

Somali Community and the state of Education 2015

Council of Somali Organisations briefing paper



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Introduction

In his address to the attendees of the first Education Reform Summit in London in 2014, former Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove stated that since 2010, the number of children in failing secondary schools has fallen by almost a quarter of a million. Additionally, eight hundred thousand more pupils were being taught in schools ranked good or outstanding by independent inspectors compared to 2010. Results of the 2015 test scores indicate similar findings: Key stage 2 results show substantial increases in the number of 11-year-olds securing skills needed for secondary school compared to 2010. Ninety thousand more primary school children are achieving the expected standards in reading, writing and maths than in 2010. Schools Minister Nick Gibb said the improving test scores showed the government is delivering on its one nation vision for education. However the same successes can't be noted for students from ethnic minority backgrounds. Economic disadvantage has a very significant impact on the educational attainment of children from ethnic minority background. An analysis of the attainment levels of different ethnic groups disaggregated by children who are eligible for free school meals (a proxy for socio-economic level) and those who are not showed that both income and ethnicity shape the likely educational outcomes of children. For all ethnic groups, children eligible for free school meals, are significantly less likely to achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C than children of the same ethnic group who are not eligible for free school meals. Black pupils are around three times more likely to be permanently excluded than white pupils.

With Somali students in London having some of the highest exclusion rates in the city, this report focuses on the Somali community and provides an overview of conditions concerning education with regards to the Somali community. Its analysis is derived from questionnaires conducted with 12 Somali community organisations in London who run education projects and activities and regularly engage with schools and intervene on behalf of Somali students and parents in relation to educational matters. Organisations interviewed are from across London. The key services that the majority of them provide are educational support & training, employment assistance, benefit and housing advice. The vast majority of them support between 60-100 service users per month.

Contextualising the state of education in the Somali community

Economic disadvantage has a very real impact on educational attainment. Somali families, as minority ethnic families are more likely to live in areas of deprivation and come from lower socio-economic groups. Therefore, much of the lower attainment of some of these groups can be attributed to socio-economic factors. For example, according to data from the Youth Cohort Study, across all ethnic groups, 69 percent of students with a parent in a managerial or professional job achieve five GCSEs at grades A*-C, compared to 36 percent of students with a parent in a manual occupation.

This report suggests that the socio-economic factors are paramount in affecting the educational attainment of ethnic minority groups such as the Somali community. Poverty and/or low occupational status of parents will impact on children's progress. Low expectations of teachers will also impact on attainment. Low expectations and aspirations of parents or pupils themselves and lack of parental engagement in the children's education have been cited as factors in lower attainment. Lower socio-economic status will increase the likelihood of families living in deprived areas where schools tend to have poorer outcomes. Poverty is related to other social and health factors that might impact on schooling.

In addition, a number of other factors that may have the potential to affect the educational attainment of certain minority ethnic groups have been cited (OSF 2014). These include lack of English language fluency (some subtle writing errors persist even in older pupils who have been in the English education system for at least five years), racial abuse or harassment; lack of role models, unfamiliarity with the workings of the education system; teaching based on unfamiliar cultural norms, histories and points of reference. Many of the current Somali settlers are recent arrivals who have been less educated in comparison to other minorities, in part due to their nomadic background and the breakdown of the educational infrastructure in Somalia (Harris 2004). But despite these challenges, many young Somali pupils are doing well in schools. In Camden, for example 63 percent of British-Somali girls achieved five or more A*-Cs in subjects including English and Maths. This figure is in line with all girls in Camden Secondary schools. The figure was 54 percent for British-Somali boys. For Tower Hamlets, the overall figure of achievement for British-Somali pupils was 58 percent, while for white British pupils the figure overall was 49 percent. In other words, current literature demonstrates that there are strong indications that many British-Somalis in London are doing well at school and progressing on to higher education and professional employment. However, concerns related to overall under-achievement in comparison to their white counterparts, which is compounded by socio-economic and linguistic challenges, have been noted thus far and the community organisations that have been consulted for this report reconfirm these concerns.

Key concerns at the community level

There were many issues of concern raised by the community leaders ranging from lack of role models and inspiration, lack of family support and family breakdown to living in overcrowded or poor housing conditions and being on low incomes, which overall were considered to contribute to a picture of disadvantage regarding educational performance. The main pressing concerns that community leaders indicated were lack of parental engagement and school exclusions that are couched in terms of perceptions of discrimination.

Many British-Somali parents struggled to support their children through school because of a lack of understanding of how the system works combined with their own lack of education. This could be understood in terms of not understanding their own role in their children's education. Community leaders suggested that British-Somali parents wanted their children to do well at school, but they did not always have the means to help them. This becomes a particularly difficult challenge in households where the fathers are absent.

With regards to school exclusion, there has been long-standing concern about the correlation between school exclusions and race. Pupils from some minority ethnic groups in England—and black boys in particular—are disproportionately represented within school exclusion figures. A number of community leaders flagged the numbers of British-Somali boys being excluded from mainstream education, commenting that they were “stereotyped” as boisterous and problematic. Each organisation has between 12-15 exclusion cases per month, which is relatively significant. These are both temporary and permanent exclusions. The types of exclusions most cited include physical violence, verbal abuse, disruptive behaviour, vandalism and bullying. It was felt that young boys who are excluded from secondary education in particular become marginalised and at increased risk of crime and gang involvement that further negatively impact on their life chances. School exclusion is particularly problematic for pupils in their final year, as the process of finding an alternative school for pupils takes on average 5-6 months.

Recommendations

Almost all of the community leaders of the organisations who have been consulted felt that with the younger students progress had been noticed, but more needed to be done to engage parents, and they emphasised the importance of clearer communication between parents and school staff especially in relation to creating awareness about school policies on issues such as behaviour and attendance policy. Including more Somali school governors came up repeatedly. Minority ethnic school governors are significantly under-represented in every type of authority as it is and this applies to both governors and chairs of governors. The community leaders further recommended:

- Involving professional role-models and organising one-to-one mentoring sessions with the students
- Recruiting more British-Somali teachers and teaching assistants
- Supporting communications between parents and schools and encouraging more Somali parents as governors
- Training on teenage behaviour for organisations that deal with school exclusion
- Schools need to communicate with parents sooner that their child is at risk of being excluded and not after the exclusion has been processed

Conclusion

The importance of education was emphasised by all of the community leaders who participated in the research and have highlighted how Somali parents prioritise their children's education. Parents enrolling their children into after school homework clubs and supplementary classes that most of these organisations provide have been cited as evidence. But the parents' lack of understanding of the education system and being unable to properly support their children, often since parents may not have been educated themselves, has repeatedly been one of the main obstacles that contribute to underachievement and school exclusion. Community leaders noted that parents should be better supported to be involved in their children's education, which could mitigate future problems such as exclusion.

List of references

<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-education-for-pupils-outside-mainstream-school/supporting-pages/alternative-provision>

Camden Council, "Key Ethnic Minority Achievement Statistics and Information Report 2011–2012", FOI, 2013.

Tower Hamlets, "Key Ethnic Minority Achievement Statistics and Information Report 2011–2012", FOI, 2013

Open Society Foundations 2014 'Somalis in London' Report

Participating community organisations

Help Somalia Foundation

Ocean Somali Community Association

Tower Hamlets Somali Network

Barking and Dagenham Somali Women's Association

Golden Opportunity Youth Association

Elays

Anti-Tribalism Movement

London Somali Youth Forum

Bromley Somali Community Association

Somali Advice And Forum of Information

Somali Youth Helpline

Somali Community Democratic Association