Comics In Schools

Background research

The below is our background research and literature review which we undertook prior to beginning the work in schools. To see the interactive resources created through the project, click here.

## *1.	Somalis in the UK*

In the UK, Somalis[1] are the largest refugee population,[2] and Somali children make up the largest group of refugees in schools;[3] however this is just a part of the picture. The Somali community is also one of the longest established in the UK, with merchant seafarers travelling and settling here from the late 1800s onwards as sea trade rapidly expanded. Somali and Yemeni sailors established one of the earliest mosques in Britain, in the international port of Cardiff (often mistaken to be the first).[4] More recently, Somalis settled here through British links with Somaliland, and also the growth of heavy industries in the Midlands and North around the 1950s,[5] bringing with it economic opportunity. During and following the civil war from 1980s onwards, many arrived as refugees and asylum seekers – some from other European countries rather than directly from Somalia. There are now around 99,500 people of Somali origin living in the UK.[6] Heterogeneity and local context is therefore important to understand with reference to different needs, outlook and approaches.

## *2.	Somalis in schools*

### *a.	UK*

In schools, Somali pupils are currently one of the lowest performing groups in terms of educational attainment,[7] though it's crucial to note that there are limited national statistics on 'Somali' pupils. Local authorities (LAs) can choose to collect data in this way, so the overall trend is derived from local data collection.[8]

Despite the fact that Somali pupils and their parents have been shown to have high aspirations and a positive attitude to schooling – markers which for other groups correlate with high achievement – educational attainment for Somalis is variable and as an overall group remains low,[9] indicating that a different approach is required to understand the factors supporting and inhibiting the progress and achievement of Somali students – see the points below.

### *b.	Camden*

This national picture glosses over local variation however. The London Borough of Camden is currently home to 6,000-8,000 people of Somali origin.[10] In 1999, only one Somali pupil passed five GSCEs at grades A*-C[11] - though total numbers of Somali pupils were small. Fifteen years later the picture is different, with larger numbers of Somali-heritage pupils, and a greater range of grades reflected. There has also been an immense amount of work at all levels to raise attainment, involving the borough council, schools, parents and families, community organisations and supplementary schools.[12] Somali pupils are currently on a par with the borough average at achieving five A*-C grades at GCSE at 63% (girls) and 54% (boys) - this is still much lower than the national average of 86.3% (girls) and 79.8% (boys).[13]

3.   Specific points on Somalis and UK education

a.   Situating the 'problem'

As ever, these statistics only show a small part of the whole story. There are a number of assumptions and attitudes also present.

When dealing with low attainment in school, rather than the simple but misinformed case that pupils of Somali origin are just not clever or capable enough, we of course should look outwards: a student's capabilities lie much more within an ecology of interconnected factors.

Parents and families play a role in encouraging, supporting and chivvying. Parents - as well as pupils - are sometimes challenged in understanding the English schooling system:

[New pupils] have to deal with the challenge of behaving according to new and sometimes seemingly arbitrary rules as well as the new effort in concentrating on school learning for relatively long periods of time. Many of these new pupils do not have the concepts of different subjects e.g. maths and science and many also need to learn to read and write.[14]

Schools and the schooling system also play a role. Here, there is limited space for tailored approaches and content, and increased likelihood to class children as special education needs (SEN) as cultural differences are misunderstood.[15] Research suggests there is also a disproportionate number of Somali boys excluded from schools,[16] where they are up to eight times more likely to be excluded from school than their white peers,[17] although again actual numbers remain small.

Importantly, Somali parents feel that "schools have less understanding of, and provision for, children who are unmotivated and disruptive. They feel

that these problems are perhaps more common in their communities but that there is no appropriate institutional response to address them."[18]

In terms of the 'problem' itself, it may be said that low attainment will solve itself over time, as communities get used to the new system. Some reports have shown, through looking at other migrant groups, that a degree of time has a lasting impact on attainment.[19] This may be assumed to be relevant only for newly arrived families; though the time issue has also been shown to have minimal impact in the case of Somali pupils, with attainment not affected by length of stay, and other factors being more important.[20]

Similarly, focusing on attainment – achieving high grades – could be missing the mark. Potentially much more important and fruitful is all-round 'achievement,' and how this links to a pupil's progress (going from a grade F to D, although still classed as a low grade, can contextually be a much greater achievement than from B to A) - as well as their potential and aspirations. This question is part of a wider national discussion but particularly relevant here as 'under-attainment' is now synonymous with 'the Somali community,' further entrenching an image and preconceptions and inhibiting alternative approaches and perspectives.

b.   What does 'Somali' mean anyway?

It is important to think about who says 'Somali.' Who do they mean when they say it? Is this fixed or does it shift with context? 'Somali' is a large term denoting a number of groups of people, and different people will use it to mean different things, at different times depending on context. This must always be remembered. Is it self-ascribed or imposed? Is it used as a differentiating factor, or a positive part of a person's identity?

This point is particularly relevant as the comic used as a base for this resource is called 'Meet the Somalis.' In the comics, 'Somali' denotes "a wide-ranging community: first-, second-, and third-generation Somalis; people of Somali origin who self-identify as Somali-Norwegian or Somali-British, for example; and people of Somali origin who no longer self-identify as Somali but have instead taken on European nationalities."[21]

While undertaking our research and running the workshop sessions in schools, many were critical of this title as they thought that it 'made the situation worse' in terms of stereotypes. It was the case overall that people of Somali origin were dubious of the title and people of other backgrounds weren't.

Due to the fact that the group of school pupils we worked with didn't in any way self-identify with 'Somali' when left open to them, we have preferred to use the terms 'Somali-origin' or 'of Somali heritage' in this resource.

UK schools: cultural identity and achievement

Cultural identity is formed from a number of factors such as 'race', ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, (dis)ability and nationality (Clarke, 2008, Hall, 1992). With the changing nature of the world and the impacts of phenomenon's such as colonisation, migration and globalisation, cultural identities have become more intricate and fluid with individuals viewing themselves in a variety of different ways (Hall, 1992). The different identities that any one individual holds can be contradictory and conflicting (Giddens, 1991)... Academic Stuart Hall put forward the notion of 'new ethnicities', describing that we as individuals speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience and a particular culture (Hall, 1993).

Cultural identity has the potential to be used as a tool to inform public policy and to address social problems (Muir & Wetherell, 2010)...

The education system has been criticised for having a one size fits all approach which may not meet the needs of many students. In many ways schools have a mono-cultural approach where they insert culture into education rather than education into culture (Ladson-Billing, 1995, Hale, 1994).

Nusrat Faizullah (2014) Cultural identity and the achievement gap, p4–5

c.   Preservation of tradition vs. creative, formative identity negotiation

There is also a clash between 'preserving' traditions and a Somali identity familiar to parents and older generations, and being able to form new or adapted identities based on new realities. The static preservation in contrast to the more fluid and creative process of identity formation is particularly apparent across family generations. Some young people try to reject their Somali identity because they are ashamed of "what it means to be a Somali and perhaps to be a refugee"[22] – however others are comfortable switching between identities and worlds. Here within the identity mix is the fact that many, but not all, Somali-origin people in the UK and across Europe have refugee status, which has "ruptured their personal narratives and meanings about their lives" as well as feelings of powerlessness.[23] This of course links strongly to:

d.   Stereotypes and assumptions

Limited and poor representation of the Somali community in mainstream and social media has had an effect on the way young people in the Somali community are perceived by teachers and their peers of different backgrounds. Research in five schools showed perceptions amongst some teaching staff that "assumed that Somali boys were 'traumatised' therefore they could not be expected to learn or behave. Somali girls were assumed to be passive and oppressed Muslim women, who would be prevented by

their parents from progressing on to further and higher education."[24] Indeed, Somali boys can show aggression and insecurity when under pressure or being victimised; however, "such behaviour is not common but is often over-reported and is in danger of becoming a very negative stereotype. (It is also not necessarily a response to previous traumatic experiences but could be due to other current concerns.)"[25]

Emphasis on past and pre-migration experience – in education as well as other areas such as mental health; what a person 'was' or 'must have felt' – means that current experiences of living and working post-migration are often forgotten.[26] Schools should be aware of the barriers and limitations within the curriculum that can make it challenging for children to learn or engage. As any school system functions as a specific cultural context, concepts accepted as 'normal' may well be alien to pupils arriving from a different context, and need explaining.[27]

For pupils to feel safe, it is vital that their cultural, linguistic and religious diversity is recognised and promoted. The most effective way of knowing if a school is getting an inclusive ethos right is by asking pupils.[28]

e.   *Not following pattern*

A number of factors are generally linked to higher attainment amongst minority communities, such as strong parental support, high aspirations, English as a main language etc. In the case of Somali pupils, these factors are not translating into higher attainment, which differs from for example the Bangladeshi and Turkish communities in the UK.

Unlike Bangladeshi students, the attainment of Somali students does not match the level expected from their high educational aspirations, academic self-concept, and attitude to school. And Somali pupils did not appear to benefit from the high Contextual Value Added (CVA) achieved by the schools they attended.[29]

Parental educational aspiration is very high, with 99% of Somali parents expressing a wish for their child to continue in full-time education after the age of 16; 94% of Somali-origin students also expressed this wish – much higher than the 76% of White British parents and 77% of White British students.[30]

For all other minority communities, having a first language other than English is linked with lower attainment at age 16. However, again Somali students do not appear to follow the same rule, if anything the attainment of Somali students with English as their only, first or main language is actually lower than for Somali students with a language other than English as their first or main language."[31] Similarly a longer length of stay in the

UK which is usually linked to higher attainment is also not necessarily applicable in the case of Somali communities.[32]

f.   Importance of 'non-academic' interventions (FSM, link workers, parents etc.)

In terms of increasing attainment in schools, there are numerous studies to show that non-academic or lateral interventions frequently have a higher impact that focusing 'directly' on pupils' academic work. For example, "under-attainment amongst Somali and Turkish pupils, and under-attainment amongst Bangladeshi pupils prior to KS4 [Key Stage 4] appears to be significantly explained by poverty and social deprivation", and it was therefore found that introducing Free School Meals (FSM) raised attainment to a greater extent than introducing English as an Additional Language (EAL).[33] Similarly, strong parental support for education and dedicated support within the school have been cited as most important facilitators to achievement for Bangladeshi and Somali pupils by school staff.[34] School engaging with parents is a powerful tool for raising attainment, including ensuring a thorough understanding of the UK school system, but need to dedicate considerable resources towards this.[35]

g.   Gender

For some, a move away from Somalia had brought a change in gender roles, impacting the whole family. The loss in social status and instability for men coupled with increased pressures for women – "three or more unaccompanied children, can't speak good English…She is not mixing with the community, all the time she is cooking, she can't fill in the forms, and they are sending her more letters. That woman is all the time in need"[36] – brings challenges for practically supporting children's education. Levels of maternal education also has an impact – with 83% of Somali students with mothers who have no educational qualifications,[37] mothers also feel unable to properly support their children with homework. This stigma leads some to disengage with their children's education.[38]

A lack of a father figure, for reasons of war, divorce, working elsewhere and others,[39] also came across in the school workshops.

In terms of school, fathers in Somali and Turkish families are much less involved in children's education than mothers,[40] but this is changing. The experience of schools in Camden is that Somali fathers had a hands-off role in their child's education, and fathers rarely attended parents' evenings or meetings to discuss their child's progress. This is increasingly changing, with many more taking an active and visible role.

h.   Intergenerational communication (expectations, aspirations etc)

Intergenerational communication emerged as an issue throughout the research and workshops, in terms of being able (or not) to speak to parents about difficulties. Children didn't necessarily feel able to speak to their parents, particularly their fathers, preferring to speak to friends or trusted teachers/staff at school of Somali background. This was due in part to parents not understanding the current situation of their children, and vice versa.

There were strong expectations for children to uphold their Somali identity, with parents and older generations very much focused on Somalia as 'home,' some viewing their life here as temporary, no matter how long they'd lived here for.[41] There is as well a double displacement – people are in a new country, thinking of home, but that 'home' is now lost to civil war,[42] so in a new place "the process of adapting and integrating was coupled with anxieties over losing one's cultural identity, language and faith."[43]

Doing well academically is without doubt a high priority for both Somali parents and children.

If you're not doing well in school, you're doing nothing. The general Somali attitude is that if it isn't academic success, then it's not success.[44]

Also, parental expectations are higher for girls but aspiration lower, and lower expectations for boys with higher aspiration.[45]

i.   Deficiency vs. strengths and resources

Pupils can sometimes be seen as what they lack and what they aren't, rather than what they have, and who they are. This 'deficit' point of view needs reframing, to understand that the "rich cultural and cognitive background[s]"[46] of students can be embraced and used as a resource in schools.

In a similar vein, "much existing literature focuses on refugee vulnerability rather than coping."[47] This outlook and rhetoric does little to change the perception of 'poor' and 'needy' communities, when multiple tools can be found from within communities. Schools and authorities should not feel daunted by looking at the whole picture – indeed finding out what the whole picture is – and working collaboratively to find an approach or solution that may work in that local context.

"In considering these causes it is important not to pathologise communities, blaming them for their own failure. But neither are parents and children passive victims, they have some agency, as well as resilience, and can act to change their

some of their circumstances. In particular, the Somali community has a strong sense of self-help… The Somali community has considerable resources and a very strong tradition of self-help. Many LEAs are not using these resources and not working in partnership."[48]

Endnotes

[1] 'Somali' denotes a diverse community: it is used to mean first-, second-, and third-generation Somalis; people of Somali origin who self-identify as Somali-British, for example; and people of Somali origin who no longer self-identify as Somali but have instead taken on European nationalities.

[2] The Economist (2013) The road is long

[3] NALDIC (2011) Refugee and asylum seeker children in UK schools, p1

[4] Sophie Gilliat-Ray (2010) 'The first registered mosque in the UK, Cardiff, 1860: the evolution of a myth' Contemporary Islam Volume 4, Issue 2, pp 179-193

[5] ICAR briefing (2007) The Somali refugee community in the UK

[6] OSF (2014) Somalis in London, p24 from Census 2011

[7] Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF

[8] ibid, p39-40

[9] Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF, p14

[10] OSF (2014) Somalis in London, p27

[11] Jones & Ali (2000) Meeting the Educational Needs of Somali Pupils in Camden Schools, Institute of Education, p7

[12] Various meetings in Camden Sept-Dec 2014; Jones & Ali (2000) Meeting the Educational Needs of Somali Pupils in Camden Schools, Institute of Education, p8

[13] OSF (2014) Somalis in London, p51

[14] Jones & Ali (2000) Meeting the Educational Needs of Somali Pupils in Camden Schools, Institute of Education, p7

[15] Jill Rutter (2004) Refugee Communities in the UK: Somali Children's Educational Progress and Life Experiences, London Metropolitan University p6

[16] E.g. Kahin (1997) Educating Somali Children in Britain, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books; Jones & Ali (2000) Meeting the Educational Needs of Somali Pupils in Camden Schools, Institute of Education

[17] Jill Rutter (2004) Refugee Communities in the UK: Somali Children's Educational Progress and Life Experiences, London Metropolitan University p6

[18] Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the

achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF, p22

[19] Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF

[20] E.g. Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF, p78; Jones & Ali (2000) Meeting the Educational Needs of Somali Pupils in Camden Schools, Institute of Education, p8

[21] OSF (2013) Meet the Somalis, p1

[22] Kahin in Rutter (2004) Refugee Communities in the UK: Somali Children's Educational Progress and Life Experiences, London Metropolitan University p3

[23] Nasir Warfa et al. (2012) 'Migration experiences, employment status and psychological distress among Somali immigrants: a mixed-method international study' BMC Public Health, 12:749

[24] Jill Rutter (2004) Refugee Communities in the UK: Somali Children's Educational Progress and Life Experiences, London Metropolitan University p6

[25] Jones & Ali (2000) Meeting the Educational Needs of Somali Pupils in Camden Schools, Institute of Education, p12

[26] Nasir Warfa et al (2012) 'Migration experiences, employment status and psychological distress among Somali immigrants: a mixed-method international study' BMC Public Health 12:749

[27] Jones & Ali (2000) Meeting the Educational Needs of Somali Pupils in Camden Schools, Institute of Education, p13

[28] DFES (2007) Raising the attainment of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish heritage pupils, p9

[29] Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF, p15

[30] ibid p75

[31] ibid p78

[32] ibid

[33] ibid p14

[34] ibid p20

[35] ibid p16

[36] Somali interviewees in Warfa et al. (2012) 'Migration experiences, employment status and psychological distress among Somali immigrants: a mixed-method international study' BMC Public Health, 12:749

[37] Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF, p73-74

[38] Jill Rutter (2004) Refugee Communities in the UK: Somali Children's Educational Progress and Life Experiences, London Metropolitan University p7

[39] ibid p3

[40] *Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF, p23*

[41] *Jill Rutter (2004) Refugee Communities in the UK: Somali Children's Educational Progress and Life Experiences, London Metropolitan University p6*

[42] *Nasir Warfa et al. (2012) 'Migration experiences, employment status and psychological distress among Somali immigrants: a mixed-method international study' BMC Public Health, 12:749, p8*

[43] *Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF, p143*

[44] *Quote from a young man of Somali origin, born in the UK who we spoke to during the research period*

[45] *Steve Strand et al (2010) Drivers and challenges in raising the achievement of pupils from Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish backgrounds DCSF, p25*

[46] *Teresa Kruizenga (2010) 'Teaching Somali Children: What Perceived Challenges Do Somali Students Face in the Public School System?' International Journal of Education 1:1 p4*

[47] *Atubo & Batterbury (2001) Coping with environmental change: the experience of Somali refugee women in a West London housing estate LSE, p4*

[48] *Jill Rutter (2004) Refugee Communities in the UK: Somali Children's Educational Progress and Life Experiences, London Metropolitan University p7*