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Iraqi Refugee Mothers' Perceptions of Parental Involvement and Experiences within School Systems

Bethany Deniece Parker

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, betdpark@vols.utk.edu

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Bethany Deniece Parker entitled "Iraqi Refugee Mothers' Perceptions of Parental Involvement and Experiences within School Systems." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Child and Family Studies.

Delores E. Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Cara Djonko-Moore, Barbara Thayer-Bacon

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Iraqi Refugee Mothers' Perceptions of Parental Involvement and Experiences within
School Systems**

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Science

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Bethany Deniece Parker

December 2016

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to examine Iraqi refugee mothers' perceptions of their involvement in and experiences within their children's schools. Research was informed by symbolic interaction framework, which views human behaviors in relation to their perceptions of and experiences with the world around them. Therefore, qualitative methodology was employed in order to ask participants specific questions related to their perceptions of parental involvement and their experiences with the local school system. Four participants were recruited, and recruitment of participants was facilitated through an organization that aids refugees as they resettle in the United States. The organization assisted with the distribution of recruitment brochures and provided space for the researcher to conduct private meetings with prospective participants.

The findings from participant interviews indicate that although Iraqi refugee mothers understand the traditional meaning of parental involvement and do practice traditional models of involvement in schools, they also engage in more non-traditional models of parental involvement that emphasize support through listening and 'advice-giving' to their children. Furthermore, findings indicate that Iraqi refugee mothers have had both negative and positive experiences with their children's schools; and many of their experiences are related to the ages of their children. For instance, participants with older children described more negative experiences related to their children's high school experiences than they did to their children's elementary school experiences.

The implications of this study point to a need for school personnel to recognize the relational needs of Iraqi refugee children in schools and to understand immigrants' non-

traditional views of parental involvement in schools in order to build meaningful relationships with Iraqi refugee families.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Refugees in the United States

The Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees states that the term “refugee” is applicable to any person who

...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who not having nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1967, p. 14)

Prevalence data have indicated that in 2014, worldwide an estimated 59.5 million individuals were forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. Of this number, 19.5 million individuals fit the criteria for refugee status. In the context of the United States (US), the law states that a refugee is someone who “is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or a political opinion” (Martin & Yankay, 2014, p. 1). In 2015, the United States resettled approximately 70,000 refugees – the numerical ceiling for refugee admissions set for that particular year by the President of the United States (American Immigration Council, 2015). The

second-largest group of refugees to enter the United States for the 2015 fiscal year was 12,608 Iraqis (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016). Furthermore, of all refugees entering the United States, more than 40% are children under the age of 18 years (American Psychological Association, 2010).

As more populations are displaced due to political and economic factors worldwide, the United States is likely to experience a rise in the number of refugee children entering America (Georgis, Gokiert, Ford, & Ali, 2014; U.S. Department of State, 2016). As refugees resettle in the United States, one of the first institutions to which they are introduced is the school (Nawyn, 2010). Therefore, refugee parents and school personnel are required to interact with one another as children transition into an educational system (Kugler, 2009). However, transitions and interactions are often perceived negatively. Research has shown this is because school personnel and people entering the United States from other countries have differing views, understandings, and expectations of education – likely as a function of culture, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lawson, 2003; Taylor & Cohn, 2012). For example, while teachers frequently cite a lack of parental involvement as their biggest hurdle when working with families (Epstein et al., 2009), parents view themselves as actively involved in their children’s education but in ways different from what is expected by teachers (Kugler, 2009; Lawson, 2003; McBrien, 2011).

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of the current study is to examine Iraqi refugee mothers’ perceptions of their involvement in and experiences with their children’s schools. Although several studies (Georgis et al., 2014; McBrien, 2011; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Tadesse, 2014) have emphasized the importance that culture plays in refugee parents’ perceptions of and participation in their

children's education, very few studies have focused specifically on Iraqi refugees. Because refugees represent a myriad of cultural, social, ethnic, and religious groups (UNHCR Mid-year Trends, 2015), a study that investigates Iraqi refugees' perceptions of their involvement in their children's schools and education is warranted.

The justification for narrowing the sample to include only Iraqi refugees is twofold: First, Iraqi refugees are one of the largest groups of resettled refugees in the United States (Martin & Yankay, 2014; Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015; UNHCR Mid-year Trends, 2015). Second, very little research exists on Arab refugees broadly and Iraqi refugees specifically. Furthermore, what is assumed about Iraqis has been primarily extrapolated from research on refugees in general. However, generalizing findings from one population to another can be problematic. When generalizations are made, the unique dynamics of the particular groups are disregarded. Therefore, generalizing findings from one group of refugees to another may cause erroneous conclusions to be drawn. For instance, although Arab populations share a similar language and dominant religion, customs (e.g., diet, dress, cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes) vary across countries and regions (Nydell, 2012). Therefore, a study targeting Iraqi refugees' perceptions of parental involvement in the United States' schools is needed to address issues that might be particular to Iraqi refugees. The study will add to the sparse literature on some of the dynamics related to schooling of Iraqi refugee children.

Differing Perceptions of Parental Involvement

As indicated earlier, school personnel and parents frequently have differing perceptions of parental involvement. This is particularly true when parents and school personnel come from different cultural and/or socioeconomic backgrounds (Hill & Taylor, 2004). In one study, Lawson (2003) examined perceptions of parental involvement in a sample of low-income, urban

parents. He compared the perceptions of parents with the perceptions of their children's teachers. Findings indicated that teachers defined parental involvement as parents' effort to assist the school in reaching its goals. For example, teachers described parental involvement as parents "seeing what the teacher asks is done," and "cooperating when they are asked to do certain things" (p. 104). In that same study, although parents' initial definitions of parental involvement aligned with what teachers described, as parents' stories progressed, they described parental involvement as being "...a desperate fight for their children's lives and futures" (p. 91), a dynamic that transcended the needs of the school. For example, parents viewed parental involvement as extending beyond teacher needs to include their [parents] general ways of life, such as children's activities and care beyond the school context. More specifically, parental involvement included activities such as making sure children were fed, clothed, and safe. Subsequently, parents perceived themselves as actively involved in their children's academic success when their home and community efforts directly affected their children's school attendance, educational advancement, and overall educational success.

Additionally, the gap between perceptions of parental involvement widens further when the intersectionality of socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and cultural background are considered (Usher & Kober, 2012). Despite research that has demonstrated that parents with different demographic characteristics see themselves as fully involved and engaged in their children's schools (Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009; Lee & Bowen, 2006), teachers perceive those parents as being disinterested in their children's schooling (Hill & Taylor, 2004). This is particularly noteworthy for two reasons: First, families of low-socioeconomic status are disproportionately comprised of racial and ethnic minorities (APA, 2015), whereas educators are predominately middle-class and non-Hispanic white females (Deruy, 2015; Pyke, 2014). Second,

refugee families are commonly characterized by the confounding effects of low-socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic diversity, and cultural diversity (“Ethnic Community Profiles,” n.d), which creates a stark context for the emergence of differences in perceptions of parental involvement (Usher & Kober, 2012).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although the parental involvement literature related specifically to refugees is growing, there is a dearth of research that explores Iraqi refugee mothers' perceptions of their involvement with school systems. For this reason, I critically analyze the literature on parental involvement in schools among economically disadvantaged or culturally and linguistically diverse groups. In this section of the review of the literature, I briefly discuss the ways refugees are currently represented in news and media and how public opinion has impacted refugee policies in the United States. I will also provide a brief history of refugees, particularly Iraqi in the United States. I subsequently review the literature on parental involvement among diverse communities and groups, paying special attention to parental involvement in schools among refugee communities. Finally, I present the theoretical framework that influenced the present study, followed by a discussion of the association between perceptions of parental involvement in schools and social context. This will include a discussion of how socialization, roles, and the definition of a situation may influence refugee perceptions of parental involvement in schools.

Media Characterization of Refugees

The definition of a refugee clearly asserts that those seeking refugee status must be in a situation that places their lives in jeopardy. However, media outlets worldwide do not emphasize this. In fact, with the rise in number of people seeking refugee status over the course of the past fifteen years, portrayals of refugees have become increasingly negative (Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013). Refugees are depicted as a problem and often described as criminals, natural disasters, pollutants, and infections (Cisneros, 2008; Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013; Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil, & Baker, 2008; Mountz, 2010). For instance, French cartoonist and Charlie

Hebdo's acting editor Laurent "Riss" Sourisseau (Meade, 2016) went so far to portray Aylan Kurdi – a Syrian toddler who died off the coast of Turkey – as a potential sex offender.

Additionally, Esses, Medianu, and Lawson's (2013) content analysis of 102 Canadian news articles highlighted the way media transforms public uncertainty about refugees into crises and threats. Their analysis further discusses the ways in which many negative media portrayals promote the dehumanization of refugees.

Undoubtedly, the way in which refugees are portrayed in media plays a major role in public policy and discourse. For instance, over the past four decades, there has been an influx of migrants to the United States (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015), leading to an increasingly negative representation of immigrants in the American media (Mountz, 2010; Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013; Van Dijk, 2000). Currently, many Americans view immigrants – particularly those of Arab origin – as threats to national security (Leuder et al., 2008). This dynamic is believed to contribute to resentment and hostilities towards refugees, and influence public policy and legislation (Associated Press, 2016; Ramsey, 2016; Taub, 2016). For example, prior to the terrorist attack on the US in September 2001, all refugee and asylum seeker cases for the US were handled by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service. However, in November 2002, Congress enacted legislation that shifted the US Refugee Admissions Program to the Department of Homeland Security (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015). The negativity and fear of refugees has also trickled down to the states, in that, many states are now opposing the entry of refugees into their states. For example, the state of Tennessee recently proposed legislation to prohibit refugees from entering Tennessee (S.J. Res. 467, 2016). Similarly, because of the negative depictions of refugees and religion, politicians are proposing potential discriminatory policies against refugees and people of certain faiths (Diamond, 2016).

History of Refugees

Though refugees existed well before the 21st century, it was not until the early 1900s that national and international laws were created to protect refugees (Jaeger, 2001). However, long-term implementation of procedures to aid refugees did not become a concern until the end of World War II. By 1950 the United Nations General Assembly convened in Geneva to draft and sign the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and on January 1, 1951, the High Commissioner's Office for Refugees and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees was officially established in order to provide international protection to refugees. Despite the aim to provide protection, the 1951 convention contained geographical limitations relative to who could be considered a refugee. For example, the 1951 convention contained the phrase "events occurring before 1 January 1951," (UNHCR, 1967, p. 14) which was understood to mean "events occurring in Europe" (UNHCR, 1967, p. 15). Thus, extending protection primarily to European Jews, Russians, and Armenians (Jaeger, 2001; UNHCR, 1967). Consequently, the 1967 refugee protocol was added to extend protection to refugees worldwide. Those documents provided the legal framework for defining refugees, as well as information regarding mutual obligations to refugees and host countries (Jaeger, 2001; UNHCR, 1967).

Before the 1951 Convention was drafted, and before 1967 Protocol was enacted, the United States implemented its own legislation related to refugees. This followed the 1948 admission of more than 250,000 displaced Europeans (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015). The 1948 legislation preceded events of 1975 that would eventually lead to the creation of national regulations for refugee resettlement services.

With the fall of Vietnam in 1975, the United States was tasked with resettling hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees that the war displaced (Office of Refugee Resettlement,

2015). As a result, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which standardized resettlement services for all refugees admitted to the U.S. It also incorporated the definition of “refugee” used in the 1967 Protocol (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015). The Refugee Act provides the legal basis for the Office of Refugee Resettlement, and since its enactment, the U.S. has resettled more than three million refugees.

There is no quota for the number of refugees that can be admitted to the United States in any given year. However, the United States does have preference or priority categories available for refugees based on the extent to which they face risk, whether they have family in the U.S., and if they are members of a group that is considered “special interest.” As mentioned, in the fiscal year 2015, 12,608 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the United States. Because Iraqis are a numerically substantial group of resettled refugees, the following sections will focus on Arab/Iraqi culture – especially as it relates to familial structure and women’s rights and education.

Iraqi Culture

Arab culture has emerged alongside an unending series of Western interventions in the Middle East (Reynolds, 2015). Therefore, like each of the approximately 20 Arab countries that comprise the Middle East, Iraq’s culture has been shaped by its social and political history with foreign entities.¹ Therefore, it is difficult to understand the situation of the Middle East (including Iraq) without understanding the roles of these outside forces. For example, many of the political boundaries of Middle Eastern countries have their origins in negotiations made by European politicians, and much of the political history of the Middle East over the last century is linked to the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and the redrawing of the map of the Middle

¹ See Fattah (2003), Reynolds (2015), and Tripp (2007) for more information.

East by European powers. This includes the creation of Iraq from three separate Ottoman provinces (Reynolds, 2015). This has contributed to a rich cultural history for Iraq and its people. Of the approximately 37 million people in Iraq, 75 to 80 percent of Iraqis are ethnically Arab, 15 to 20 percent are Kurdish, and 5 percent are Turkoman, Assyrian, or other. Ninety-nine percent of the total population identify as Muslim, and that percentage can be broken into two primary denominations – 60 to 65 percent Shia and 32 to 37 percent Sunni (World FactBook, 2015).

Family structure. Religion influences the structure of Iraqi families (Nydell, 2012); and though it is acknowledged that individual, familial, and cultural differences are present within Iraq, it is not possible to concisely discuss the nuances of all family types. Because of this, general trends related to family function will focus on the majority population of the Iraq: Arab Muslims.

Islam emphasizes strong family values (Shoup, 2008). Accordingly, Abudabbeh (2005, p. 426) noted that “if the Qur’an is the soul of Islam, then the family can be described as the body.” Abudabbeh described the way Islam impresses upon the devout, their duties as husbands, wives, and children. For example, fathers play distinctly different roles in their children’s lives than mothers play and family structure is influenced by the everyday beliefs that men are the protectors and providers for their families. As such, they take care of their wives and children as well as their parents and sisters. Along with the roles of protectors and providers, fathers are seen as the undisputed heads of household and primary decision-makers (Shoup, 2008). Similarly, aspects of culture other than religion influence roles in the family. The conservative and patriarchal values frequently seen in Arab societies place great emphasis on men as leaders in their homes and communities (Shoup, 2008). Men are expected to have large families, which reflect their success (Nydell, 2012; Shoup, 2008). On the contrary, broad cultural norms and

religion specifically, emphasize women's roles as mothers who are emotional supporters and the primary caregivers of children (Moosa, Karabenick, & Adams, 2001; Nydell, 2012).

Parental Involvement in Diverse Contexts

Parental involvement has been defined in a variety of ways. Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) have listed the phrases "home-school partnership," "parental-participation," and "parents as partners" as types of parental involvement, and each phrase offers its own variation of behaviors that constitute parental involvement. The variety of ways in which parental involvement is conceptualized have led to misunderstandings between schools and families as related to what specific behaviors can be classified as parent involvement in children's school experiences. For instance, drawing upon the definition posed by Perez Carreon, Drake, and Barton (2005), parental involvement has been used broadly to mean any of the "practices embedded in a cultural space" (Georgis et al., 2014, p. 23). Similarly, Abdul-Adil and Farmer (2006) asserted that parental involvement is inclusive of "any parental attitudes, behaviors, styles or activities that occur within or outside the school setting to support children's academic and/or behavioral success in their currently enrolled school" (p. 2). However, Epstein (1986) also describes the more traditional model of parental involvement with schools as including the following: performing basic obligations, participating in communication with the school, assisting at the school, and assisting in learning activities at home. These categories consist of specific activities such as providing school supplies, attending parent-teacher conferences, chaperoning field trips, and reading aloud to children at home. Because parental involvement is so ambiguous, the particular characteristics that are ascribed to the concept affect how both teachers and parents view parental contributions to children's school success as well as how teachers and parents view one another (Young, Austin, & Growe, 2013).

Despite research that has demonstrated that parents with different demographic characteristics view parental involvement differently and engage in different types of parental involvement (Grolnick et al., 2009; Lee & Bowen, 2006), the gap between teachers' and families' perceptions of parental involvement widens as socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and culture are considered (Usher & Kober, 2012). This is of particular interest because families from low-SES backgrounds are disproportionately families of color (APA, 2015; Taylor & Cohn, 2012) and are less likely to hold Euro-Western beliefs (APA, 2015). Whereas, educators are predominately non-Hispanic white and middle-class (Deruy, 2015; Pyke, 2014). Differences in perceptions are evident, for example, when one considers that teachers from a middle-class background are more likely to believe that students and families from low-SES backgrounds are disinterested and uninvolved in schooling (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Furthermore, economically disadvantaged parents, especially for those whom English is a second language, are oftentimes viewed as "...empty containers, which need to be filled before they can give anything of value to the schools" (Lightfoot, 2004, p. 93).

Because of the roles different contexts of diversity play in perceptions of parental involvement, the following four sections focus on socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, culture. In the first section, I describe the parents' views of themselves and their perceived role in their child's education. I also describe parents' views of schools and the ways their views of self and school influence subsequent parental involvement. Second, I briefly discuss some of the ways families from different racial and ethnic groups experience and interact with schools. Third, I discuss two examples of the role cultural background plays in parental involvement. Finally, I focus on the intersectionality of the aforementioned contexts with special consideration given to refugee families.

Socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status (SES) is often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation. It is commonly conceptualized as the social standing/class of an individual or group, and includes aspects of privilege, power, and control. Furthermore, SES includes a measure of inequities in resource distribution (APA, 2016). Effectively, “SES is relevant to all realms of behavioral and social science, including research, practice, education, and advocacy” (APA, 2016, par. 1).

In regard to education specifically, national and international researchers have asserted that one of the highest indicators of children’s school success is parental involvement (Deslandes, 2009; Epstein & Sanders, 1998). Parental involvement contributes to children’s academic achievement and positive involvement in their school communities (Berger, 2008; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009). Children who have parents who are involved in their schools and with their teachers have more positive attitudes toward school (Epstein, 2001). They also tend to exhibit higher levels of self-regulation, better grades, higher levels of mastery of academic goals, more autonomy, and more school engagement than do children who have less involved parents (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005). Overall, the benefits of parental involvement can be seen across all grade and sociodemographic levels (Lee & Bowen, 2006). However, families from low-SES communities are less likely to have the financial resources or time availability to provide children with academic support (APA, 2016). For instance, parents from low-SES communities may be unable to afford resources to create a positive literacy environment (Orr, 2003). Similarly, Coley’s (2002) Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K) followed approximately 20,000 children in 1,000 schools and found that 36% of parents in the lowest-

income quintile read to their children on a daily basis, compared to 62% of parents from the highest-income quintile.

Despite financial and time constraints, parents from low-income backgrounds consistently report that they are concerned about their children's education and academic success is important to them (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Lawson, 2003; McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). For instance, Drummond and Stipek (2004) found that African American, Latino, and Caucasian parents from various low-income communities all rated parent involvement activities such as helping with homework and knowing what their children were learning close to the top ("definitely should") of their four-point scale. However, low-income parents' involvement is not always obvious. Several authors have attributed this not only to time constraints that limit involvement within the school, but to parents' perceptions of school environments (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Lawson, 2003; McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000; O'Connor, 2001). For example, O'Connor's (2001) interviews with poor and working-class white parents revealed that parents felt uncomfortable in the classroom setting because of their own lack of educational attainment, so they hesitated to become involved in their children's school. Furthermore, Anderson and Minke (2007) found that the parents in their research study also valued their children's academic success. However, parents reported considerably more parent involvement at home than in the school – indicating that parents are often overlooked because their involvement occurs primarily outside the school setting.

McDermott and Rothenberg (2000) interviewed six mothers. Three women were African American, two were Puerto Rican immigrants, and one was European American. All of the women were mothers of children in a school with a poverty level that ranged from 83% to 90%. These women unanimously said that they felt unwelcome and uncomfortable in their children's

school; and that they felt the teachers “spoke down” to them. Furthermore, they generally perceived schools as racist institutions. Subsequently, mothers actively avoided interactions with their children’s schools. In fact, mothers explained that they deliberately decided not to participate in school activities because they would only work with teachers who respected and valued their children. As indicated, if parents define interactions with schools as unwelcoming (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000), then parents may choose to intentionally avoid contact with the school system and limit parental involvement to forms that take place outside of the school context.

Race and ethnicity. Socioeconomic status is not easily separated from race and ethnicity. In fact, Lareau’s (2003) in-depth analysis of the lives and parenting styles of black and white families reveals that socioeconomic status is a more significant indicator of the skills children acquire than race is. This is particularly significant because families from low-socioeconomic communities are disproportionately comprised of racial and ethnic minorities (APA, 2015; Taylor & Cohn, 2012) and centers the discussion on the ways race/ethnicity affect parental involvement.

Though Lareau (2003) asserted that socioeconomic status is a more salient indicator of children’s skills, in her previous work with Horvat (Lareau & Horvat, 1999) the independent role race plays in parents’ ability to comply with educators’ requests is emphasized. The authors interviewed several groups of people – including a group of black parents born between 1941 and 1966 – and found that historical legacies and current climates of racial discrimination undermined black parents’ trust in their children’s schools. Black parents were more likely to view schools with suspicion and were critical of the risk of unfair treatment for their children. Because of the broader context of race relations, this made it more difficult for some parents to

meet teacher expectations that parents be positive and supportive. For instance, one family deemed educators' behaviors unacceptable and destructive, despite parents' concern and involvement. Similarly, in a study by Gamoran, Lopez-Turley, Turner, and Fish (2012), the authors found that Hispanic families had less access to social capital such as trust and shared expectations. Therefore, they have "less extensive parent-school networks compared to non-Hispanic Whites" (p. 97). Finally, Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy (2009) reported that parental experiences with schools were influenced by their children's racial experiences. Once sociodemographic, income, and wealth variables were controlled, black parents were marginally more likely to experience the grade retention of their children and significantly more likely to experience the expulsion or suspension of their children than white parents. Similarly, white parents were marginally more likely to experience the expulsion or suspension of their children than Hispanic parents when sociodemographic and family resource variables were controlled.

Culture. Culture also plays a role in the ways families choose to engage with schools, and its significance is only growing, because more foreign-born people live in the U.S. today than at any other time in the country's history (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). By 2060, it is projected that 20% of all Americans will be foreign born, and by 2044 more than half of all Americans will belong to a minority group (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Examples of this growth can be seen in the Arab population in the U.S. Both the Arab American Institute Foundation (2010) and the U.S. Census's report (Asi & Beaulieu, 2013) indicated that the number of people who identified as having Arabic-speaking ancestry has increased approximately 72% between 2000 and 2010, and the number of Arab households has increased by 91% since 1990. A further example of the U.S.'s growing diversity is evident in the Latino population, which constitutes the largest proportion of all immigrants and half of the overall population growth in the U.S. (Olivos

& Mendoza, 2010). Thus, exploring how culture influences parental involvement is more salient than ever.

In Moosa et al.'s (2001) study of teachers and parents, they give examples of ways culture affects the parental involvement of 39 first-generation Arab (Iraqi, Yemeni, and Lebanese) mothers. The authors determined that personal contact was a valued form of communication within Arab culture, and that mothers preferred direct interactions (e.g. face-to-face and phone calls) with teachers. Undoubtedly, that cultural communication style may help explain why 81% of the mothers attended parent-teacher conferences on a regular basis and 97% of mothers expressed their willingness to participate if requested to do so. Data from that study further indicated that mothers were more likely to find public interactions, such as workshops distressing. Therefore, mothers tended to rate their participation in such educational programs as a less important form of parental involvement.

Through interviews with recently arrived Mexican immigrant students at a U.S. high school, Andrews (2013) analyzed four cultural models of parental involvement: deference to elders, focused on behaviors, academic supervision, and nurturance and moral support. He found that parents employed these parental involvement strategies throughout their daily interactions with children in an effort to ensure academic success. Parents expected their children to show deference to teachers in their interactions with them, respect to their teachers by deferring to authority rather than through negotiations and reasoning. Parents also exercised their parental involvement by monitoring their children's behaviors and grades, and by offering physical and emotional support to their children, such as providing them with food and clothing as well as giving them advice and encouragement. Andrews (2013) reported that despite their lack of

physical presence in the school or communication with teachers, it was evident that parents were highly involved in their children's academic lives but in culturally relevant ways.

Theoretical Framework

Iraqi refugee mothers' perceptions of parental involvement within school systems can be explained by a number of theoretical perspectives. However, I have chosen to focus on one perspective for exploring perceptions of parental involvement. In the next section, I introduce symbolic interaction framework, and I expound upon its usefulness for the current study. Specifically, I focus on how I have used the concepts of socialization, role, and definition of a situation to explore Iraqi refugee mothers' perceptions of their involvement with schools.

Symbolic interaction framework emphasizes that a person's interpretation of events, questions, and circumstances depends on a variety of influences and stems primarily from the person's socialization (Mead, 1934). Socialization includes a person's language, education, family upbringing, and cultural beliefs as well as the process of learning the symbols, meanings, norms, and expectations of society (White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). Because socialization forms a person's interpretation of circumstances, subsequent behaviors within that context are intricately linked. More specifically, symbolic interaction framework asserts that humans are products of society. As such, one's perceptions of reality and behaviors are informed by a myriad cultural beliefs and values (White et al., 2015). Logically then, this leads to the assumption that to understand the meaning of an individual's behavior, it is critical to understand the context from which those behaviors originate. Therefore, symbolic interaction framework's offers a beneficial lens for viewing the perspectives of Iraqi refugee mothers' parental involvement in schools. The framework asserts that cultural values will influence the way the mothers define

parental involvement as well as how they view their roles and interactions with their children's schools.

A related concept that aids in the exploration of Iraqi refugee mothers' perceptions of parental involvement in schools is based on the idea of roles. According to White et al. (2015) a person's role is associated with the rules of behaviors that characterize a specific position, and provides guidelines for how a person within that role should act. With this in mind, symbolic interaction framework would suggest that an Iraqi refugee mothers' beliefs about herself as a woman and mother may play a role in the way she chooses to be involved in her child's education.

Finally, symbolic interaction framework's definition of the situation is beneficial to explore the concept of parental involvement. That is because the way individuals define a situation is linked directly to how s/he was socialized and the roles they enact (White et al., 2015). According to (Thomas & Thomas, 1928), both societal influences and perceptions of the self contribute to the creation of what is real and once individuals determine what is real, they will act upon it. Therefore, arguably, parental perceptions of schools and teachers and subsequent engagement will be linked to their definition of reality grounded in their socialization. For instance, Iraqi refugee mothers' understanding of school systems and personal experiences with schooling in their home country may determine the ways in which mothers choose to interact with their children's schools.

Socialization. Humans are products of the societies in which they have been socialized. Therefore, humans learn the rules that govern behaviors, and they acquire cultural attitudes and values that affect perceptions (Mead, 1934; White et al., 2015). In this sense, parents are bounded by the dynamics of the culture (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) in which

they were socialized. This, in turn, affect the ways parents are involved in their children's schooling (Georgis et al., 2014). For example, various groups of refugees originate from cultures that place high value on educators (McBrien, 2011; Tadesse, 2014). The value they place on teachers contributes to the view that it is disrespectful to make suggestions to teachers or to disagree with teachers, even if teachers' decisions are not supported. This is evident in the following case: In McBrien's (2011) interviews with Vietnamese mothers, she learned that preschool teachers placed high value on developing independence in early childhood. Teachers encouraged young children to practice dressing and feeding themselves, and they suggested that parents emphasize the same values to their young children. In contrast, Vietnamese mothers encouraged the facilitation of obedience and interdependence in children. Even when mothers disagreed with teachers, they did not engage in dialogue about the disagreement.

In their country of origin, those mothers had been socialized in several ways: First, they had learned what it meant to be a member of Vietnamese culture, which is evident in the value placed on obedience and interdependence. Second, they viewed their roles as mothers as facilitating the aforementioned values. Finally, Vietnamese mothers had been socialized to defer to those in positions of power, which, in this example, were the teachers (McBrien, 2011). Each of these elements of socialization impacted the ways the mothers interacted with their children's schools and teachers and their perceptions of their involvement in their children's schooling. This is evidenced by their unwillingness to question teachers' practices even though they directly contradicted the social aspects they valued.

Role. The roles parents enact are based on socially constructed norms that dictate appropriate behaviors for a variety of situations (White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). For example, parental perceptions of roles and responsibilities are the most important factor predicting parental

involvement (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). This is especially salient for women, whose socially constructed roles emphasize active involvement in their children's lives (Lindsey, 2015). For example, in many Arab families, mothers are viewed as constantly loving and kind, and they fill the roles of emotional supporter and primary caregiver (Moosa et al., 2001; Nydell, 2012). This role includes overseeing the education of children (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000).

The purpose of the current study is to explore Iraqi mothers' perceptions of their involvement in and experiences with their children's schools. As indicated previously, researchers such as Lawson (2003) and Grolnick et al. (2009) have examined the ways in which parent and teacher understandings of parental involvement within schools differ and others (e.g., Usher & Kober, 2012) have studied the ways in which perceptions differ as a function of varying demographics. However, there is little or no research on Iraqi refugees in the U.S. Therefore, what is known about Iraqi refugees in their host country is almost nonexistent. Furthermore, as noted earlier, because the school is one of the first interactions refugees with children have within their host country, it is important to understand Until now, much of what is known about Iraqi refugees' interactions with school personnel has been extrapolated from the general literature on immigrants. In this exploratory study, I interviewed four Iraqi refugee mothers to ascertain their perceived experiences with their children's school system. In line with the existing literature on parents' experiences based on demographic groupings, I expect that participants' experiences will follow patterns similar to those of other culturally and linguistically diverse groups. I also anticipate that mothers will discuss barriers to their involvement in school.

CHAPTER III

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The chapter begins by outlining the historical context of qualitative methodology while paying particular attention to the significance of using face-to-face, semi-structured, individual interviews when exploring the perceptions of research participants. Next, the chapter outlines specific study designs, such as research questions, sampling and recruitment, data collection methods, and data analysis.

Historical Context of Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is an ‘umbrella term’ (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2001) that describes social methodologies aimed at exploring the ways in which people understand the world around them. Broadly, qualitative research is an interpretive approach to social reality and a description of lived experiences. It consists of several different approaches, however, each approach focuses on understanding the social experiences of individuals, groups, and cultures (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). Researchers who use qualitative approaches explore behaviors, perspectives, feelings, and experiences. For example, ethnographers focus on cultures and customs, grounded theorists focus on social processes and interactions, and phenomenologists focus on the meanings of experiences (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010).

Qualitative research is more than an approach to research and data. As described by Seale (2004), qualitative methodology can also be understood as a social movement. He describes the qualitative method as “...a banner around which people in social and cultural research communities have mobilized, with a particular energy from the late 1960s onwards in Western (Anglophone) social research” (Seale, 2004, p. 100). Though qualitative methodology was prevalent before World War II, the American-led development of social survey methods

dominated methodological thinking and practice in human sciences well into the 1950s and early to mid-1960s. Because of this, the reemergence of qualitative methodologies in the late 1960s acted as a movement for the rediscovery and legitimization of approaches to human inquiry (Seale, 2004).

Interviews. One such method of qualitative research is interviewing. Because interviewing has a rich history of forms and uses (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Platt, 2002), it is one of the most common and powerful ways used to understand other human beings (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Interviewing frequently takes the form of individual, face-to-face verbal interchange, but can also be conducted in a group setting, mailed or self-administered as a questionnaire, or conducted as a telephone survey (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Platt, 2002). Furthermore, interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. They may take place once or multiple times, and can span any length of time. Because of this, interviews provide researchers with the flexibility to choose the exact method for which their study is well-suited (Fontana & Frey, 1994). For instance, the current study utilized a face-to-face, semi-structured, individual interview method.

I have chosen this method of data collection for three significant reasons. First, it is a commonly held belief that communication is a combination of verbal and nonverbal cues (Yaffe, 2011), and face-to-face interviews allow the researcher to take advantage of social cues such as body language and voice intonation (Opdenakker, 2006). Furthermore, nonverbal cues are especially significant in regard to inconsistent or contradictory communication (Mehrabian, 1971), which is likely to arise because of the communication style of the research participants. For example, Arab culture emphasizes indirect responses and the use of bodily gestures (Nydell, 2012) – making social cues such as body language a common and significant part of

communication. Because of this, I determined that the benefits of face-to-face interviews outweighs the possible concern of interviewer influence.

Second, I have chosen to use semi-structured interviews because of the time commitment involved. Research participants are the primary caregivers of children, and because they are frequently the adults responsible for care of the home and food preparation, interviews cannot extend for lengthy amounts of time. They must be focused enough to allow the participants to be interviewed without compromising the time they otherwise dedicate to the care of their households. Furthermore, unlike close-ended questions, semi-structured questions allow participants to answer questions with very few boundaries. Participants are still able to comment, explain, and share their experiences and attitudes toward their experiences with school systems.

Finally, I chose to interview mothers individually as opposed to in a group setting because of sensitive and private aspects of schooling and the cultural norms of Arab culture. Cultural norms of Arab society emphasize shame and honor (Nydell, 2012), and interview questions have the potential to be viewed as private and sensitive in nature, because they require mothers to disclose personal experiences with schools. Therefore, the extent to which research participants' reflections are negative or positive could affect their shame or honor if exposed in a group setting.

Participants. I interviewed four Iraqi refugee women over the course of one week. See Figure 1 for a brief overview of information related to participants. Each woman was interviewed once, and the interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. The women ranged in age from 33-46 and women identified themselves as married. Each woman had at least two children – with the highest number of children being five. All of the women identified themselves as the primary caregiver of their children, and three of the women listed their

husbands (the children’s fathers) as playing a significant role in the care of their children. Three of the women had at least one child in high school, none of the women had children in middle school, and three of the women had at least one child in elementary school. The women interviewed have lived in the United States for at least four years.

Each woman identified herself as an Iraqi refugee. Each woman also identified herself as White/Caucasian, and three women identified themselves as Muslim. Three of the women are currently employed and receive governmental benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, Section 8 housing benefits, and Women Infants and Children food nutrition benefits. The only woman who is not employed is attending cosmetology classes full-time. The other three women are taking English classes, but have not yet acquired their high school equivalency/general education development (GED). Three of the women attained at least a bachelor’s degree in their home country and were employed in professional level careers in their home countries.

NAME	AGE	NUMBER OF CHILDREN	AGES OF CHILDREN (years)	YEARS IN THE U.S.	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Khadija	43	5	21, 19, 16, 10, 4	5	Full-time	Though Khadija received less formal education than all the other women in this study, prior to immigrating to the U.S. she worked in a well-paying, highly respected position as a seamstress and hair/make-up artist. At the time of her interview, she was working in food services at a local university.
Hanna	46	3	19, 17, 15	4	Unemployed	Prior to immigrating to the U.S., Hanna worked in tourism management. She also had higher education degrees in tourism and second field*. At the time of her interview, she was attending cosmetology classes full-time; and she is scheduled to graduate in November 2016. *unknown to researcher
Ilham	33	2	9, 2	5	Part-time	Ilham received a bachelor’s degree and worked in education before immigrating to the U.S. Currently, she works part-time as an artisan through a local non-profit organization.
Amira	43	3	14, 9, 0	5	Full-time	Amira received a bachelor’s degree in business administration from a well-known university in Iraq; and she worked as a teacher before immigrating to the U.S. She currently works full-time in food services at a local public school. She also works occasionally as a translator for a non-profit organization.

Figure 1: Overview of Participant Information

The organization displayed research recruitment brochures at their office. Each brochure included information related to the date, time, and location of an informational meeting. Second, the organization provided the researcher (me) with a private space to hold an informational meeting with prospective participants. At the informational meeting, I informed participants of the nature and purpose of the research project. This included an explanation of how information would be gathered and the time commitment for participants. I informed them that they would be interviewed in a private, one-on-one basis, and that each interview would last approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. Each participant was also informed that the interview session would begin with a brief demographic survey.

Data Collection. Prior to data collection, I obtained research approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Afterward, data were collected over the course of four individual face-to-face interviews. Each interview was audio recorded. The researcher took field notes both during and immediately after each session. Field notes consisted of body language, seating arrangement, settings, personal perceptions, unusual circumstances, and any other notable incidents. Prior to the oral interview, participants each completed a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix).

Research questions. Individual interviews focused on mothers' experiences with their children's schools. During the interviews, participants were asked to respond to main, open-ended questions. Based on information gained from several research studies, I first developed a comprehensive list of questions related to schools, parenting, and child well-being. I presented this list to a qualitative researcher on my thesis committee, and she aided me in narrowing the list to include questions that focused more specifically on gauging parental perceptions. The following are the questions participants were asked during their interviews:

1. What does parental involvement in schools mean to you?
2. What is a parent's role/what is a parent's job?
3. Tell me about a time that you did something for your child so that s/he would do well at school or be ready for school.
4. Tell me about a time you felt like you were helping the school.
5. Describe a time you visited your child's school.
6. Describe a time you communicated with someone (teacher, principal, counselor, etc.) from your child's school.
7. Tell me about your child's school in the U.S.
8. What's the same about schools in America and schools in Iraq?
9. What's different about schools in America and schools in Iraq?
10. What's the most important thing about school?
11. If anything, what would you change about schools?
12. What do you think a teacher's job is?
13. Tell me about your child's current teacher. Or tell me about one of your child (ren)'s American teachers that you remember well.

As mothers responded to the main, open ended questions, they were asked to elaborate. For example, a follow-up question to "What does parental involvement mean to you?" included a question such as the following: "What does an involved parent do?" and remaining questions were based on the participants' responses with a focus on their perceptions of interactions with school personnel. For example, "How would you describe your relationship with your child's school?"

Data analysis. I transcribed each participant's audio recorded interview prior to analysis. All identifying information contained in the transcripts and field notes was replaced with pseudonyms. Any other personal information that could potentially identify the participant was purged from the data. Next, all audio files, transcripts, demographic data, and field notes were uploaded to QSR NVivo 11, which is a software designed to organize and retrieve large quantities of data. Once all data was uploaded and organized, analysis adhered to the following sequence: In the first step of analysis, I reviewed the transcripts and field notes to become more familiar with the participants' narratives. Second, I read through the transcripts to develop tentative clusters of meaning. Third, I read through the transcripts line by line and began open coding to identify themes and concepts. Fourth, I grouped themes and concepts into key categories. Finally, I analyzed key categories for trends, with the goal of maintaining a clear framework that accurately explored participants' perceptions of their parental involvement with schools.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

I have selected key portions of the data that reflect recurrent themes of the interviews with mothers about their perceptions of parental involvement and experiences with their children's school personnel. These statements have been analyzed through a process of open coding. In general, open coding is the first step in many forms of qualitative data analysis. It includes labeling concepts and defining and developing categories based on their properties. It is oftentimes non-linear, because as more data is collected, new themes may arise that require the researcher to review and analyze old data again. It requires the researcher to break down data and examine it for relationships, similarities, and differences. New concepts are labeled and once all the data is labeled, significant parts are grouped together into categories (Khandkar, 2009). Open coding was used to provide a basis for discussion of various ideas of parental involvement in schools. Furthermore, it was used in order to build a framework for potential future interviews with refugee mothers about their involvement in and perceptions of school systems.

Perceptions of Parental Involvement in Schools

The primary research question was, "What does parental involvement in schools mean to you?" and follow-up questions asked mothers about their specific experiences with their children's schools. For example, participants were asked to describe a time they visited their child's school, tell me about their child's school in the U.S., tell me about their child's teacher in the U.S., and tell me what they would change about schools.

In responding to the question, "What does parental involvement in schools mean to you?" Two themes emerged: (1) traditional understanding of parental involvement in schools and (2) involvement beyond the physical school space. The first theme highlights research participants'

perceptions of parental involvement from a traditional perspective. However, the second theme emphasizes participants' perceptions of parental involvement outside of the physical educational space and interactions.

Traditional understanding of parental involvement in schools. In regard to the first theme, traditional styles of parental involvement in schools typically focus on needs or requests coming from the school through such channels as emails, written notices, and face-to-face interactions. They include parent-teacher conferences and volunteer activities (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Two interview participants described their perceptions of parental involvement with these types of activities in mind. For instance, Amira perceived parental involvement as keeping track of her children's progress in school and helping her children stay involved in school as well. She described an example of parental involvement below:

For example, if they have a conference, I have to prepare for that. Me or their father. One of us – which one has time. Then we will discuss it at home later, so we know everything going around them. The teacher will tell us about how they are doing in school. If they need improvement in some area, we will work on it together.

Similarly, Ilham described her perceptions of parental involvement as responses to the requests of schools. However, she focused more on the perception of parental involvement as being physically present in schools for activities such as volunteering and parent-teacher conferences:

Like if you – in kindergarten and first grade sometimes they have you volunteer. You go just like a volunteer and help with school

with some things, and the library sometimes. You just put the books where they go. So these things, but I don't think in the class. Actually you get in the class and see how they – I mean, you sit with them in the hallway. So these things they do I think. I never done that before.

Involvement beyond the physical school space. The other two participants described parental involvement not so much in terms of their physical actions to aid the school or communicate with teachers but instead as actions extending beyond the borders of the school to include activities beyond academics that will help their children become well-rounded individuals and successful citizens. This includes offering their children advice to help them navigate and fit into the new culture. For example, when I asked Hanna what parental involvement in schools meant to her, she responded, “I’m trying to be the best to direct my children to work hard, and take the best grades in their schools.” And when I asked her to describe what she does in order to direct her children, she said she encourages her children to,

Take advice how to make relationship – good relationship between them and their friends and their teachers. Like this...and always discuss if there is some problem between my child and their friend. You know, it's different. You know, we are new here and there is different culture. Sometimes there is a problem between my children and their friend; and we discuss everything – every problem if there is a problem

She said she also encourages her children “to be polite, to respect their teachers, and their friends. Good relationship.” Similarly, Khadijah’s perception of parental involvement in school

revolved around supporting her children by working to prevent problem behaviors and protecting them from unforeseen negative circumstances, and alleviating distress that her children might encounter in the new culture. Khadijah noted that

[Parents] should know their children, like, doing good and nothing bother them in the school too. Because sometimes school is a good place. Sometimes it's a bad place. Like, you have too much children from different culture, and you don't know what your children see in school, like what kind of people; and you should [make] sure everything is okay with your children.

When I asked her how she makes sure everything is okay with her children, she said, "Like, with the child, like, you speak with your child. Ask him and give him advice about what you think is good or bad." For Amira, this also included support through listening and advice-giving:

A parent's role is to direct their kids in the right direction, but also pay attention to their, to the kids requests and their needs, and to listen to them. This is the most important thing, I think. So through that we can, I can get feedback from them and if they need something we work on it with their father. If they have trouble or anything else, we can solve it together.

And for Ilham it included teaching her children about "the good things," which included cultural heritage as well as moral development:

Teaching the good things to the children, and I think for me the culture. Like my – he lives here. They live here. They know what

is here, what is the culture. They know everything, because they are growing up here, but they don't know anything about my culture, so I teach them maybe about our culture and language. I like that. Arabic language, and religion they should know too...And of course teach them to be, like, respectful, honest, and responsible obviously.

Experiences with Schools

Once research participants explained their perceptions of parental involvement in schools, I asked them questions about their experiences with their children's schools. Participants spoke about both their positive and their negative experiences with the school system. However, most experiences were a mixture of positive and negative aspects. For example, Amira described her experience with her daughter's school in the beginning as being stressful, primarily because of her daughter's difficulty understanding the language.

In the beginning – about five years ago – when we came to the United States, English language was a little bit barrier. It was challenging for them, especially for [daughter], because she was older than [son]. So when she was going to the class, she had difficult time with the understanding the teacher and she was sad for a while. When I was going to school to return her to me, she was sometimes really, really sad. One day she told me, “Mom, I want to go back to [home country], because I was – I used to be a top student. I'm here in class. I don't know what is going on. What's the teacher saying? What's the students saying? It's hard,”

but I told her, “I promise you, it is just time. After a while, you learn the language. Kids learn so fast. You will learn, and you will be top student again. Just wait. You will see. I promise you.” And that was correct.

Amira went on to express the joy of seeing the hope she had for her daughter materialize and the eventual positive experience that made the whole family happy:

After six or seven months, she start happy with her school. Everything change. Her behavior changed. The smiles come back to her face again, and she was happy again. I was happy. All the family became happy! So now she’s a top student again. So that was the something important to talk about it. And yeah. But now they are adapted well to the school here, and they like it so much. Both of them, they are happy in the USA school. Yeah, the system, the teachers. They [children] are happy again.’

Similarly, Hanna commented on how her experiences with her children’s schools are both positive and negative. First, she explained that she’d had positive experiences with her children’s school and that people were nice and helpful:

It’s good. Yeah, it’s perfect school. I like my children’s school, because they are always helpful. They are always friendly. Yeah, because my...when my husband went to the school, always tell me that all teachers are friendly and helpful. You know, it’s a different language, but they are helpful.

But in a follow-up question, I asked her what she would do to change schools, she revealed that some of her experiences with her children's school were not positive, because of the discrimination her children experienced. These negative experiences appear more to emanate from the children's peers rather than from interactions with teachers:

Everything is okay. Nothing change. Just uh...it's okay to say anything? I heard from my son that some of their friends, they always say, "We don't like Arabic people," or – I hate this. You know, I hate racists. Just this one...You know, it's not good for their opinions and their thoughts. You understand me? To talk with children and put some rules for – I know there is a rule here in America. You can't say anything about religion. You can't say anything about political. I know, but they broke the – they [students] always broke the rules. Yeah, and they are most of them they are talking about religion and political like this...But you know it's not good for [points to her head] to hear all the – It's not good for their development to hear all of the bad things other people are saying.

Khadijah's stories about her children's teachers also exemplify how dynamic the research participants' experiences were. For example, Khadijah begins her discussion of her children's schools very positively, "All the time I tell my children they are lucky to be to study here in United States, because they have a very good system and school and very good teacher." She even describes the positive experiences she had with two of her children's teachers:

I think (middle son) he was have a teacher in the ESL class. He was very, very good teacher. He's very – he make (middle son) like school, and that's like something very good. And he have another teacher. He was have problem with English and I wasn't have a car, and she was pick him after school to home after he finish his work. I can't forget something like this, because they are like so helpful, so nice.

She also described how her experiences with her youngest daughter's teacher were positive, because once Khadijah's daughter transferred schools, her teacher visited the new school in order to make sure Khadijah's daughter was doing well, "Yeah, and I think [daughter] teacher she was coming [to visit] her for another school to ask how she doing, and what she was doing before, because [daughter] wasn't speak English, and yeah."

However, once she's finished describing the positive experiences she had with her younger children's teachers, she asked, "Do you want me to tell you about the bad one now?" And she gave a detailed account of a negative experience she had with her oldest son's high school teacher. Her experience appears to have changed as a function of her children's age. In the following excerpt from her interview, Khadijah describes the discriminatory profiling that happened to her son when he was in high school. As Khadijah describes it, her son's teacher told another person that she believed Khadijah's son would kill someone and end up in jail. When confronted by Khadijah and her interpreter, the teacher denied that she said this. However, police officers later confirmed that the teacher did, in fact, make comments about Khadijah's son killing someone and going to jail.

And some teacher was very bad. Like, like [son's] teacher. Some ask [her] about him; and [she] say, "I think this guy will be kill someone and go to the jail." This is the bad teacher. I told about her...That's very wrong; and when we speak with her, there's some people coming with me and they told her about what she say, and she said, "I didn't say that." And she really say that for him! The police ask her and she told them, and they told us. It was very bad. Like, she try to – to push him to the jail or something. Yeah.

Similarly, Amira referred to the possible connection between age of children and school experience:

I think especially for all ages, just especially high school I wish is there be more communication between the teacher and students. It's good for now. I'm satisfied with it, but I wish if the condition be more than that. Yeah, especially with teenager age. They need more teachers to listen to them and talk with them, and help them with what's they are struggle and what's they need help with, so if they focus more on the communication this will help a lot...Yeah. Yeah, so this help them a lot. They feel, they will feel like the school is not something they have to go. They will feel comfortable when they go to school if there is a good communication between the school, between the staff, teachers, and the students. Make the environment more open and more comfortable for the students. That's will help a lot.

Overall, the two themes described above demonstrate the dynamic perceptions and experiences that Iraqi refugee mothers have had with the local school system. While two mothers perceive parental involvement to fit the mold of the traditional U. S. models, such as attending parent-teacher conferences and volunteering to benefit the school, the others perceive parental involvement to involve parental behaviors that extend beyond the school environment but still play a major supportive role in their children's academic success. Interestingly, the mothers who initially perceived parental involvement as encompassing activities such as listening to children and providing them with advice are also the mothers with high school aged children who discussed negative experiences relative to discrimination and teacher's negative biases towards children. This will be discussed further in the discussion section below.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine Iraqi refugee mothers' perceptions of their involvement in and experiences with their children's schools. I anticipated that interviews would focus on mothers' perceptions of how they are involved in their children's academic lives. Furthermore, I expected that mothers' experiences would follow similar patterns to those of other culturally and linguistically diverse groups reported in the literature. For instance, much of the literature discusses how parental involvement in schools among diverse populations differs from traditional models of parental involvement (Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015). However, mothers' in the current study appeared to have an understanding of and familiarity with what the U.S. school systems expect from them. For instance, Ilham and Amira both gave examples of how they make a concerted effort to attend parent-teacher conferences and participate in school initiated volunteer activities – both of which are examples of traditional models of parental involvement in schools (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

Second, as mothers explained their perceptions of involvement in and experiences with schools, I anticipated that they would discuss barriers to their involvement in schools. Though each mother did mention barriers due to cultural differences, such as language, the majority of mothers focused more on their perceptions of parental involvement as what they did to support their children outside of the school environment. For example, they discussed their perceptions of how parent-child relationships play a significant role in children's academic success and overall well-being. These findings parallel findings in Lawson's (2003) study of perceptions of parental involvement among urban low-income parents. Much like his findings, when mothers in the current study were asked explicitly, "What does parental involvement mean to you?" they

described parental involvement as including attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, and generally responding to teacher requests. However, as the interviews progressed, participants discussed the behaviors in which they actually engage, and it became apparent that parental involvement for them encompasses much more than surface behaviors. It includes deeper and broader connections of support and involvement in their children's growth and development. Among Lawson's (2003) sample, parental involvement was viewed as moving beyond the needs of the school and teachers, in that parental involvement included general ways of living that facilitate the overall well-being of children, such as providing them with safety and basic needs in their homes. This is similar to what mothers in the current study described.

Similar to Lawson's (2003) study, Hanna and Khadijah, in the current sample, readily explained that their perceptions of parental involvement included family support and advice-giving. Additionally, though Amira and Ilham said that they perceived parental involvement in a traditional sense, they each described their actual behaviors, which include providing their children with support outside of the school setting.

Implications for Practice

It is worthy of note that mothers who described their perceptions of parental involvement as giving their children advice for navigating the school system are also the mothers with high school aged children. Therefore, this may imply that understanding Iraqi refugee mothers' perceptions and experiences is especially beneficial for teachers of older children. Furthermore, these mothers are also the ones who related more negative school experiences: Hanna's worry about the racism her children face at school and Khadijah's worry about the discriminatory profiling her son received. Similarly, though Amira did not mention any direct negative experiences her daughter is facing currently, it appears that her daughter – a first year high

school student – may be experiencing new relational challenges that are unique to the older age group of Iraqi refugee children, because Amira discussed what she wished was different about schools. On the other hand, gender may play a role in how children relate and interact with each other. Also, research has shown that teachers have different expectations of children as a function of their gender and interact with them accordingly (Koepke & Harkins, 2008).

Despite the small sample size, school systems can use this data to inform their practices with Iraqi refugee families with children in their school system. Based on mothers' perceptions, it is suggested that administrators and educators be sensitive to the specific relational needs² of refugee communities (Rah, Choi, Nguyen, 2009). This can be accomplished by making a concerted effort to learn more about the children and families that a school is serving and the stress refugee children and families are encountering in the host culture. As Amira suggested, administrators and educators can start by showing interest in refugee children's their lives inside and outside of the school setting.

Furthermore, this study suggests the need for administrators and educators to seek to build relationships with refugee families by acknowledging and respecting the value of both traditional and non-traditional forms of parental involvement. According to Tarasawa and Waggoner (2015), current models of family engagement should be modified to promote educational involvement among marginalized populations. Those authors underscore the benefits of combining traditional and non-traditional models of parental involvement. For example, instead of the unidirectional emphasis of traditional models of involvement – attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in the school, etc. – non-traditional models of parental

² Relational needs refer specifically to communication between school personnel and refugee children and their families.

involvement such as instilling cultural values, talking with children, and sending children to school clean and rested (Arias, Morillo-Campbell, 2008) should be considered as key ingredients to children's academic success and well-being. As Tarasawa and Waggoner (2015) noted, it is prudent for administrators and educators to recognize the value of supporting models of parental involvement that are not school-centered or teacher-focused.

Similarly, it is suggested that schools assess their own practices for involving families. As research and practice shift to evaluate schools' obligations in the family-school relationship, it is important for school personnel to be aware of their efforts to welcome families into schools. Instead of focusing on the ways families are or are not involved with schools, schools should focus on what they are doing to promote families' involvement in schools (Amatea, 2013). For example, many teachers cite lack of communication (Amatea, 2013) as one of the biggest hurdles to working with families. However, it may be beneficial to educators if, instead, they question why families are exhibiting specific communication patterns – language barriers, time constraints due to jobs, unwelcoming school environment, etc.

Implications for Future Research

As noted, the current research study serves a number of useful purposes, however, several limitations of the study are evident. Hence, the following suggestions are indicated for improving future studies. Limitations are also discussed.

Communication. First, including more questions that clearly ask mothers to describe their perceptions of parental involvement in schools may be beneficial. For example, instead of only asking mothers general questions like, “What does parental involvement mean to you?” asking them more direct follow-up questions like, “What can mothers do to be involved in their children's education?” and “What do you do to be involved in your child's education?” may

elicit more detailed and clearer information about what it means to contribute positively to their children's lives. Also, replacing the word *school* with *education* in questions may elicit more responses, because it is less restrictive.

Second, spending more time with each question and asking more follow-up questions to guide researcher understanding may have been beneficial. For example, during interviews, the participants were asked predetermined questions; and once I determined that their answer was complete – through a prolonged pause in conversation – I asked them either to explain their answer or I asked them the next question. However, I may have yielded more detailed answers if I had not asked the next question, but rather restated the initial question in a different way, or asked more questions related to the initial question. For example, “Tell me about your child's school in the U.S.” could have easily be elaborated on by asking mothers to describe positive and negative aspects of the school, or to describe something interesting they noticed about the school, or to describe how they felt when they entered their child's school, or what they thought of the way their child's school was organized/decorated.

Third, employing an interpreter may have produced richer, more in-depth information related to the initial research question. Though the women interviewed are proficient in English, and did not appear to have difficulty understanding the questions I asked, they mentioned feeling uncomfortable communicating in English with school personnel. Therefore, it is possible that the same level of discomfort may have been present during interviews. Employing an interpreter may have alleviated discomfort that may have been present by providing participants with a sense of confidence in their abilities to answer questions. Furthermore, they may have felt more comfortable providing exhaustive accounts of their experiences with schools if they had the opportunity to do so in their first language.

Cultural differences. Another limitation to the study relates to cultural differences. As a native-born, U.S. citizen of a differing socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic group, and educational level than research participants, my preconceived ideas about parental involvement limited what I anticipated to find when asking the women to discuss their own perceptions of parental involvement in and experiences with schools. For example, I expected the mothers in this study to discuss the way they met the basic needs of their children, and how meeting those needs contributed to their children's academic success. However, the questions I asked produced discussions about the importance of meeting the social and emotional needs of children. There was very limited discussion about providing children with such things as food, clothing and shelter. Instead, mothers talked about how their relationships with children are critical to success in school and life. This may be due in part to the collectivistic ideals of Iraqi society (Nydell, 2012).

Furthermore, because of the cultural differences between Iraqi and United States' culture, future studies may wish to focus more explicitly on the meaning of parental involvement in Iraq before exploring participants' parental involvement in U.S. schools. This may include exploring participants' experiences with schools in their country of origin. Such information might have provided more background information relative to women's current perceptions of parental involvement.

Limitations

There were several limitations related to sampling, recruitment, and study design. First, the small sample size presents generalization difficulties. For example, the generalizability of this study is limited because the responses of the four research participants cannot be effectively applied to an entire group of people. Second, all the women recruited are located within the same

school district. Recruiting participants from diverse districts might have provided a more varied information of experiences. Perhaps, different school systems have different implicit and explicit rules regarding family-school processes and interactions.

Finally, two main criticisms of face-to-face, semi-structured, individual interviews are its lack of flexibility in questioning that leads to flaws in data collection, and its excessive influence on research participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In regard to lack of flexibility, the current study may have benefited from a phenomenological approach that progressed gradually in reference to participants' answers to preceding questions instead of requiring participants to answer predetermined questions. Furthermore, excessive influence on research participants is always a consideration when working with human subjects. In this particular study, I knew the participants personally, which may have exacerbated my influence on their responses to interview questions.

Trustworthiness. In addition to the limitations mentioned above, the issue of trustworthiness is noteworthy. For the purposes of the current research, participants were not given the opportunity to read the entire document. This was done in order to ensure ethical guidelines and the right to anonymity were maintained. Because the sample included only four participants from the same community, it is highly likely that the participants would be able to identify one another based on demographic information and data included in the research study. However, in a study including a larger research sample, it is suggested that participants be given the opportunity to read their own interviews as well as the entire research document. This would provide a means for testing the trustworthiness and validity of the research.

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APPENDIX

Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions: Please provide a response for each of the following questions.

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your marital status?
 - ___ Single
 - ___ Married
 - ___ Separated
 - ___ Divorced
 - ___ Widowed
3. With which racial or ethnic group do you most identify? If other, please specify.
 - ___ American Indian/ Native American
 - ___ Asian
 - ___ Black/African American
 - ___ Hispanic/Latino
 - ___ White/Caucasian
 - ___ Pacific Islander
 - ___ Other: _____
4. What is your religion? _____
5. What is the highest level of education you have completed in the **United States**?
 - ___ Elementary school only
 - ___ Some high school, but did not finish
 - ___ Completed high school or GED
 - ___ Some college, but did not finish

- ___ Trade or technical/vocational school
- ___ Two-year college degree/ A.A. / A.S.
- ___ Four-year college/ B.A. / B.S.
- ___ Some graduate work, but did not finish
- ___ Completed Masters or professional degree
- ___ Advanced graduate work or Ph.D.

6. How long have you lived in the United States? _____

7. Are you currently employed? _____

8. What is your current employment? _____

9. Do you currently receive any governmental benefits (SNAP, WIC, Section 8 housing, etc. free/reduced lunch?)

- ___ Yes
- ___ No

10. How many children do you have? _____

11. How old are your children? _____

12. What are the genders of your children?

13. Who is the primary caregiver for your children? _____

14. List all others who play a significant role in the care of your children:

15. Do you have at least one child in elementary, middle, or high school right now?

16. What is the highest level of education you completed in Iraq?

- ___ **Elementary school only**
- ___ **Some high school, but did not finish**
- ___ **Completed high school or GED**
- ___ **Some college, but did not finish**
- ___ **Trade or technical/vocational school**
- ___ **Two-year college degree/ A.A. / A.S.**
- ___ **Four-year college/ B.A. / B.S.**
- ___ **Some graduate work, but did not finish**
- ___ **Completed Masters or professional degree**
- ___ **Advanced graduate work or Ph.D.**

17. Were you employed in Iraq? _____

18. What was your employment in Iraq? _____

19. Did you receive any governmental benefits similar to SNAP, WIC, Section 8 housing, etc. when you lived in Iraq?

- ___ **Yes**
- ___ **No**

VITA

Bethany Parker completed her Bachelors of Science degree in 2014 from the Family and Consumer Sciences Department at Carson-Newman University. Her area of study was Child and Family Studies with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education. She is currently pursuing her Masters of Science degree in Child and Family Studies. Her research interests include the ways communities and governmental systems interact with marginalized and/or diverse groups of people; and, in turn, how marginalized and/or diverse populations interact with communities and governmental systems. Additionally, she is interested in how data pertaining to interactions between the two can be used to inform best practices and family well-being.

Bethany currently works at the University of Tennessee's Early Learning Center for Research and Practice.