

Addressing the Unique Needs of Arab American Children with Disabilities

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Abstract Arab American children with disabilities have been largely neglected in literature pertaining to racial and ethnic minorities in special education in the United States. Few policy makers, human service practitioners, and researchers in this country are likely aware of the tens of thousands of Arab American children with disabilities. This paper offers guidelines for addressing the unique needs of Arab American children with disabilities. These guidelines address: awareness of Arab culture, outreach programs for Arab American families having children with disabilities, assessment of Arab American children, Arab American parent involvement in their children's education, Arab American children's English language proficiency, overrepresentation of Arab American children in special education, and conducting further empirical research on Arab American children with disabilities. The paper also provides preliminary evidence to support further exploration of the numbers, characteristics, and experiences of Arab American children with disabilities. The issues and discussions in this paper are of particular relevance as special education and related service providers in the United States continue to explore more culturally appropriate interventions and supports for minority children with disabilities and their families.

Keywords Arab Americans · Ethnic minority groups · Cross-cultural studies · Children with disabilities · Culturally appropriate services

Introduction

Arab Americans come from an enormously diverse cultural heritage that includes different religions, languages, nationalities, education levels, and social classes (Derose 2009). The majority of Arab Americans are concentrated, in descending order, in the following ten states: California, Michigan, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, Illinois, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania (Arab American Institute 2012). Because surveys using federal standards for race and ethnicity classify people of Arabic descent in the White category, the outcome is an inaccurate count, which only adds to the many barriers to conducting research on the Arab American population (Jaber 2003).

In addition to the traditional challenges faced by other minority groups in the United States, Arab Americans face unique difficulties. The few studies conducted on the acculturation of Arab Americans into American culture and society have revealed that Arabs, especially people of the Islamic faith, find acculturation to the United States to be difficult. Primary factors contributing to the difficulty include religion, the importance of maintaining cultural values and traditions, and exposure to prejudice and discrimination (Derose 2009; Wingfield and Karaman 1995).

The number of Americans of Arab descent has grown significantly since the mid-1990s (Pew Research Center 2012; Hakim-Larson et al. 2007). According to Brown et al. (2012), the Arab American community has become one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the United States since 2000. The 2011 American Community Survey

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(ACS), reported that there were about 1.8 million Arab Americans living in the United States, an approximately 47 % increase in population size in 10 years (US Census Bureau 2011); but according to the Arab American Institute (2012) the number is 3.5 million. As the number of Arab Americans grows, so does the number of Arab American children with disabilities. This indicates that special education and related service providers (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, and social workers) are increasingly likely to work with an Arab American student (Donovan 2013).

Yet, Arab Americans remain the least studied ethnic group in the United States (Derose 2009; Moradi and Hasan 2004), and literature on Arab American students in public schools is limited (Ferguson 2004; Martin 2009). Further, although the importance of addressing cultural and linguistic diversity is underscored in the delivery of special education and related services (Cartledge and Kourea 2008; Kuykendall 2012) and abundant research has been conducted on other racial minority groups (Aud et al. 2010; Johnson et al. 2003; Skiba et al. 2008), research on Arab American children with disabilities and their families remains remarkably sparse (Abadeh 2006; Donovan 2013).

The goal of this paper is to raise awareness about Arab American children with disabilities and provide an overview of features of Arab culture that may be important considerations in the identification and intervention with these children. The paper consists of three main sections. The first section provides brief background information about Arab Americans. The second section presents preliminary data on Arab American children with disabilities. The third section provides guidelines for addressing the unique needs of Arab American children with disabilities. The paper concludes that further investigation of the unique needs and the challenges Arab American children with disabilities and their families is warranted in order for service providers to offer culturally and linguistically appropriate special education and related services for this population.

Arab American Children with Disabilities

Only three empirical studies specifically targeting disability among Arab American children were found. In the first study, Kuaider (2005) explored the adaptation and daily routine of nine Arab American families having children with disabilities. This researcher reported that all mothers participating in the study were generally satisfied with the services their children were receiving. However, they experienced conflict with school at the early stages of placement in special education settings. Mothers with a higher level of education were less satisfied with the quality

of instruction provided to their children, and had more conflict with the special education and related service providers. Further, the researcher reported that Arab American mothers' involvement with disability networks and parent support groups was very low. These mothers strongly opposed placing their children in group homes. Finally, the results of this study indicated that religion was an extremely important factor influencing the lives of these women.

The second study investigated perceptions of Arab American parents of children with special needs regarding communication with the school and professionals who work with their children (Abadeh 2006). Participants were both foreign-born and born in the United States and had children with special needs in the first through fifth grades. Results indicated that parents shared similar views about communication; however, mixed outcomes were noted in their responses to the kinds of preferable communication. Further, there were differences between parents who had been in the United States for long time and recent immigrants. The results also revealed that parents wanted to be involved in their children's education, especially when these children have special needs. However, parents' involvement was impeded by language barriers and previous experiences with schools in their native countries.

In the third study, Donovan (2013) investigated Arab American parents' experiences with the special education process in the US utilizing a phenomenological qualitative approach. The parent participants included five mothers and one father. The findings revealed that mothers had both supportive and unsupportive experiences during the special education process with spouses and teachers.

In a recent article, Al Khateeb et al. (2014) addressed culturally appropriate counseling practices with the Arab American persons with disabilities and their families. After providing a brief overview of Arab culture, culturally-appropriate counseling considerations related to family, attitudes toward disability, religion, communication, acculturation, help-seeking behaviors, and stereotypes were presented.

In addition, a handful of studies investigating various disability issues in ethnic minorities, including Arab Americans, were found (e.g., Altieri and von Kluge 2009; Beattie et al. 1997; Budman et al. 1992; Diken 2006; de la Cruz et al. 1998; Feldman and Gum 2007; Hunt et al. 2004). However; dozens of studies, reports, books, book chapters, and guides have been published on considerations in working with Arab American children and families for school psychologists (e.g., Haboush 2007; Vang 2010), counselors (Abudabbeh and Aseel 1999; Jackson 1997; Nassar-McMillan et al. 2010), mental health professionals (e.g., Derose 2009; Hakim-Larson et al. 2007), social workers (e.g., Al-Krenawi and Graham 2000; Lind 2006), educators (e.g., Aburumuh et al. 2009; Moosa et al. 2001;

Schwartz 1999; Suleiman 2000; Tabbah et al. 2012; Wingfield and Karaman 1995), and health service providers (Adam 2012). Significantly more publications were found on Arab American history, culture, demographics, identity, and acculturation (e.g., Abudabbeh 1996; Al-Hazza and Bucher 2010; Arab American Institute 2012; El-Badry 1994; Chen and Sheldon 2012; Ferguson 2004; Goforth 2011; Haddad 2004; Martin 2009; Nobles and Sciarra 2000; Wingfield 2006).

In light of the lack of data on the prevalence of disabilities among Arab American children, the current researchers attempted to develop a very rough estimate of their numbers. Estimates were based on the following information: (1) the total number of Arab Americans living in the United States is 1.8 million, or about 0.06 % of the American population (US Census Bureau 2011), about 25 % of whom are school-aged children (Frisby and Reynolds 2005); (2) the 2010 US Census reported that approximately 56.7 million people (18.7 %) of the American population had a disability, 5.2 % (2.8 million) of who were school-aged children with a disability (Brault 2012). If the data on the disability prevalence rate in the US holds true for the Arab American population, the estimated numbers of Arab Americans of all ages with communicative, physical, or intellectual disabilities may reach 336,000 individuals, and the number of Arab Americans under 18 years who represent 31 % of the Arab American population (The 2005–2007 American Community Survey, as cited in Kayyali 2012) with a disability may reach 23,400. However, given that most unofficial sources reported that the number of Arab-Americans exceeds 3.5 million (e.g., Arab American Institute Foundation 2012), the actual numbers of Arab Americans with a disability might be substantially higher. Although the same concepts and methods were used to identify children with disabilities from various ethnicities in the 2012 *Condition of Education* (National Center for Education Statistics 2012), extreme caution should be exercised when looking at these estimates for at least two reasons. First, reliable data on the size and demographic characteristics of the Arab American population is lacking. Second, disability prevalence rates vary considerably across cultures. A variety of factors may have an impact on disability prevalence rates among Arab American children, such as consanguinity; linguistic influences; access to quality of health, educational, and social services; and perceptions of disability.

Guidelines for Addressing the Unique Needs of Arab American Children with Disabilities

The following guidelines are offered to assist special education and related service providers (e.g., school psychologists,

school counselors, physical and occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and health service practitioners) who work with Arab American children who have a disability or are suspected of having such a disability. These guidelines are based on published literature pertaining to Arab American students and their families. In particular, these guidelines are taken from Al Khateeb et al. (2014), Erickson and Al-Timimi (2004), Donovan (2013), Goforth (2009), Haboush (2007), Kuaider (2005), Nassar-McMillan and Hakim-Larson (2003), Nobles and Sciarra (2000). As with all guidelines, service providers must use professional judgment in applying guidelines with each child and family individually.

Developing Awareness of Arab Culture

The importance of developing culturally appropriate practices with Arab American children with disabilities and their families cannot be overstated. Arab Americans differ from the dominant culture as well as from other minority populations in terms of native languages, religious and social belief systems, and family structure. Further, there are tremendous economic, social, religious, educational, and acculturative differences among the Arab American population (Boulos 2011; Erickson and Al-Timimi 2001). Aburumuh et al. (2009) found that teachers had limited understanding of Arab and Muslim children. Thus, service providers should increase their knowledge and appreciation of the Arab culture and develop an understanding of the social and political context within which the Arab American children and families are nested (Goforth 2009). Arab and Muslim Americans are subjected to discrimination and even hate crimes more than other ethnic groups (Khan and Ecklund 2012). Moreover, many Arab Americans are recent immigrants who may be experiencing acculturative stress. Psychological and behavioral problems frequently arise during acculturation. Sulaiman (2008) found that among Arab American youth, 28 % were diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

In general, the Arab culture can be described as collectivist, in which the individual has a close long-term commitment to the family (Hammad et al. 1999). An individual's characteristics not only affect the individual but also the entire family (Goforth 2011). Furthermore, family honor (the perceived quality of worthiness and respectability that affects the social standing and the self-evaluation of family members) is central in the Arab American culture (Goforth 2011).

Service providers also need to be aware of the differing communication styles of Arab American families. Most Arab Americans do not clearly state and emphasize what they want others to know. Rather, they tend to be less direct and depend highly on subtle messages that include use of body language, facial expression, and timing of silence

(Al-Krenawi and Graham 2000; Nobles and Sciarra 2000). An awareness of these differing communication styles could contribute to more effective interaction with Arab American families and may prevent misunderstandings that might lead to conflict during the special education process (Kuaider 2005). As Hammoud et al. (2005) note, interactions with Arab Americans are facilitated by establishing personal relationships and understanding the nuances of communication, both verbal and nonverbal. Further, when communicating with recent Arab American immigrants, service providers should assess language comprehension and, if needed, an interpreter should be used.

Service providers should also be aware of the crucial role of religion and spirituality in the adaptation and daily routine of Arab American families having children with disabilities. The majority of Arab Americans are Christians; however, the percentage of Arab Americans who are Muslim has increased in recent years (Arab American Institute 2012; Arab American National Museum 2010). An important aspect of the Arab culture is the central role of religion (Abudabbeh 1996). For Arabs, Islam is not only a religion but rather a way of life. Most Arabs believe that many, if not all; things in life are controlled by the will of God (fate) rather than by human beings. Because of this, religiosity might be integral to the psychological and behavioral wellbeing of many Arab Americans. In the study conducted by Kuaider (2005), mothers acknowledged the rewards of caring for a child with special needs. Other studies have suggested that religion can be a contributing factor in the adaptability of Arab American parents and their acceptance of their children with disabilities (Abadeh 2006; Crabtree 2007).

Initiating Outreach and Awareness Programs for Arab American Families Having Children with Disabilities

In the US, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 (US Department of Education 2004) which governs how states and public agencies provide special education and related services to US children guarantees the rights of all US children with disabilities and their families regardless of race or religion (Heward 2012). Accordingly, specific efforts should be made to assist minority children with disabilities and their parents assert their rights through legislation like IDEA (Balcazar 2001). Given the Arab Americans' possible lack of awareness of special education procedures and practices in the US (Donovan 2013), schools should clearly explain the special education process to them. Specifically, parents need to know the main principles of IDEA such as free appropriate public education, individualized education program, least restrictive environment, parents' roles, and procedural safeguards.

Conducting Appropriate Assessment of Arab American Children

Assessment of Arab American children may pose special difficulties especially for school psychologists who have little or no knowledge of the Arab American population. IDEA requires objective assessment practices when identifying children as having a disability. A main mandate of IDEA is nondiscriminatory assessment. This means that the tests must not be racially or culturally discriminatory, and they should be administered in the child's native or primary language. Further, when a child is assessed, someone familiar with the child's cultural and linguistic background must be part of the assessment team (Burnette 2000; Hardman et al. 2010).

Information should be gathered about an Arab American child's English language proficiency during assessment (Goforth 2009). Language may also play a role in the degree to which a child's assessment appears to reflect social-emotional difficulties (Haboush 2007). As Sayed (2003) noted, Arabic is a highly expressive language, which includes considerable repetition and emotion, therefore, Arab children may appear more disturbed than non-Arab children.

When evaluating Arab American children; teachers, counselors, and school psychologists should take into account Arab American culture and traditions (Goforth 2009). They need to implement the assessment process in a culturally appropriate way. Given the significance of maintaining family honor and the stigma attached to disability and special education in the Arab culture, some Arab American parents refuse referring their children to special education (Donovan 2013; Haboush 2007). These parents, especially fathers, struggle with accepting their children's placement in special education settings (Crabtree 2007; Donovan 2013). They believe that special education placements may result in lower self-esteem and self-expectations among children. Thus, extensive work with Arab American families may be particularly important during initial stages of referral and assessment (Erickson and Al-Timimi 2001; Goforth 2011). Including the family in all decisions will be important to help family members feel that their honor is maintained and to promote acceptability of the assessment process. Special education and related service providers need to overemphasize that all information regarding the child and family is confidential (Diken 2006; Goforth 2011). Nassar-McMillan and Hakim-Larson (2003) also suggest using a multisystem, comprehensive approach when gathering information during the assessment process of Arab American children. For example, both the immediate and extended family members can be invited to the meeting when conducting interviews. During the interviews, various kinds of information

could be gathered, including levels of acculturation to the dominant culture, educational and child-care practices in their home country, and immigration history. Similarly, religion should be considered when evaluating Arab American children because religion is infused in Arab American ethnic and cultural identities, especially for Muslim Arab Americans (Goforth 2009). Gender is also important to consider when providing services to Arab Americans, especially if the student is an adolescent (Goforth 2009). Being the opposite gender to the student may present some difficulties. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2000) suggested that maintaining certain gender boundaries will be necessary. These include maintaining minimal eye contact, appropriate physical distance between the service provider and the student, and involving the family in the process.

Promoting Arab American Parent Involvement in Their Children's Education

Parental active involvement in their children's education is strongly encouraged by IDEA (Donovan 2013). However, Arab American parental involvement in child's school (e.g., volunteering, observing, participating in special occasion activities, and attending IEP meetings) was found to be low to moderate (Abadeh 2006; Donovan 2013). In general, mothers are more involved than fathers in their children's education (Donovan 2013; Kuaider 2005). Moreover, Arab American parents tend to be actively involved with their children's learning within the home environment; however, their involvement with their child's school is usually less (Kuaider 2005). Moosa et al. (2001) investigated first generation Arab American mothers' involvement at the elementary school level. The study focused on mothers because of their role as the primary caregiver for children in the Arab culture. Results revealed a lack of involvement of Arab American parents in their children's education. Teachers attributed this lack of involvement to cultural factors, language barriers, considering the school as the sole authority governing their children's education, and having younger children at home who require their presence. On the other hand, most mothers attended parent-teacher conferences, expressed willingness to participate in school activities if they were requested to do so, and created a home environment conducive to learning and assisted with homework. Thus, teachers and parents perceived involvement differently.

The few studies related to Arab American parent involvement with parent support and advocacy groups reported mixed results. While Kuaider (2005) found that Arab American parents' involvement with disability networks and parent support groups was very low, Donovan (2013) found that some of the Arab American mothers she

studied participated in informal advocacy experiences. Nevertheless, parent support groups can play an important role in providing parents with support and knowledge and in assisting them to manage the demands of having a child with a disability (Law et al. 2001). Hence, service providers may need to explore factors inhibiting Arab American parents' involvement with disability networks and parent support groups, and develop strategies for enhancing their participation as appropriate.

Assessing Arab American Children's English Language Proficiency

IDEA also requires that any identified disability must not be the result of the student's limited English proficiency (Donovan 2013). The children of recent Arab American immigrants possess varying levels of English fluency (Haboush 2007). Language may represent a barrier to academic success for Arab American children whose native language is Arabic. Because some Arab American children have limited English language proficiency, several Arab American organizations (e.g., Arab American Action Network; Arab American Development Corporation; Arab-American Family Support Center; Brooklyn Arab American Friendship Center; Center for Arab American Philanthropy) developed programs to aid Arab-Americans with English as a second language.

In a study on Arab Americans in Detroit; Baker et al. (2004) found that 80 % of their study sample reported they spoke English well or very well and that most were also bilingual. In another study, Suleiman (1999) found that 75 % of all Arab Americans were able to speak English very well. However, some studies have reported significant numbers of Arab students with limited English proficiency (Martin 2009). According to the 2000 U S Census (de la Cruz and Brittingham 2003), 51 % of Arab Americans spoke Arabic language at home. It is not unlikely, then, that an unknown number of Arab American students, like other language-minority students may be misidentified as having special educational needs because of their trouble with English (Cummins 2001). Connecticut Administrators of Programs for English Language Learners (2011) explains that when an English Language Learner (ELL), such as an Arab American child who is not proficient in English, is experiencing significant academic difficulties; it can be a challenge to determine if the difficulties are due to the language difference or to a true disability that requires a referral to special education. The United States, which passed the *No Child Left Behind* Act in 2001, is currently addressing the challenge of effectively designing and implementing instruction for the growing population of bilingual ELL students, like Arabic-speaking students. This is reflected in the increased interest in training of teachers

of ELLs (e.g., National Center for English Language Acquisition 2011; Palmer et al. 2007; Samson and Collins 2012).

Many Arab American children need to acquire enough facility with the English language to meet the academic requirements of US schools. Although the educational accommodations made by US schools serve these children from Arabic-speaking countries, issues and questions that are specific to these children arise as schools strive to scaffold these children's transition into the English-speaking world of US education (Alshayban 2012; Palmer et al. 2007). Mother tongue influence may seriously affect Arabic-speaking learners' use of English.

Addressing Potential Sources of Overrepresentation of Arab American Children in Special Education

Minority children are typically disproportionately represented in special education in the United States (Zhang and Katsiyannis 2002). It is therefore possible that Arab American children are likely to be incorrectly identified as having a disability and consequently overrepresented in special education programs. In order to reduce the likelihood of a premature decision to refer children to special education, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) offered greater flexibility to schools by permitting the use of the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach as part of the evaluation process. RTI is a three-tiered approach to providing effective instruction to struggling children at increasing levels of intensity. Children are referred to special education evaluation only if they do not respond to the instruction (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities 2005). Specific measures that can be taken to provide Arab American children with appropriate special education services are presented in Figure.

Developing Research-Based Information Resources on Arab American Children with Disabilities

As mentioned earlier, there is a paucity of empirical research on Arab American children with disabilities. The current researchers found that data on the numbers and characteristics of Arab American children with disabilities is unavailable. The only study that has been published pertaining to the prevalence of disability among Arab Americans addressed older individuals (Dallo et al. 2009). School-aged children were excluded from this study. In light of this, could only a rough estimate of the prevalence of disability among Arab American children could be provided. In light of this, research on the prevalence of disability among Arab American children using the statistical methods used by Dallo et al. (2009) is needed.

Another high priority research area is basic demographic characteristics (child age and gender, parents' education, family income) of this population. Research is also needed to identify challenges encountered by these children and their families in accessing special education services in the United States. Likewise, there is lack of information about these children's families. Among priorities for research in this area are parent involvement in the special education process, parents' perceptions of their child's disability, and impact of disability on the family. Furthermore, an area of high priority research relates to teachers providing special education services and programs to these children. Examples of priority research in this area include teachers' knowledge of cultural characteristics of these children and teachers' experiences and perspectives on assessing and instructing them.

Conclusions

A recurrent theme emphasized by different authors is that Arab Americans may face more challenges than other minority groups. These challenges result especially from the negative perceptions and stereotyping, and widespread misinformation about their history and culture through media, curriculum content, peer groups and teachers (Goforth 2011; Haddad 2004). These are compounded by a child's disability which may have devastating effects on most Arab American families. Although Arab Americans may be one of the smaller minorities in American public schools (Goforth 2011; Schwartz 1999), given the rapid growth of this ethnic group and its unique challenges and needs; more research-based information about Arab American children with disabilities and their families is needed (Abadeh 2006; Dallo et al. 2009; Donovan 2013). Without adequate information on Arab American students, it would be very hard for special education and related service providers to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for working with these children and their families (Goforth 2011). The special education literature emphasizes that problems may arise from service providers' lack of knowledge of cultural values and perspectives on children of diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic or religious backgrounds (Martin 2009; Ovando et al. 2006). Prominent among these problems are disproportionate assignment to special education and low quality instructional programs and practices (Agbenyega and Jiggetts 1999; Terry and Irving 2010). In contrast, effective parent involvement and parent-teacher relationships in the special education process can be useful to children, teachers, and parents. Thus, service providers should gain familiarity with Arab American children's culture, language, and perceptions; and move beyond commonly held beliefs and

assumptions about Arabs so they can understand and support these children and their parents better and communicate more effectively and clearly with them. The authors hope that this paper will provide a basis for further investigation of the unique needs and the challenges Arab American children with disabilities and their families that would enable service providers to offer culturally and linguistically appropriate special education and related services for this population.

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