## Education for Somali Students in London:

Challenges and Strategies

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## Introduction

London's role as a receiving center for international migration and leading center of world diversity has been one of the city's defining features since the height of the British empire made London, in a way, the capital of the world. It is by far the most diverse city in all of Britain, with 40 % of its residents belonging to an ethnic minority ("Office for National Statistics"). With this ethnic diversity comes astounding linguistic diversity; over 300 different languages are spoken in London schools ("Languages Across Europe"). This diversity is a strength, creating one of the most vibrant cities in the world, and at the same time a source of difficulty and conflict, as shown by the decades of tension around immigration policy and public opinion toward London's transnational citizens (Winder).

One of the clearest causes of the conflicts around immigration is the high volume of demand and the diversity of specific needs that it creates for public services, such as housing, health care, and education. Transnational migrants generally arrive with little initial connection to their new home and often face discrimination and harassment in various parts of society (Winder), and will therefore be more likely to turn to public support, especially in a nation like the United Kingdom with its vast network of social welfare programs. At the same time, their diverse cultural traditions, religious traditions, and origins means they arrive with a vast array of differing needs and expectations of such services.

Education is one of the services most challenged by migration, and also one of the ones where it is most critical that those needs be met. If the new transnational citizens are to settle permanently then the educational system must prepare them to live in British society as effective citizens while respecting their right to maintain their cultural traditions. In the world's emerging global cities, London being the pre-eminent one, this is a particularly important task. It is vital that

these cities understand the task they face and develop sound practices for providing effective education in such an environment. This paper will focus on education in London, specifically the challenges faced by Somali pupils and what city authorities and the Somali community have done to try to ensure effective education for these students. In order to understand the issues I did significant research into the literature on Somali communities in London, both from academic journals and reports from boroughs, and conducted interviews with members of borough education and refugee services offices and with workers at Somali community organizations to gain two perspectives on what is being done to help Somali pupils achieve.

The underachievement of Somali pupils is a serious problem within the London school system. The problems and barriers to achievement for Somalis are well documented and understood by researchers, education officials, and the Somali community. Boroughs and school offices are making efforts to address these, but there is a gap between the knowledge of what needs to be done and its on-the-ground implementation. Somali community organizations offer services to help fill that gap, but they are limited by lack of resources and the scope of the problem. There is also significant variation in achievement and services available both between and within boroughs. In a global city like London, schools are overwhelmed by the diversity of needs they must meet, but it is critical that they view this as a positive challenge and not a burden. Schools must devote significant resources to meeting the needs of these pupils and find strong leadership to implement the necessary programs.

### The Somali Community in London

Somali presence in the UK dates back to the nineteenth century when Somali men arrived with British merchant ships and settled in port cities, including the East End of London (Olden

213). The community as it exists today, however, is a much more recent presence. In 1960 the Somali territories colonized by Britain and Italy were unified and granted independence as a parliamentary democracy, which stood until it was overthrown in 1969 by a military coup led by Siyad Barre (Besteman 581). Waves of Somali refugees and asylum seekers began coming to Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s as Barre's dictatorship grew increasingly violent and oppressive, and even more so when Barre was ousted, leading to a brutal civil war that the nation is still trying to recover from (Harris 20). The first wave of Somali migration to the UK after the violence began consisted mostly of refugees coming directly from Somalia, but in recent years has consisted more of secondary migration, with Somalis arriving from third countries, such as Holland and Denmark (Harris 23-4). A popular explanation for this is that they are seeking to take advantage of the UK's welfare services, but anecdotal evidence suggests that they have often found worse living conditions in the UK and that the larger Somali community in London and the generally more multicultural society are more important draws (Harris 24).

Upon arriving in the UK, Somalis seeking asylum or refugee status have to navigate a bureaucratic system that is increasingly designed to make it difficult to effectively claim asylum and gain refugee status. The UK's refugee and asylum policies are subject to the guidelines created by the United Nations and international human rights agreements, in addition to the UK's own Asylum and Immigration Act of 2004 (Giner 250-1). There is a clear shift in policy starting in 1999, after which the rates of refusal for asylum claims increased dramatically, to the point that in 2003 over 60% of claims were refused (Harris 27). A common practice for Somali applicants is to grant them Exceptional Leave to Remain, rather than full permanent refugee status. Refugee status gives them the full rights and responsibilities of citizens, while ELR grants temporary permission to remain (usually for four years), which will then be reconsidered for permanent status. The

common usage of ELR and other temporary measures creates common feelings of insecurity for Somalis in the UK, as their status can remain unsettled for years (Harris 31).

The exact size of the Somali community, mostly refugees and asylum seekers, in the United Kingdom, and London, is difficult to determine. The 2001 census reported 43,373 Somalis living in the UK (Hopkins 366), but this figure is generally agreed to be a vast undercount (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 9, Hopkins 366). Estimates have generally been between 90,000 and 100,000, but some have gone as high as 250,000 (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 10). According to a 2006 report, Somali community organizations in London estimated the city's Somali population to be around 65,000 (Hopkins 366). The boroughs of Brent and Tower Hamlets are believed to have the largest Somali populations within London, but Somalis are widely distributed enough to be a significant presence for most Local Education Authorities (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 11). In an interview, a refugee services officer in the borough of Brent (generally considered to be the most diverse in all of Greater London) reported that Brent schools alone have a Somali population of around 3,000 students.

A report published in March 2008 by the Lambeth Research and Statistics Unit titled "Raising the Achievement of Somali Pupils: Good Practice in London Schools" gathered information from 28 of the 32 London Local Authorities about the Somali populations in their schools, which illustrates the influence of the Somali community on schools in London. The report found that among those 28 boroughs (four did not respond the project's request for information) there were 29,395 Somali pupils in London schools, with individual authority totals ranging from just 14 up to 3,374. All but 9 had at least 500 Somali pupils and 15 had at least 1,000. These numbers will likely increase greatly in coming years as approximately 20,000 of the Somali pupils were in primary schools. At all four Key Stages analyzed in the study at least 80% of

the students were on Free School Meals, indicating the widespread experiences of poverty in the Somali community (Demie et. al *Good Practice* 15).

While still a relatively small percentage of Britain's overall population Somalis form a significant and growing portion of Britain's (especially London's) astoundingly diverse population. The lack of a reliable population count for Somali communities is a significant issue because population figures are an important factor in decisions by local authorities and welfare services in allocating funding (Rutter 1). The ability for these people, especially the young people who will most likely live full lives and have children of their own here, to adjust and live fulfilling lives is crucial to the health their community and of Britain's multicultural society as a whole. While this is a process for which many must be responsible, London's schools must necessarily play a large part in it.

Identity is a complex issue for Somalis in Britain today. Like most young transnationals they are a part of multiple cultural traditions. In many circles they are not welcome as part of British society. Anti-Somali sentiment began almost immediately after they began coming to Britain in large numbers in the early 1990s. "Somalis ... leapt to the top of the national asylum rankings, which automatically put them close to the top of the British unpopularity stakes ... They were housed in rotting rooms often with rough and antagonistic neighbors" (Winder 420). One editorial in a Dover newspaper wrote: "Illegal immigrants, asylum-seekers, bootleggers and scum-of-the-earth drug-smugglers have targeted our beloved coastline. We are left with the back-draft of a nation's human sewage and no cash to wash it down the drain" (quoted in Parekh 219). UK asylum policy has grown harsher in recent years, focusing more and more on denying social benefits to asylum seekers and making it clear that asylum seekers like the Somalis are unwanted in the UK (Giner). A report from a 2008 conference of young Somalis in London makes it clear that

young Somalis expressed mixed feelings about their 'Britishness'; they are still heavily influenced by growing up in London, while their Somali roots are still also important in defining who they are (Hassan and Samater 8-9). Somalis are almost universally Muslim and this forms an important part of their identity in Britain as well, with some even placing it above being Somali (Valentine and Sporton 210).

The community is one of the most disadvantaged in all of London. Unemployment is a major problem. A 1990s report on the Somali community in Tower Hamlets found an unemployment rate of approximately 80%. Other studies in the 1990s found male unemployment rates between 70-97%, a situation that is not believed to have improved much to this day (Rutter 3). Interviews conducted for this paper supported the fact that it remains a major problem and a 2007 study about Somalis in the borough of Lambeth found an unemployment rate of 82% (Demie, Lewis, and McLean 18). This problem has several causes, primarily that Somalis arriving in London either have little educational background or are unable to prove their credentials, which would be unlikely to be accepted in the British system anyway (Rutter 3, Olden 221). "Somalis constantly express frustration that [their qualifications are] not recognized, and point to the underutilization of their professional skills – doctors driving minicabs, teachers unemployed" (Harris 39). Limited proficiency in English is also an obstacle to employment for Somali arrivals, regardless of their qualifications (Olden 221).

Finding suitable housing is another common problem for Somalis in London. Reports indicate that they often face severe overcrowding in their homes, as many have large families (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 6). They are also often re-housed at the whims of councils and the Home Office, and end up moving often (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 19). One asylum seeker was moved between London, Birmingham, and Bristol (Doward). These

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housing issues make it much more difficult for Somalis to settle in the UK and feel at home and welcome, and . less likely to develop feelings of connection to their new homeland.

There are approximately 100 Somali community organizations in London (Harris 66). They provide a broad range of services such as advice on immigration and asylum claims, housing advice, education advice and supplementary services, help with employment and training searches, and hosting youth clubs. While the importance of these services is not disputed, concerns have been expressed about Somali organizations in London. Some have criticized them for retaining clan allegiances from the homeland and for failing to effectively coordinate with one another to maximize funding opportunities and avoid overlap in service provision (Hopkins, Griffiths). One factor that may partly explain some of the difficulties that the Somali community has had, and that makes Somali-run community organizations particularly important, is that according to several of those interviewed the Somali community is very tight-knit and often hesitant to trust or seek help from those outside the community.

Many sources, both in literature and those interviewed, raised concerns about the numbers of Somali young people turning to crime and other anti-social behavior. A Somali community worker in the borough of Tower Hamlets reported that one of their greatest concerns was the number of young people joining gangs. A youth worker in Brent shared the concern about crime and commented on the amount of time he spends with Somali Youth Offenders for various crimes. Crime was a major topic at the 2008 London Somali Youth (Harris 13-6).

#### Educational Underachievement and Its Causes

Given this background, one might predict that Somali students' achievement would lag behind that of other groups in London schools, and that is exactly the case. In fact, what relatively

little data exists indicate that Somali pupils are the lowest achieving group in London. National data on Somali achievement is essentially impossible to come by because Somalis are included in the more general categories "African" or "Black African" (Demie et. al Challenges and Responses 11). In recent years, however, local London authorities have realized that they need to track achievement more specifically and have begun separate achievement data more specifically by ethnicity. A report published in March 2008 by the Lambeth Research and Statistics Unit titled "Raising the Achievement of Somali Pupils: Good Practice in London Schools" aggregated this information from 28 boroughs in London in order to compare Somali achievement in 2007 to national averages. At all four Key Stages analyzed (KS 1,2,3 and GCSEs) Somalis were the lowest achieving ethnic group in every individual subject and in overall results (Demie et. al Challenges and Responses 11). Particularly disturbing is the fact that the statistics showed decreasing achievement at each level. The students at Key Stage 1 did better than those at Key Stage 2, and those at GCSE level did worst of all (Demie et. al Challenges and Responses 11). While this is likely partially a result of older students entering the system at higher levels being farther behind than younger students, it also implies that schools are failing to help students along as they progress through the school system. Underachievement was not just a one-year phenomenon. Data from the borough of Brent over the course of 2006-2009 showed Somalis as one of the three or four lowest achieving ethnic groups on the GCSEs. The picture was much the same for 2007 and 2008 data from Key Stages 1-3 in Brent, with Somalis again consistently being the lowest achieving ethnic group (data provided by borough). The situation is similar in Camden. While the conditions for statistical analysis of Somali achievement are not ideal because of the way records are kept nationally, enough boroughs in London have begun keeping more specific data to make it clear that Somali pupils are lagging significantly behind those of other ethnic groups, although data

did indicate some improvements in recent years.

The causes of this underachievement are well understood both in the literature on the issue and by the professionals working for boroughs and Somali community organizations interviewed for this research. There is near unanimous agreement within the literature and from the interviews conducted that the language barrier is the biggest issue Somali pupils face. Other major issues raised were high rates of pupil mobility, lack of parental awareness and engagement, poor educational background from Somalia, lack of strong role models, cultural alienation and racism, and high rates of poverty. This section will focus on the dynamics of these causes, while responses of the school system will be addressed in the next section.

The pervasiveness of the language barrier, and the difficulty of overcoming it, has been a recurring feature of the research into Somali communities in London. Obviously if pupils have poor English language skills they will struggle or even be completely unable to grasp the curriculum and learn the material they are being taught. "Many Somali Children in schools are beginners in the English language and new to the British educational system. Nearly all receive some kind of EAL specialist support" (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 19). Students arriving directly from Somalia are unlikely to know English, as it is only the third or fourth language spoken in Somalia (Olden 219). Even those born in the UK may not have the same English language skills as other children their age because their parents mostly speak Somali, and English is not commonly used within the community (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 18). As the Somali community has grown larger in London, it has certainly provided benefits for Somalis, but it also makes it easier for them to get by without learning to speak English effectively, even though in the long run they would obviously be better off if they became fluent in English. According to one interviewee some parents still struggle with the language barrier, even after being in the UK for

up to 15 years.

Another, more subtle, aspect of the language barrier is that many pupils, even when they have developed good skills speaking English, struggle with formal language and with writing, which makes certain academic pursuits and exams difficult. One factor that may contribute to the difficulty in learning English is that Somali culture is very much an oral culture, valuing word of mouth and oral history above the written word; the language didn't even have a written script until the 1970s (Olden 215). The distance between the linguistic cultures of their two homelands likely compounds the difficulties Somali students face. This, combined with the patchy history of education in Somalia even prior to the outbreak of civil war (which essentially led to the disintegration of the education system there), means that many Somalis are not literate even in their home language. Providing English as an Additional Language services, then, is obviously one of the most crucial approaches for schools to raise Somali achievement. Evidence from one London borough that tracks student achievement by language ability illustrates the importance of language skills. In Key Stage 2 results the percentage achieving Level 4+ increased dramatically for each of the four language stages from just 11% for Stage 1 (beginners) to 33% at Stage 2, 52% at Stage 3, and 95% when fully fluent (Demie et. al Challenges and Responses 17). That 95% achievement level for those fully fluent is far above the national average of 81% for Key Stage 2 attainment (Demie et. al Challenges and Responses 17).

One community worker at a Somali organization near Notting Hill expressed serious concern over the high rates of Somali pupil mobility. While several interviewees commented on the traditions of mobility in Somali culture, in the London context frequent moves seriously disrupt children's education. "Many Somali children have interrupted schooling in this country due to re-housing. The experience of one child now in Year 3 is not uncommon: 'I was in my

current school from Year 2 but before that I was in Leicester and then we moved to Northampton. I have been to four schools'" (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 19). A study on Somali achievement found that in one London Authority 55% of students in Key Stage 2 were mobile (meaning the joined the school after the normal start of the stage) compared to 25% for the next highest group. At the GCSE level 44% were mobile (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 12-3). Research suggests that this is a serious disadvantage for pupils. In a London Authority that monitors achievement based on pupil mobility, achievement at Key Stage 2 declined significantly based on how late in the Stage the pupils had joined the school (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 16). It's no easy task in a crowded city like London, but boroughs must take steps to improve housing circumstances for the Somali community and provide more permanent accommodations so that children can settle in at a school, and families can become part of a community.

Another problem universally raised by those interviewed was the lack of parental engagement with and awareness of the English school system. This is, of course, partly related to the language barrier as many parents do not speak English and most schools do not have Somali translators available at all times. Parents who cannot communicate effectively with their children's school will miss important events and dates, areas of concern for the child (academically or behaviorally), and information about the children's progress. Furthermore, with the language difficulties and lack of education that many parents have they are often unable to help children with their schoolwork.

The problems, however, run deeper than just language issues. At a conference of young Somalis in London in 2008, participants reported a feeling that their parents are more concerned with monitoring the situation in Somalia than they are with their children's education (Hassan and

Samater 11). While this may be an inaccurate perception, it demonstrates that Somali youth feel there is a lack of parental involvement with education. Two more likely explanations came from employees of community organization. One issue, according to workers at an organization in the borough of Brent, is that Somali parents, coming from the violence and chaos in Somalia, are simply satisfied that their children are in a school where they are safe and receiving an education, and therefore turn their attention to the many other issues that they face. Another explanation lies in a key difference between the Somali and English approaches to education. In Somalia teachers are expected to bear the full responsibility for education and parents do not expect to need to be involved in their child's education. Furthermore, unlike in England, in Somali schools children would not advance to the next level unless they had mastered the material of their current level (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 16). Therefore, parents see their children moving from year to year in London schools and assume that this means they have made the necessary progress, while this may not actually be the case.

Generational gaps in attitudes and cultural knowledge exist between young Somalis and their parents, and this is exacerbated by the fact that children will often be much more comfortable in and influenced by English culture than their parents, creating a rift between generations (Hassan and Samater 12, Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 17). One report found that "Young people therefore tend to ignore their parents' help or suggestions, thinking that they are already in a better position" (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 17). Between language issues, cultural differences, and the many other problems like housing and asylum status that parents must deal with, it is not surprising that a lack of parental involvement is an obstacle to increasing achievement for Somali youth. Still, getting parents effectively engaged with the school system and helping them acquire the tools to support their children is one of the most critical tasks for the education

system and Somali community organizations looking to improve achievement of Somali pupils.

Other obstacles for Somali pupils are a lack of strong educational role models, racial harassment and cultural alienation, and poverty. Several community workers mentioned that with many parents unemployed and sometimes simply missing from a child's life, a sentiment shared by parents (Demie et. al Challenges and Responses 18). According to a borough officer in Camden, the children sometimes see their parents who are unemployed despite their education, and then as a result of that example question the value of making school a priority. A report on Somali pupils in Camden found that students expressed significant concern about racism and bullying, which they experienced in school and on the playgrounds (Ali and Jones 25). This is in addition to the wider hostility toward refugees and asylum-seekers that they experience in British culture and media. Indeed, one researcher found that "Some pupils appeared to disengage from school life. When questioned they said they felt that they felt different, unwelcomed and not part of the school and the community" (Rutter 6). Further, the poverty of Somali families means that many parents are unable to provide the kinds of extra resources like supplemental books or even simply a home with good space to do homework that other pupils have. All those interviewed believed that one important step that would help Somali students and their families is to hire more Somali teachers and teaching assistants. Their presence would help with the language barrier, as well as provide positive Somali role models and improve the cultural awareness and sensitivity of schools.

Somali pupils face a broad range of issues in London schools. Other minority ethnic groups and transnational populations in London likely share many of these problems, such as language barriers and poverty. Other issues, like the dynamics of past educational experiences and certain specifics of the language problem and refugee experience are more specific to the Somali

community. Fortunately these issues are now well documented and understood so that education authorities and Somali community organizations can respond to them in order to promote educational improvement for Somali pupils.

#### Local Authority Responses to Underachievement

With the causes of Somali underachievement known, school and borough officials in London have taken steps to try to help these pupils reach their potential. Because education is run on the borough level, responses vary significantly across London. Those documented in this section are based largely on interviews with education officials in the boroughs of Brent and Camden, although some examples from other boroughs taken from the literature are included as well. Brent is a remarkably diverse borough, with approximately 90% of the population ethnic minorities and about 150 languages spoken.

One important step that both boroughs have taken in recent years is to start keeping track of achievement data for Somali students as a specific ethnic group, rather than as part of a broader African group. Understanding the nature and scope of the problem is critical to drawing attention to it and coming up with solutions, but that was hidden for many boroughs without specific tracking of Somali achievement. Brent started in 2006, and a 2000 report on Somali pupils in Camden has data on Somali achievement there from the 1999 school year (Ali and Jones). Both boroughs found that Somalis are the lowest achieving group, or close to it, in almost all grade levels and subjects in their schools.

Brent has taken steps to try to improve Somali student achievement. Arriving students are given a language and skills assessment to determine their educational level. In the past students would be immediately placed by age, which created problems with students with interrupted

education and poor language skills being placed levels beyond their prior education. Now, however, the borough uses access classes and induction programs to help students catch up to the appropriate level while working to integrate them into mainstream classes.

In Camden a similar approach is used for newly arrived students. If a student is over 16 on arrival they are placed in link classes for one year in order to catch up and become familiarized with English education before they are integrated into mainstream classes. New arrivals under 16 are placed into mainstream classes right away, and are withdrawn for extra support classes part time each day.

One of the largest challenges posed by the presence of large numbers of refugee and asylum seeking students in a school is that at the classroom level many teachers will be unaware of the type of situation these students are in unprepared to meet the extra needs that they may have. In order to help these teachers prepare, the Brent Ethnic Minority and traveler Achievement Services (EMTAS) produced a booklet titled "The inclusion and attainment of refugee and asylum seeker pupils" that is given out to schools. The booklet contains sections entitled "Teacher Awareness" (provides information to help teachers understand the situation of refugee and asylum seeking pupils), "Induction" (advice about and suggested strategy for integrating newly arrived pupils), "Accessing the Curriculum" (how to create a welcoming environment and help English as an Additional Language pupils), and "Involving Refugee Parents" (how to promote understanding and involvement by refugee parents).

Essentially the handbook lays out the borough's policy for schools on providing an effective educational environment for refugee/asylum-seeking pupils, which the majority of Somalis in London are. There are separate but similar induction strategies for primary and secondary students. The goal of admissions and induction practice should be to create an atmosphere of trust

between the school and families and students. While there are different specifics, for both levels the borough starts with an interview with the pupil and family to obtain important information -the family's situation, the student's educational history is and level -- and to help the family and student know what to expect in the school. This is also the point at which assessments of the student's English language and other academic skills will be done. After this the borough recommends waiting 2-4 days before the student starts attending so that the teacher of their class will have time to prepare and be briefed on the student's situation and so that a "buddy" student or team of students can be organized to help the student settle in (it is recommended that this student speak the same first language if possible). After this the student will begin attending classes and the borough recommends regular monitoring meetings to track the progress of the new pupil. The largest difference between the primary and secondary plans is that the buddy system is much more prominent at the secondary level, which is generally described in more detail. The chapter also recommends creating a welcome packet in the family's home language for parents with basic information on the school and other important services such as health, transit, and adult education opportunities in the area.

The chapter "Accessing the Curriculum" contains further advice for specific methods in the classroom to help refugee and asylum-seeking students and for helping and assessing English as an Additional Language (EAL) students. The chapter does not describe specific extra support programs, which vary between individual schools, but both interviewees in Brent borough services reported induction programs that provide separate, specific instruction in English and other areas that the pupil may need to catch up in for at least part of the school day. The borough council also produced a separate "Somali Language Pack" for teachers. The pack contains some background information on Somali culture and is a guide to provide translations of useful school-related

phrases into Somali. The pack is intended to help teachers and students better understand each other.

The fifth chapter in "The inclusion and attainment of refugee and asylum seeker pupils" is focused on strategies for schools to encourage parental involvement for refugee families.. The chapter first lays out some of the reasons why refugee parents may be less involved in education: inability to communicate in English, unfamiliarity with English school system, poverty and stress, etc. The chapter then offers a few suggestions on how to encourage parent-teacher communication such as translation of letters, following up with phone calls, and specifying one "friendly adult" as the first point of contact in schools. It then focuses on some of the specific issues that the school should make sure parents understand such as the curriculum and the structure of English education. It also recommends that schools consider recruiting staff from refugee backgrounds.

Recruiting more Somali teachers and school staff was one of the most common recommendations from those interviewed, in all boroughs and both in borough offices and community organizations. To this end, the borough has set targets for recruiting bilingual teaching assistants and Brent EMTAS is encouraging schools to link with the community to find them. According to the Refugee Education Officer interviewed at EMTAS there were no Somali teachers or TAs in the borough three years ago, but that there are now more than 15 and there are nine more in training. The officer reported that the borough has seen improvement for both students and parents in the schools with Somali employees in the classroom. As discussed earlier there are large numbers of unemployed Somali professionals in London who simply cannot get their credentials recognized in order to get jobs and so they need new training or certification that will be valid here. Brent has run a project to provide incentives for members of the Somali community to do this and found it successful in recruiting Somali workers for schools. Boroughs and schools

should further implement plans to help these people become teachers or TAs, helping the Somali community in two ways at once by providing jobs and improving accessibility to English schools for parents and children.

In Camden the induction program for new arrivals who do not speak English is based on providing EAL support teachers, extra attention from link workers, lunch-time sessions, and extra in-class support. The length of provision of these services depends on the pupil's level of need, and there is no time limit.

The borough's refugee team consists of seven workers to help schools in Camden provide the most effective education possible to its refugee pupils, of whom Somalis are the largest group at around 1,400. Three of the workers are Somalis, two of whom work as the home-school link advisors (one for primary and one for secondary schools) and the other is a coordinator for the work the borough does helping community organizations run supplementary school programs.

The link workers help schools run programs to encourage parental involvement. The secondary school link worker focuses on work with parents, targeting newly arrived pupils, and work with schools to offer individual support, bringing Somali university students to meet with younger pupils, supporting pupils at-risk of exclusion, and encouraging pupils to remain in education past the age of 16. For students with behavior concerns the borough promotes an approach of talking to the pupils about Somali heritage, culture, and history in order to help them develop stronger self-esteem and sense of identity. At the primary school level the link worker focuses on many of the same issues, but with even greater emphasis on parental involvement, bringing parents into the classroom to see what their children do and how the schools work and organizing information sessions and workshops for parents. Some schools in the borough, although not many (three out of nine at the secondary level), have their own Somali link worker to

work on these issues. All concerned agreed that the presence of a link worker specific to the school is a great asset that significantly improves school-parent involvement and relations.

The borough also works directly with community organizations in Camden, to help them organize and run supplementary schools to provide extra educational help for Somali students. It offers free training to community organizations so that those working with pupils are aware of the curriculum and methods being taught in the schools provide ssome funding to the community organizations for these services. The borough officer stressed that this service is not to force the community organizations to use the same curriculum or methods, but to ensure that they know what topics are being taught and how, so that they can best determine how to help pupils. The officer stressed the importance of working with the community organizations, saying, "as an authority, if you really want to engage parents and support them to raise achievement, you can't undermine the role of community organizations." In other examples of schools working with community organizations, teachers have occasionally contacted community groups to find a mentor for a group of Somali students and according to one community organization schools sometimes contact them for extra support when there are particular situations needing attention.

The borough has several other approaches that they are planning on further implementing in the near future as well. One concern expressed by the officer was in relation to the issue of uninvolved fathers in Somali families, so the borough is planning to start more work to promote improved educational engagement by Somali fathers. They also want to investigate more into Somali use of the borough's under-five services for young pre-school children. They believe that early engagement and early education has great advantages and may be an area where Somali children are disadvantaged in relation to other children.

## Community Organization Responses

Somali community organizations play an important role in helping Somali students achieve their potential. The 100 or so such organizations in London offer a wide variety of services, but many of them focus on helping youth and naturally education is a critical aspect of that.

Somali community groups often run supplementary schools, usually on Saturdays or after school, where pupils can get extra help with homework and important concepts in the curriculum. Every community organization consulted for this project provides some sort of homework assistance, and in Brent the borough's Connexions office, which provides social services for young people, also runs a Saturday school for Somali pupils. Every organization involved reported that the services make a difference in pupils' achievement, and while they obviously have self-interest in making that statement, there is no reason to believe that it is false. Many of them have certified teachers as volunteers, and the extra individual attention pupils receive in such a setting goes a long way toward improving academic performance

According to a worker at one community organization, a program to help with the transition to secondary school turned out to be very successful and appreciated in the community because it helped parents with basic paperwork. A common mistake parents made was not realizing that they needed to fill in all six spots for ranking secondary school choice. If they only listed one or two choices and their child did not get a place in one of those schools, then the borough would assign the child to a school without any input from the family because they had no way of knowing the parents' preferences. Basic issues like the language barrier and lack of familiarity with British paperwork could potentially lead to a child being placed in a school far from the family's home, placing strain on the parents' ability to make sure the child gets to school on time or at all. This community organization is also planning to start a program to reach out to

Somali fathers to encourage them to be more involved in their children's education.

Many of these organizations also do work to help young people on issues outside of school that are still closely related to academic achievement. One organization believes that gang involvement is a major problem for Somali youth, partly as a result of a lack of other organized activities, so it runs social clubs several days each week to provide space for young people to gather and socialize more constructively. Because there is frequent conflict between Somali gangs and gangs of other ethnic groups in the neighborhood, the organization tries to bring the two sides together to talk out the issues and prevent violence. Some organizations also provide sports activities, particularly for girls who often won't participate in wider community sports teams because of religious and/or cultural issues.

Other efforts focus more on improving attitudes toward education in the community, both for parents and students, and trying to establish more role models for younger students. One community group in Camden hosts and annual achievement awards ceremony to recognize and award prizes (like laptops and iPods) to the top achieving Somali students on GCSEs. The organizers said the ceremony has been growing each year and has been successful at building further support and emphasis on education in the community. One community worker said that the Somalis are a very competitive community and that younger students and their parents see the students being recognized at the ceremony and want that for themselves or their child.

Another program run by a different organization tries to bridge the gaps in attitudes and culture between children and their parents. One part of this is having evenings where children will put on a short play or production that parents will then watch, or vice versa, in order to encourage better understanding between both sides. They said these events have been successful and that participants, both parents and youth, have told them that they have been valuable programs. They

also use more conventional strategies like conferences and mentoring programs to achieve the same result, with the ultimate goal being to help children see the value in the Somali culture from their parents and that their parents want to help them succeed and for parents to see the benefits that the western culture can bring their children. These conference and mentoring programs also work on issues more directly related to schools like helping parents understand the educational system and helping children understand the importance of education and how to succeed.

The community organizations and their employees/volunteers (particularly those who also taught in schools) were also able to offer valuable insights into some of the issues that Somali students face in schools and things that schools could improve. Several of the employees/volunteers reported that despite the efforts that local authorities are taking, there still is not enough support for newly arrived Somali students, particularly those who don not speak English. They are still often placed in classes when they lack sufficient English skills to follow the lessons, and the schools do not provide enough support and resources to help them keep up. The community workers also said that often teachers find it easy to teach the class toward the students who speak English and effectively ignore Somalis and other EAL students. This only encourages Somali children to feel further alienated, less inclined to put in the effort in their school work, and perhaps act out with bad behavior. The community workers, who were also teachers, felt that some other teachers viewed Somali and other minority/refugee pupils as a burden to the classroom. One researcher who conducted case studies in schools found that, "In all five schools there were negative perceptions of Somalis boys and girls among some teaching staff. These perceptions assumed that Somali boys were 'traumatised' therefore they could not be expected to learn or behave. Somali girls were assumed to be passive and oppressed Muslim women, who

would be prevented by their parents from progressing on to further and higher education" (Rutter 6).

While the presence of diverse students who don't speak English undeniably poses challenges, it also brings great learning opportunities through the diversity of experience, culture, and language present, and nothing constructive for either the pupils or the classroom as a whole can come from such negative attitudes. It is important to remember that one cause of these attitudes is likely frustration with the fact that teachers who are not bilingual are limited in their ability to teach EAL students yet have to face this challenge with limited resources to help. Some in community organizations felt that providing the needed resources to support Somali and other refugee pupils is not a high enough priority for schools and local authorities that they sometimes characterized as indifferent.

Community organizations also reported problems with schools' efforts to reach out to parents. Despite the attempts of schools to improve their accessibility it remains very difficult for parents who don not speak English to contact school's to monitor their child's education or raise any concerns they many have, because most schools lack Somali-speaking staff, despite recent improvement in that regard. Further, many letters sent out from the school are written only in English, which many parents do not read.

The community organizations themselves, however, are not without their critics and flaws. Gail Hopkins, who conducted research on Somali community organizations in London, argues that community organizations have not sufficiently collaborated to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of their services; sometimes they compete with one another for funding for similar projects (Hopkins 370). She claims that some organizations are clan-affiliated, which interferes with their ability to effectively serve all Somali residents in London and prevents the type of

organizational collaboration that could result in better service provision and more success in obtaining funding (Hopkins 370-71). No one interviewed for this project mentioned clan affiliations or tensions as an issue in the community, but based on Hopkins' research, they likely do still play a role in Somali communities in London. Also, Somali community organizations could do more in terms of directly advocating for their community to the school system. Several people mentioned that Somali parents have been hesitant to voice their concerns to the schools. While the organizations help with this by educating parents about the school system, they could do more to proactively organize parents to voice concerns to schools, perhaps by organizing large groups of Somali parents to host a forum with school officials or visit the school to discuss the problems the community sees.

One very promising aspect of the work of Somali community organizations in London, besides the many valuable services that they offer the community, is that many of the employees or volunteers interviewed in this project were young Somalis themselves, who felt a desire or even obligation to help those coming after them. One organization is run by a group of young women, several of whom are also teachers in London schools, who came to London as refugees from Somalia in the 1990s and after graduating university decided to work to help the younger generation. The organization focuses on young people age 12-19, helping to provide them extra guidance and support, which the organizers believe young Somalis in London often lack. This example, along with the other young Somali men and women involved in community organizations demonstrates the community's resolve to improve its situation.

## Conclusions

Most local authorities have recognized the need for action in improving the educational achievement of young Somalis, and have devoted significant resources and made plans to help newly arrived refugee pupils. There do, however seem to be problems with the implementation of these programs as both community organizations and boroughs reported that Somali students and their families still often do not have the support they need to succeed. The perception of official indifference among some community organizations, while it may be accurate in some cases and to a certain extent throughout London, probably has an alternative explanation. Somalis are just one of a large number of groups of ethnic groups placing demands on a school system with limited resources. What gets interpreted as indifference might often simply be a result of insufficient public resources. The issue of the shortage of translation and interpreting services for Somali parents in their dealings with schools provides one example. In the borough of Brent, 90% of the population are ethnic minorities and there are approximately 150 different languages spoken. To expect schools to provide language services for all of these languages is unrealistic.

Still, there are steps that local authorities can and should take. One worker at a community organization in Brent said that "schools should have their own translators available for parents, where they pre-book [to meet with the school]." Even if the services cannot be made available in every single school, local authorities should try to create teams of translators for the entire local authority based at a central office who would be available to translate letters or go to a school to interpret for a visiting parent. This could be run in the way that the community organizer suggested, where parents set up a time for a meeting, and the translator is at the school to help the parent get their concerns addressed and questions answered. This would also deal with the issue of letters and other school materials only being available in English, for which there is no excuse.

Every school should have a packet of important information about how the school runs and how to contact the school in Somali to give families at the start of every school year, and especially upon the arrival of new students. This should be just one part of comprehensive efforts to build an environment of trust and open communication with Somali parents, to promote their ability to monitor and assist their children's educational progress. Several of those interviewed believed that parental involvement is the biggest difference between schools that are successful with Somali students and those that are not. Every school that has a substantial Somali student population should hire a full time Somali home-school link worker whose primary responsibility is to facilitate parental engagement.

Addressing the language barrier for Somali students must be the other top priority in schools. Schools that do not do so already should create specific, intensive programs to get children up to a basic level of English fluency before they are placed in mainstream classes full time. There should also be a transition period where some sort of language support is available in the classroom. Schools should also include cultural education segments in mainstream classes where students learn about Somali culture and history (and that of all other ethnic groups present) to promote the feeling of belonging and positive self-esteem in Somali pupils. To further promote this schools need to make hiring more Somali teachers and teaching assistants a top priority, which was one of the most common recommendations from those interviewed, both in borough offices and in community organizations. The presence of Somali teachers helps with the language barrier for both students and parents, and promotes a culture of belonging for Somali students.

The third primary issue that schools need to focus on is the school culture and teaching attitude toward Somali and other EAL students. The chief way to do this is through careful hiring. In a report of case studies of ten London schools that have done well in creating a strong education

environment for Somali students, a common factor was that all had a strong headteacher and other leaders with a real commitment to the education of Somali pupils and other minorities (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 97). When hiring headteachers and other staff, one characteristic should be a strong commitment to and understanding of achievement for ethnic minority and refugee students. There are other steps that can be taken to promote this with the staff a school already has. One issue explained by a community worker in Brent was that teachers often see the refugee label and forget that the pupils "were people before that, before they were given this label." To this end the boroughs should include individual stories about the background and success of pupils in the packets of information about education for refugees and asylum-seekers. One school even produces a booklet every year with background information about every bilingual pupil in the school to ensure that every teacher is aware of the language abilities of students and has access to information on classroom strategies to help them (Demie et. al *Challenges and Responses* 22).

Finally, schools should seek to use the substantial resources available in the people of the Somali community. Schools should reach out to parents who they know are involved in the school and try to enlist them as volunteers to help reach out to other parents to help them be engaged with the school. Furthermore, local authorities should seek to take advantage of the fact that many unemployed Somalis have professional qualifications, but are unable to have them recognized in the UK. They should engage these people as volunteers and set up programs to help them get certification here to work as teachers or teaching assistants and mentors to Somali pupils. The borough of Brent has already had some success with a program like this.

The reality is, however, that schools will always face budget issues and with the astounding diversity that almost all schools in London have it will be difficult for many schools to implement programs so specifically targeted at Somali pupils. This means that community organizations will

need to fill the void, although they certainly have issues with funding as well. Community organizations need to work together to maximize their efficiency and effectiveness. They need to continue providing, and expand their provision of, supplementary educational services to help Somali students close the gaps between their achievement and other students. One of the biggest focuses of these supplementary services should be on helping children master the English language, particularly in the written and formal forms that will be important to them on school testing. They should also seek out opportunities to work directly with schools, and schools must respond to these requests to maximize the use of low cost services to help underachieving students.

It is clear, though, that schools and community organizations working on issues directly related to education will not be enough to improve all of the issues that hurt achievement for Somali pupils. It will require a holistic approach to address the poverty of most Somali families, improve their housing situation, and promote better understanding between Somali and British cultures. The housing issues are particularly urgent for educational achievement as students getting moved around in housing hurts their ability to settle in and get comfortable at a school, and overcrowded housing makes it difficult for children to find a good space to do homework. Borough should look into ways to improve the communication between the various social services that work with Somalis and other refugee and asylum seekers, in order to promote holistic solutions to the many problems that these communities face.

In the incredibly diverse and multicultural communities that exist in today's global cities, increased migration and diversity poses a variety of challenges for state-run schools to address. But these challenges also offer opportunities to improve the cultural richness and world understanding of all present in the city. The situation of education for Somali transnationals attending London schools sheds light on a variety of the challenges that schools in global cities face. Different ethnic

groups will have different specific challenges, but other groups will share many of these issues that Somalis face as well. In many cities these challenges will be more manageable due to the fact that no city in the world matches the astounding diversity of cultures and languages present in London. Meeting these challenges with effective education for all residents in global cities is absolutely crucial to the health and functioning of our cities in a world that places more diverse cultures in interaction with each other every passing year.

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