Since the early 1990s, Minnesota has been one of the most popular destinations for Somali immigrants and refugees. According to the Minnesota State Demographic Center, the largest groups of Somali immigrants to Minnesota between 1990 and 2000 were those aged 4 to 16 and those aged 25 to 44. The influx of Somali immigrants to Minnesota has and will continue to have a direct impact on the state’s school system because the majority of immigrants are either school-aged children or young adults of childbearing age.

The percentage of students enrolled in the Minneapolis Public Schools’ English Language Learner program has increased by 550% during the last 10 years, including 5,734 Minnesotan students who reported speaking Somali at home during the 2003–2004 school year, up from only 242 students in the 1996–1997 school year (Figure 1). This has created dire problems for schools and school districts because a lack of English comprehension is an impediment to providing basic services to immigrant students and a barrier to higher academic achievement for these students.

The majority of recent Somali immigrants do not fully understand the English language or educational norms in the United States, and cultural differences can easily result in misunderstandings. For example, in the United States, parental support is informally assessed by “showing up” behavior: supportive parents engage in volunteer activities, attend school performances and events, and are available for parent-teacher conferences. By this measure, immigrant parents may appear disinterested in their children’s performance even when they believe that they are doing their utmost to encourage their children’s success in school.

This article presents the results of a study conducted in the Twin Cities area between 2003 and 2004 that attempted to understand the perceptions Somali parents had about their children’s schooling and their own roles in their children’s education.

The purpose of the study was to determine whether differing perceptions among teachers and Somali parents about Somali parent involvement are rooted in cultural differences. The study was partially funded through a New Initiative grant from CURA, which supported data collection and analysis.

Methodology

The study involved five focus groups and six individual interviews with Somali parents, for a total of 32 participants. The number of participants in each focus group varied from three in the smallest group to eight in the largest. All the groups except one consisted of females, and all the interviewees except one were women. Additionally, I engaged in informal conversations with people who worked with Somali immigrants in different capacities, including a teacher, a school administrator, a school counselor, and a social worker. Twenty-eight of the participants lived in Minneapolis and St. Paul, whereas the others lived in a suburb just outside the Twin Cities.

Where necessary, interpreters were used during focus groups and interviews. Participants were parents of school-aged children in kindergarten through sixth grade. Parents had to report that they had been in the United States for 10 years or less before they were eligible to participate. The assumption was that the longer they have been in the country, the more likely they would have “learned” cultural definitions of parent involvement in the United States and learned to conform to local norms. The option of selecting parents through schools, although simpler than asking for volunteers in the community, was deliberately avoided to reduce bias or a sense of pressure on the parents’ part to say what they felt the school would expect of them.

Parents as Supporters of Education

Somali parents in the study overwhelmingly described themselves as responsible for providing out-of-school support for learning, but emphasized some kinds of support more than others.
Peripheral Support. All participants felt that they were an integral part of their children’s education and actively participated in the educational process. They described themselves as encouraging and supporting children to do well and behave in school. Twenty-six participants identified specific activities associated with their role as teachers in the home. This included teaching children to respect their elders, authorities, teachers, and parents through such behaviors as listening, not talking back, not being rude, and responding appropriately.

Participants identified taking care of their child’s basic human needs as a key ingredient of their support. One mother stated that they are behind their children “100% and buy them books.” Parents reported that they fed children, buy them whatever they need, wash their clothes, get their bags ready for school, make sure they are on time, and take them to the library. Mothers do everything they need to make sure students are successful.

It was clear from this study that fathers were not as involved as mothers with their children’s education. When participants were questioned about the lack of apparent involvement by fathers, reasons included fathers having been killed or gone missing during the Somali civil war, working long hours, not wanting to be embarrassed at their own lack of knowledge, and holding to traditional beliefs that educating children is the mothers’ domain.

Direct Academic Support in the Home. Twenty-five participants indicated that they help children with homework. In some cases, the parents reported that they did not understand exactly what was needed to complete homework assignments, although they always asked for some demonstration that academic progress was being made. One mother said that although she may not fully understand the content of her children’s work, she always checked to see who has an “A” grade and who has a “B.” Her children are then aware that they are accountable to her for their performance in school. Another parent asked her children’s teacher for notes outlining the homework her children could expect to get for the entire week.

Role of the Larger Community. The larger Somali community was referred to throughout interviews and focus groups as playing an important role in the education of participants’ children. Participants referred often to members of the Somali community as resources that facilitated their children’s education. When parents need extra help with their children’s homework, they seek out friends and other community members and advise their children to ask other students for help. Somali community centers and other support organizations arrange after-school programs and tutoring that supplement students’ coursework.

Visibility in School. Many Somalis do not understand why they are expected to come into the schools and, as they put it, “do the teachers’ work for them,” when they consider their role is primarily to encourage their children to work hard, help them with homework, and take care of their physical needs so they can perform at their peak. Parents may stay away from the school to avoid interfering with the work of professionals. Only three participants said they were often visible at their children’s schools. These parents attended meetings at the request of teachers and administrators. They also volunteered to carpool or chaperone school field trips and organize other parents who were interested in special activities. It is important to note that these three participants had been in the United States for at least eight years, had tertiary education, and had good command of English. Two had also received some formal education in the United States.

Barriers to Involvement

[W]e come from a community where the teacher is like the father and he takes care of everything. And here it is not the same because they want you to get involved. Really [that is] what they are thinking—they don’t tell you that. . . . You know, it’s hard to know sometimes because we are from a different world culture.

—study participant

Many of the difficulties Somali parents face make them appear unwilling to be involved in their children’s education, but reflect confusion over expectations and appropriate behavior. Parents often do not understand what they are supposed to do to demonstrate their support and enthusiasm for education. One participant noted that no one told her what is expected of parents. She felt that she had received no help from schools about how to create a successful learning environment in her home, and was thrown back on her

Figure 1. Number of Students Reporting Somali as the Primary Language Spoken at Home

![Graph showing the number of students reporting Somali as the primary language spoken at home from 1996-1997 to 2003-2004.](source: Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning)
own experience, which was outside of the United States. Another parent felt confused, and worried that she was not doing enough for her children.

When schools communicate that they would like parents to be more actively involved in their child’s education, they inadvertently send mixed and incomplete messages. The father I interviewed illustrated this confusion with the following scenario:

Parents are always being told, “Please, please, come in to the school.” But then as soon as you come in the school, the next thing is, “Well, wait a minute. You have to write your name down, give you a badge... and then we have to get security to escort you.” Or, “You can’t go anywhere. We have to call your children from the class.” And then the parent you may see sitting or standing there a long time, sometimes because they are waiting for their son to [be] brought down, and you see a parent who is maybe late for work. It’s good because of safety, but still also you see that there is a different territory.

This statement hints at a problem of trust between immigrant parents, particularly recent refugees, and schools. Because of negative experiences while immigrating to the United States, many recent refugees are afraid of social services and law enforcement, an attitude that is reinforced by the assumption that the authorities are always ready to convict or deport refugees.

A mother explained that when they experience trouble among themselves, they prefer to “deal with it themselves” rather than involve authorities. These experiences help to explain why security measures at schools bemuse them, and why they become easily discouraged from visiting.

Cultural Differences. In Somali culture, relationships with teachers outside of the school are important. Teachers and parents who encounter one another in a store or at places other than the classroom engage in informal conversations, although they may occasionally talk about a child. These informal relationships strengthen communication and make it easier for teachers to talk with the parent if there are concerns about a student’s academic performance. In Minnesota, in contrast, parents said that teachers rarely acknowledged them when they saw each other outside the school. Because being ignored violated their cultural expectations, they became uncomfortable about going into the teacher’s territory to discuss their child’s academic progress.

Differences in managing time also interfere. One participant explained that Somali immigrants have a very strong oral tradition and tend to memorize things. For instance, when a person needs to get household items, she would commit the items to memory until she reached the store. The memory is short-lived, and once she has bought the items, she does not have to think about them further. In Minnesota, appointments are made days, and sometimes weeks, ahead of time. Because of their reliance on short-term memorization, it is easy for Somali immigrants to forget a date in the face of more immediate events and daily chores. This means that when teachers make appointments that are a week or more away, as they often do, parents tend to forget. A Minneapolis social worker I interviewed concurred with this observation and said that one of her goals is to stress to the Somali refugee women with whom she works the importance of time-management and appointment-keeping.

English language proficiency is clearly an impediment to parental participation in schools. All the participants in this study mentioned difficulties arising from their poor ability to communicate in English. Those who were fluent English speakers and were involved in their children’s education expressed concern for those who were non-English speakers. Those who were unable to communicate in English expressed their frustration and sense of helplessness, not only in the context of their children’s education but also with reference to life in general in the United States.

Communication. Communication between the home and the school is more complicated because it usually arrives in written form. When asked about letters that were sent home, 14 participants admitted that they ended up throwing away letters. They gave various reasons for this, including not understanding English, not realizing the importance of the letter, and feeling overwhelmed by all the information that came in the mail, including letters and notes from the school. One mother said, “[My] difficulty was understanding what was important among all the literature [I] received from the school. There is lots of paper to return and [I am] not sure which to return and which to ignore.”

Those parents who reported attending parent-teacher conferences were frustrated when they asked about their child’s progress and were told their
performance was “OK.” This was a term they said was used for a broad range of academic outcomes. For example, a mother stated that her son was getting a C-average grade in his classes and she thought that this was very poor work, but each time she asked about his progress she got what she called the standard answer, “OK.” Another mother said that her daughter’s teacher used this answer on several occasions, so she was not sure if the teacher was unwilling or unable to discuss her child’s progress in more depth.

A final issue these parents raised was the fact that teachers tended to contact them primarily when their children were in academic crisis. They stated that they would have preferred to know when they were performing well; at the very least, the parents expressed the desire for earlier notification of their children’s academic decline so that they could address the situation before it became a crisis.

Other Concerns
All parents I interviewed expressed concern that their children were losing touch with their culture. Many spoke of their efforts to maintain their cultural norms in their homes, and by having their children attend Quranic schools, which are an essential part of their academic education and a link to their culture. Fear of negative peer pressure undermining Somali culture was mentioned in most of the focus groups, particularly by those parents who spoke little or no English. Children had to act as translator of all communications, including any letters from the school, leading them to act like they were the head of the household and their parents were inferior to them. One mother worried that the increase of drug and alcohol abuse among young Somalis was also contributing to the problem.

Praise for Schools
All interview and focus group participants had good things to say about their children’s schools in general. When they were asked if they were “happy” with the schools, all said that they were, in spite of the problems that they had outlined during other parts of the interviews. The father interviewed said,

[There are] free things here—free education, free transportation, free food for the kids, from kindergarten to high school seniors. The parents need these things which are free.

The curricular system is very good. We don’t have any problem with curriculums here.

In Africa, fees are attached to all aspects of schooling, so this is a welcome change.

A female participant echoed this sentiment when the same question was posed to her. Reasons she gave for why she was happy with the educational system included the safety and security it provided to children. In particular, school buses picking up and dropping off students at their homes ensured their well-being. Furthermore, schools provide safe havens for children, particularly for girls, who often live in crowded housing conditions and have many chores and responsibilities in the home. At school, they can be children, enjoying play and learning.

Suggestions for Schools
The parents I interviewed felt that schools should be more active in adult education. For example, parents were interested in formal instruction to teach them what their roles should be as active parents in their children’s education. One of the focus groups discussed the possibility of having a monthly meeting at their school with translators present. The purpose of the meeting would be to explain upcoming events at the school and suggested activities for parents who wish to be more involved. The parents saw themselves as willing students who needed guidance, but who did not know how to ask to participate. Parents also saw schools as a possible source of learning English. One woman welcomed the idea of teachers stopping by her house at their convenience. This idea was greeted with enthusiasm by other participants.

Recommendations and Conclusions
Although Somali parents firmly laid responsibility for increasing parent involvement at the door of the schools, I believe that the Somali community could use its existing infrastructure to help parents take more initiative to become actively involved. For example, Somali community centers could encourage regular parent gatherings at which those who are more experienced in the expectations of U.S. schools could educate their peers. There are opportunities for Somali community organizations to play a more active role in bridging the cultural gap between schools and Somali parents. Because Somali community leaders comprehend social and cultural norms in Minnesota better than newcomers, leaders are in a position to act as guides for both Somali parents and Minnesota educators as they struggle to further understand each other’s expectations with regard to Somali children’s education. Furthermore, leaders in the Somali community who are well-versed in U.S. laws should conduct workshops for parents in which they explain laws to recent immigrants.
to reduce parents’ misperceptions and fears. Understanding the legal system would greatly reduce parents’ need to rely on interpretation by their young children, thereby removing the age-inappropriate authority of decision making from immigrant children and restoring it to their parents.

In this study, parents mentioned wanting to meet with teachers in a more relaxed setting, rather than in the formal school environment, so that they could discuss their children’s progress as well as learn more about Minnesota culture. Educators should strive to create a comfortable environment and invite parents for social meetings between adults. For example, because community centers are frequent gathering places for the cohesive Somali community, they might offer a comfortable space where educators and parents could gather and discuss expectations about the role parents and educators should play in Somali immigrant children’s schooling. Educators could answer questions regarding what role parents should play and how to fulfill school expectations, while learning new skills and gaining new understanding of Somali culture from parents. Schools could enhance this activity by providing regular workshops or other events at local Somali community centers, where information could be disseminated about upcoming school events. The distancing of such events from the formal school bureaucracy and the easy availability of translation services in the community center context would facilitate participation.

Somali parents arrived in the United States with skills established before they immigrated. Some immigrants and refugees were practicing professionals in their country of origin and were forced to take on whatever jobs they could find in Minnesota because their skill sets were not recognized or because parents themselves did not know where to begin applying for jobs to match their skills. For example, one participant who was a professional seamstress now works in childcare. Another who is a trained dentist works as a teacher’s assistant. Educators are in a position to recognize and utilize parents’ skills in the academic arena by inviting parents to contribute their opinions and capabilities when making decisions regarding students’ education.

Parents, in turn, could use workshops to expose teachers to Somali culture and to share with educators their own knowledge and skills in a nonthreatening environment. The broader community would benefit from such interactions by learning how it can help support both schools and parents, particularly parents who are not fluent in English or parents who are less well-educated.

Information from this study can be used as a basis for further study into ways of incorporating aspects of both Western and Somali cultures while developing parent involvement programs in schools. As Somali immigrants continue to increase in number, it is crucial that new immigrants and established members of the community learn how best to work together for a shared sense of community.

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