

Parental Involvement in an Islamic school in Australia: An Exploratory Study

Dr Raihani
The University of Western Australia
raihani@uwa.edu.au

Dr David Gurr
The University of Melbourne
d.gurr@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

Education has a significant role in developing identity in society, with schools places of student identity formation and cultural development. It is widely perceived that Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries have a strong engagement with their own school for ideological and cultural reasons, such as sharing and preserving the Islamic ideology and home cultures, yet there are few studies exploring this phenomenon. This paper presents findings of an Australian Islamic school's strategies in involving parents in their child's education process. This exploratory research is focused on parent and teacher beliefs and understanding about parental involvement, strategies implemented to promote involvement, parents' responses to such strategies, and factors influencing parental involvement. This paper contributes to the discussion of minority cultures in regards to parent-school relations.

Introduction

Whilst it is clear that family background is important to student success at school (Hattie, 2009), the study of parent-school partnerships in schools is an under-researched area, perhaps reflecting the changes over the past century in the roles parents play in schools, with greater parent involvement a relatively recent phenomenon (Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006). In a review of literature on successful schools, Leithwood and Steinbach (2002) provided a convincing case that, for schools in challenging circumstances at least, to achieve outstanding outcomes required working with families to influence family educational culture and to improve the social networks available in schools. What often happens in educational research is that the area of parent-school partnerships does not receive the attention it warrants because there are competing areas of influence on student learning. For example, in our own research on successful school leadership in Australian schools, Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford (2006) have developed a model which has social capital and parent-partnerships as but two of the sixteen elements that school leaders can influence which will impact on the teaching and learning program. In Australia, there is an emerging parent-school partnership research base (e.g. Anderson, 2006; Chan & Chui, 1997; Millar, 2006; Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006). Spry and Graham (2009) provide a summary of key concepts and research on Australian parent-school partnerships, and describe an early implementation of a parent-school partnership project sponsored by the Lismore Catholic Education Office (we refer to this study later).

Although there has been growing attention by researchers over the last decades to Islamic schools in Australia, there have been few specific studies of parents' involvement in these schools. One of the few studies to explore Muslim

Paper code: 1797

parent involvement in education (Clyne, 2001) showed that their involvement in non-Islamic schools was limited and handicapped by cultural, language, and employment issues. Clyne's study, however, was not focused on Islamic schools.

There is a need to study Islamic schools in Australia for at least two reasons. Firstly, as the Muslim populations in Australia have developed very significantly in the last decades, the need of the Muslims for representative schools which accommodate their beliefs and cultures is getting stronger (Saeed & Akbarzadeh, 2001). From the establishment of the first Australian Islamic school in Melbourne in 1983, there are now 30 schools serving more than 15,000 students. In Australia, Islamic schools exist within the national system alongside government schools and are classified as independent schools. As such, they receive financial support from the federal and state governments, and are accountable in terms of meeting the government's curriculum requirements. So, knowledge about Islamic schools in all aspects of education including home-school partnerships is necessary in order to ensure simultaneous educational improvements across the whole range of schools in Australia.

Secondly, it is widely believed that Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries have a strong engagement with their own school for ideological and cultural reasons, sharing and preserving the Islamic ideology and home cultures (Clyne, 2001; Saeed & Akbarzadeh, 2001). This belief, however, may not be manifest in reality. Studies conducted in the Netherlands have shown low parental involvement by Muslims in their children's education in Islamic schools (Driessen & Merry, 2006; Merry & Driessen, 2005). Parents' having demanding employment, the proximity of home to school, and a belief by parents in the school's sole responsibility for their children's education have been found to be the reasons behind such a low involvement. In the US, however, parents are more involved in Islamic schools as far as their children's academic success is concerned (Merry, 2005). Feeling that they are immigrants who have to compete with local people is a drive for such involvement. As knowledge about all of these in the context of Australia is absent, research on parental involvement in Islamic schools in this continent is desirable so that possible variations from other Western contexts can be ascertained.

This paper presents findings of a preliminary single-case study of an Islamic school's strategies to involve parents in their children's education. It aims to answer the research questions about: belief and understanding of the school's stakeholders particularly the principal, teachers, and parents in regard to home-school partnership; the school's efforts and initiatives to involve parents in their children's educational process; and parents' responses to such initiatives. This paper also identifies several potential factors coming into play in the arena of parent-school interactions. In structure, this paper reviews the relevant literature on home-school partnership, and discusses the issues smothering the existence of Muslims and their education in Australia before explaining briefly and justifying the methodology used to approach the study. It presents findings based on major themes emerging from the interviews, and at the end provides conclusive accounts of the parental involvement in the studied school.

Home-school partnership

Successful parent-school partnerships are important for school success for several reasons. Parents are the primary and continuing educators for their children (Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006), and without engaging with families, student outcomes are likely to be lower than they should be (Leithwood & Steinbach, 2002). Parent involvement in education is positively linked to academic performance, school attendance, student behaviour and discipline, the quality of school programs (Michael, Dittus, & Epstein, 2007; Leithwood & Steinbach, 2002), and knowledge and understanding of school programs and activities (Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006).

According to Epstein (2001), the nature of parent-school partnership is changing. Previously, the partnership was typically activated when there was a problem with students' learning and behavior. Now, however, the partnership is planned and enacted to contribute to student achievement and success in school. A wide variety of involvement programs are evident, with, for example in the USA context, The National Network of Partnership School (NNPS), describing a home-school partnership framework that consists of six types of involvement (Michael, Dittus, & Epstein, 2007):

1. **Parenting** means that the school facilitates and encourages parents to have good parenting skills through seminars and workshops. It also means that parents should provide basic needs for their children to make them able to learn both at school and at home.
2. **Communicating** means that school should establish patterns and channels of communication with parent/community by which it can share information and concerns with them.
3. **Volunteering** refers to activities of the parent or community in school programs such as helping teachers in classroom activities.
4. **Learning at home** means that school should encourage parents to help their children learn at home, do homework, monitor children behavior and so forth.
5. **Decision making** in which parents are encouraged to be involved in school decision-making processes so that they have a strong sense of belonging to the school.
6. **Collaborating with the community** refers to the school initiating and maintaining strong partnership with the wider community or stakeholders of the school. Each of these six types of involvement can be used as well by schools as strategies to increase community involvement (see also, McNeil & Cronnin, 2008).

Recent research on family-school partnership in Australia found several key dimensions of such partnerships which were similar to the above framework, including understanding the roles of each partner, connecting home and school learning, communicating in a variety of ways, participating in school programs and activities, decision making, collaborating beyond the school, and building community and identity (Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006). Principals and

Paper code: 1797

other school leaders were viewed as being key to establishing effective parent-school partnerships (also see Wright & Stegelin, 2003).

Muslim and Islamic Education in Australia

Macassar teripangers from Indonesia are known to have been the first Muslim people to have contact with Australia, doing so in their search for trepang (sea cucumbers) for the Asian markets. They worked the shores of Australia in the early 1700s, and possibly earlier, and had direct influence on the Aboriginal peoples through language, culture and shared stories. They were followed by the Afghan cameleers who built the very first mosque in Adelaide in 1890. After World War II, Muslims from Lebanon, Turkey, Bosnia, Somalia, and elsewhere migrated to Australia either due to conflicts in their homeland, or for improved living conditions. According to the 2006's census, the Muslim population in Australia exceeded 340,000 individuals or 1.5% of the total Australian population. This number increased from 282,578 in 2001, and more than 120,000 of the 340,000 were born in Australia. Lebanese and Turkish constitute the largest proportion of the population followed by people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, and Indonesia.

Since their arrival in Australia, Muslims have been faced with problems of acceptance and assimilation. White supremacy made the Macassarese move away from the Australian coasts where they had worked for more than 200 years (Cleland, 2001). Currently, as Humphrey (2001) argues, Muslims in Australia, as in other Western countries, have to negotiate their "Muslimness" in many areas of life including social, legal, and political environments. In particular, they have to negotiate their identity on the issues of nationalism, Muslim women, and other traditions which are perceived as belonging exclusively to Islam and as contradicting the dominant culture. The media, which are a main source for shaping public opinion and imaging about Islam and Muslims, are another domain in which Muslims have to negotiate their Muslimness. In this domain, Muslims have to struggle to counter arguments and the imaging that puts Islam and Muslims in the position of being scrutinized negatively by the wider community.

As there was no provision for Islamic schools in Australia for much of the 20th century, Muslims initiated 'weekend schools' in the 1950s in Melbourne and Sydney, the two areas where the majority of Muslims live. At the beginning, Muslims had difficulties in finding both financial and human resources to support the weekend Islamic schools (Saeed, 2003). There were only a few people who were able to teach Islam to the children. The schools were mostly embedded in local mosques where Muslims usually prayed. In the schools, they learnt *al-Qur'an* (the Islamic holy book) and the languages of the countries to which culturally the parents belonged, such as Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, and others. This type of school has continued even until now, but the first regular school was established in Victoria in 1983, which was then followed by the establishment of other schools across the states. At the time of this research, there were thirty Islamic schools in Australia accommodating more than 15,000 students.

The number of Islamic schools is unable to accommodate the needs of the whole Muslim community in Australia. Considering the current population of Australian Muslims, these Islamic schools can only serve a small percentage of

Muslim children. The rest of the children go to government schools and other private schools. Clyne (2001) found that Australian Muslim parents expected their children to go to schools that could provide an education that is Islamically oriented in terms of religion, culture, and moral values. These reasons are also commonly articulated by Muslim parents in other Western countries (Al-Romi, 2000; Mandaville, 2007; Merry & Driessen, 2005). According to Saeed (2003), there are some Australian Muslim parents who send their children to Catholic schools as these schools often provide a single-sex environment at secondary level, and they have a strong moral education foundation.

Research methods

A single-site multiple perspective case was conducted. The school is a large school (more than 1500 students and 300 families) in one of the largest cities in Australia. This school was the only one of the contacted Islamic schools in this city to respond positively to our research request. The majority of students come from a Middle Eastern family background followed by a significant number of African and Asian students. Most of the parents came to Australia as migrants.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the principal, two middle-level leaders, two teachers and six parents were conducted. Face-to-face individual interviews were not always possible due to the perceived Islamic ethics of male and female communications, so three of the parent interviews were conducted by phone. The number of interviews by category is presented in Table 1. It was initially planned to also include a survey of 100 randomly chosen parents, but despite considerable effort, only ten surveys were returned, making the survey data unusable; four of these parents indicated their willingness to be interviewed.

Table 1: Number of interviewees by category

<i>Category of Respondents</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Mode of Interview</i>	
		Face to Face	Phone
Principal	1	1	
Middle Manager	2	2	
Teacher	2	2	
Parents	6	3	3

With only minor changing in wording eleven questions asked for each category of respondents covering the respondent's background, views about schooling, views about parent-school partnerships, examples of parent-school activities and the extent of parent participation, and factors which might support or impede parent-school partnerships.

Paper code: 1797

The interviews were transcribed, sent back to participants for checking, and analysed through coding, categorising, and interpreting using the N-Vivo qualitative data analysis software.

Research findings

To protect anonymity, the middle-level leaders and teachers are grouped within the teacher category. The findings emerging from the interviews are grouped under the following thematic headings:

- *School-parent partnership*
- *Promoting religious and personal development through religious and fundraising activities*
- *The student diary as the main method of communication*
- *Changes in parent-teacher interview practice*
- *School information sessions*

School-parent partnership

In terms of school-parent partnership, how members construct their role in such a partnership is important as it determines those activities in which they are likely to be involved (Deslandes, 2001). In this study, both teachers and parents believe in the importance of a mutual and respectful partnership between school and parents. "It is like a marriage", said one teacher (Teacher A) when she was asked to describe the importance of school-parent partnership. She went on to say that the "husband" and "wife" have to build effective communication in order to achieve common objectives. Teacher C provided another evocative analogy by stating that someone cannot clap with one hand. She went on to say: "We always think that parents need to be involved in education. They have to have an idea of what is happening to their child".

Parent A confirmed the importance of parental involvement in school education by considering the school as being like a business company: "If you want to be customer-oriented, they [the school] need to get feedback from the parents, so I think it is very important to get parents involved." The reasons for the importance of the home-school partnership lie in the academic, religious, and behavioral concerns of the respondents. Respondents unanimously agree that an effective home-school partnership eventually leads to the improvement of student achievement through the involvement of parents in students' homework, providing motivation and supportive actions toward their children, and classroom assistance. The principal and some of the parents believed that parental involvement maintains students' religious commitment through parents ensuring their children's practices of religious obligations such as prayers, fasting, and so forth at home. Parents view the religious support offered by Islamic schools such as this as giving them a viable sub-culture option with a non-Islamic country (Clyne, 2001; Merry,

Paper code: 1797

2005). Further, McCreery, Jones, & Holmes (2007) found that Muslim parents wanted Islamic schools to support Islamic faith by allocating times for students to pray, providing halal food, and promoting Islamic character.

Promoting religious and personal development through religious and fundraising activities

Religious and fundraising activities are functions that are popular with the parents, as through these the school is able to attract large numbers of parents to the school. These functions include Friday congregational prayer, *Ramadan iftaar*, 'Eid festivals, religious lectures, and Palestine solidarity fundraising. All of these functions incorporate fundraising for the school and community mosque which was under-development at the time of the research.

These school-initiated functions helped fostered a sense of community. Parent A confirmed this: "Because this school also functions as a community together, I do participate sometimes in the mosque activities in Ramadan and fundraising. We do help whenever we can". Teacher A commented:

It is from community to community. There is a teacher on the other day who mentioned of other schools that she does not see so much food and eating and socializing. You see people eating here you know, it is amazing. Every Friday we have fundraising. They are selling BBQ foods. That's completely done by the parents.

Parents, however, viewed these activities as mostly being designed to cater for the religious needs and solidarity of the surrounding Muslim community, and irrelevant to the improvement of their children's academic education. The principal, whilst not disagreeing with this sentiment, believed that in conducting the above functions and activities the school is contributing to the wider development of students.

We do make activities. We invite parents, invite friends, lecturers, and we continue to train them to avoid unlawful or *haram* (Islamically forbidden) things. We invite scholars, and we also invite local police to talk about discipline and how to respect the law. *Alhamdulillah* [Thank God] we have good students here, and there are even no students smoking here.

It is clear that religious commitment and discipline have become one of the main foci of the school's education, both for students and for the parents and the wider community. The principal explains that he frequently invites parents to discuss their obligations as Muslims to practice Islamic teachings, and by doing this how they become a role model for their children. This strategy, however, is not welcomed by all parents, with one parent viewing this as excessive in that the school was viewed as intervening in the parent's private affairs.

It is pertinent to mention here that with a large number of Muslims in Victoria, the current number of Islamic schools is felt insufficient to cater for the Muslim needs for suitable education provision. This situation is also the case in the provision of mosques as places of worship for Muslims. The studied school, with its embedded mosque, is therefore one of the few choices for Muslim parents to

Paper code: 1797

send their children to school and to go for worship, particularly Friday prayer, Ramadan, and 'Eid activities. So, there is a shared and collective need for a place of religious actualization, which accounts for why school fundraising and religious activities are popular among parents. However, as some parents indicated above, parent involvement in other aspects of education remain less significant.

A key to successful partnerships between school and home is communication. An intelligent school uses a variety of ways to communicate with student, parents and the wider community. In the following themes, several aspects of parent-school communication are explored.

The student diary as the main method of communication

Whilst there are the usual communication methods of telephoning and parent-teacher interviews and meetings, when asked about the school strategies to improve parental involvement, all teachers interviewed emphasised the student diary as one of the most used means of communication with parents. The diary is used not only for noting down students' activities and timetable, but also for communicating with parents through notices written by teachers. It is expected that students show the diary every week to their parents for their signature.

That is the most important way of communication in the school. The diary has been used by the teachers to communicate with the parents. Any information about behavioral issues, or any academic or anything can be written in the student diary. ... So the diary has been used effectively. Parents can write notes and send it to teachers. Because of time constrain, they can't come to campus so they write what they are concerned. We actually tell the parents: ask the child about the diary. We have a program that teacher to collect the diary every week. She will see the column of the signature. (Teacher C)

The student diary also serves as a way for parents to be involved in their child's educational processes so that they know at early stages what is happening to their child, and can anticipate or take any necessary actions to help their child (Teacher B). The teachers commented that in some cases there were no parent signatures, suggesting an absence of parental checking of the diaries. This could be because the parents are indeed not inspecting the diaries, and/or because students are not showing the diaries to their parents. To overcome this, teachers claim that the school usually makes an effort to inform parents by telephone, and that they photocopy the page of the diary on which they have put notes in case parents blame the school for not keeping them informed.

The interviewed parents responded to the use of the diary differently. Some admitted their failure to give enough attention to their child's diary because of their busy life style, whilst others indicated that they do check it regularly. All of the parents agree about the importance of the diary as a source of information for them about their child's education progress. Most of the parents stated that whilst they do help their child's learning as indicated by the diaries, they do sometimes forget to put their signature on the diary. While the teachers believed that parents are informed about their obligation to inspect their child's diary, this is not clear

Paper code: 1797

amongst all parents, with Parent A indicating that he did not know if he had been requested to do so.

Importantly, the effectiveness of communicating through the diary is doubted by some parents, a view that contrasts with those of the teachers.

If I write on the diary, it is only up to the teacher. They [my notes] do not come to the office. One year before, I wrote something [on the diary], and it came to the teacher only. So [it is] no point to write, because they are not coming [or brought] to a discussion (Parent B).

Some other parents contend that the student diary is merely a normal procedure that every school should have. Parent E was not impressed with the use of the diary as it was mostly about her child's schedules of homework and activities; she hardly used it as a way to communicate with the school. Overall parents' viewed the diary a tool for one-way communication from the school to parents, and not as a means of parents communicating with the school.

Changes in parent-teacher interview practice

As commonly held in other schools, the parent-teacher interview is a routine method to inform every parent about their child's educational progress. Parents confirm that this strategy provides them with important information about their children, but not many parents use this as a means to communicate their concerns about the school in general. So, it becomes rather a one-way information session for parents, much as the diary is a one-way communication tool.

The school is aware of this perception and has tried to facilitate an improved parent-teacher interview process. Previously, the interview was held from between 9am and 4pm which did not allow working parents to attend the interview. The school has changed it from nine to six, and conducted twice a year in first and second semesters. This new process does allow parents to better support their child's learning. What is lacking is the opportunity for genuine two-way communication: "a healthy partnership between teachers and families begins with frequent two-way communication" (Constantino, 2003, p.98). The interview should not be seen as merely a reporting session, but as a way for teachers and parents to discuss student progress and support (Graham-Clay, 2005, p.121).

School information sessions

The school runs a variety of whole-day and evening information sessions for parents. According to the teachers a range of issues are discussed between the teachers and parents at these sessions.

Apart from having the information session for parents, we also have a parent information night, one night during the year. Maybe like 5-7:30 at night after work. Basically we invite parents to help the children. And we go through the curriculum. The coordinator talks of what they are doing, and we talk about what children need to do at home, and we let the parents know about what is going on at the school. And then at the end there is the opportunity for the parents to ask us questions and so we are

having feedback. And last year, when we had an interactive whiteboards in the new building, and we also let the parents have a turn to use them. Also at the end of year we had a prep orientation session for the parents where we expected them to come to the school and [find out] how they can help with their child. (Teacher D)

When the questioned about the sessions, the parents indicated that they come to the sessions when they are invited, although some of them were concerned with the way the school runs such sessions. For Parent B, the information day was merely a one-way communication by the school to transmit necessary information, with rare opportunities for parents to have their voices heard. Parent E tells a story about a session for parents of senior students she attended with which she was not happy. Only fifteen percent of the parents attended that particular meeting, and unfortunately the school was represented by the School Imam, and two religion teachers. Some parents raised important questions related to their child's particular problems, but of course, as Parent E says, the Imam and teachers did not know how to respond to the questions. She still does not understand why the secondary or VCE coordinator did not come to that very important meeting.

What Parents B and E described are further examples of the lack of genuine engagement with parents. Research has shown that uncommunicated expectations between teachers and parents often create tensions between the parties, and in turn has a negative influence on the students' learning process and outcomes (Olsen & Fuller, 2008). Cultural differences, which entail not only expectations but also language difficulties, might make the partnership deteriorate if appropriate actions are not taken. Communicating each group's own expectation is recommended, and this must be initiated by the school (Constantino, 2003). Hornby (2000) recommends that teachers should be prepared to adapt their expectations and means of communication in order to optimize parental involvement.

Discussion of findings

There is a synergy between parents and the school (principal and teachers) about the need for an Islamic school where their children learn both religious and secular knowledge and skills. Considering that public schools cannot provide an Islamic environment, particularly in terms of the observation of religious obligations, parents believe that an Islamic school is an appropriate place to send their children. There is an assumption by most parents that the school will also meet the academic needs of their children, although there was a suspicion amongst some of the interviewed parents that the school did not use its resources sufficiently to support a well-balanced academic program, with too much going to the religious aspects of the school.

Islam obliges its followers to pursue education to the highest level they can, and it puts those who are well educated equal to those who have faith. Ways of fulfilling this obligation including the parents primary role of educating or putting their children into education. In this perspective, their involvement in school is very well placed as a way to support the fulfillment of their religious obligation. This, however, is not convincingly manifest in the current study. The heavy involvement

Paper code: 1797

of parents in school and mosque fundraising can be an indicator of their participation in their children's education, but can also be seen as a result of collective feeling of victimhood within the broader Australian community (CMMIPS, 2009). This traditional form of participation is not, however, the type of participation that meets the educational needs of the children in such matters as homework support, parent presence at school assemblies and other activities. Furthermore, as indicated previously, parent presence in the school seems to be centred more on community based activities such as Friday prayer, Ramadan iftar and 'Eid festivals, rather than on educational activities..

From the parents' perspective, a one-way communication style was most evident in the parent-school relationship. Whilst this style of communication remains necessary to develop effective parental involvement, research has shown that a successful home-school partnership relies very much on two-way communication (Constantino, 2003). A starting point is the opening the channels of communication by schools to send information out to parents, as the studied school has done. "The responsibility for providing information needs lie with the school, rather than relying on parents to seek out the information they need" (Bull, Brooking, & Campbell, 2008, p.9). As the teachers interviewed indicate, the school has opened a wide range of communication channels for parents to voice their concerns. The interviewed parents, however, viewed this as being one-way. They did not mention any means through which parents might communicate with the school.

Another problem of communication between teachers and parents, or miscommunication, is acknowledged by at least Teacher D:

You have to be very careful how you speak to the parents as well. Sometimes it is the children who did not show the diary to the parents. So it is just a bit about communication with the parents. Sometimes we have parents angry because their child is, for instance, knocked down by other friends, or fallen during play etc. We just try to settle them down. I ask every teacher to remain calm if any parent has miscommunication, obviously not abusing them.

Whilst it is evident from the teachers' point of view that parents can voice their concerns to the teachers, sometimes, there is miscommunication as confirmed by the above teacher. Hanhan (2008) and Graham-Clay (2005) identify several barriers to communication between educators and parents, which include the perceptions of each side about the other, cultural differences, parental experience of schooling, economic and time constraints, and lack of the use of information and communication technology. In the studied school, cultural differences and parents' schooling experiences seem to be influential in the one-way communication flow. Parent C realises that her expectation about the school's efforts to involve parents might come from her schooling experiences in which her parents were heavily involved. In addition, she argues:

Being educated in [a Western country] and seeing my parents' views and their involvement in my education, I realise that parents will have different expectations depending on their own education, and their

parents' involvement into their education, but also the school's stance and expectations about how parents should be involved.

Parents E and F who were also educated in a Western education system and well informed about such systems, also maintain that a significant number of teachers with Asian backgrounds might create barriers for parents to communicate their expectations. From the teachers' perspectives, however, the communication problems might also come from parents with limited English ability, as most parents are recently arrived migrants.

Beside the communication factors as mentioned above, other factors include parents' working demands and hence their busy lifestyle.

They've got commitment, [and] they've got business of their own. There are kids here who are having parents running a business. The work is very demanding. The business demand and the time they have is very influential. It is hard for them to come out from their work and come here. Sometimes parents do get annoyed when we call to come over and discuss their child (Parent C).

A busy lifestyle might also be contributed to by the fact that many families have several children.

Another factor which the teachers and parents are concerned with is the parents' educational background. Besides bringing with them their original belief, culture, and values, migrating parents often possess a low educational background, which influences their ability and willingness to be involved with the school. Many parents find it difficult in helping their children with their learning processes and problems because of their own insufficient educational background. Leithwood and Steinbach (2002) use family educational culture as a broader concept than just educational background. Family educational culture includes beliefs about intellectual work, family work habits, academic guidance and support, stimulation to think about issues in the larger environment, academic and occupational aspirations, adequate health and physical conditions. They argued that, for schools in challenging circumstances, schools that are able to positively influence family educational culture (through programs such as parent education programs, creating a home environment that encourages learning, expressing high but realistic expectations, and becoming involved in their children's education) have student outcomes above expectation.

Other influential factors on parental involvement which emerged from the interviews include the proximity of parents to the school, the transportation available for parents to come to the school, the school's clarity of policy and procedures on parental involvement, and lack of efforts by the school to educate parents as to how they might be involved in the school. Most interviewed teachers believed that the distant proximity of most family homes to the school makes it difficult for parents to be more involved in the school such as attending meetings, helping in classroom, and so forth. This is worsened by the lack of public transport serving the areas from where the parents live to the school. The interviewed parents identified that the school is lacking clarity of policy and procedures for involving parents. Parent C is particularly concerned about this in that she said

that it was difficult for her to understand how the school wants her to be involved. Perhaps because of this, Parent E maintained that the school does not have a well-planned program to educate parents in the areas of how they might be involved in their child's learning processes.

The first part of the parent-school partnership project described by Spry and Graham (2009) involved the construct of a framework to conceptualise the partnership. They describe three levels of partnership:

- **Silent** – passive parent relationship in which parents are seen as being respectful of teachers, having limited capacity to help, and where teachers are acknowledged for their expertise. There is a clear demarcation between home and school.
- **Managed** – parent relationships supervised by the school. Parents are viewed as disinterested, more concerned with their own child than with all children, and a threat to teacher professionalism. The partnership is one that is viewed as protecting the vision and mission of the school.
- **Activist** – parents are viewed as being engaged, co-leaders and joint decision makers with staff, motivated by moral purpose (such as helping all children), and allies to teachers. It is a reciprocal partnership to ensure school sustainability and learning for all children.

In our research, the partnership seems to be a cross between the silent and managed levels. Parents display many of the qualities of the silent level, whilst the actions of the school suggest it is more associated with the managed level. Interestingly, parents want more say and teachers believe they are providing more opportunities for two-way communication and partnership. It is not evident that either parents or the school want activist relationships.

Concluding remarks

The school's leadership has demonstrated some desire to improve parental involvement. The strategies for such improvement are activities commonly found in other schools including the use of several functions to provide information for parents, teacher-parent interviews, etc., and, in addition, the religious activities that are special to this type of school as an Islamic school. However, the belief of the school community (the principal, the interviewed teachers and parents) in the importance of parental involvement in their children's learning process constitutes an important area for the school to develop and refine. The school's success in raising a tremendous amount of funds for religious and Muslim solidarity causes driven by the shared Islamic faith and collective feeling of being in a non-Muslim country is an undisputed sign of parental willingness to being involved in what the school is doing. In addition, through mosque and religious festivities, the school has become the centre for its community (Constantino, 2003). Interestingly, such a religious sentiment does not seem to be an influential factor in increasing a more focused parental involvement in their children's education in the studied school. This confirmed Merry's (2005) study on a similar topic in other Western contexts.

Paper code: 1797

There are three major areas that this school could work on in order to increase parental involvement: establishing a shared vision in regard to the parent-school partnership, improving communication, and fostering professional development. It is clear that all respondents believed in the importance of parental involvement, but there was little agreement on what this might look like. A school vision for this is needed, shared by parents and teachers, and aligned with the moral purpose of the school, “nurturing the growth and development of children” (Wright & Stegelin, 2003, p.63). Spry and Graham’s (2009) framework could be used to articulate a common view. Getting alignment between parents and teachers needs effective communication, and the school leadership is a key element in improving communication. The school needs to better understand the expectations and educational culture of each family, and families need to understand what is needed to support the work of teachers. Communication to ensure that there is a supportive family educational culture is perhaps key to this (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). The third area of improvement is staff professional development, to build the capacity of the staff in order to enhance the school’s culture and develop structures supportive of parent-school partnerships.

Overall, parental involvement in this particular Islamic school was limited, with one-way communication from the school to parents as a dominating strategy. This small pilot study indicates that it would be worthwhile exploring this phenomenon further as both teachers and parents indicated that they want a more equal partnership, but seem not to know how to do about this.

References

- AL-ROMI, N. H. (2000). Muslims as a Minority in the United States. *International Journal of Educational Research*(33), 631-638.
- ANDERSON, M.-A. (2006). *Being a School Councillor in a Government Secondary College in Victoria, Australia: Constructions of Role and Meaning*. University of Melbourne, Melbourne.
- BULL, A., BROOKING, K., & CAMPBELL, R. (2008). *Successful Home-School Partnership*: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- CALDWELL, B. J., & HARRIS, J. (2008). *Why Not the Best Schools? What We Learned from Outstanding Schools around the World*. Camberwell: ACER Press.
- CENTRE FOR MUSLIM MINORITIES AND ISLAM POLICY STUDIES (2009). *Mapping Employment and Education among Muslim Australians*. Caulfield East: Monash University. Accessed on 26/08/2010 from http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/a-diverse-australia/national-action-plan/_attach/muslim-mapping-report.pdf
- CHAN, B. Y., & CHUI, H. S. (1997). Parental Participation in School Councils in Victoria, Australia. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 11(3), 102-110.
- CLYNE, I. D. (2001). Educating Muslim Children in Australia. In A. SAEED & S. AKBARZADEH (Eds.), *Muslim Communities in Australia* (pp. 116-137). Sydney: UNSW Press.
- CONSTANTINO, S. M. (2003). *Engaging All Families: Creating a Positive School Culture by Putting Research into Practice*. Maryland: Scarecrow Education.
- DESLANDES, R. (2001). *A Vision of Home-School Partnership: Three complementary conceptual frameworks*. Paper presented at the A Bridge to the Future - Collaboration between Parents, Schools and Communities, Nijmegen - The Netherlands.
- DRIESSEN, G., & MERRY, M. S. (2006). Islamic Schools in the Netherlands: Expansion or Marginalization? *Interchange*, 37(3), 201-223.
- EPSTEIN, J. L. (2001). Introduction to the Special Section: New Direction for School, Family, and Community Partnerships in Middle and High Schools. *NASSP Bulletin*, 85(627), 1-6.
- HANHAN, S. F. (2008). Parent-Teacher Communication: Who's Talking? In G. OLSEN & M. L. FULLER (Eds.), *Home-School Relations: Working Successfully with Parents and Families*. Boston: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.

Paper code: 1797

- HATTIE, J. (2009) *Visible Learning: A synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses in Education*. Oxford: Routledge.
- HORNBY, G. (2000). *Improving Parental Involvement*. London: Cassel Education.
- HUMPHREY, M. (2001). An Australian Islam? Religion in the Multicultural City. In A. SAEED & S. AKBARZADEH (Eds.), *Muslim Communities in Australia* (pp. 33-52). Sydney: UNSW Press.
- GURR, D., DRYSDALE, L., & MULFORD, B. (2006). Models of successful principal leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, 26(4), 371–395.
- LEITHWOOD, K., & RIEHL, C. (2005). What we know about successful school leadership. In W. FIRESTONE & C. RIEHL (Eds.), *A new agenda: Directions for research on educational leadership* (pp. 22–47). New York: Teachers College Press.
- LEITHWOOD, K., SEASHORE LOUIS, K.A., ANDERSON, S., & WAHLSTROM, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.
- LEITHWOOD, K. & STEINBACH, R. (2002) *Successful Leadership for Especially Challenging Schools*. In DAVIES, B. & WEST-BURHNAM, J. (Eds) (2003) *Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management* (London: Pearson Education), pp. 25-43.
- MANDAVILLE, P. (2007). Islamic Education in Britain: Approaches to Religious Knowledge in a Pluralistic Society. In R. W. HEFNER & M. Q. ZAMAN (Eds.), *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education* (pp. 224-241). New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- MCCREERY, E., JONES, L., & HOLMES, R. (2007). Why Do Muslim Parents Want Muslim Schools. *Early Years*, 27(3), 203-219.
- MCNEIL, L., & CRONNIN, D. (2008). *Working in Partnership--the Pains and Gains of Parent-School Partnership*. Paper presented at the Working in Partnership Conference. Hobart:
- MERRY, M. S. (2005). Advocacy and Involvement: The Role of Parents in Western Islamic Schools. *Religious Education*, 100(4), 374-385.
- MERRY, M. S., & DRIESSEN, G. (2005). Islamic School in Three Western Countries: Policy and Procedure. *Comparative Education*, 41(4), 411-432.
- MICHAEL, S., DITTUS, P., & EPSTEIN, J. (2007). Family and Community Involvement in Schools: Results from the School Health Policies and Programs Study 2006. *Journal of School Health*, 77(8), 567-579.
- MILLAR, N. (2006). *Through the Looking Glass: From Comfort to Conformity to Challenge and Collaboration: Changing Parent Involvement in the Catholic*

Paper code: 1797

Education of their Children Through the Twentieth Century. Unpublished PhD, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

OLSEN, G., & FULLER, M. L. (2008). *Home-School Relations: working successfully with Parents and Families* (3rd ed.). Boston: Pearson.

SAEED, A. (2003). *Islam in Australia.* Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

SAEED, A., & AKBARZADEH, S. (Eds). (2001). *Muslim Communities in Australia.* Sydney: UNSW Press.

SAULWICK MULLER SOCIAL RESEARCH. (2006). *Family-School Partnership Project: A Quantitative and Qualitative Study.* Canberra: Saulwick Muller Social Research.

SPRY, G. & GRAHAM, J. (2009) Genuine Parent-School Partnerships, In CRANSTON, N. & ERLICH, L. (Eds) *Australian Educational Leadership Today: Issues and Trends.* Bowen Hills, Queensland: Australian Academic Press, pp. 123-140.

WRIGHT, K., & STEGELIN, D. A. (2003). *Building School and Community Partnerships Through Parent Involvement.* New Jersey: Merril Prentice Hall.