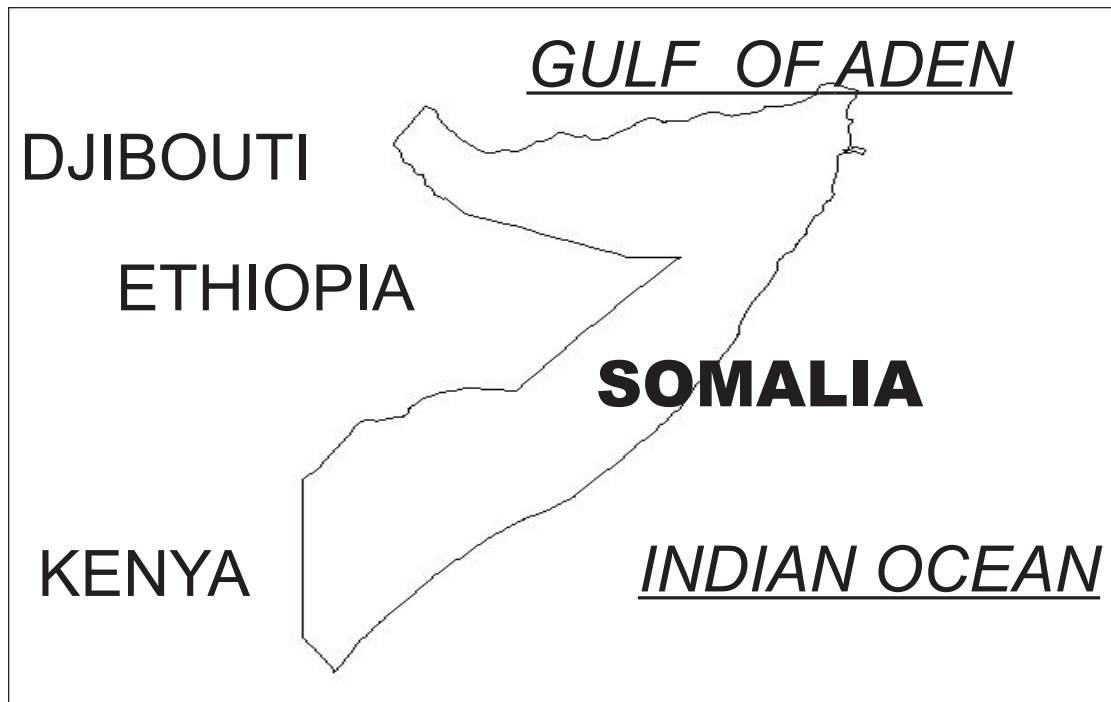


SOMALI YOUTH REPORT



Excerpts from the report prepared for The Maryland Office for New Americans, Maryland Department of Human Resources, November 2001, by Dina Birman, Edison J. Trickett, University of Illinois at Chicago and Natalia Bacchus, University of Maryland.

Distributed by the English Language Training Technical Assistance Project with the support of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Administration for Children and Families, ACF Grant number #90RB-0005.

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Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning
1610 Emerson Street
Denver, Colorado 80218

Phone: (303) 863-0188

Fax: (303) 863-0178

Email: elt@springinstitute.org

Web Site: www.springinstitute.com

Spring Institute for Intercul-
tural Learning

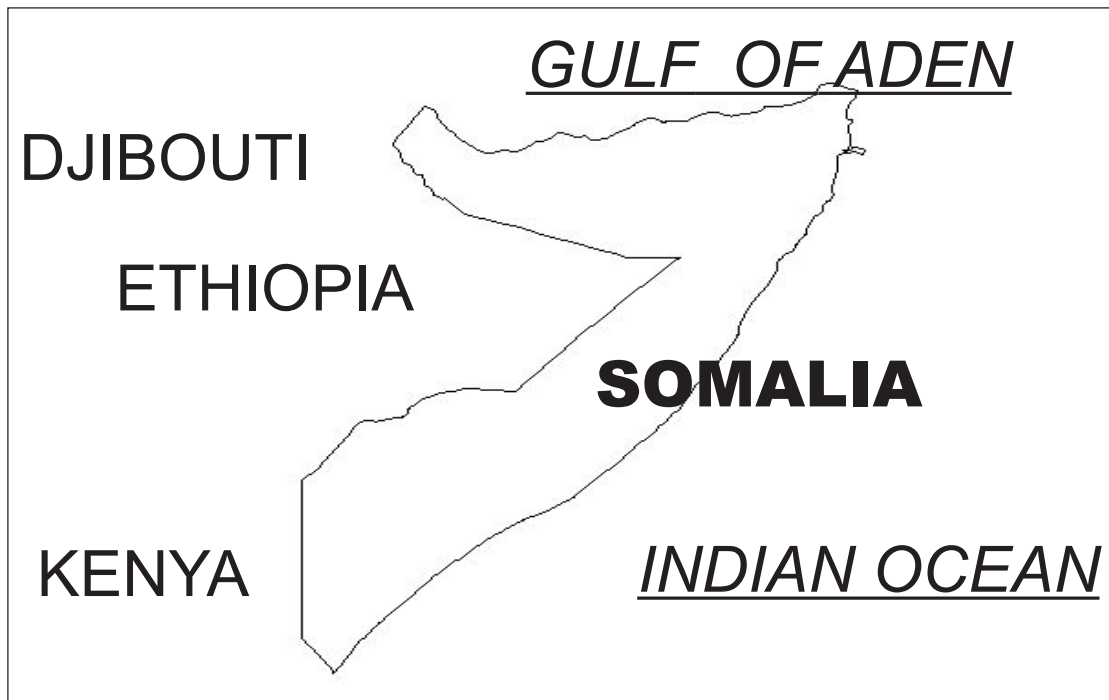
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BACKGROUND

The research on which this report is based is part of an ongoing assessment of refugee adjustment sponsored by the Maryland Office for New Americans (MONA). MONA thanks the Spring Institute for sharing the results with English Language Training Providers.

This document offers a description of adjustment of Somali refugee students in one U.S. community, based on a study conducted by researchers at the University of Maryland and University of Illinois (Birman, Trickett, & Bachhus) with funding from the Maryland Office for New Americans (MONA). The purpose of the study was to conduct a needs assessment and provide recommendations for improving adaptation of the youth in this community, and also to document the process of acculturation and adaptation of these refugee youth. The information presented here was gathered through extensive interviews with members of this community, including Somali students, their parents, community leaders, and school personnel. Semi-structured interviews of the youth were conducted in groups, and included middle school and high school students, as well as students who were out of high school but could reflect back on their school experience. Interviews with parents were conducted with groups of mothers and fathers separately, to accommodate the wishes of the community. A number of community leaders and members were consulted and interviewed to learn about their perspectives, background information and to clarify any questions that arose. School personnel at the elementary, middle, and high school level including ESL and mainstream teachers, counselors, and other relevant staff were interviewed individually and in groups. The findings are presented below.

Overview of Somali History, Culture, and Traditions

To place the experiences of Somali youth in context, we begin with a brief overview of Somali history, culture, and traditions. Somalia is located in Eastern Africa, bordered by Kenya to the south, Ethiopia on the West, Djibouti on the northwest, and the Gulf of Aden on the north. Its population is primarily rural, with over 75% of the people being farmers or raising camels, cattle, sheep, and goats. The climate is hot, with both rainy and dry seasons.

In 1988 an armed revolt broke out against the regime of Somali President Siad Barre and people began leaving in the following year. Clans became polarized and waged war against one another. By late 1991 war had intensified, Siad Barre was forced into exile, and about 45% of the population was displaced inside Somalia or neighboring countries. Nomads came to the cities to fight for power and destroyed buildings, looted, and raped and killed city civilians. Families had to leave the cities by any means possible, usually airplane or boat, and many tales of the horrors associated with this process have been told. Children witnessing the death or rape of family members, executions in one's house, and girls being kept captive for years and routinely abused by soldiers have been reported. The issue of trauma is thus central to an appreciation of what the Somalis bring to their life in the United States.

Somalis speak the Somali language (and some, due to a history of colonization, Italian and English as well). They come from a sophisticated culture organized around clans that differ by ancestry and region of the country. Somalis are Sunni Muslims, with Islam being the principal faith and source of Somali national identity. Following such customs as Somali dress and choice of foods is both a

source of religious affirmation and a set of practices that have resulted in some cultural misunderstandings and conflicts when practiced in the public schools.

In Somali families men are the authority figures and decision-makers, though here in the U.S. women often work outside the home in addition to child-rearing and home responsibilities. Children attend Koranic school for religious education at an early age and faithfully observe Ramadan. Somalis deeply value family. They tend to keep problems to themselves rather than share them with cultural outsiders.

Many of the Somali refugees resettled in the U.S. are members of the Benadir clan and differ from other clans in Somalia in several ways. Historically, their ancestors are said to be from the Persian Gulf and ruled kingdoms in Somalia before colonialism. At the time of the war in the early 1990s, they tended to live in cities such as Mogadishu (the capital), Merca, and Brava, rather than the more rural locations as did other clans. In addition, they are not nomadic as are many other clans, but hold such jobs as merchants and importers/exporters in the cities. They are also more highly educated on average than other clans, many having gone to universities both in Somalia and abroad.

The Refugee Experience and Resettlement

The Somali refugees had a difficult journey to the U.S. The majority fled Somalia in the midst of the war, and ended up in Kenya or other African countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt. The escape itself, most often by boat, was very dangerous. After the escape, many of the refugees stayed in Kenya, or made their way to other countries, where they stayed for many years. Some families made their way into the cities and were able to work. However, without permanent resident status and permission to work they were subject to harassment by police. In order to apply for asylum in the U.S. the refugees had to return to the refugee camps, fill out paperwork, and wait for their U.S. refugee status, sometimes for several years. The conditions in the camps were very primitive. Refugees lived in crowded tents. The weather was very hot and conditions unsafe, such as the presence of snakes in the camps.

Somali refugees started coming to the U.S. in the mid 1990's. The Maryland community was settled starting in 1996 with members of the Benadir clan. The Somali community is very concentrated, with the majority living in one apartment complex. The population in the surrounding communities as well as the public schools is predominantly low income African American. Somali children and youth reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhood. They are particularly frightened by crime, and some have had dangerous confrontations. Some described feeling worried that something may have happened to their friends when one of them is late and is walking home in the neighborhood. One youth was attacked while working in McDonald's. They report seeing drug dealers in the neighborhood. These experiences rekindle the fear and uncertainty of their refugee experiences and make them feel like they are not yet safe.

The Maryland Somali community has retained many key aspects of their culture and lives in Somalia. They remain a very religious community, as reflected in time in prayer, head coverings for women and adolescent girls, and restrictions on the activities of adolescents. Religious leaders are revered, and the community has pooled resources to rent an apartment that serves as a mosque where in addition to prayer religious education is provided for children and youth on weekends.

Somali families living in the apartment complex are large and often interrelated. Living conditions are crowded. These conditions contrast starkly with the conditions in Somalia before the war, as refugees related to us that each extended family owned a house, the mothers were able to stay home and take care of the family, and materially they had everything they needed. The standard of living here in the United States thus differs for these refugees from their prior lives. In addition, the American concern with materialism contrasts with their lives in Somalia. As one boy related, *“in Somalia you wore sandals, and if your sandals broke, you fixed them. In the United States you have to wear sneakers, and other students make fun of you if you don’t have the right kind of (expensive) sneakers.”*

I. THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

A relatively large group of Somali students entered the local public school system in the summer of 1996. Somali students brought to school with them the strong bond forged by culture, religion, shared hardships, and a common refugee experience. While they find some commonality with other international students in their ESOL classes, they are closest to other Somalis. Some of the children are related to each other, and others live in blended families where they call other unrelated children in the household “brothers” and “sisters”. The sense of family and community in these households is very strong, and is a source of support and comfort.

Over time, many of the Somali students have formed relationships with American students, but there are difficulties linked to cultural differences around appropriate behavior, particularly for adolescents. Thus, Somalis who are friends with other Americans have to restrict some of the activities they engage in because many things that Americans do Somali children are not allowed to do. For example, it is not seen as appropriate for Somalis to go out in mixed sex groups, which eliminates many of the activities Americans engage in. To avoid getting into trouble, Somalis prefer to go out with other Somalis or with their families to the movies or to go shopping. These and other cultural differences affect the school experiences of these students

Early experiences adapting to American schools - Certain themes recurred in our interviews with Somali students and they are described below.

Being different

One initial source of difficulty, particularly with American students, was being treated badly because of being different. All the Somali students we spoke with who went to middle or high school recalled being teased and taunted about their clothing, the girls for wearing scarves, and their lack of English-speaking ability. One girl explained the American students’ behavior:

“I think why they acted the way they did the first time we came in is because we had an impact on them too. They had their own people around and suddenly all these weirdoes came in. Even though we aren’t weird, we are different. So I think if before we came there if the school talked about it – that there are some Somali kids coming, that they went through a civil war – that maybe they (the American students) would be sympathetic.”

Students also felt that they had been unprepared to encounter what they did at school. Just as they hoped that American students and teachers would have been told more about them, they wished that they had been told about what difficulties they may initially encounter, such as the teasing, name-calling, and people not knowing who they were and why they were in school.

Somali children also expressed bewilderment at how few opportunities they had when they first arrived to explain to others where they came from. Indeed, teachers we interviewed frequently expressed reluctance to ask the students about their past, citing a concern about activating traumatic past experiences and the belief that these students must be asked about their lives all the time and are tired of talking about it. However, students indicated that they were very willing to talk about their

country, and most said they were pleased to be asked. It did bother them, however, when people asked them “dumb” questions like “did you walk around naked in Africa?” or “did you sleep in trees?” *“When they would ask us that we would just ask it back,”* said one boy, *“we’d ask ‘do you sleep in the trees?’ They would answer ‘no’ and we’d say ‘well neither do we’.”*

Students vividly remembered the feeling of being lost on the first day of school, with no orientation, not being able to find their way around the building, and having no “buddy system” to help them even find their way to class (a particular concern in middle and high school). They felt that their introduction to school could have profited from 1) a better orientation to the school. 2) Having a “buddy system” where they are paired up with either an American student or foreign student who had been in the United States awhile who could explain how to figure things out. 3) Having a new students’ group so they can share what they have learned or have questions about. 4) Having after school help for new students.

Fights

Some of the confrontations with American students escalated from verbal confrontations to fist fighting. Fighting happened among the girls as well as the boys. *“They would say that we smelled bad and dressed funny,”* said a Somali girl. When asked if there was any way to avoid the fighting, a boy replied *“No. If you try to ignore them, they push you.”* Some kids said that they felt at the school it was bad to be “smart” at school. One middle school student said he had once gotten into a fight over a grade on a math test because he had a higher grade than the American kid. One student mentioned that being smart makes others think you are “acting White”. She said she did not really know what that meant.

A particularly difficult incident happened at one high school, toward the end of the first school year that the Somalis were at the school. A fight had broken out in the school cafeteria because of “butting” in line. Apparently started by an American student, the pushing quickly escalated into a fight between Somali and American students. In response to the incident, the administrators felt that the tensions between Somali and American students were running high. In addition, it was school spirit week, and faculty and students were trying to promote a celebratory and positive climate. To handle the situation, the school decided that to prevent any further tensions Somali students would be sent home. All the Somali students at the school, including those who had not been in the cafeteria when the incident happened, were called out of class, put on a school bus, and sent home. However, the bus took the students only to the apartment complex where many, but not all of the Somali students lived, and these students had to find their own way home. Further, apparently none of the American students involved with the fight were punished.

In the aftermath of this incident, Somali students and parents were extremely angry and concerned about how they had been treated. It appeared to them that the school, even the adults at the school, had made no attempts to understand them, and when tensions rose banished them from the school as if they did not belong there, rather than addressing the underlying problem.

Religious issues

Many issues of difference between Somali and American students involved religious practices. Religion remains a central part of the lives of the Somali students. This involves daily prayer, no dating, and it is not seen as appropriate for males and female adolescents to go out together to the

movies or the mall. As one male said, *“In America everyone has a boyfriend or girlfriend. In Somali culture you don’t have one until you see a person you would like to marry.”* The students said that they could marry someone who is not Somali as long as they are Muslim or intend to become Muslim. But they also spoke of differences in personal appearance and dress, such as that Somali girls are supposed to keep their hair covered and boys are supposed to keep their hair short, and they are not allowed to get tattoos (unlike their American friends who do).

Early on, Somali girls were singled out in school for observing the Somali religious custom of wearing scarves. American students kept asking the girls why they always wore scarves on their heads. Some girls at school would try to pull the scarves off, saying that they wanted to see their hair. As one Somali girl put it, *“100 times we explain it to them, they don’t get it. But later on, right now, they understand the religion and its purpose. Now they understand why we wear the scarves, so now they accept us.”*

At the high school in particular problems with scarves arose because the school required picture IDs, and school staff wanted the girls to have their pictures taken without the scarves. In addition, the school had a policy prohibiting bandanas, because they had been used as a gang symbol. Some of the girls had adapted their scarves to wear as bandanas, so that they could respect their religious custom and blend in a bit more at the same time. In the end, the school was able to handle these issues appropriately, but early on, the girls reflected on how difficult it was for them to convince both other students and adults to respect this custom.

For boys, the biggest problem involved prayer, as they pray 5 times per day. Over time, schools developed ways to accommodate the boys by excusing them from classes at particular times during the day. Teachers would write passes for students, and space was provided in some schools in the counseling offices or elsewhere to pray. During Ramadan students were allowed to stay in the classroom during lunchtime because they were fasting. On Fridays, students (mostly boys) were excused from school early to prepare for the Muslim holy day.

While all of these accommodations have made life much easier for the Somali students, it took time, energy, patience, and persistence on the part of Somali students and adults to educate schools about Somali culture.

Academic Adjustment

Somali students seemed to have a great deal of respect for school, stemming from the great importance placed on education in Somali culture and made even more important because of lack of prior schooling related to the war. In interviews, Somali students shared some negative impressions of American students. First, they felt that American students are not respectful of teachers, whereas Somalis are very appreciative of being able to be in school and having an opportunity to get an education. In addition, respect for teachers and teacher authority to discipline children was greater in Somalia. They noted that American kids are ruder to their parents, talk back to them, don’t listen, and are generally more disrespectful. Finally, they felt that without authority of teachers, American kids tease them, do not understand them, or appreciate what they have been through.

All students agreed that ESOL was their favorite class. *“You could be yourself. No one looked at you differently because you had a scarf or an accent. Everyone had an accent!” All our friends were from ESOL.”*

The issue of dropping out of school was also discussed. Many different factors were mentioned, including the belief of some students that having a job and making money is better than going to school. Some cited the difficult conditions facing Somali students in school as well, such as doing poorly in school with no resources for help and not having friends in school. They all knew some Somali students who have dropped out of school. One Somali male said, *“Some people get lost, or graduate while still in ESOL, some people quit too.”* When asked why this happens to some kids, a female said, *“They were sick and tired of it. Rebellious, I guess. They wouldn’t listen to the teachers. They end up with the wrong people. In high school you see a lot of stuff, like drugs and stuff.”* A male explained, *“They didn’t fight. They take the easy way because they say ‘This is hard, I cannot do this. So I’m gonna leave it, forget this stuff’.”*

One male student’s sister did not get to graduate high school because of the age limit placed on being in school (21 years of age). She was placed in 9th grade at age 18 and had to leave school in 12th grade when she turned 22. This really upset her and her family. Her brother said, *“Now she has to work everyday instead of having an education.”*

In addition, many students mentioned that they had problems keeping up with the pace of school due to their interrupted education in Somalia. Students’ comments included:

“It was too much information. Suddenly I had to learn all this stuff very quickly.”

“It was hard, they (teachers) expect you to do the work no matter what.” And

“Some teachers used to understand us but not all. Like regular English teachers, they give you a test or essay and whether or not you understand it is up to you.”

The lapse in their educational background also affected the way they felt about school and their motivation to keep trying. One male explained how the challenge made him work harder:

“When you don’t know the subject you’ll try to fight with it so you can get it. That’s what I did.” A

female explained how she sometimes wanted to give up but her family kept her going.

“Sometimes I felt like quitting, like skipping class. Then I’d think about how my dad is working, my mom is working, nobody is home, and everybody’s trying so hard so you should try hard too. That’s what kept me going.”

Legacy of Trauma

Resettlement professionals and ESL teachers are frequently concerned about the impact of legacy of trauma on refugee children. We explored this issue in interviews. Most of the children came in 1996, and the younger ones do not remember Somalia or the war at all. Some have come more recently, some directly from Somalia, and lived through the violence there. Even older kids have a hard time remembering Somalia before the war.

The children said that they saw a lot of violence – in refugee camps and before in Somalia. Many had family members die. However, surprisingly, the children we interviewed did not think of themselves as having been traumatized. They draw strength from their religion, and say that everything that has happened to them and their people is God’s will and should not be questioned. They said, *“In the Koran it states that God will not give you more than you can bear.”* Therefore they believe their experiences are ones they can cope with and it will get better. They know that they have been through a lot and that their experiences are much different than what American kids have known. They say that is what makes them such a tight knit group.

Children did talk about their feelings of loss of many aspects of life in Somalia. In general, they missed the overall fabric of life in Africa, the regularity to life, the waking up to the call to prayer from a mosque, the routines, their friends, and their homes.

Family life

Somali children expressed great connection to their families. In some families, there is pressure for students to get a job and help support the family. Some end up dropping out of school to help out the family economically. One Somali student interviewed drives his family around without having a license. Because mothers often have to work as well, there is less time for family than many would like. Households are more crowded here, with many families living together in small apartments. Several fathers have passed away and eldest sons have to assume the position of authority in the family. Many kids said they feel pressure to do well in school so they can get a good job and help their family move to a better place. The centrality of family life is reflected in the comments of children in high school, who say that they would not feel right going away to college and leaving their families. One male stated *“My mother took care of me all the way to this age. How can I leave my mother alone and live my own life?”* **Thus, the family unit of these students has a great deal to cope with in terms of survival.**

Future in the U.S

We asked the children to talk about how they saw their future; what kinds of things they envisioned for themselves as they grew up. In general, their view of their future here was not hopeful. Indeed, many stated that in the future they hope to live in Africa, another 3rd world country, or go back to Somalia. Behind this concern was a bleak picture of their current situation. They talked about difficulties they face adjusting to life in U.S., and several expressed concern that they do not see members of their community progressing here in the U.S. As one female said, *“I live in American now but I am not living like Americans. We do not have the luxury still. My family cannot afford the American lifestyle yet.”* They feel that they cannot live in safe neighborhoods because their parents do not speak enough English to get better paying jobs. Their desire for a good education is both to help their parents in the future and to allow them to move away from their current situation.

While the students had high aspirations for themselves, they seemed to have little understanding or realistic assessment of how they might attain them. Some high school students spoke about becoming programmers or doctors but seemed to have little understanding of what that would involve. Some students currently in college are very successful. Even among this group, however, which includes Somalis majoring in such occupationally promising areas as computer science, biology, and engineering, the turmoil of their pasts is reflected in uncertainty about what they will do in the future. As one female put it, *“We don’t think about tomorrow. We just do what we are doing and whatever happens happens because in five years of our lives so much change has happened. We never know anything for sure”*. A male said, *“I just go to school now and I try my best”*.

II. PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES

For the most part, the parents interviewed were satisfied with the schooling their children receive. Mothers in particular were very happy that their children were able to be in stable school settings and said their experience with school personnel and teachers has been very positive. Although they admitted there were problems between their kids and American students when they first arrived to Maryland, they said the schools (especially the ESOL teachers) were very helpful in getting their children adjusted and keeping them informed. One complaint mothers had was that they cannot be as involved in their children's schooling as they would like to be due to having to work so much.

Discipline

Fathers said that the schools are doing an adequate job teaching their children academically, but should be doing more to discipline the children behaviorally. They said that in Somalia discipline starts in the school and then parents reinforce it in the home. When asked about the types of discipline sought after, they mentioned how in Somalia teachers could use small sticks to strike the students on the arms or legs and the student would be punished in front of the other students so everyone would see the consequences of bad behavior. Fathers mentioned that they feel they cannot discipline their children at home because at school they can act up and not get punished and also because the children tell them they will call 911 and report their parents if they try to touch them. This in essence gives children far more power in the home than they had in Somalia.

Academics

All in all, Somali parents are happy that their children are able to go to school again and receive an education. They did, however, mention several differences between schooling in Somalia and here in the U.S. Parents said that the quality of education was better in Somalia than they see here in America. For example, in Somalia students start learning about all the different sciences (biology, chemistry, physics) from the time they are in elementary school, while here in the U.S. learning about the different sciences does not occur until late middle school or high school. Parents also mentioned that in Somalia students that also care about receiving a good education surround their kids, while here in the U.S. their kids are surrounded by students that do not care about receiving a good education and are not a good influence on them. Lastly, they said that in Somalia the schools and teachers play a more important role in the child's life and the community than do schools and teachers in America. Although the Somali parents had some complaints about the school system in the U.S., they said they were happy that their children were safe and receiving an education.

III. TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

The many interviews with teachers at elementary, middle, and high school as well as staff at the International Student Guidance Office in Prince George's County Schools resulted in a wealth of information about the students, strategies for helping them, and recommendations for the future. Predictably, the kinds of issues most salient for teachers differed depending on the age of the students and the level of school. In general, elementary school students seemed to have an easier time adjusting to school than students in middle or high school. In middle school peer relations and issues of identity development were seen as areas of concern, while at the high school level issues of fighting, dropping out, post high school career planning, and lack of development of basic skills because of years of interrupted education were seen as the greatest problems.

Issues

Different issues emerged throughout the interviews with teachers at all grade levels. They are summarized below. Specific grade levels are noted where applicable.

Academic issues

Academic issues surfaced most strongly at the middle and high school level. Many teachers noted that it seems, "*There are two groups of Somalis students, one of which does well and one of which does not.*" The area of concern involves reading level, where even within the same family one child will be performing well while another will not. Some teachers see this as increasing the risk of dropping out and not being able to find meaningful employment.

In attempting to educate these children school system personnel mentioned needing more resources, such as more ESOL teachers, and ESOL aides who can assist students as they make the transition into mainstream classes. Teachers acknowledge the tension between transitioning students as quickly as possible and giving them the needed support when the transition occurs.

Also placement issues recurred as a concern for teachers. The age of students, coupled with their lack of formal education due before immigration makes it difficult to know what to do and needs to be addressed at the system level. There was much frustration among teachers about several students being unable to continue in school because of their age, but needing the education. There are also difficulties in how to distinguish students needing special education placement from those with no special needs other than to make up time lost in prior education. Another difficulty involves the relationship between a traumatic history and how learning occurs in a potentially noisy and chaotic school environment where the threat of violence is real.

Behavioral issues

With respect to behavioral issues, Somalis are, in general, seen as well behaved, particularly in comparison to other African students from such countries as Sierra Leone, the Congo, and Liberia. One teacher remarked, "*It is easy for new students to get taken in by the wrong crowd*". Teachers report that ESOL students are particularly susceptible to developing friendships with troublemakers, learn the "wrong" behavior from them, and end up getting into trouble. This has been evident in

fighting at the high school level, as reported above, and other incidents in the lower grades. For example, one elementary school example involved the chewing of bubble gum. Somali children had never seen bubble gum before coming to the U.S., were excited about chewing it, and did not know it was not allowed in school. Fortunately teachers realized that their chewing it in class was because no one had ever explained the rules to them. As another example, Somali children had never heard curse words before, did not know they were not to be spoken in schools, and repeated them in the classroom. Again, teachers explained to them that they were inappropriate and the children stopped repeating them.

Additional examples of **cultural misunderstanding** on the part of American teachers and administrators have already been noted. For example, at one high school students are not allowed to wear bandanas because they can signal gang affiliations and incite incidents in school. Initially the school responded to Somali girls wearing bandana-styles scarves as if they were wearing gang-affiliated bandanas. While the school recanted after the Somali girls explained that it was a religious affirmation, the process represents the kind of cultural pressures and misunderstandings that these students sometimes experience in the school setting. Thus, both the occurrence and meaning of behavior problems in the school setting should be assessed in the light of such cultural misunderstandings and potential affronts to these students.

Mental health and social adjustment issues

With respect to mental health issues expressed in the school setting, the two primary concerns expressed by teachers involve family issues related to school performance and the potential residual of trauma experienced before immigration. Some teachers reported that family circumstances may have made it difficult for children to turn to family members for help. In some instances parents have been killed and the children are living with distant relatives. One implication of this for school personnel is that they do not trust that there will be follow up of referrals to families from the school about needed services for the child. In addition, teachers, particularly ESOL teachers, are keenly aware of the potential trauma experienced by Somalis children and youth before immigration. They worry about traumatic content coming up in class because they are not sure how to handle it either in terms of the student expressing the traumatic content or in terms of the other students in the class.

In addition, teachers report that more resources to address mental health issues of children are needed. Teachers expressed a need for more counseling resources for students suspected of having been traumatized, and support from mental health specialists to brainstorm possible classroom strategies that can help the teachers manage behavior problems or address the needs of a particular child. Many teachers asked, *“What should I do if a traumatic memory or story comes up in class?”*

Teachers noted concerns about uncomfortable topics coming up in class due to cultural differences that may not be related to trauma, but that are difficult to handle as well. For example one teacher described a situation where a reading assignment was given an ESOL class on foot binding in ancient China. “I thought this would be a somewhat neutral topic, since none of the children in the classroom were themselves from China, a way to discuss cultural differences and customs, allow the children to talk about these issues in non-threatening ways’. However, one of the Somali students responded that indeed there are different customs in different countries, and that ‘in Somalia they cut the girls’, referring to the widespread practice of infibulation among Somali females. For the teacher, this created a very uncomfortable situation in the classroom, because she did not know how to approach this topic, whether to discuss it, or to not discuss. This incident also illustrates the

phenomenology of teaching in these classrooms, as teachers never know what topics will come up, and are worried that when they do arise they will be unprepared to deal with them. Several teachers noted a need for a place in the school system where they could turn for help in such situations. Further they expressed a need for more professional development or consultation with respect to mental health and more general psychological/cultural adjustment issues of the children.

Parent involvement

In general, teachers are concerned about relative lack of parent involvement in the formal school structures. Attendance of Somali parents at such traditional school events as parent/teacher night and the PTA is seen as negligible in general. In addition, it is difficult to reach Somali families at home because many parents work more than one job and have limited English-speaking skills. Some teachers have had negative experiences when they tried to contact parents. In one situation where teachers had contacted parents of a Muslim girl to discuss their daughters' school performance, the parents pulled her out of school because they learned that she had gone out on a date, and the parents felt that she was exposed to bad influences at school. Teachers were extremely concerned that their involvement in this situation may have resulted in this young girl not getting her high school education, and that their lack of resources to approach her parents was potentially hurting her future. Though in this case the family was not Somali, similar situations arise with a number of different refugee groups, and community, religious, and cultural resources could be very helpful in negotiating these situations with parents in culturally sensitive ways.

Separation within the school

Many teachers commented on how the ESOL students are separated from the American students within the school. Particularly in the high schools with sheltered ESOL classes, one teacher remarked, *"It's like two different worlds. ESOL kids hang out with ESOL kids and the American kids don't know anything about them"*. Thus, Somali students in ESOL were seen as separated from others in the school. Overcoming these barriers would involve creating structures in the schools that bring "American" and refugee/immigrant children together, because such connections are not occurring naturally.

Since the initial Somali influx many positive changes have taken place at the school. At the high school, for example, a teacher of African American history has been routinely inviting African students to come and speak in her classes, resulting in positive attitudes developing toward the African students, and also giving them opportunities to talk about their backgrounds and cultures.

IV. CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES/APPROACHES

“Buddy system” At the elementary school level, teachers reported trying a “buddy system” where American born students who were doing particularly well in school would pair with Somali students and help in a variety of classroom roles such as studying together.

Role modeling Having students help each other in class, or mentoring of younger refugee students by older ones, were in the spirit of elementary and middle school teacher comments. In our interviews with Somali youth many felt that such buddy or mentoring programs at the middle school or high school level would have been helpful to them when they first arrived.

Learning a few words in the refugee language Some elementary school teachers commented that learning even a few key words in Somali conveyed to the students an interest and allowed them to be the “experts” by teaching teachers common words (e.g., numbers, colors, greetings). Another teacher learned some Somali words on her own and then surprised her Somali students by using the words in class.

Field trips Strategically, elementary school teachers found that doing field trips, and having a great deal of hands on experience with language was useful to do before trying to get students to read themselves. In addition, teachers at all levels agreed that field trips are useful tools for exposing refugee students to new situations and American customs.

Instructional aides. Having teachers’ aides who could pull students aside or out of class for more intensive instruction was highlighted at the middle school level. Although not trained in ESOL, these aides provided some additional one-on-one attention for refugee students in mainstream content classes.

Journaling At the high school level some teachers found that having Somali students write in journals allowed them to express ideas and concerns that they did not do verbally in class. It also helped teachers assess what writing and understanding level each student is at informally.

Individualized planning The importance of individualized planning with respect to literacy needs, behavioral issues, and emotional concerns was stressed. The fact that even within ESOL levels considerable between-student variability was found supported even further the importance of getting to know each student well.

Disciplinary system Several teachers mentioned the importance of consistently implementing a strict and fair disciplinary system. One outlined a “check on the board” system whereby every time a student got into some kind of trouble a check was placed after their name on the board. Three checks and they were given a detention. The teacher said that usually at two checks the behavior changed. Teachers also thought that it was important for them to have information about Somali culture and that they needed to learn some rudimentary words in Somali.

Special clubs, programs, and projects Clubs, such as the “People around the world club” at the high school provide a place for American and International students to learn about different cultures and societies, whereas the “Newcomers’ Clubs” are for the newcomer students, run by the ESOL

Outreach Counselors at various schools. These clubs give new international students a supportive group setting to air observations and concerns they have encountered in their new American setting. In addition, the Homework Club in the Somali community is seen as an important resource for these students, giving them academic support, access to American volunteers who can help them understand the culture as well as the language, and in general providing a positive social environment to spend time in after school. Some projects, such as Peacemakers at the high school provided skits and assemblies which discussed or showed examples of cultural differences and problem-solving skills in negotiating them. However such efforts are seen as most effective when they can continue over time.