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**A Changing World…A Changing Classroom:
What the American Teacher Can Learn From Somali Immigrants**

Learning about other nations and cultures around the world has been a standard part of the American curriculum for centuries. Classrooms are changing, however; with the large influx of new immigrants into the U.S., the opportunity for school age children in America to learn about *and* from each other is growing. With this wonderful opportunity also comes challenge – for immigrants, their new communities, and for the educators who must teach for success. Immigrants come to America for many reasons such as jobs, college and family; for those who are refugees, like most of the new Somali immigrants in the U.S. today, the reason is escape from brutal civil war and famine and hope of a better, more stable life. As with most immigrant groups, individuals have varied and different background experiences which influence the ways in which each of them view and adapt to their new surroundings. Though originally from the same country, Somali refugees have followed distinctly different paths to America – and these paths and experiences have helped to shape individuals whose needs now need to be met by their new communities and the educators within them. The background of Somali refugees, like the circumstances surrounding all immigrants, is important for educators to understand in order to better meet the needs of students and families as they learn to survive, function and eventually strengthen their identities and live their lives within American culture.

A refugee is a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his [her] nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [herself] of the protection of that country" (Magnuson 7). Though religion binds the Somali people (most all are Muslim), Somalis belong to one of six major clans – the "clan shift"

of power in Somalia is one of the main reasons for the civil wars which have plagued the country since its independence from the oppressive occupation of Italy and Britain in 1960. Though the U.S. backed Mohammed Siad Barre, a member of the Darod clan, as president (as a strategic maneuver against Soviet-allied Ethiopia), his rule was overthrown in 1988 by rebel forces made up of other Somali clans. The clan leaders (who quickly became militia leaders) ruled and fought over regions of Somalia until an escalation in the violence in 1991-1992. The militias also confiscated and blockaded food shipments, resulting in a severe famine. More than 300,000 Somalis died in this short period, and more and more fled to Kenya, Egypt and Yemen after U.S. peacekeeping forces withdrew following a brutal battle in Mogadishu. Somali immigrants began coming to the United States soon after (Schaid and Grossman 8-9). Connected to each other by the extended clan system, Somalis living in America continue to send great amounts of their income to family members still living in Somalia. The average income of a household in Somalia is about $226 per year; approximately 60 percent of people in Somalia are unemployed and 73 percent live in poverty. Somali immigrants in America send over $700 billion to relatives in Somalia every year (Bonasso 1). Ironically, it seems that the same clan system that connects families and gives Somalis such a sense of support and belonging, is the same system that feeds into the ongoing civil war in Somalia.

With the civil wars raging in Somalia, formalized education was not regularly available for its inhabitants after 1988. Therefore, though many of the parents had access to education before their refugee status, their children did not. Somali refugees have fled their native country with little food, few supplies, and without a solid education for their children. The refugee camps that have accepted displaced Somalis during these times are not only varied in geographic location, but in the number and quality of services that are provided for the occupants. Refugees in Yemen seem to have the hardest time. There is no help from the Yemeni government, and since the nation itself is struggling economically, refugees are often treated like a burden. The refugee

camp of Kharaz is located in an isolated part of the scorching hot desert, far from other towns, work opportunities, roads and water. This is the land that the Yemeni government offered. Corruption and raids from locals threatens residents. There are no educational opportunities – people here are concerned simply for their survival (Steil 2). Those young people that fled to Egypt and Kenya with their families seem to have the most exposure to formalized education – Egypt being the most accepting of Somali students and the most aligned with Western educational practices. Students who live in Egypt before coming to America often know some English, and most have also learned Arabic. Refugees who have spent time in Kenyan refugee camps have usually had access to education, but the variables are many and more obvious. Girls, for example, are often treated as servants in many Kenyan camps, and are expected to do housework instead of attend school. Kenya provides the land for the camps, but does not provide anything else; all supplies, food and water resources, healthcare, and education are offered through aid agencies and/or resident volunteers. Some camps have more outside involvement than others – some are so organized that transcripts from Kenyan refugee camps are available to American schools when students enroll (Schaid and Grossman 22-23). Others, like Dadaab, operate seventeen primary schools, but depend on volunteer teachers and former students to act as teachers since the camp is not eligible for free primary education. Though the teacher-student ratio is high and the schools have to depend on the few old textbooks donated by relief agencies, many students do sit for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), an American university entry exam. Students in Kenyan camps usually learn Kiswahili as well (Mureu 1-6). These differences are important to note because though from the same geographical area, students' reactions (much as their families') to American culture and schools will be different because of the varied experiences refugees have encountered during their flight from Somalia.

Some of the challenges that face Somali immigrants are unique from other immigrant groups. Muslim customs and practices are not typically familiar to many American communities, especially those in the Midwest. This religious difference, along with the brightly colored dresses and head scarves of Somali women (more so than men) and a greater contrast in skin color than some other immigrant groups, make it easy for them to be labeled as “other” or “foreign”. Somali Bantus, descendents from slaves brought to Somalia from Western Africa, have very dark complexions, and now make up a high percentage of current Somali refugees. Finding Somali (or Arabic) translators is more difficult in many parts of the U.S., and some American residents may feel uncomfortable due to a lack of familiarity with the Somali language (Schaid and Grossman 7-8). Also, though many Somali parents and their younger children have been able to take advantage of mainstream schooling with some degree of English instruction, either in Somalia years ago or in America now that they have immigrated, the generation of older children have struggled to find their place in American schools. These older children arrived as teens with little or no English and were not able to be successfully placed for success in public schools before reaching graduation age. This can also happen with Somali immigrants who arrive from refugee camps without educational opportunities and with those arriving (though few) directly from Somalia (Guerin, et al 3).

These vastly different prior educational experiences can make it difficult for American schools to adequately place Somali immigrant students as they arrive in the U.S. It is important for schools to assess individual students to find out if each has had *no schooling*, *interrupted schooling*, or some *informal schooling*. A Somali community expert from a large city in Minnesota explains:

“Students who have no schooling obviously have a lot more to learn than their American peers. Everything from folders to schedules to lining up in the hallway is new. Students with interrupted schooling know about school, but about a different type of school; and they have learned in a variety of subject areas, but not necessarily in the same subject areas – nor the same

material – that other students have learned…students with informal schooling have been to a Quranic School…The purpose of the school is religious training" (Magnuson 17).

Knowing about a student's educational background can help educators to better place all immigrant children in effective classes, and to better address the specific needs that each student will have as he or she strives to learn within the American school system – a system which, for most, is startlingly different from what they have known.

Since it is the children that are most rapidly and routinely exposed to the new American culture through school, a gap often develops between parents and the younger generation in regards to knowledge and acceptance of American ways. The immediate need to learn English is often the start. Obviously, learning English is important to navigating successfully in the U.S. – an "English dominant world." However, the acquisition of English often begins to symbolize more to young immigrant students. "To them, becoming English speaking is the same as becoming American. English is not just a vehicle for communication, it is the social and political marker of affiliation and belonging. If they can cross over a border into the English speaking world, they will become American" (Olsen 197). Learning English is not just a portal to opportunity, but can also become a shield against shame. Many new immigrants are treated with hostility or laughter when their attempts at communication are not understood. One Somali girl, a tenth grader, commented that she needs to speak English all the time in order to fit in. She tells of being made fun of if she speaks her native language, but she is still mocked when she attempts to use her limited English skills. "I learn to shut up," she concludes. This need for acceptance through the acquisition of English often leads to a loss of an immigrant student's native language – "thus they become not only English seekers, but they abandon their native languages and become English preferers" (Olsen 198). Often it is the words that convey abstract ideas such as emotion that are lost first, creating a language barrier between the child who has lost enough knowledge of their native language to be unable to communicate on an emotional

level with their parents, and the parents who have not learned the English needed to speak about these tender issues (Qin 8). This rift between children and parents due to language is only one of the many ways that this generational gap can develop. As immigrant children begin to place more importance on learning English (and becoming American), their quest for friends outside of the Somali cultural circle begins. Though it is important for immigrant students to have peers outside of their native culture to improve self esteem and help immigrant students to learn more about their new language and community, it is also important that immigrant students take pride in their heritage and keep up practice with the language of their family.

One way that an educator can help an immigrant student to incorporate the learning of English and the nuances of American culture – while allowing the student to retain much of his/her cultural identity – is to structure the classroom and its activities in a safe way that promotes individuality and discussion. Giving immigrant students the opportunity to talk about their culture, family roles, native country and background experiences sends a clear message to all of the students that everyone is unique and differences have merit. Creating an environment in which American-born students can ask questions and learn about other cultures firsthand, while at the same time giving immigrant students the chance to learn more about American ways and culture, is a safe and productive way to eliminate teasing and promote group learning.

Since Somali students come from a clan-based, group oriented way of life, cooperative and collaborative learning is a natural way for them to learn. Because Somali culture is very interactive and social, students will benefit from these types of activities; they may actually struggle with independent work at first. Because of this, and because what teachers may perceive as cheating may actually be seen as cooperation by Somali students, it is imperative that teachers take the time to explain procedures for assignments thoroughly. Helping students to use and learn about educational resources is important because many immigrant students often do not know how to ask for the help they need, use the library, or seek out other academic support.

Somali students also tend to be very concrete thinkers used to the teaching methods of memorization and recitation, so grasping abstract concepts may be difficult – especially when they are presented in a foreign language. Somali students may say that they understand something even when they don't, because one of the worst things for them is the feeling of embarrassment. This does not mean that teachers should water down assignments, because Somali students do generally have a strong desire to learn (Kubacki, et al 10-11). Knowing these cultural nuances can help teachers to better assess the abilities and needs of Somali students, and the more an educator knows about the native culture of the students in the classroom, the more comfortable the teacher can make the students – inspiring both personal and academic growth.

Because of the traumatic route that most Somali immigrants take to get to the United States, there are behavioral variables to consider as well. Many young Somalis have had demanding adult responsibilities and experiences, and therefore interaction with American authority figures can be challenging and stressful. While the girls generally do well, many of the boys have lacked an authority figure in their lives (and have actually, in many cases, become the male head of household); some may not have had an adult male in the family for ten or more years (Guerin, et al 3). This can lead to oppositional behavior toward teachers and administrators. Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) is also common among Somali refugees. This can present as day-dreaming or distractedness, or even in paranoid or overly-hostile reactions. Because most Somali youth have grown up in refugee camps or in a country torn apart by war, many had become accustomed to a turbulent and volatile living situation, and are therefore more easily provoked (Schaid and Grossman 14). A bilingual education teacher (and former refugee) from Minnesota explains that, "For Somali children in US schools today, coming from such chaotic and violent situations, they need to, and *do*, develop their own coping mechanisms. I think of the hierarchy of human needs – where the very basic needs of food, shelter and safety need to be met before a person can even become aware that there are other

needs such as education and self-actualization" (Magnuson 19). This understanding of Somali immigrants' backgrounds is especially important in American schools, where a student could easily be placed in special education classes for an emotional impairment or learning disability, when counseling support could help over time to alleviate stressors that inhibit the student from performing academically.

Communication with families is an important part of helping an immigrant student to adjust effectively to a school environment. Many times, teachers can misinterpret the absence of Somali parents at conferences or school activities as a lack of interest in education. In fact, Somali parents value education highly and want their children to be educated, but don't often work with the schools for a variety of reasons. Culturally, it is often thought a bad thing for a parent to visit a school because it may mean that their child is causing trouble. Parents' English is often worse than their children's, and because embarrassment is a source of shame in Somali culture, parents will avoid the awkward attempts at communication with teachers. Many are confused and worried about the perceived negative influence that American school and culture is having on their child, and prefer to stay away. The majority of Somali parents rely on their children to communicate with them about school – which can lead to misunderstandings and manipulation on the part of the student (Guerin, et al 2). Though engaging immigrant parents in the goings-on of the school may be difficult due to the language barrier and parental apprehensions, it is a valuable step toward better understanding a student's home life, roles and family responsibilities, and reasons behind struggles at school. It can also help an educator to assess if the family needs health or counseling support, and help to create a consistent dialogue between home and school.

Because I teach many immigrant students – many of whom are Somali – I have thought deeply about how to better structure my classroom and teaching practices after researching this group of immigrants. As an English teacher, I use cooperative and collaborative learning often.

I plan on bringing in more support literature that reflects the cultures and issues of my students, and leading more discussion based on the readings. Asking students to shed light on the cultural nuances of written work based on their own experiences is a great way to encourage all students to learn about the world from many diverse perspectives. I will also modify my autobiographical essay assignment to include more information about influential events that have shaped my students' lives and their roles and responsibilities at home. This will give my immigrant students a chance to be proud of their own culture, while they teach my American born students about elements of culture they may not have known. This also gives my immigrant students the opportunity to talk with their peers and socialize as they share their work. Planning assignments and projects with the needs of my immigrant students in mind can help me to find out more about my students' backgrounds, along with ways to help them to learn the material, procedures, and socialize with peers. It takes 3-7 years to become fluent in English for academic learning (Olsen 201). The more immigrant students can communicate with each other and learn safely in their new school environment, the more relevant school will become to their future goals.

I would also like to become a larger part of developing communication between school and parents – specifically immigrant parents. Though we only have a finite number of teachers that speak the languages of our immigrant population, we have many immigrant students that are either graduates or upperclassmen. A mentoring program would work well in my school – and could incorporate students and community members as both mentors for students and communication liaisons between teachers and families. Our Somali families are quite connected and close-knit, and there would be ample opportunity for mentors to choose families and students that they have a connection with. We are also close to both Lansing Community College and Michigan State University. It would be worthwhile to investigate the possibility of college students helping out in a mentor role as well.

Though the focus here is Somali refugees, the information collected is applicable to so many other immigrant groups. Seeking out information and learning about the backgrounds and experiences of immigrant students is imperative for the success of both the student and the teacher as they work together. Creating and implementing classroom activities and procedures that perpetuate a safe environment is key. Teachers need to be trained in teaching students with diverse needs and diverse backgrounds. Though most immigrants have flocked to large, populated cities, many are now settling in suburban and rural areas. Teachers across the United States need to learn about the new faces that will be present in their classrooms. Immigrants will continue to arrive in the U.S., and will be becoming members of many different types of communities. We need to train teachers to look deeper into strategies to reach immigrant students and to foster a multicultural atmosphere in their classrooms to teach ALL students to live, function within, and appreciate a globally diverse vision of our world community. Our world does not reflect a classroom with one type of face – teaching from a multicultural standpoint prepares students for a global economy and a world rich in diversity of people and ideas.

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