

How Moroccan mothers and fathers view child development and their role in their children's education

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Despite the documented importance of parental engagement in early learning, little is known about how parents in the Middle East and North Africa understand child development. To inform the literature, a small-scale study involving four focus groups was conducted with parents of children aged six years and under living in Casablanca. The purpose of this study was to explore parents' understanding of and support for their children's early development. Results reveal that parents see a vital role for themselves in their children's upbringing as supporters and nurturers, but little role as teachers. Across different education and income levels, parents in this small-scale qualitative study believe that children's experiences in their first years of life do not affect their longer-term intellectual development or school success and see little value in early intellectual stimulation or formal preschool education. Our results suggest that parents need to understand their role as their child's first educators. Also, it is essential that parents are taught *how* to promote their children's early cognitive development without undermining their nurturing roles.

Keywords: Middle East parents; parenting roles; early development; early education; gender differences

Introduction

Parents play a critical role in shaping their children's development. They teach both cognitive and non-cognitive skills including perseverance, self-control and self-esteem, skills that may affect school success and adult achievement (Heckman 2011; Peterson and Seligman 2004; Duckworth and Quinn 2009). Research on brain development identifies the earliest years of a child's life as a critical period for developing the foundation for later learning (Fox, Levitt, and Nelson III 2010). Similarly, international research (e.g., Melhuish 2010; Sylva et al. 2010) indicates that the early years is a period of substantial cognitive and non-cognitive growth. Consequently, Lamb and Lewis (2011), amongst others, point to the central role of parents in supporting and shaping children's early development. Parents' knowledge of their role in shaping early development can affect their motivation to engage with their young child and their expectations for their child's development (for a review of international parenting practices see Rubin and Chung 2013). Such knowledge can also affect parents' interactions with their children (Bugental and Johnston 2000) and their children's behaviours.

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In many cultures, infancy is considered a passive period in which little learning occurs; consequently, parenting roles are limited to feeding and bathing (Rubin and Chung 2013; Bornstein and Cote 2004). For example, in a random sample of Turkish mothers of children aged 36 months or younger, 68% of the sample did not know that brain development begins in the early months of life (Ertem et al. 2007). Similar evidence was noted in a survey of adults in the USA which found significant knowledge gaps in adults' understanding of the appropriate expectations to hold for children of differing ages (DYG 2000).

As previously reported, childcare in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region is considered a private matter with limited parental and community investment in children's intellectual development (Zellman et al. 2009; Zellman, Martini, and Perlman 2011). Parents and educators believe that teachers and school principals are education experts with the role of the parents limited to sending their children to school, well-fed and with completed homework (Zellman et al. 2009). This approach places responsibility for learning with the schools and leaves many young children without the stimulation necessary to develop their social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills until they start school at the age of six. Given education in the region is formal and structured; it may limit the development of early problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

There is, however, a dearth of literature available that addresses parents' understanding of child development or early education in the MENA region (cf. Gregg 2005). Yet, understanding parent views about early development and education is especially critical in countries like Morocco that lag behind other countries with similar levels of economic development in school performance (e.g., literacy rates; World Bank, 2013; Penn 2002). In recognition of the different societal roles occupied by men and women in Morocco (Pels 2000), the authors believe it is important to examine potential differences in parenting views and parenting patterns of fathers and mothers. This paper describes findings from a small-scale qualitative study undertaken to learn more about how Moroccan parents think about these issues. Specifically, we addressed four questions:

- (1) What do parents view as their primary child-rearing obligations and challenges?
- (2) How do mothers and fathers of young children view their role?
- (3) How accurate is parents' knowledge about child development?
- (4) What role do parents see for themselves in preparing their children for school and in their children's school success?

Methods

To answer these questions, we conducted four focus groups with parents of children from birth to six years of age in Casablanca, Morocco in July 2012. The focus group topics were drawn from the literature on the role of parents in early development (Duckworth and Quinn 2009).

Focus group topics

Each focus group explored the topics included in the study's research questions: (1) perceived child-rearing obligations and challenges; (2) parenting role and how it is shared with their children's other parent; (3) knowledge of child development; and (4) contributions to their children's education.

Choice of Morocco and Casablanca

With limited funds, this preliminary study focused on one city in a single country. Casablanca is a large, diverse city that includes many recent rural immigrants. We chose Morocco because it is similar to other countries in the MENA region in terms of education outcomes, youth unemployment rates and the quality of the public education system (World Bank 2012, 2013; Tessler 2000). Although we attempted to capture this diversity in our groups, the parents who participated cannot be considered to be representative of the general Moroccan or MENA population. Nevertheless, findings from these focus groups provide an important starting point in understanding parental views in the region.

Parent recruitment procedures

To find a diverse group of parents with at least one child from birth to six years of age, we combined convenience and purposive recruitment techniques. Our data collectors recruited participants through word of mouth and used their 'database' of individuals who had participated in previous focus groups to acquire names of parents who might participate. Prospective participants were asked a series of questions that enabled our data collectors to classify them by socioeconomic status (SES), as we wanted focus groups that were homogeneous on this dimension. These questions included profession, level of education, housing type and other indicators. Prospective participants were not told anything about the topic to be discussed to ensure that the groups included parents who varied in their level of interest in parenting topics. Each focus group included eight parents of the same gender and SES level (high and lower). Parents were offered a voucher worth approximately \$25 for their participation in the 1.5-hour group discussion.

A total of 32 parents (16 fathers and 16 mothers; age range: 25–45) participated in the focus groups. Of the 16 mothers who participated, 5 were working. This number is well above the rate of maternal employment recently reported for Morocco. Four of the five were in the upper-income bracket. This finding is consistent with data that find that better-educated women are more likely to work (IEFS/IWPR 2010).

Conduct of focus groups

A female fluent in Arabic and French with substantial experience in running focus groups led each session. The ethical rigour of the study was assured by employing an ethical protocol which was approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee at the first author's institution. The choice of language (Arabic/French) was left to the focus group members; the high SES groups chose to speak French, while the lower SES groups selected Arabic.

The focus group facilitator drew from a set of 27 questions. Each group began with questions about children's ages and genders. Questions then explored how parents perceive their role and responsibilities as parents, including how they learned to be a parent, what they believe they need to teach their children and how they teach them. Another set of questions asked about the role of their spouse and other family members in their young child's development. A fourth set of questions asked parents to discuss their views about child development, including how important the first year of life is for later development and learning. A final set of questions asked parents about schooling and their role in their children's education.

Parents were informed that their group would be observed and videotaped but that anonymity would be protected; group members were asked not to discuss group content with others outside the group. Those with older children (half of each group) were encouraged to contrast their treatment of older and younger children as they answered questions.

Analysis of focus group information

All focus groups were transcribed and translated into English. The three project researchers independently reviewed each transcript, looking for general themes. The researchers then met several times to discuss the emergent themes and how to represent them in code. Major codes included salience of parenting, influences on parenting, important ideas and values to convey, spousal differences, influence of other family members, disciplinary approaches, self-assessment as a parent, importance of the first year of life on later development and parents' views of their role in their children's education. Within each of these codes, subcodes were developed. The data were then coded by the first author and reviewed and validated by the other two authors. Coded data enabled us to identify themes that were common across all parents and those that were specific to defined groups of parents, e.g., mothers or higher SES parents (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2012).

Findings

In the following sections, we present findings grouped under the four topics listed earlier. Irrespective of gender or SES, it is notable that parents held many of the same beliefs and values.

Parental obligations and challenges

Parents talked about the obligations they felt they had assumed when they became parents. There was a general consensus that parents today are more actively engaged with their children than their parents had been with them. The notion of parental sacrifice was also commonly expressed. Parents reported giving up time and money to help with homework, drive children to and from school, and to buy them things that will help them develop such as CDs, toys, PlayStation and Internet access. Frequently mentioned in all the groups was the importance of television in helping children develop. A number of parents encouraged their children to watch the bilingual *Dora the Explorer* because they believe it supports language development. Parents in all groups believe it is important to expose children to experiences outside the family home. One lower-income father noted that, 'taking your children out or travelling with them ... helps the children to grow up with an open mind'. Many parents described family outings in terms of 'an obligation' or as 'necessary'; however, one higher-income father said it made him happy to do this. Weekends are clearly the time that parents make efforts to spend time with their families. It was repeatedly mentioned that there are few parks or other options for outings in Casablanca. Consequently, many parents take their children to McDonalds' play area or, in the case of upper-income families, to private clubs.

Parental roles and behaviours

Parents in all of the groups saw a substantial role for themselves in helping their children develop. Lower-income parents particularly focused on their wish that their children would be successful. As one lower-income mother put it, she wants her children to 'be better than ourselves'. For her, and for many other lower-income parents, this involved ensuring that their children get more education than their parents. Several higher-income parents noted it was even more important now to do well in school and attain higher degrees because life is tougher now and success more elusive.

There was strong support for gender equality in raising sons and daughters, but this equality did not extend to all areas. Obedience and discipline were major discussion topics.

It quickly became apparent that the term 'education', particularly when applied to very young children, encompassed far more than cognitive development. Indeed, the discussion suggested that the term might be more accurately translated as 'socialisation'. If this term is applied, then the following discussions about the role of affection in educating children and the distribution of responsibility between the parents in educating children offer a slightly different and likely more accurate perspective.

Fathers and mothers are expected to assume different roles

Many parents asserted that affection is important to children's development and is necessary to instil in them the importance of learning. There was strong consensus that mothers are expected to be more affectionate than fathers; one upper-income father stressed mother–father differences, 'she (mother) gives more affection for the child, and she is closer to him, things that a father can't provide to his child'. Most parents accepted that mothers were going to be closer to children than fathers because they spend more time with them. One upper-income father said he did not have enough time to spend with his children but his wife compensates. A lower-income mother echoed this view, she said that the mother should educate her children more than the father because he is busy earning a living. A few upper-income fathers described the father's role as that of a life coach or life guide.

Many fathers cede child-rearing decisions to their wives, especially when the decisions concern daughters. Several parents expect the father's role to increase as the children get older. As one parent noted, the father's role expands once the child becomes an adolescent and needs to be reprimanded.

Many parents expressed the view that education was the responsibility of mothers. For example, one lower-income mother said, 'the mother should educate her children more than the father'. Another low-income mother continued, 'she controls their schooling'.

Many mothers regret that their husbands are too 'soft' with the kids, they want him to be more of an enforcer or disciplinarian. In only a few cases did we hear about more equitable arrangements. One upper-income father said, 'me and my wife we both play the role of the police officer'.

Several mothers noted that children must see their father as the leader in the family. A number of fathers from both income groups recognised that fathers do need to assert authority in the family. One upper-income father noted that the father's authority creates 'a balance; due to his close relation with his mother the child doesn't feel afraid of her so needs someone to stop him'. Another father in this group described the way that parental roles can work effectively in eliciting good behaviour from children:

it is good to create equilibrium between the roles of the parents; if the father is charismatic the mother should be affectionate and vice-versa ... if the child acts badly he is automatically afraid of his father but he is going to tell his mother the truth.

But another upper-income father argued that this can go too far, noting that the mother should not force the father into the role of 'the horrible punisher'.

A number of the fathers in each economic group resisted the disciplinarian role. They talked about how they had limited time with their children and wanted to have fun with them during that time. A lower-income mother recognised this and said, 'the father doesn't spend a lot of time with his children, he misses them, so he doesn't want to complicate his relation with them'. Both mothers and fathers recounted instances when fathers appeared to reject the role of authority figure. One lower-income mother expressed frustration with her husband's lack of authority and responded: 'my husband allows our son to miss school during the morning, but I'm firm in this issue: our son should go to school'. Another lower-income mother was less tolerant of such fathers, 'fathers nowadays over-love their children'.

A few mothers complained that their children's fathers spent almost no time with the children; fathers essentially confirmed this when they talked about being very tired when they got home from work. One angry mother described soccer as 'the second wife' in her household. Several mothers noted that mothers need to be 'smart' to engage fathers with their children.

Fathers and mothers in all groups talked about their efforts to present a united front to their children in matters of discipline. One upper-income father noted, 'when both of them (the parents) are preaching the same speech the child knows that he will get the same judgment from both of them'. This sentiment was echoed by a lower-income father, 'children shouldn't know the divergences that exist between the parents'.

Morocco was described to us as a 'very collective' society. Extended families at all income levels spend a lot of time together and grandmothers do a great deal of childcare. In middle- and lower-income families, it is common for households to include three or more generations. Sometimes family members live in the same apartment building, so that aunts, uncles and cousins as well as grandparents are very close by. While many parents talked about the advantages of this closeness, a number noted that sometimes family members do not respect the rules and boundaries that parents establish for their children. One lower-income mother talking about her children's grandparents said:

if someone else interferes in the education of your child, you can't control your child as you wish ... (if) ... your child experiences two systems of education ... he is going to obey the less firm of the two, which isn't yours ... most of the time.

One lower-income father reported that he used to live with his parents and:

it was difficult to control my child because he was always with his grandparents and when I want to reprimand him they ordered me not to do it, so now that I live in my own house things changed, and I have more control over my children's education.

Socialising obedience is a challenge for many parents

Parents in all groups struggled with discipline and had very mixed views about the value of hitting children. Some felt that such discipline was valuable, particularly if parents explain the reason. Most said that they hit their children occasionally. Numerous parents warned that

hitting becomes less effective over time; talking to children or taking toys away, they claim, are more effective approaches. One upper-income father argued that hitting a child teaches him to hit others. One lower-income father tries to motivate his children with rewards and tries to understand the reason for their disobedience. Another lower-income father noted that parents can function as role models for good behaviour: if parents are courteous to each other, the children will model this behaviour. Several fathers argued that sometimes parents need to impose their authority. For example, one said, when the school says something has to be done, and his daughter says 'no', he says to her, 'do it'.

A number of parents reported being hit by their own parents as children, a few by older brothers as well. Several fathers described the very harsh discipline that they received as children and expressed determination not to do such things to their own children.

Child development knowledge and expectations

Our questions about child development elicited strong views that parents' responsibilities in a child's first years were appropriately focused on feeding, clothing and keeping the child safe and clean. Intellectual development was generally understood to begin much later.

Experiences in a child's first year have little impact on future success

Many parents were uncertain about whether the first year of life mattered to a child's later success in school, but among those who had an opinion, most, regardless of income level, thought that it did not matter. One upper-income father considered the first year 'irrelevant'. Another upper-income father described children at three to five months as 'a piece of meat'. A lower-income father said that experiences in the first year of a child's life 'definitely' did not affect later school success.

The most common reason offered for why very early experiences do not matter is that children do not remember what happened to them. A lower-income father thought that learning commenced around two years (he noted toilet training as an example). A few parents thought it was inappropriate to expose children to too much in their first year of life: as one upper-income father stated, a child of a year or less 'shouldn't be bombarded. It is too early'. Some parents said that nothing matters until children begin to talk.

There was general consensus in the lower-income mothers group that in the first year, mothers should feed, massage and bathe children. Lower-income fathers strongly supported these notions, arguing that children cannot listen when they are below age one. One lower-income father expanded this time frame, he said that children do not understand anything before age three.

There was a general sense among focus group participants that parents cannot do much to improve intelligence; if anything can be done, it is best done by correcting mistakes, taking children out and providing a good diet. There were a few dissenters: one upper-income mother said that the child's development can be affected even when the child is still in the womb; this mother played music and listened to the Koran on tape while she was pregnant. A lower-income father concurred; he described intelligence as a gift from God, but believed that parents can help to develop it. Children are born with an empty mind, he said, and parents need to fill it over time.

At the same time, reading stories and playing with toys were seen as important activities for young children. One upper-income father argued that such activities promote self-confidence, particularly if the family engages in activities that children select, making

children feel special. An upper-income mother said that family activities bring the family closer, develop the children's imagination, their brain and their psychological equilibrium. A lower-income father concurred, noting that activities outside the house make children more energetic. Very few saw any value in formal early education, as discussed later. The one parent who said that school was important in the early years quickly added that it is important because it provides interaction with other children.

Most parents had not considered how their interactions with their very young children might affect their intellectual or social development years later. When a question about school readiness was asked in each of the focus groups, typical answers focused on providing a good diet; one lower-income father said that helping children be ready for school could be facilitated by serving them a good breakfast. It became clear that the concept of school readiness was not part of these participants' culture.

Schooling and education

Parents in all groups highly value a good education for their children, although a number of parents do not believe that more education (particularly post-secondary education and higher degrees) is important. Parents are deeply dissatisfied with the public schools in Casablanca; virtually, all upper-income parents and a number of lower-income parents send their children to private schools. Parents also share the view that preschool education is not necessary or even desirable. However, there were a few parents who use childcare and defended its value; often, those who use childcare took pains to explain that they used it because they lacked other options.

A good education includes several dimensions

For many parents, a good education includes much more than cognitive development; many parents consider values a key aspect of a good education: most often mentioned were respect for elders and religious commitment. More than one parent echoed the sentiments of a higher-income mother who said that a person can have many degrees but not be 'developed'.

Many of these parents, regardless of income, seemed to have a practical view of education. Indeed, college was not universally valued, which may reflect high unemployment rates in the region, and particularly among better-educated young people (Burston-Marsteller 2011). One upper-income father said that he wanted his children to be well-educated, but they did not need an 'extraordinary' education. Several upper-income mothers noted that success should be defined more broadly than school success. It might be ok, one said, to have just a high school education if you are good at art or business. Another upper-income father questioned the value of a bachelor's degree. He noted that plumbers and carpenters make good livings; he would like to see the status of these jobs improved. Said one upper-income mother, you can have 'all the degrees in the world' but you still have to cook for your husband. One lower-income mother considered college a waste of time. Other mothers in that group thought education should be valued to the extent it helps students get a good job. Yet, some lower-income mothers clearly had higher aspirations for their children; one reported that she takes her school-age daughter to the French cultural centre twice weekly for French classes. Another said she would encourage her children to go as far in school as they wanted to go.

There was widespread dissatisfaction with schools

Parents in all the focus groups agreed that the quality of the public school sector is poor. Parents complained about the very large class sizes, which create management problems. They also complained about the large amount of rote memorisation. Of particular significance in Morocco is that the language of instruction in the public schools is Arabic even though the language of commerce and higher education is French. Children do not begin to study French until they are eight to nine years old, and French instruction is second language instruction; this reportedly leaves many children unable to speak it fluently. In response to these concerns, there is a large private school sector in Casablanca. A key selling point for the private schools is that most provide bilingual instruction and assure parents that their children will be fluent in French when they complete their educations.

Private schools were seen as having their own problems. One lower-income mother reported that some private schools give students higher grades than they deserve to satisfy parents. One lower-income father described private schools as 'just a business'.

Parents have a role to play in children's formal education

Because the groups were focused on children six years and below, there was limited discussion of parental roles in formal education. Nevertheless, a few parents with older children did talk about this role. One lower-income father with a 15-year-old daughter reported that he often visits his daughter's public school to ask questions and find out how she is doing despite the fact she asks him not to.

Parents generally feel obligated to help their older children succeed in school by making sure they do their homework, but do little more than this. A likely reason is that parents in all groups feel they lack the skills to teach their children. A number of parents described teachers as 'experts', and contrasted that status with their own. Indeed, one lower-income father noted that had he been able to afford it, he would have taken his child to a formal early education programme because the teachers in such programmes are 'professional': they know how to teach drawing and other skills, something that he and his wife could not do.

There is little support for preschool education

There was strong consensus that children do not belong in out-of-home care settings before they began school unless their mother is working. One upper-income mother told the group that her child's paediatrician had told her that it was better, if possible, for the mother to stay home with a young child. Other upper-income mothers noted that if children start school too early, they will get tired of school and not want to go later on. A lower-income father stated, 'the mother is the most important person in the education of the children'.

Three reasons emerged for the lack of support for early care and education. The first was that in the families included in our focus groups, most mothers do not work, so there is no need for care. Further, even in the families with working mothers, there are usually family members, typically a mother or mother-in-law, who will provide safe, affectionate care.

A second reason concerned the quality and safety of out-of-home and non-relative care. An upper-income father noted:

I thought when he (his son) was 4 or 5 months to put him in the daily-nursery, but I realized that ... in the majority of cases they are mistreated, so I opted for the choice of recruiting a maid.

But hired help in the home brings its own problems. A single individual is inherently less reliable than a company, said one upper-income father, 'the nurse or the maid can let you down at any time'. Another father in that group spoke to quality issues in non-familial care. He noted that parents need to ignore the less positive features of the care that non-family members provide. 'You have to close your eyes on a few things', he said. 'I close my eyes about the nanny being on the phone'. Others noted that maids were not affectionate and simply could not be trusted.

And finally, given that parents believe that little learning goes on in the earliest years, safe and affectionate care is viewed as more than meeting their children's needs. Few families concern themselves about the quality of care provided by grandmothers or aunts; it is assumed to be acceptable. A higher-income father was unusual in expressing some concern about the limitations of family member care: 'with the grandmother they don't learn anything and here I join Yasser (another focus group member) in his opinion that if the daily-nursery has a solid educational system the children learn more and discover new things'. Said another higher-income father, 'in some case they (grandparents) ... no longer have the patience to do it, also their method of education is no longer appropriate for our times'.

In general, grandmothers were regarded as a major family asset, and those with a good mother or mother-in-law who cared for the children felt privileged. A view captured in the observations of one upper-income father who said, 'I looked for a wife with a (capable) mother'. Another man in this group noted that he and his wife had had to hire a nanny because his mother-in-law lacked the strength to care for the children; he jokingly congratulated the man who chose a competent mother-in-law.

Despite widespread agreement that out-of-home care is not desirable, a few parents were using such care. One lower-income mother had taken her son to childcare at age three on the advice of his paediatrician because he was not speaking; she agreed he was too young and assured the other women in the group that she would not have done this had he not been delayed. One upper-income father sent his child to day care early because his wife went back to work. He claimed that his child was more alert and sociable as a result of being with other children. A few parents who did not use care agreed that such care provided opportunities to socialise, although many children socialise with siblings and nearby cousins.

Summary and discussion

Our analysis revealed that parents see an active role for themselves in their children's development; this role is far larger than that of their own parents. Parents feel obligated to expose children to experiences outside the family's home which energise, encourage creativity and broaden children's horizons. Done as a family, they may also strengthen the family unit. Most parents believe that mothers will be closer to and more affectionate with children than fathers because they spend more time with them. These bonds of affection enable mothers to carry out their responsibility for the children's early education; a responsibility that nearly all parents believe belongs with the mother.

For many parents, the affection that mothers provide needs to be balanced against the authority of the father. But a number of fathers rejected this traditional division of

parental roles, expressing the desire to play with and enjoy their children rather than discipline them.

Strong ties to extended families support and complicate parental roles. Many grandparents spend a lot of time with their grandchildren, especially when the mother works. Parents highly value these relationships because they are based on the affection that grandparents naturally feel towards their grandchildren. Grandparents were seen by many, however, as undermining parental authority.

Most parents were uncertain about whether their interactions with their very young children might affect the children's later intellectual and social development. But among those who had an opinion, most, regardless of income level, thought that experiences in the first years of life did not affect longer-term intellectual development or school success. Consistent with these views, very few saw any value in preschool education.

Parents believe they will have a fairly narrow role once their child starts school. A likely reason is that parents in all groups viewed themselves as having limited knowledge about education compared to 'expert' teachers.

Research underscores the importance of early intellectual stimulation in brain development, but such efforts are less likely if parents believe that very young children do not listen and cannot learn. Few of these parents believe that early education has much value, despite evidence that high-quality preschool programmes promote many aspects of child development (e.g., Melhuish 2010; Burchinal et al. 2009). Thus, our findings suggest that these parents could do a great deal more to promote their children's cognitive development and school success such as talking to and reading to their children (Melhuish et al. 2008), while continuing to provide affection and support.

These focus groups have provided preliminary insights into how Moroccan parents view their roles and socialise their young children. These views suggest a need for policy responses that inform parents and empower them to play more diversified roles in their young children's development: not just as protectors and supporters, but as teachers and guides as well. Parent education campaigns about the importance of the early years, the value of preschool and the vital role that parents can play in their children's formal education seem both warranted and desirable. Other efforts might be advisable as well, such as support for early education programmes. Additional research, particularly with larger more geographically diverse samples, is clearly needed to confirm and elaborate our findings.

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