents maintain their personal attention to their children at home. (2) Shared responsibilities of families and schools, and this view emphasizes on the importance of coordination and cooperation between schools and families, encouraging communication and collaboration between the two institutions. Teachers and parents are believed to share common goals for their children, and they need to work together to achieve the goals efficiently. (3) Sequential responsibilities of families and schools, which emphasizes on the critical stages of both parents' and teachers' contributions to child development. The parents' role in children's socialization in the early years is critical to prepare children for school. At the time of the children's formal entry into school, the teacher assumes the main responsibility of educating them. Based on the previous idea, Epstein (2011) developed a model of overlapping family and school spheres that accounts for families, schools, and students in terms of their history, development, and changing experiences. The external sphere of the model consists of overlapping or non-overlapping spheres which represent the family, school, and community. The overlap among these spheres represents the level of partnership between all three institutions. These overlaps are influenced by many factors such as time, age, grade level, historical influences, experiences, philosophies, and practices of families, schools, and communities.

In addition, Epstein's model categorizes parental involvement behaviors into the following types:

(1) Parenting, defined as fulfilling the basic obligations of families to support health, safety, and conditions to promote child development (e.g., schools supporting parents in the development of parenting skills and understanding the home conditions necessary to foster child development).

(2) Communicating with families about school and their children's progress (e.g., parent–teacher conferences, report cards, and notices).

(3) Parent involvement at school (e.g., volunteering in the classroom, attending sports or other performances).

(4) Parent involvement in learning activities at home (e.g., supporting homework and other everyday learning activities).

(5) Parent involvement in decision-making around education.

(6) Collaboration with community organizations (e.g., provision of after-school clubs or liaison with local businesses).

Since several studies demonstrate disagreement on how to define parental involvement (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Yamauchi et al., 2017), this article uses the term "parental involvement" as a general term as it has been used in the theoretical framework (Epstein, 2011) and it is the most consistently used term in the Arabian Gulf literature (Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2016; Al Harrasi & Al-Mahrooqi, 2014). It should be noted that the term "parents" here can include other family members as well. The Bahraini society adopts a modern civil lifestyle in general, where nuclear families predominate. Still, there are some extended families and include other family members (e.g., aunts or cousins) who help in educating children at home.

1.6. Context

Compulsory education in Bahrain is divided into primary (grades 1–6), intermediate (grades 7–9), and secondary education (grades 10–12), and is segregated by gender in public schools at every level until tertiary education. Children begin compulsory schooling in Bahrain when they are six years old. There are 248 schools in Bahrain: 211 public schools and 73 private schools. The total number of students in public schools is 149,000 and 78,000 in private schools. The total number of teachers in public schools is 14,042 and 8283 in private schools. The organizational structure of public schools consists of the school principal, assistant principal, head teachers, teachers, social workers, learning resources specialists, and others. Both public and private schools

are governed by the Ministry of Education. Most of the students in private schools come from families with average or above-average socioeconomic backgrounds. Most of the families in the participants' public schools come from average or below-average socioeconomic backgrounds as parents hold secondary or university qualifications (AlHashmi, 2019).

2. Methodology

This section provides an overview of the research context, methodological approach, subject selection, data collection and analysis approach, and ethical considerations.

2.1. Research approach

This study adopts a qualitative methodology that aims to describe the social realities and social processes from the point of view of important stakeholders; assistant principals. This methodology can help achieve an in-depth understanding of the diverse responses offered by the participants (Cohen et al., 2018). This methodology is based on the interpretive paradigm which tries to look at the multifaceted dimension of human behavior and seek explanations of social actions through understanding the individuals' perspectives that are part of these ongoing actions and the situations and contexts (Cohen et al., 2018). Interpretive case study design (Cohen et al., 2018; Merriam, 1998) is used in this study to understand the narrative of the participants and develop conceptual categories to gain an enhanced account of their views on parental involvement in education. Yin (2009) noted that the use of case studies "provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling the readers to understand ideas more clearly" (p. 72). In addition, Cohen et al. (2018) notes that "case studies can penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis" (p. 376). According to Punch (2005), "a case may be an individual, a group, an organization, a community, or a nation" (p. 144).

2.2. Site and subject selection

The sample consists of assistant principals who served as key informants and were inter-viewed for their in-depth understanding of the school system since they are responsible for leading home–school-community relations in Bahraini public schools. A convenient sample was gained by inviting assistant principals attending a professional development

course at Bahrain Teachers College to participate. Eight female assistant principals showed interest to participate. The participants had more than 10 years of experience in teaching. They worked in primary public schools in Bahrain – three worked in boys' schools while the others worked in girls' schools.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996; Smith, 1995) were used to explore assistant principals' views. The interview questions were derived from the literature related to Epstein's theoretical framework (Al-Daihani, 2005; Bower & Griffin, 2011; Epstein, 2011; Epstein et al., 2018). Each interview was conducted face to face and lasted for around 45 min. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for the data analysis. Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach in qualitative data analysis was used which entailed three interconnected phases: data reduction (cutting down the data in a sensible way), data display (finding networks and charts to summarize the data), and drawing conclusions (reaching possible findings that need verification). During the data analysis of the interviews, the researcher reviewed, transcribed, and wrote notes and basic codes related to the interviewees' responses. These codes were developed further into advanced codes, and then into patterns. Finally, these patterns were organized as connected themes that answer the research sub-questions.

2.4. Ethical consideration

The research was guided by ethical guidelines such as obtaining official permission (from the Ministry of Education and the University of Bahrain) and informed consent from the participants and ensuring privacy and confidentiality of the participants. The participants were assigned pseudonyms (T1, T2, …) in the data analysis.

3. Results

This section presents the findings that emerged from the qualitative data analysis to answer the main research question: How do school assistant principals perceive parental involvement and how does their school facilitate home– school relations? The results are organized according to the following sub-questions.

3.1. How do schools facilitate parental involvement and what do parents do to get involved in their children's schooling?

The assistant principals discussed their use of different activities and means of communication to involve parents. The key to the success of these efforts is to "have an ongoing communication throughout the year and to create a welcoming environment in the school, this communication should be regular and open to all parents" (T1). Various means of communication are used to communicate with parents such as having an open day, individual meetings, phone calls, text messages, social media, and newsletters. Parents should also be encouraged to "attend the classroom and observe their child's performance in person … this is constructive and increases students' enthusiasm" (T3).

The participants suggested that a parent's regular attendance to open days is not always the best way to sustain an effective teacher–parent communication because "[open days] are typically very formal and brief, they are not held in a relaxing atmosphere. On the other hand, one-to-one meetings that are arranged amongst parents and teachers are more relaxed and friendly" (T3). The assistant principals recommended "raising parents' awareness about schools' regulations" (T7) and including them in "classroom and extra-curricular activities such as book fairs, scientific exhibitions, and ask them to attend or present in workshops" (T2), such as workshops that would focus on "how to deal with behavioral and academic problems" (T3). Many participants stressed on the importance of inviting parents to school events and involving parents in the school council. These school events may include: honoring distinguished students, national day celebrations, sports activities, graduation ceremonies, as well as special workshops arranged for parents of special needs children or children with learning difficulties. Parents' participation in the school council would allow families to be "involved in decision making and the formation of the school's strategic plans" (T2). However, parent councils predominantly "include parents with professional qualifications that the school can benefit from in supporting and developing school programs" (T3).

The participants discussed ways for parents to get involved in their children's schooling which correspond to Epstein's model (2011): parenting, communication, helping the child at home, volunteering, and decision-making. The participants provided examples of activities that belong to each type of parent involvement: (1) Parenting: "providing a safe and healthy environment at home and maintaining a good understanding of what happens in the classroom" (T1), "being involved in the child's daily routines at home" (T4), "creating a culture of respect, responding to the teacher and adhering to the regulations of the school systems" (T3), and "providing any resources required by the school" (T2).

(2) Communication: "answering invitations to participate and attend school events" (T1), "provide feedback and suggestions on the development of the child's academic and behavioral skills" (T5), and "attend school activities such as parent–teacher conferences or classroom observations" (T8). (3) Helping the child at home: "preparing home activities in line with what the child is learning in class" (T2), "checking weekly plans and following-up with homework requirements [...] reviewing test and homework results and providing feedback" (T4). (4) Volunteering: "participating in classroom activities such as reading circles" (T3) and "participating in extra-curricular activities such as exhibitions and presenting in workshops" (T8). (5) Decision-making: "active involvement in parent council" (T1, T4, T8).

3.2. What are the benefits of home–school cooperation?

The assistant principals discussed the benefits of teacher cooperation with parents in the following four categories: benefits for students, benefits for teachers, and benefits for parents. Firstly, the participants said that students can benefit from such cooperation as this will "ensure children's safety and emotional wellbeing, create higher trust between family and school, and create easier ways to problem solve" (T1). Home–school communication can also help in "identifying weaknesses in a child's academic performance" (T2). Participants also indicated that home–school communication helps in "raising [the student's] motivation" (T7) and "raising the academic level and reducing behavioral problems among children" (T5). This type of parent involvement has also been said to "help in achieving progress in students' personal development, improve students' self-confidence and sense of responsibility, develop students' talents as the school discovers them while parents contribute to enhancing them" (T6).

Home–school communication gives teachers the benefit of having a "better understanding of the child's personality, cultural and socioeconomic background, and family circumstances" (T1, T2). It also allows teachers to experience a "sense of accomplishment when their students benefit and achieve better results due to the cooperation between home and school" (T1). One of the participants also suggested that this process can "help teachers achieve better annual appraisal results [...] and it motivates teachers to put in more effort because they are aware that parents are supporting them" (T3). She added that teacher-initiated collaboration with parents can "enhance teachers' competence in communication and problem-solving and reduce students' behavioral problems as they will be more conscious of their students' home conditions or problems" (T3). Another participant added that this type of cooperation can "reduce the pressure on

teachers because parents will take ownership in helping their children with homework, follow their child's academic progress and work toward resolving behavioral concerns" (T7, T8).

It was also suggested that parents can benefit from home–school collaboration. Participants indicated that with this type of collaboration parents would be "able to know their child's level and increase their skills and increase their self-confidence as role models for their kids" (T1). Parents will also be "more responsive to school requirements" (T2), "reduce the social and psychological barriers and increase parents' commitment to supporting the school's mission" (T3). One of the participants added that "parents would be more aware of the aims of teaching and the learning process, and this will help them observe the progress of their own children and monitor their academic achievement [...] parents might remarkably add to their child's learning through encouraging them to read more and browse the internet for more information" (T4). Parents would also feel "satisfied with the teachers' efforts toward their child and would accept the teacher's comments and become closer to the school. This would lead to more parental support to the school; both moral and financial" (T8).

3.3. When do teachers call parents? When do parents call teachers?

When discussing the most common reasons teachers call parents, all the participants indicated that "teachers call parents to discuss students' low academic performance and behavioral problems" especially when the "student's achievement or behavior suddenly changes or when the child is absent or misses a test or homework" (T3). Teachers might call to "seek parents' suggestions and ask for permission to take disciplinary actions when problems occur" (T4). Some participants gave additional reasons such as "understanding students' cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds" (T3, T4), "thanking parents for their positive efforts" (T6, T8), and "inviting some parents for voluntary activities or attending special events" (T8).

The participants added that parents, on the other hand, would call teachers "when the child complains about a situation or about their grades" (T1), "when a student's grades suddenly decline" (T2), "in cases when they feel that their child is being treated unfairly" (T4), "to explain why their child failed a test or to request homework resubmission" (T5), "when the child is in trouble or suffering and they want to hear from the school" (T6), or "when parents have difficulty in understanding specific school instructions" (T8). Parents would also occasionally call "just to establish a positive relationship with the

teacher" (T1), "inquire about how to best support the child and find out about classroom activities" (T2), "discuss issues related to child-rearing" (T4), and to "thank teachers for their efforts" (T6, T7).

The participants' responses indicated that parents usually call the school administration in relation to negative situations such as "to complain about an uncooperative teacher" (T1, T5), or about a "teacher's unfriendly behavior, like mocking children in front of the classroom, using inappropriate language that embarrasses the child ... they also complain about teachers' low performance" (T3, T5).

Some parents would "call the principal to file a complaint about a teacher or when they feel the social guidance adviser is not able to solve their problem" (T8). Other aspects that parents communicate with school principals include informing the school about a child's medical condition, bullying, conflicts, exam timing, and amount of homework; checking their children's attendance and behavior, or when the child is facing a sensitive problem which parents would not like to share directly with the teacher. In some cases, parents would contact the principal regarding positive aspects such as "providing feedback about teachers' and school performance and regulations [...] asking about the details of a specific program" (T2), or "when the parent wants to share a useful proposal to the school" (T6, T7).

3.4. What do parents' behaviors and roles contribute to a child's academic success?

The assistant principals talked about their perspective of parental behaviors that contribute to a child's academic success. These behaviors can be categorized into two categories: school- and home-related parental behaviors.

According to the participants, the school-related behaviors that parents can engage in to support their children's academic success are mainly "being present in school, as this gives the child a sense of safety and reinforces positive attitudes" (T1), "supporting teachers' efforts and school policies, ensuring the child's attendance, and helping the child complete their homework" (T2), "noticing their child's strengths and abilities, and encouraging them to put in more effort" (T3), "getting involved in the decision-making process at school" (T5), "making up for any potential shortcoming from the teachers' end by having an active role in teaching the child 'right from wrong'" (T5). The participants also expressed that "both parents and students need to be positive, enthusiastic, and a lifelong learner" (T6), and that parents can "support children's learning by enrolling them in Islamic lessons, sports centers, and taking them to museums" (T7). On the other

hand, the parents' role in supporting their children's learning at home is by "serving as role models and engage children in home activities that support learning" (T1), "giving children space for discussion and expressing their opinion" (T2), "demonstrating a positive attitude about education to their children" (T3). The parents' role at home extends to other behaviors such as "befriending their children, listening to them and respecting their opinions" (T4), "relating what the child has learned in school to the everyday and life environments" (T5), "organizing field visits to museums and parks to add practical experience to the lessons the child learns in a classroom environment" (T6). Parents can also support the child's academic success "through engaging children in social relationships inside the home and the community by assigning children some tasks and activities at home that enables them to use problem-solving skills" (T8).

The participants elaborated on home-related behaviors that parents can engage in to support the students' academic success, including emotional support and "promoting confidence and the determination to succeed [...] continuously motivating the child and providing affirmations and positive expectations towards their abilities" (T1). Participants also added that "parents must be close to their children and be aware of their problems. Parents should install self-confidence and appropriate social skills in their children" (T3), and they also "should share time with their children, enrich their experiences, and open horizons for children's imagination" (T7). The participants emphasized on the parent's role in "following-up with their child's homework, providing constructive feedback, and helping the child overcome academic struggles" (T1), "ensuring school attendance and creating a safe home environment that encourages learning" (T4), "teaching children to be organized, independent, and confident in their abilities" (T7), and "reinforcing good habits such as punctuality and commitment" (T8).

In this part of the findings, the participants gave relatively more attention to the overlapping spheres of home, school, and community. For example, they emphasized on the importance of relating children's learning in school to everyday life through engaging children in relevant social activities at home and the community. However, when the participants were asked whether parental involvement varies by educational background or socioeconomic level, only five of them gave detailed answers while the other three gave short answers such as "not necessarily" or "in some cases." Some participants indicated that parents' educational background or socioeconomic level can have "a significant effect on their children's education" (T3), "highly-educated parents are ready to be involved in their child's education, and their involvement is considered valuable to the school [...] however, this doesn't always guarantee positive involvement" (T4), "the higher the educational level of the parent, the greater their awareness of the

importance of communication. Other families might struggle in helping the student with certain tasks because they are unaware of the importance of home–school communication, they might also find difficulty in communicating with teachers" (T5). On the contrary, another participant suggested that "parents may have higher educational degrees or a high socioeconomic status, but their contributions towards their child's education is very limited" (T6). Another participant added "we can't overgeneralize [the role of a parents' education or socioeconomic level]" (T7).

3.5. What are the challenges or barriers facing home–school relations?

The participants laid out some barriers that are assumed to hinder the teachers' ability to communicate effectively with families. These barriers can be categorized as follows: teachers' work circumstances, their personality, their awareness, their level of training, and the parents' behavior.

3.5.1. Teachers' work circumstances

When listing barriers to effective communication with families, participants listed "lack of teachers' time, and many responsibilities" (T1), "the teaching load and full schedules" (T2), "busy schedules, the demanding curriculum requirements which take up a lot of the teacher's time" (T3), and having a "large class size" (T5).

3.5.2. Teachers' personality

Some of the challenges listed by participants are related to the individual personality of the teacher, such as the "personal nature of some teachers who lack the softer skills that would permit them to communicate effectively with parents" (T2), "some teachers may feel helpless to creating a meaningful change in students' behavioral and academic performance [...] some teachers are hindered by weak personalities and poor communication skills." (T3)

3.5.3. Teachers' awareness

Teacher's awareness was another challenge to effective home–school relations based on quotes from the participants, such as "lack of teachers' awareness of the importance

of the parent's role" (T3, T5, T7), "some teachers think that there is no need to engage parents in the teaching/learning process [...] to avoid having someone interfere or meddle with their objectives" (T4).

3.5.4. Lack of training

Communication not being an area of focus during teacher training also came up as a barrier to establishing home–school relations. Participants stated that some teachers "lack the skills to communicate with parents" (T1), and "lack experience and awareness, especially amongst new teachers" (T2).

3.5.5. Parents' behavior

Participants suggested that some parents' behavior is another challenge that prevents successful communication; "fear of parents' reaction to their children's low performance or misbehavior [...] feeling underestimated by parents" (T1), "exposure to previous negative experiences with parents" (T2), "nervous parents do not encourage parents to communicate" (T3), "some parents have more concern toward their child's grades than the child's learning [...] These types of parents are more likely to assign blame to the teacher and hold them accountable for the child's poor academic performance" (T4, T6), "difficulty in relating to and understanding parents who come from different cultural or educational backgrounds" (T5, T6), "parents mannerism (overpowering or provocative) can sometimes discourage teachers from contacting those parents" (T8).

The participants discussed potential barriers that are likely to prevent parents from getting involved in their child's education and schooling. The discussed challenges can be categorized into five categories; parents' circumstances, language and cultural barriers, parents' beliefs, school policies and programs, and avoiding embarrassment.

3.5.6. Parents' circumstances

The participants listed some reasons related to individual circumstances that are likely to prevent parents from effectively communicating with the school such as "lack of time, childcare, dealing with children of different ages in different schools" (T1), "heavy burden on parents, especially mothers who are responsible for work or childcare" (T3), and "preoccupation with work" (T5, T8). The participants also suggested that "social and psychological problems" (T2) such as "divorce, low income, health problems" (T7)

and an "unstable home environment" (T8) can interfere with the parents' ability to get involved in their child's education.

3.5.7. Language and cultural barriers

"The difficulty of the curriculum, especially for non-Arabic speakers" (T2, T3, T4) was considered as a potential reason for parent's inability to play a supportive role in the child's learning.

3.5.8. Parents' beliefs

Some of the challenges listed by the participants included parents' beliefs as "some parents have extreme confidence in their child's grades and abilities [...] they seem to believe that education is the teacher's responsibility solely, whereas the parent takes on the role of a bystander [...] they seem to think that not following-up on home and schoolwork with the child will make the student more responsible and self-reliant" (T2), "some parents believe that the school is the only entity responsible for the child's education" (T3).

3.5.9. School policies and programs

Participants also indicated the school policies and programs may create a barrier to parent's willingness to maintain a successful home–school relationship, stating that the "unattractiveness of programs offered by the school to parents [...] the lack of a welcoming school environment and the inability of school staff to attract parents to communicate with schools [...] previous unsuccessful communication experiences lead to a reluctance in establishing a new relationship with the current school" (T6) all act as barriers. Another participant added that "some school policies can segregate parents and their role would be just signing student reports" (T4).

3.5.10. Avoiding embarrassment

Several participants suggested that the parent or student experiencing embarrassment might create a barrier to collaboration with the school; as "some children refuse having their parents attend school to avoid embarrassment" (T4), and a "child's extreme behavioral problems may discourage parents from communicating with the school" (T6).

3.6. What is the assistant principals' role in supporting parental involvement?

The participants conceptualized their role in supporting parental involvement through the following steps:

1. Supporting teachers' efforts through "improving the professionalism of the teachers' communication" (T1), "organizing training courses that prepare teachers to communicate with families" (T3), and "organizing workshops, lectures, and symposiums for teachers" (T7).

2. Creating a welcoming environment that "emphasizes on a culture of community and partnership" (T1), "involving parents in the improvement of the school environment" (T3), and "utilizing technology to communicate with parents" (T7).

3. Understanding the parents' needs and "identifying parent's opinions regarding the hours of communication, the programs provided by the school, the methods of communication and support required from the school" (T3).

4. Engaging parents in decision-making processes and strategic planning by "involving them in developing the school's vision, mission, and objectives [...] and honoring their ideas and suggestions in parent council meetings" (T2, T7).

5. Developing policies and programs that support parental involvement such as "adopting an open-door policy" (T1), and "diversifying programs to communicate with parents" (T2).

6. Accepting diversity by "encouraging all parents to engage in activities" (T1), "knowing how to deal with parents from different cultural backgrounds" (T3), and "creating an equal and reciprocal relationship with the school" (T8).

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that the assistant principals hold positive attitudes toward parental involvement in their children's education and they support the participation of parents in various aspects of education, which supports AlHashmi's (2019) finding. The participants held the belief that parental involvement has a positive impact on the students' learning outcomes, a similar finding to that reported by Al-Daihani (2005). The participants agreed that schools would generally benefit from parental involvement, as this collaboration will increase students' achievement, reduce behavioral problems,

facilitate positive relationships and mutual trust, and reduce complaints. The participants asserted that schools provide effective and continuous communication with parents. The schools offer various opportunities to encourage parents to become involved in student learning through school-directed activities. The participants placed more emphasis on the benefits related to the first three types of parental involvement (that correspond to Epstein, 2011 framework): parenting, communication, and learning at home. The participants placed less emphasis on other types of involvement such as volunteering, decision-making, and community collaboration. These findings are consistent with other findings based in the Gulf region (Moussa-Inaty & De La Vega, 2013).

The results also reveal that some participants expressed concern that parents' participation might challenge the school's authority and efficiency, a similar finding to that reported by Addi-Raccah et al. (2021) and Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008). Some of the participants seemed to have a one-way school-centered view of parental involvement rather than a reciprocal view — a finding that is consistent with Bertrand et al. (2018), which suggested that schools can assign different roles to parents either as authentic partners or school supporters. The assistant principals placed more emphasis on the "school sphere" (Epstein, 2011), which indicates that they are more likely to facilitate school-centered parental involvement. The participants gave less attention to encouraging parents to take a dynamic role or to strengthen relations with other social and public organizations in the community such as religious, community and cultural centers.

The results indicate that the participants expressed less agreement regarding the school's role in supporting learning at home and supporting parents in helping children learn through exposure and everyday activities. The participants gave relatively less attention to the overlapping spheres of home, school, and community. For example, only a few of the participants indicated the importance of bridging the children's education in school to everyday life through establishing relations with the home and community.

There is still a need for more effective two-way communication and knowledge exchange (Feiler et al., 2008) between homes and schools. The findings suggest that home–school practices in the participants' schools may not be in line with the recommendation provided by DeMatthews (2018) which encourages schools to provide social or family services and utilize social capital from children's homes. Parents according to this view should be considered as partners who provide valuable views about how children learn and develop in their natural home settings, rather than being viewed just as supporters of the school.

The participants indicated that teachers typically call parents to report a problem, and that communication that is positive in nature is not commonplace. On the other hand, parents call teachers regarding issues and complaints as well as to get information, thank teachers, or seek advice. The participants did not state that neither parents nor teachers discuss the parents' experiences and observations of the children's talents or interests, suggesting that both teachers and parents may lack awareness of the importance of out-of-school learning and allocate more importance and attention to school-centered learning. It is important for schools to initiate positive communications with parents to report on students' achievements instead of communication being mainly focused on delivering information about issues or complaints. The participants did not emphasize the parents' opinions about school strategies and plans, or what the parents can contribute toward their children's daily out-of-school learning activities, their talents, and interests. Other areas such as encouraging parents to share their views on how to improve their children's schooling through home-centered parental involvement was also not given enough emphasis. The participants did not provide examples related to collaborations between parents and schools and community organizations – or the overlap with the community sphere (Epstein, 2011) or the funds of knowledge concept as suggested by Moll et al., (1992) – such as encouraging children to attend Islamic Quran schools, to participate in social and cultural activities organized by their communities, or to participate in sports and charity work.

Various social and cultural aspects emerged in the interviews with the participants that should be considered when planning and implementing home–school relation activities. Gender for example is one issue. Public schools in Bahrain are segregated by gender, boys' primary schools are administered either by male or female staff, while teachers and students in intermediate and secondary schools are from the same gender. Mothers tend to be more involved in visiting schools if the school is administered by female staff. While fathers would be visiting their children's schools in the intermediate and secondary school levels, this point is consistent with findings by Ridge and Jeon (2020). Some parents would have some reservations when their daughters participate in some physical or musical activities depending on their cultural and social backgrounds. Families who come from non-Arabic backgrounds need more support from schools to involve them in their children's education. It is important for schools to give more attention to promote parents' participation in decision-making and volunteering in schools as this seemed to be less evident than other types of involvement. Parents' councils should include parents from different social, cultural, and educational backgrounds to allow all families to share their perspectives on school decisions. It is also important

that schools support practices that encourage "hard-to-reach" parents to engage in their children's schooling.

5. Conclusion

School principals, teachers, and parents are faced with various challenges that create barriers to effective home–school relations. This study may contribute to the educational policy-making efforts in promoting positive home–school relations through the following recommendations, which are an extension to the recommendations offered by Al-Hassan (2020), AlHashmi (2019), and Al-Sumaiti (2012). Schools should prioritize teacher trainings that focus on communication with parents and create a welcoming culture for parents. Schools should also develop new and attractive programs to enhance home–school relations which include all parents from different social and cultural backgrounds – as small percentages of families are non-Arabic speakers who come from the Indian subcontinent. It is also important to encourage fathers to get more involved in school-oriented activities – as recommended by Ridge and Jeon (2020). Parents should be encouraged to take an active role in different types of activities which include volunteering, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Schools should also create learning opportunities that connect in- and out-of-school learning and support parents in helping children learn through exposure and everyday activities – as recommended by (Al-Mahdi, 2010a, Al-Mahdi, 2010b, Al-Mahdi, 2019). The findings of this study could be useful for teacher education and professional development. The preparation programs offered to teachers should focus on preparing teachers to communicate with parents, understand their needs, and involve them in the learning process. Colleges of education should address teachers' perspectives and attitudes in the area of home–school relations by conducting a bigger-scale research that includes more participants from different specializations (e.g., intermediate and secondary schools). Future research should also explore home–school relations from the perspective of different stakeholders (e.g., comparing male and female school principals, comparing private school principals, including the chief of schools) and disseminate successful practices that promote a partnership between families and schools.

6. Limitations

Although the current study offers important benefits to understanding parental involvement in Bahraini schools, the small sample size may not allow for the generalization of the findings into the broader population. There is high similarity among the participants in their views about parental involvement, one possible explanation for this is that the participants generally share similar characteristics (e.g., gender, age group, years of experience, and centralized school policies).

Similar studies conducted with other assistant principals would certainly support or contradict the current findings. Furthermore, another limitation is that the convenience sample included only female participants, which may skew the findings as gender is an important factor in parental involvement, especially in segregated educational systems. In addition, the study focused mainly on public schools, similar studies conducted on private schools would give important insights about home–school relations in different contexts.

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Author Biography

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Appendix 1

Summary of the Data Analysis (Themes and Sub-themes)

(Q-a) Schools' ways for facilitating parental involvement

Ongoing communication

Regular and open to all parents

Effective teacher–parent communication

One-to-one meetings

Schools' regulations

Classroom and extra-curricular activities

Behavioral and academic problems

School council

(Q-a) Parents' ways of involvement in their children's schooling

Parenting, communication, helping the child at home, volunteering, and decision-making.

(Q-b) Benefits of home–school communication

Benefits for students: fostering emotional wellbeing, trust, problem solving, academic performance, motivation, talents and reducing behavioral problems.

Benefits for teachers: understanding child's personality, cultural and socioeconomic background, and family circumstances. Increase teachers' sense of accomplishment, achieve better results, motivate teachers to put in more effort, improve communication skills, and reduce students' behavioral problems.

Benefits for parents: allow parents to take ownership of children's learning. Increase their educational skills and their self-confidence, make them more responsive to school requirements, increase their support to the school, allow them to monitor their children's academic achievement, and encourage them to offer moral and financial support to school.

(Q-c) Teachers call parents about:

Low academic performance and behavioral problems

Understanding students' cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds

Thanking parents for their positive efforts

Inviting parents for school activities

(Q-c) Parents call teachers about:

Complains about a situation or about their children's grades

Establish a positive relationship

Inquire about how to best support

Discuss issues related to child-rearing

(Q-c) Parents call school administration about:

Negative situations

Children's attendance and behavior

Providing feedback

Share a useful proposal

(Q-d) Parents' behaviors and roles that contribute to a child's academic success

School-related behaviors

Supporting teachers' efforts and school policies

Noticing their child's strengths and abilities

Getting involved in the decision-making

Home-related behaviors

Emotional support

Social skills

Constructive feedback

Safe home environment

Family educational background and socioeconomic level

(Q-e) Barriers facing home–school relations

Teacher-related barriers

Teachers' work circumstances

Teachers' personality

Teachers' awareness

Lack of training

Parents' behavior

Parent-related barriers

Parents' circumstances

Language and cultural barriers,

Parents' beliefs,

School policies and program,

Avoiding embarrassment

(Q-f) Principals' role in supporting parental involvement

Supporting teachers' efforts

Engaging parents in decision-making processes

Developing policies and programs

Accepting diversity