

Educating Immigrant Youth in the United States: An Exploration of the Somali Case

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"Ethnicity matters, and it seems to matter for a long time."¹

"Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension."²

"The search for authenticity and the reclaiming of an Islamic identity, while drawing its inspiration from the past, is geared towards creating alternative futures."³

I. Introduction

Becoming "a diasporic people, blasted from one history into another," is a great tragedy.⁴ However, in the heart of the storm, new opportunities and new dangers are born. The Somalis today constitute a complex transnational set of communities fanning out from Somalia and spanning the globe from Australia to Western Europe and North America. The Somali diaspora consists of individuals (and groups) who arrived and were received in a wide range of host societies at different times and in different ways, bringing with them the social, cultural, and political divisions of back home. All this has been exacerbated by the divisive legacy of the civil war (1978–present). Even after resettlement Somalis do not sit still. Instead, they are characterized by continuous movement within the diaspora. The complex set of communities resulting from these histories is also unique, as they shared life—however imperfectly and at times unequally—in Somalia.

In the United States, Somalis, however complex and distinctive, are part of a long history of immigration. Part of "the second wave" of immigrants—a name used by immigration scholars to distinguish post-1960 immigrants from those who arrived between 1881 and 1924—Somalis constitute only a drop in the bucket compared to the influx of Hispanic and Asian immigrants, and are a very recent group (largely from after 1990).⁵ Because of this, the scholarly literature about the Somali diaspora is still in its infancy, although numerous M.A. and Ph.D. theses are currently underway. However, outside the halls

of academia, the arrival of Somali refugees and immigrants, with their distinctively assertive culture, has occasioned many debates; for example, in school boards, community relations offices, and workforce development task forces in counties and cities throughout the U.S. In these debates, the host community's question of "why can't they be like us?" often clashes with the immigrant community's worry that "we will be forced to lose our identity." Such contrasting perspectives have often led to friction and misunderstanding. In Lewiston, Maine, during 2002–2003, it caused such conflict between local inhabitants and Somali newcomers that neo-Nazis joined the fray in the hope of driving the latter out.⁶

Given the need for research that might bridge the gap between scholarship and Somali realities in the U.S., it is the modest objective of this paper: (1) to approach the study of the education of Somali immigrant youth through the lens of existing scholarship about other and older immigrant communities of the second wave, and (2) to weigh the relevance of the concerns of this scholarship to Somali realities as these begin to emerge, and draw preliminary conclusions from the juxtaposition of the two. While the results are far from satisfactory and cannot substitute for urgently needed detailed empirical studies of Somali diasporic communities, we hope that this essay can provide researchers and practitioners some guidance as to pitfalls to avoid and directions to pursue. We will first turn to a provisional historical survey of Somali immigration into the U.S.

A. History of Somali Immigration in the U.S.

The history of Somali immigration has not yet been written and must be an urgent item on the scholarly research agenda.⁷ If we focus on the period since independence in 1960, it is well known that during the civilian administrations of the 1960s many Somali students were sent abroad on scholarships. Most of these, however, did not come to the U.S. It is chiefly after the military coup of 1969 that many young men came to the U.S. for work, study, or both. Some were motivated by a personal sense of curiosity and adventure—"*avventura*," as it was known in the formerly Italian south. Others, however, went in more or less self-imposed exile, due to their relationship to the military regime. This flow of young people—men and women—increased in the early 1980s, when political oppression selectively targeted more and more families, and when, after the 1977–80 war with Ethiopia, armed oppo-

sition fronts emerged outside of Somalia. Even youth who did not join the fronts began to leave the country, often out of fear of the collective punishment the regime meted out to individuals for the alleged actions of their relatives. These people applied for political asylum in countries like the U.S. In the 1980s, every family that could afford the costs, especially families earning petrodollars in the Arab Gulf countries, sent its youth to be educated abroad. Even members of the military establishment itself often sent their children to Europe or the U.S., well out of reach of an increasingly unpredictable and arbitrary regime. Establishing diasporic communities in the Washington, D.C. and New York City areas, these foreign students, refugees, and asylum seekers, now in their forties and fifties, became what we provisionally call “the Somali first wave.” Little did these young Somalis know that in 1988, when Hargeisa and Burao were destroyed by the regime, and again in 1990, when Mogadishu exploded, they would be the ones to offer refuge to whole families, including grandfathers and grandmothers who could not have dreamed of ever having to leave home.⁸

It is the Somali refugees and asylum seekers of this second Somali wave—vastly more numerous than those of the first wave—who have drawn attention to themselves almost everywhere they have (been) settled. This wave included those who experienced the greatest horrors and suffered the largest losses. They watched with disbelief as former neighbors and friends turned on each other. Many witnessed the murder and/or rape of close family members and the deaths of those who did not survive the harrowing treks to safety. Many fled with no more than the clothes on their backs, and often suffered great hardship in the refugee camps or in the overcrowded homes of relatives already living abroad. And many arrived in their new country with skills and wisdom for which the new environment had no use. In contrast to the first wave of Somali immigrants, they experienced enormous problems settling in the U.S. Arriving in families of many different kinds, sizes, and ages, they were confronted with the need for housing, health care, transportation, jobs, and education for their children.⁹

The goal of the literature survey in this essay is to shed light on the issues surrounding the youth (aged 12–22) belonging to this second wave of Somali refugees, as well as their brothers and sisters who were born in the U.S. after their families’ arrival here. Many of these young people were forced to flee Somalia as a result of the most violent phase of the civil war in the south (from December 1990 onward) or were born between this date and their parents’ resettlement in the

U.S. By the time they reached the U.S., many had spent time in Ethiopia, Kenya, or Yemen, whether in camps or with relatives, and had on average missed five or six years of education. Due to interrupted schooling, they often had a serious education deficit and had to enter age-appropriate classes in middle or even high school with little or no English proficiency and no basic skills nor even classroom habits. In many ways, the problems these young individuals face are even more extreme than those faced by Somali children who were born here, and their need for support (with regard to school achievement, time is not on their side) is even more acute.

II. The Scholarship about Immigrant Youth and Education

The scholarly literature about immigrant youth focuses on what it calls “second-generation” youth (those born of immigrant parents in the U.S.), as well as “Generation 1.5” youth (immigrant children who were born abroad but came to the U.S. so young they receive most of their schooling here). Sociologists are most prominent in this research, although psychologists and education and public health experts also join the fray. They base their work on both large quantitative and smaller qualitative (including ethnographic) studies of immigrant Hispanic/Latino and Asian communities, which form the bulk of second-wave immigration flows. What are some of the insights of this scholarship that might be relevant to Somali youth in the U.S.? In this section, we will first focus on the bad news and then on the good news. In the third part of the essay, we will analyze what appear to be the strengths and liabilities of the Somali communities as they confront the challenges of educating their children, in light of the surveyed scholarship and our own provisional observations. We will conclude with reflections on the limitations of this scholarship and the pitfalls of the approach followed.

A. The Bad News

The bad news is as follows. The literature indicates that immigrants who are poor and are visible minorities are at the greatest risk to see their children do worse than they did. The terms used are “downward mobility,” “second-generation decline,” and “segmented assimilation.” The latter means that, while some groups of immigrants—often voluntary and not impoverished—assimilate rather effortlessly into the

white middle class, other groups slip into the American underclass and permanent poverty.¹⁰ Those immigrants who live “in proximity to other U.S. minorities” and are themselves visible minorities (these are the terms used in the literature) are in greatest danger of this. The children of these immigrant groups are often discriminated against and attend substandard schools. This results in what scholars have called an oppositional identity or adversarial consciousness. This is a set of attitudes that may at some level be rational but is nevertheless deemed “maladaptive,” as it turns people against education and leads to inferior school achievement. Thus Carol Schmid concludes:

Students who are most at risk of academic failure are from poor and minority backgrounds that view schooling as an alienating force that provides unequal opportunities. These students...believe that their identities and languages are undermined or depreciated.¹¹

Other immigrant minority youth do not resist education, the scholarship suggests, but cannot afford to go to (or stay in) school because of economic pressures on their families. For example, in 1994–95 drop-out rates for Hispanic/Latino youth were 30 percent, but 10 percent of these had never actually entered school. At the same time, 40 percent of Hispanic children lived in poverty.¹²

Much of this bad news also appears to be relevant to Somali refugees and immigrants. Although there are plenty of Somalis, especially among those who came before 1990, who are well educated and reasonably well-off, many second-wave refugees live in economically challenged, minority-dominated neighborhoods, with children (belonging to Generation 1.5 and 2) attending large public schools that were not adequately prepared to receive them.¹³

Given the difficult circumstances that Somali refugee youth often face in U.S. schools, is “second-generation decline” inevitable for them, as the scholarly literature suggests? The answer, and this is the good news, is “no.” Scholars of immigration contend that there are many forces and factors that allow even poor immigrant youth to do well in school and eventually in the job market. What do these scholars contend are some of the factors that protect youth from downward mobility?

B. "Consonant" and "Dissonant" Paths of Acculturation

In this context, social scientists have found that the characteristics and resources of parents and the wider immigrant/ethnic community have a great impact on the successful acculturation of their children. Scholarly research has proven that the notion is false that "the new second generation must completely shed their old cultures and languages and remove themselves from their ethnic enclaves to be academically and economically successful."¹⁴ Instead of being told to disappear in the American melting pot through complete assimilation, immigrants are now expected to achieve "acculturation," defined as "a developmental process towards adaptation and gaining competence within more than one cultural setting."¹⁵ Unlike assimilation, which is a one-way process by which the inferior immigrant culture should give way to the superior host culture, acculturation is assumed to affect both parties and to be reciprocal. That is to say, as the immigrant group adopts attitudes, values, and norms from the host society, so does the latter adopt attitudes, values, and norms from the former.

Scholars have distinguished between three kinds of acculturation: "consonant," "dissonant," and "selected."¹⁶ When there is consonant acculturation, parents and children adapt to U.S. mainstream culture and society at the same tempo and in the same ways.

There is dissonant acculturation when youth quickly adapt to American ways, while parents do not. In the case of the latter, many different scenarios may play themselves out, but almost all involve serious generational conflict and the loss of parental and community guidance for the youth. When this happens, youth may get caught (or lost) between the values of the majority culture and those of their parents. For example, the U.S. ideal of developing "autonomy from parents as a means toward achieving the strong sense of personal identity necessary for leading a productive life" often clashes with parents' expectation "to remain indefinitely in a position of mutual interdependence with family members" and to establish "a sense of self-worth and maturation by subordinating their own needs and by assuming increasing responsibility for meeting the needs of family members."¹⁷ Psychologists refer to such a culture clash between parents and kids as "psychological discontinuities," or "gaps or absences in shared cultural knowledge, meanings and practices," which "make it difficult for individuals to understand differences and to formulate effective bicultural repertoires."¹⁸ In youth, this may lead to low self-esteem¹⁹ or other negative

outcomes. Dissonant acculturation, which may turn children into caretakers and translators for their parents, may have a negative impact on parents as well by making them feel powerless and dependent.

One of the major tasks of adolescence, psychologists point out, is to develop and become comfortable with one's identity.²⁰ For immigrant and minority youth, part of this development of identity involves an "intensified exploration of the meaning of one's ethnicity"²¹ and the "special task to negotiate a balance between two value systems: that of their own group and that of the majority."²² If the process is highly conflicted, due to cultural friction with parents or discrimination by the mainstream, it can lead to a host of problems, among them stress, low self-esteem, anger and oppositional behavior, "ethnic identity crisis," "identity deficit" (when a youth no longer knows what to do), or "marginalization" (the rejection of both domains).²³ When young people fail to find support from either their own ethnic or mainstream domains, it is suggested that peers may exercise such a dangerously large influence that they may even turn to gangs as substitute families.

Such dissonant acculturation is indeed rampant in Somali communities. A recent case study of a school in Toronto gives a particularly poignant example of the consequences this may have for a young person's education. There a girl named Amina got into such conflict with her mother that she dropped out of school, married an older Muslim man unknown to her family, and was a teenage mother soon after. She quickly came to regret her decision and called dropping out of school the biggest mistake of her life.²⁴ Research would agree with her, as such early marriage is correlated with lower educational and income levels for the rest of a woman's life.²⁵

C. The Good News: "Selected" Acculturation and Biculturalism

There is a third kind of acculturation, and this is the good news that the literature reports. It is described as follows:

Finally, with selected acculturation the second generation [youth] is embedded in a co-ethnic community that supports their parents, slows the loss of the parents' home language and norms, and cushions the move of both generations into American ways. This is characterized by lack of intergenerational conflict, the presence of co-ethnics as friends, and full bilingualism in the second generation.²⁶

Experts on immigrant youth also describe this as “accommodation without assimilation,” or the ability to “resist American mainstream culture while not embracing an oppositional minority culture.” They believe it is at work among, for example, the Punjabi Sikhs of California and the Vietnamese in New Orleans. Concluding that this form of acculturation has the best results for youth, they support the development of policies to promote it.²⁷

Of what does accommodation without assimilation consist? For immigrant youth it means the development of bicultural competencies and relationships that allow them to draw support from their own ethnic community (parents and co-ethnic peers) as well as the host community (teachers, counselors, and mainstream peers). Such biculturalism allows them to avoid “psychological discontinuities” while developing high self-esteem and positive ethnic identity. This, in turn, protects them against experiences of discrimination by the mainstream as well as other hazards.²⁸ Biculturalism has become so important in the eyes of researchers that they now measure successful acculturation in terms of the high quality relationships young people develop in both their own ethnic and the mainstream domains. Bilingualism is a part of bicultural competencies. In contrast to what right-wing media may suggest, almost all second-generation immigrant youth speak English, and it is not their competence in English as much as that in their parents’ home language that is under pressure.²⁹ While some scholars believe that bilingualism also stimulates cognitive or mental development, almost all agree that it has important cultural benefits, as it helps children resist unwanted assimilation and facilitates an ethnic support system that promotes school achievement.³⁰

D. The Positive Impact of Better Schools

Of course the burning question, then, becomes how do second-generation youth become fully bicultural? If bicultural competencies do indeed benefit the educational and psychological well-being of immigrant youth, mainstream institutions must act on this insight. The single-most important cause of academic excellence in youth is, of course, excellent schools.³¹ If those were available to all immigrant youth, this essay and much of the scholarship surveyed here might have been superfluous. This is indeed a crucial and sobering insight. Somali institutional responses to this awareness will be discussed below.

E. The Positive Impact of Parenting

Returning to the subject of opportunities and responsibilities of the immigrant communities themselves, scholars are convinced that parents, on the one hand, and the wider ethnic community, on the other, can help their children succeed in school and cushion the negative impact of low economic status and discrimination, even in the difficult circumstances described above.³² For example, compared to their non-immigrant peers, immigrant youth live more often in intact, two-parent households, and this correlates with better school achievement.³³ Immigrant children who were born abroad or came to the U.S. when they were very young also have better health than mainstream youth or third-generation immigrant children of their ethnic/racial background.³⁴ Immigrant parents often have a fiercely positive attitude toward education. When it is shared by the youth, this correlates with student educational success. Parental involvement in their children's education—showing interest in or supervising their homework, taking them on educational trips, engaging them in educational activities—can also undo the negative impact of substandard schools. This parental support and involvement, research suggests, as well as the ability to keep their children somewhat grounded in their own ethnic culture (while they become competent in the mainstream domain), have positive results for school achievement.

Parenting styles are also crucial. For example, punitive and authoritarian parenting appear to be counterproductive, while permissive parenting—sometimes associated with single-motherhood—has negative results if it constrains youth to make their own decisions too early.³⁵ Parents who make joint decisions with their children have the best results, because children internalize and come to embrace (at least in part) the values parents hold and teach. There is a vast literature (not all reviewed for this article) that shows that parental involvement with second-generation youth can accomplish miracles. In many cases, second-generation youth outperform not only their immigrant parents but also the third generation, despite their difficult circumstances. Some scholars have pointed to parents' "dual mind frame" in this context—a diasporic consciousness that appears to inoculate them and their children against the worst of their American experiences.³⁶

E. The Positive Impact of the Ethnic Community

The wider ethnic community also has a crucial role to play, as it represents “social capital” (a set of social relationships and other resources) from which its members can draw support.³⁷ Scholars have found that a strongly connected ethnic community, which supports parental values and behaviors, is proud of its culture and communal identity, provides its members with economic and social support (such as start-up capital, employment, and emergency aid), and can also compensate for the negative impacts associated with poverty and minority status.³⁸ Some of the Asian communities, they report, have this kind of cohesion and structure, and have been able to pass on to second-generation youth respect for authority, educational excellence, and hard work.³⁹ Parents and community together can bring about selected acculturation and bicultural competencies in second-generation youth, with excellent educational and mental health outcomes.

III. The Scholarship’s Recommendations and Somali Realities

All this resonates with the situation of Somali communities, which face many of the conditions that jeopardize the educational and mental well-being of their children. Do they have the characteristics experts on immigrant youth believe might produce successful, biculturally competent youth?

A. Strengths

1. A Strong Sense of Communal Identity

In general, Somalis have a strong sense of communal identity and cultural confidence and pride. They feel strongly about their cultural values and habits as well as their religion, Islam, which appears to strengthen their resilience.⁴⁰ Recent Somali immigrants often go out of their way to live together in the same towns, neighborhoods, and buildings, and almost immediately establish *dugsis*, or informal Quranic schools, for their children. Their solidarity and mutual support in times of emergency, such as labor disputes, illness, or death, are extraordinary. Somali immigrants are often entrepreneurial, undertaking joint economic ventures and pooling financial, labor, and other resources. They have their own well-established ways of settling disputes and

disagreements within the community, although courts of law have become a crucial instrument (and sometimes means of manipulation) for many. In many ways, the Somalis certainly appear to form the strongly knit, inward-looking ethnic community that, according to the scholarship, might ground immigrant youth in their own ethnic culture.

2. Resistance to American Racism

Many Somalis have been caught unaware by American racial discrimination. They do not regard their black skin as the liability or handicap that mainstream society often insists it is. At least initially, they have resisted the stereotypes and historical liabilities of being “Black” the American way. While such attitudes also reflect the social prejudice toward African-Americans to which Somalis were exposed back home, as well as the complex history of Northeast African cultural prejudice toward other Africans, generally Somalis refuse to accept the negative social categories and straightjackets U.S. mainstream society has readied for them. On the one hand, this can make them especially vulnerable in the face of institutional racism while, on the other hand, their rejection of racist stereotypes marks a positive communal identity and provides an opportunity for real change. During a recent workshop for teachers (K–12) at the African Studies Center of Ohio State University, an African-American school principal saluted the Somalis for giving a new, proud and unapologetic face to Africanness in the U.S.⁴¹ The same is also true for the ways Somalis live Islam in the U.S. As one Muslim woman said, “We used to be self-conscious about our Islamic headscarves, but now Somali women with their huge scarves and wraps have entered the scene, we have become almost invisible.”

3. Attitudes toward Children and Education

Traditionally, Somali parents have been extremely family- and child-oriented, with motherhood and childrearing central to women’s social status and self-perception.⁴² From the 1950s (the nationalist movement) onward, Somalis have had strong positive attitudes toward, and expectations of, modern education. Even if many Somali youth do not have parents with adequate English proficiency to help them with their homework, most parents, as well as the community at large, see education as the major strategy to escape poverty. They have great respect

for the *jaamici*, or university graduate. This is even true, it appears, for those who came to the U.S. straight from the countryside, without ever having lived in a city before.⁴³ Somali parents have also shown that they are ready to move to find optimal conditions for family life, especially housing, education, employment, and/or public assistance. This in-country mobility and the size of the groups that may move together have sometimes led to controversy and conflict, as in the case of Lewiston, Maine, mentioned above.

4. Establishing Somali Schools

Somalis have been famous since the nineteenth century for their entrepreneurial spirit, and the risk-taking and innovation associated with it. Relevant to this essay are the educational initiatives and institution-building Somalis have undertaken in the U.S. In all cities of Somali settlement, Somali immigrants, often first wave, have established community development organizations that help Somalis learn English, study for citizenship exams, fill out tax forms, and navigate the complex bureaucracies of public housing, health care, education, and welfare. Almost without exception underfunded and understaffed (and often divided by region or family background), these organizations nevertheless have played an important role in providing after-school tutoring and mentoring programs. The community organizations have also provided social space for students and their parents to socialize with fellow Somalis. Somali mosques (which often provide Quranic school education for the children), diners, shops, pool halls, and sports teams—equally omnipresent in areas of Somali settlement—also provide opportunities for the community (including the youth) to gather.

Even more striking, however, is how Somalis have acted on the insight that better education can be created through establishing their own schools. In the U.S., the best-known example is the International Academy of Columbus (IAC), a K–8 Charter school founded in 2002, that is publicly funded but privately run. The school has a Somali-speaking instructional assistant in every classroom, most of who were teachers in Somalia. Although the students in this school hail from ten different countries, 90 percent of them are Somali. The IAC is purposefully bilingual and bicultural in the hope of fostering the kind of “selected acculturation” that scholars recommend.⁴⁴

There is therefore no doubt that many Somali youth, male and female, are educationally successful because of (and not in spite of) the

fact that they are members of a Somali community. However, there are also ways in which Somali communities fall short of the ideal cohesive, authoritative, ethnic community that the scholarship describes. It is worth exploring these shortcomings as they represent the challenges Somalis may need to take on if they want their second- and third-generation youth to succeed.

B. Liabilities

1. Lack of Resources

The relative lack of financial resources of the Somali communities hinders their potential to develop the bicultural competencies of their children. It is true that almost all Somali communities have a mosque, diners, pool halls, Somali-run businesses (sometimes clustered together to become “a Somali mall”), and community organizations where community members can congregate and perhaps learn some English and basic computer skills. However, not only are such institutions generally extremely rudimentary and not geared toward youth, they are also—often in spite of the good intentions and efforts of the staff—male-dominated sites into which Somali women, and especially Somali girls, rarely venture on equal terms with men. If Somali women did not organize their own social events (weddings and other cultural celebrations) and, less commonly, organizations, they would be seriously socially disenfranchised. Even so, particularly in cities without good and affordable public transportation, women may become isolated and suffer from depression even more than men.

2. Parenting Challenges

According to the research surveyed, parenting challenges have a great potential to negatively affect the educational achievements of youth. The realities facing many Somali youth and parents are daunting. As a result of the civil war and the hazardous circumstances of the exodus and exile, many Somali youth lost or are not in the care of their parents. In these cases, they may not receive any parental care, and even well intentioned relatives cannot control them or give them the support they need. Many parents and first-generation youth have experienced serious loss and trauma for which only a few seek professional care. Especially for the elderly and those who had high status and incomes

in Somalia, their powerlessness and dependence on social services and public assistance is deeply unnerving and humiliating. Parents thus do not always have the psychological wherewithal to be of support to their children. Other parents, especially those without any formal education but also those with limited English proficiency, feel that they do not have the skills to involve themselves actively in their children's education. Not all parents, therefore, are in a position to take on the roles that might compensate for their children's substandard schools and ghetto conditions.

In addition, there are aspects of pre-existing Somali institutions and culture that are serving parents poorly in the new environment. The most obvious two "psychological discontinuities" have by now been recognized, but not remedied. These are Somali parents' attitudes toward schools and teachers, as well as what is called their parenting styles. First, in Somalia, parents did not need to involve themselves with their children's education. This was completely the domain of the schools and the teachers, who derived enormous authority from the parents' full respect and trust. It was therefore not lack of interest that made Somali immigrant parents initially stay away from school meetings (even though that is what the host societies, from Canada and the Netherlands to the U.S., often assumed). Of course, even if parents are willing to be more actively engaged, the question remains whether they all have the competencies and skills to supervise, monitor, and troubleshoot for their children. The community programs set up to remedy this are too often seriously underfunded and, for this and other reasons, haphazard.

Second, Somali parenting styles, especially the relationships between fathers and sons in the Somali countryside and perhaps even in the city, were often somewhat authoritarian and distant. Fathers would often talk *to* or *at* their children but not *with* them. Many Somali parents (especially mothers, who traditionally had a softer and more openly caring parenting style) have already learned that authoritarian parenting is less effective than pragmatic negotiation and shared decision-making. Many parents are now taking the advice that they should "befriend" their kids. This is exactly the kind of behavior the experts recommend, but the line between supportive and permissive parenting is not always easy to draw.

3. The Generation Gap

As in all recent immigrant groups, the Somali community is facing serious generational conflict. Parents are acutely aware of the dangers of losing their children to a consumerist and individualistic American culture, and are adopting strategies to prevent this—from changing parenting styles to emphasizing Islam as central to their children's identities as moral, successful, and Somali human beings. One recent social commentary upon parent-youth relations is a *buraanbur* (a poem in women's most prestigious genre) recited by a Somali woman in Boston:⁴⁵

They have learned lies and mischief and are afraid of nothing
They eat the kind of things that will send one straight to hell
They wear pants without belts
and drag their feet like hyenas
They curve their arms like the non-Muslim Blacks
and wear a miniskirt under their long dress
They have learned lies and mischief...

In the past, parental advice to Somali youth who wanted to deserve their respect, especially in the countryside, often took the form of "*asaaggaa raac*," that is to say, "live-up to the achievements of your age-group." This may or may not have been an adequate charge in a more cohesive social setting. Yet, in the diaspora there is neither a clear standard nor the wider social support to make such autonomy either feasible or beneficial for youth. The young people, moreover, sometimes perceive the attitudes of their elders as a lack of respect and dismissive of their identity as Somalis. Such feelings can be deepened by the fact that they may not have lived in Somalia or may have no memories of it, and may not have mastered the Somali language, traditionally a valued aspect of Somali manhood. Such perceptions represent the opposite of the harmony and support scholars say youth should find in their own ethnic community. Issues of identity formation in Somali youth and their perceptions of their own bicultural identity and competence therefore also deserve further study.

However, the biggest and most crucial challenge for the Somali community may lay in the crisis that lies at the heart of its identity and that drives people apart even as they try to pull together. This is the crisis

of *soomaalinimo* or “Somaliness” and the struggle over its relationship to Islam.

4. The Crisis of Soomaalinimo

Even though Somalis are still a highly self-conscious and inward-looking community, they are also characterized by a deep sense of crisis. It could not be otherwise after the violence of the long and still ongoing civil war. One way to describe this situation is as a crisis of *soomaalinimo* itself. In the 1950s and 1960s, many Somalis embraced ideals of moral modernity legitimized by Somali cultural authenticity, itself perceived as largely coterminous with Islam. This conceptualization of *soomaalinimo* was a cultural ideal. Yet even as an ideal, it was far from perfect. In the period between independence and the civil war, the pride in *soomaalinimo* was real, and for many, inspiring. It is this *soomaalinimo* that was damaged in the violence of the ongoing civil war and is further challenged in new ways by the host society. In the vast mix of ethnic identities that makes up the U.S., Somaliness ranks rather low. The authority of *soomaalinimo*, its claims for attention and respect from either immigrant youth or American institutions, and its relevance as a public identity are low as well.

This has serious consequences for the community’s effectiveness in the diaspora and its ability to support and provide to Somali youth bicultural competence. First, it has negatively affected leadership. Time and again, Somali men prove how hard it is for them, given their backgrounds and the new conditions of resource scarcity, to work together for the common Somali good. In spite of women’s relative exclusion from formal leadership positions back home, in the diaspora they have excelled in weaving the community together through smaller and continuous *ad hoc* acts of mutual support and collaboration. However, as Bryden and Steiner have noted, these women have neither fully recognized nor drawn the implications from their roles in supporting the mind-sets that allowed the fratricide in Somalia. Neither have they organized to speak in one voice (or even plural voices) about their roles in and vision for community well-being.⁴⁶ From the perspective of the scholarship surveyed here, the challenge of leadership makes it harder for Somali second-generation youth, both boys and girls, to develop a positive ethnic identity and to consider their own culture to be as valuable as mainstream culture.

Second, the crisis of *soomaalinimo* leads to glaring inconsistencies. For example, parents may support different warlords or regional states back home but also insist on bringing their kids to all-Somali sports events, enrolling them in a Somali charter school, and visiting other Somali groups' restaurants. They may pull together across social and clan boundaries in case of death and disaster, but then might undermine all-Somali projects organized by those perceived as rivals. Thus, the divisions of back home are, to Somali youth, something like a mine-field. One false move and a close friendship with a Somali peer may be destroyed. The question must be asked whether the crisis of *soomaalinimo* hinders a deeper exploration and celebration of ethnic identity by the young people. Given the overwhelmingly negative aspects associated with the Somali civil war, Black Hawk Down, camp and refugee experiences, poverty and low economic status, and post-September 11 realities, developing a positive Somali identity and becoming successful in mainstream society present real challenges.

5. The Prominence and Possibilities of Islam

While *soomaalinimo*, at least for the moment, has been damaged by the civil war, the new public communal identity that has emerged is more explicitly based on Islam. Even though, after September 11, 2001, Islam in the U.S. is often viewed by the mainstream as "public enemy number one," due to the authority it has in the Somali community, it is strongly imbued with power and relevance. Within the Somali community it is in many ways an enormous source of strength. It often brings out the best in its members, brings and holds them together, and connects them to a national and transnational community of Muslims. Scholars even correlate the retention of the ethnic tongue among immigrant youth to a community's joint residence and strong religious identity. Islam thus appears to provide the kind of grounding in communal values and attitudes that the experts on bicultural competencies prescribe.

As Ali Hassan Zaidi and others have pointed out, "the resurgence of Islam is, among other things, an interpretive contest over the definition of Islam and the authenticity of an interpretation."⁴⁷ Interpreted in this way, fundamentalist Islam can be either reactionary and regressive or progressive and visionary in its search for an alternative Islamic modernity. In the Somali context, both in the diaspora and at home, the contest over the definition of Islam is in full swing, with both reaction-

ary and progressive trends and individuals mingling. However, community-wide, open, public debate about these trends is largely absent.

Somali parents are not the only Muslim immigrant parents to deepen their religious commitments in the U.S. Ali Hassan Zaidi believes that Muslim parents become more religious, partly because living away from home allows (or forces) them to make a personal commitment to their faith and not to passively follow the social norms of home. Partly also, they fear that if they do not take Islam seriously, there is little hope that their children will.⁴⁸ However, for most first-generation Muslim immigrant parents, Ali Hassan Zaidi argues, their increased awareness of other Muslim communities, all regarding their own ways as most Islamic, leads them to emphasize their own cultural groups. In contrast, second-generation Muslim youth have rejected aspects of their ethnic or national cultural backgrounds and have chosen a dynamic, modern Muslim identity, which emphasizes membership in the global Muslim community over that in the national or ethnic groups of their parents.⁴⁹ In the Somali community, the bifurcation of *diin* and *dhaqan* (religion and culture) as legitimizing discourses appears to be characteristic of the community as a whole and among both parents and youth. This might lead to what the scholarship calls “consonant” acculturation. Nevertheless, parents and children are developing very different behaviors, relationships, and identities, and these merit further study.

As with any cultural identity, the question must be asked how Islam relates to power and how it is becoming an instrument for power in the hands of individuals. Will new community leaders, who speak and act in the name of Islam, use the authority Islam enjoys over many Somalis for the general well-being or for personal position and wealth? Will they strive for “accommodation without assimilation” or will they—assisted by the uninformed prejudice in mainstream America—encourage Somali youth to develop an adversarial identity that will put them at odds with mainstream society? Enabling the second-generation to combine a strong and proud Muslim identity with social and economic well-being is a responsibility that both the Somali community and mainstream institutions must take very seriously.

In this context, one must ask how Muslim leaders of the Somali community will shape the process of “accommodation without assimilation” for women and girls? Modest dress appears to have been a protection and not an obstacle for Somali schoolgirls. However, how will the authority of Islam be brought to bear on girls’ chances to obtain an education, economic security, and some extent of auton-

omy and power in their personal and social relationships?⁵⁰ There is virtually no debate—and certainly no community-wide, open, public debate—about these issues in the Somali communities of the U.S. If Islam in America becomes more and more beleaguered, and if the contest over the interpretation of Islam in the Somali community becomes increasingly narrow and conservative, the space for internal debates about normative behavior, from dress to financial interest, may become more and more constricted. Having women and youth intellectually engaged with these crucial developments would be a powerful exercise in developing and practicing their bicultural skills.

Finally, there is plenty of evidence that Somali immigrant youth are indeed developing their own diasporic transnational identities. Somali students and student associations are connecting and meeting with each other across the U.S., as do Somali sports teams from North America and Western Europe. Another striking example of this phenomenon is given by a Finnish research team. The researchers found that Somali refugee youth in Finland were not particularly focused on school performance and suffered considerable harassment and discrimination from Finnish authorities, especially the police. However, the team reported with some surprise that, with all the talk about the European Union and its significance for Finland, Somali youth were the only real Europeans. In contact with other Somalis throughout Europe, they were the only youth with a strong transnational, European mentality!⁵¹ The resilience and creativity with which Somali youth are developing a transnational Somali identity and competencies may put them—consciously or not—in the ranks of cultural innovators. This, too, deserves further study.

IV. Conclusion

According to the scholarship on immigrant youth, immigrant communities have the potential to both support and undermine the opportunities for educational achievement in their youth. They can either hold their youth back or launch them with a powerful toolbox of principles, skills, habits, and attitudes.

However, scholars give no guidance as to the balance communities that aspire to “accommodation without assimilation” should attempt to establish. Nor do they weigh personal and deeply gendered costs to those (e.g., girls and women) who may bear the brunt of maintaining close-knit ethnic communities. They rarely ask, let alone answer, the

following crucial questions: (1) at what point does the ethnic community or enclave “with its dense networks of obligations and traditions, outlive its usefulness?”⁵² and (2) does “access to global diasporic consciousness” strengthen bicultural competence and the integration of immigrant youth or cause them to disengage from American society.⁵³ This issue of balance, we believe, is a crucial challenge for Somali communities.

Both the scholarship on the educational trajectories of immigrant youth and the growing body of reports and case studies of Somali school-aged children in the U.S. have, at this point in time, serious limitations. First, in spite of the good intentions of the authors, who often have the best interests of immigrant youth at heart, this literature is often so negative that immigrant status itself is presented as pathological—a disease—further exacerbated by being “visible,” that is to say, non-White. Second, whether qualitative or quantitative, these writings have provided few in-depth studies of the perceptions and experiences of immigrant youth themselves or of the resilience and creativity of these youth and their positive contributions to their new environments (rather than the problems they cause). This is pointed out by Spencer and Dornbusch, who write:

Social scientists studying minority youth inherit a traditional research base that is focused on negative outcomes rather than adaptive processes... A good deal of research has been conducted within the framework of a “deficit model.” According to this model, minority youth perform poorly in school and later on on the job because their family background is deprived, deficient, or deviant compared with white middle class norms... Too few studies have examined the triumphs of minorities in spite of poverty, social injustice and inequities. A shift in focus may prove more productive for policy making than mere restatements of the socio-cultural context of minority youth.⁵⁴

Third, although sociologists of immigration and immigrant education often take courageous stances against nativist chauvinism and racism, the recommendations they outline for immigrant communities imply an acceptance of the “minority status”—read, general disenfranchisement—of other poor communities in the U.S., especially those of people of color. Their recommendations, therefore, caution immigrant youth not to become like African- or Mexican-Americans and thus sidestep the search for solutions that would improve the educational and employment outcomes of all those who live and work in the U.S.

History must be lived forward but understood backwards, the saying goes. It is obvious that Somalis and other immigrants are living history in fast-forward and that researchers have trouble understanding them even in hindsight. The conclusions of this essay suggest that grounding oneself in the ways immigrants and immigrant youth live life and conceptualize their experiences is indispensable to meaningful research. It may, in fact, provide a more productive point of departure than the literature surveyed here. Whatever lens is adopted to study Somali immigrants, rather than accepting a hierarchy of various degrees of “otherness” as its framework, the solutions to the problems of immigrant communities must address the wider structure of inequality—in this case, public education as a whole—as it affects all citizens. ●

Notes

1. Borgas, p. 1711.
2. Clifford, p. 312.
3. Ali Hassan Zaidi, p. 22.
4. Clifford, pp. 312 and 319 (quotation). This phrase was coined by George Lamming, speaking about African-Americans.
5. Perhaps it would be better to speak of a third-wave of immigration from the 1980s onward. In 1998, Schmid reported: “about one in every five individuals under 18 is either an immigrant or has parents who are immigrants. The expectations for 2010 are that 22% of school-age population will be immigrant youth” (pp. 71–72). In 2000, moreover, 31% of American youth were minority youth (Spencer and Dornbusch). Accurate numbers for the Somali immigrant population are not available, as the U.S. Statistical Yearbooks include only the relatively low numbers of refugees accepted, green cards received, and new citizens.
6. See the interesting video-documentary by Ziad Hamza, *The Letter*, Mystique Films, 2004 (see www.mystiquefilms.com). Anthropologist Heather Lindquist, University of Chicago, is in the process of writing a Ph.D. dissertation in Anthropology about this community.
7. It is believed that the ways in which the first generation of immigrants adapt to living in the United States has a strong impact on the opportunities and niches available to later immigrants (Schmid, p. 78). For this reason, too, the history of Somali immigration deserves further research. For a relevant case study, see Kusow.
8. Many of the refugees from northern Somalia in 1988 settled in Western Europe or the United Kingdom (the former colonial power in the north), although eventually many also ended up in North America.
9. Mawi Asgedom, in his book *Of Beetles & Angels*, describes how his own family, displaced by the Ethiopian-Eritrean war and after a stay in a Sudanese refugee camp, was eventually resettled in the U.S. His story is a success story, as he made it to Harvard. However, the refugee experience exacted a heavy toll from his family.

10. Schmid, p. 73; Levitt and Waters, p. 16.
11. Idem., p. 82.
12. Idem., p. 74.
13. For a report on the educational challenges of Somali youth in Prince George County, Maryland, see Birman, Trickett, and Bacchus 2001. In Boston, the three bilingual programs for Somalis were abolished in 2003. In Columbus, the influx of Somali students with interrupted schooling so much exacerbated existing problems that the Columbus Public Schools (CPS) were declared an “academic emergency.” The newcomers’ school that has been nurtured since 1996 has developed into a separate K–12 bilingual school, and the CPS has climbed from “academic emergency” to an “academic watch” status.
14. Idem., p. 82.
15. Genero Oppedal et al. define acculturation as “a socialization process that involves the acquisition of, and adaptation to cultural values, norms, and practices that differ from those of one’s culture of origin” (p. 5).
16. Levitt and Waters, p. 19; Portes and Rumbaut 2001.
17. Spencer and Dornbusch, p. 134.
18. Oppedal et al. give a definition of cultural competence (p. 5).
19. Idem., p. 9.
20. Spencer and Dornbusch define identity as “a conscious sense of individual uniqueness...and a solidarity with a group’s ideals” (p. 130). They point out that: “[a]dolescents in general are self-conscious and reluctant to stand out in the crowd. The visible minority youth [let alone the immigrant from a distant culture] has little choice” (p. 132).
21. Oppedal et al., p. 6.
22. Spencer and Dornbusch, p. 133.
23. Oppedal et al., pp. 6–7.
24. Ighodaro, pp. 61–62.
25. Grindstaff, p. 334.
26. Levitt and Waters (summarizing Portes and Rumbaut, 2001), p. 17.
27. Ibid., p. 16.
28. Oppedal et al., p. 7.
29. Girls often appear to retain more of their parents’ language than boys, perhaps because they spend more time at home, but this is not always a benefit. When parents’ educational expectations of girls are less than what they expect of boys, as among the Punjabi Sikhs in California, this negatively affects girls’ educational levels. Moreover, Min Zhou and Carl J. Bankston found for the Vietnamese community in New Orleans that there were serious “personal costs, especially for girls, of being caught in dense networks of expectations in which social control is all encompassing” (Schmid, p. 82).
30. Some scholars believe that bilingualism only promotes school achievement when parents have not yet learned English (Schmid, p. 81).
31. Portes and MacLeod.
32. Hao and Bonstead-Bruns.
33. Schmid, p. 73.
34. Hernandez, p. 8.

35. One aspect of this is what is sometimes called immigrant parents' "dual mind-set," which draws strength and forbearance from memories of home (Schmid, p. 75).
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid, p. 72; Portes and MacLeod, p. 256.
38. Thus, Schmid quotes Min Zhou's and Carl J. Bankston's conclusions that "ethnic immigrant children who remain close to their families' culture do better than those who acculturate more rapidly" (p. 77).
39. Zhou and Bankston.
40. In their case study, Birman, Trickett, and Bacchus reported that Somali students drew great strength from Islam and quoted one student as saying that "in the Koran it states that God will not give you more than you can bear" (p. 9).
41. Columbus, Ohio, 26 June 2004.
42. See, for example, Kapteijns, *Women's Voices*, pp. 55–72, "Sittaat," and "Women and the Crisis."
43. In Columbus such difference appears to exist between the youth of Capital Park and South Park. However, this might be due to very different factors and more research is clearly needed.
44. Another famous school is a private Islamic school in Ottawa. It is Somali run and largely attended by Somali youth. This year it graduated its first high-school student.
45. Hajiya Ruqiya, Boston, 27 September 2003.
46. Bryden and Steiner, p. 6.
47. Ali Hassan Zaidi, pp. 6, 9.
48. Ibid., p. 8.
49. Ibid., pp. 14, 16, 17.
50. Compare Note 30.
51. Minttu Mikkonen, "Finnish researcher sees Somali-born young men as 'first true Europeans in Finland,'" *Helsingin Sanomat*, International Edition, 23 March 2004. www2.helsinginsanomat.fi/English/archive, accessed September 3, 2004.
52. Schmid, p. 83.
53. Levitt and Waters, p. 18.
54. Spencer and Dornbusch, p. 126.

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APPENDIX

Recommendations to U.S. Host Communities and Institutions

1. To continue to promote dialogue between mainstream institutions (such as schools, hospitals, libraries, police departments, courts, housing authorities) and Somali refugee and immigrant communities.
2. To continue to help Somali clients of institutions that provide public services to better understand what is expected of them, but also to be alert to the possibility that Somali responses and attitudes may at times point at deep flaws in the practices and philosophies of those institutions themselves. Thus, Somali women's protests against what they consider unacceptably high rates of caesarian births might point at structural problems within the U.S. healthcare system in general.

3. To develop workshops at which Somali and other immigrant youth can discuss the challenges they face in developing realistic strategies for reaching their educational and employment goals.
4. To engage Somali youth (and the Somali community at large) in articulating what bicultural competencies they feel they may need in order to become successful members of both their own community and America as a whole.
5. To assist the Somali community in developing purposeful occasions at which old and young, men and women, can bridge the knowledge gaps separating them and promote the bicultural competencies of all.
6. To promote a focus not only on the challenges Somali refugees and immigrants represent to mainstream institutions, but also on the ways they enrich, or might enrich, their neighborhoods and communities.