EDUCATING SOMALI CHILDREN, IN THE ERA OF CAPTAIN PHILLIPS

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Objectives

- Understanding popular beliefs about Somalis
- Primer on Somali history and culture
- Highlight challenges Somali children face in the US education system
- Discuss opportunities for improving the educational achievement and experiences of Somali children
Activity #1: What do you know about Somalia?
Why a talk about Somali students?
Because of images like ......
Deconstructing and problematizing stereotypes is important because....

These stereotypes can (negatively) impact a teacher’s relationship and expectations of his/her Somali students and families

These images can have devastating impacts on a Somali student’s sense of self and association with the education system
Somalia: Geography
Somalia: In Pictures
Somalia: In Pictures

Credits: vintagesomalia.com
Somalia: In Pictures
Somalia: In Pictures

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Somalia: A Brief History

Pre-colonial Somalia
- Historically, important site of trade and commerce
- Dominated by powerful Somali empires
- Land of Punt (frankinscence)

Colonial Somalia
- In the 19th century, Somalia was divided by the British (modern day Somaliland state), French (modern day Djibouti) and the Italians (South and Central Somalia)
Somalia: A Brief History

Post-independence period

- Somalia declared independence in 1960 with unification of British and Italian Somaliland (French Somaliland → Djibouti in 1974)
- 1969-1991: Muhammad Siad Barre seizes power in a bloodless coup, following assassination of Sharmarke
Somalia: A Brief History

The Siad Barre Years

- 1969: Government adopts Socialism and aligns with USSR
- 1972: Adoption of written language; a mass rural literacy campaign follows
- 1977: Somalia wars with Ethiopia over Ogaden region
- 1988-1990: War with Somaliland
- 1991: Siad Barre is forced out of office; civil war
Somalia: A Brief History

Post 1991-present

- 1991-2000: Country is embroiled in conflict
- 2000-2012: A series of transitional governments put in place facilitated by the United Nations
- 2012: Election of country’s first federal government since 1969
- Since 2012, many Somalis have returned to Somalia to assist in rebuilding efforts
Somalis in the United States

- Population Estimates: between 35,760 (US Census Bureau, 2000) to 150,000 (Lehman & Eno, 2003)

- Two waves: (1) First wave: students and professionals, from 1960s-1980s, and (2) Second wave: late 1980s-present: refugees

- Somali refugees are present throughout the country, primarily in Minnesota, Ohio, California, Washington and Virginia.

- 1 in 3 US Somalis reside in Minnesota; 2011 US Census estimates that 32,000 Somalis live in Minnesota (in Williams, 2011)

- Estimates are considered to be much lower than reality
A tale of two migrations

- Somalis who arrived prior to the civil war tend to be affluent and highly educated.
- In the US, reside in Virginia, Maryland, DC & New York.
- Somalis who arrived as refugees, have assimilated into poor neighborhoods.
- The latter group has been impacted by many social issues (e.g., poverty, language barrier, under resourced schools etc.)
Who are the Somalis?

- Predominantly in Somalia, but large indigenous populations present in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti.
- Several minority groups including the Bantu and Banaadiri
- Official language is Standard Somali (af-Maxaay)
- Majority are Muslims (99.9%)
- Worldwide: 15-17 million
- Somalis make up the 3rd largest refugee group internationally (UNHCR)
Somali Culture

- Islam
- Family
- Education
- Language and Literacy
- Disability
Somali Culture

- Heterogenous society
- Avoid **single story** approaches with the community:
  http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en
Islam

- Foundation principle is Tawheed (the unity of God)
- 5 pillars: testimony of faith (No God but God and Muhammad is final Messenger), prayer, pilgrimage, charity and fasting
- Pillars of faith: belief in God, belief in angels, belief in God’s revealed books (Bible, Torah & Quran), belief in prophets and messengers of God, belief in the Day of Judgment, and belief in destiny
- Islam is considered an Abrahamic faith
- Muslims believe in the prophets of the Bible and Torah (Moses, Noah, Lot, Abraham, Job etc.) but do not believe in the divinity of Jesus (note: Jesus is referred to in 90 verses in the Quran)
Religious clothing

• Many Somali women observe the Islamic head cover

• Women typically don the hijab at the onset of puberty

• Act of worship to God and to preserve their modesty

• Rules around modest clothing also extend to Muslim men
Family

- The Somali family = nuclear, extended, and clan
- Relationships within Somali families are close and dependent
- Not uncommon for several generations to live under same roof
Somali women

- Somali family structure is patriarchal, but complicates our traditional understanding of patriarchal families.
- Traditionally Somali women are often forceful characters who may exercise more influence than appears on the surface (Lewis, 1993 in Kahin, 1997).
- Mothers are highly valued in Somali culture. Prophet Muhammad: ‘the path to heaven lies under the feet of the mother.’
- The resettlement process has separated many families including spouses; as a result many households are female run.
Education

- Education levels vary amongst refugees
- Most Somalis have had access to some literacy (e.g. Quranic school)
- Some Somali refugees come to the US having completed their education
- Other Somali refugee adults have either had an interrupted formal education, or have not had experience with formal education
- Most Somali adult males, typically speak some English
- Illiteracy rates are high in the Somali community, disproportionately impacting Somali women
Somali parents have struggled to educate children in midst of English language issues, racism, poverty, Islamophobia and other factors.

Due to discrimination in public schools, Somali parents have elected to enroll their children in charter schools.

1 in 3 Somali children in Minnesota reported to be in a charter school (Twin Cities Daily Planet, 2012).

In study about Somali parents charter school choice, the majority of parents reported cultural identity as more important than educational quality (Hussein, 2012).
Child development

- Caution should be applied when measuring Somali children’s development against traditional development theories (e.g., Piaget)
- Somali culture places more emphasis on social markers of development
- Learning in Somali culture is communal; children learn Somali language, literacy and culture by being apprenticed by older children
- This maybe why at times, Somali children have challenges in the individual-oriented nature of the US classroom
- Somali parents also place great value in children’s obedience
Somali Language

- Introduced in 1972
- Based on the Latin Alphabet
- Cushitic language from Afro-Asiatic family
- Est. 12.6 million speakers (Ethnologue, 2013)
- Spoken in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti
- Heavily influenced by Arabic; also has borrowed from colonial languages (French, English & Italian)
Somali Language

- Somali has 24 consonants and has long and short vowels (long vowels represented by doubling of vowel)
- Somali names often have anglicized and Somali versions (e.g. Sirad Shirdon (anglicized) – Siraad Shirdoon (Somali))

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Common Words/Phrases

- As salaamu ‘alaikum (peace by upon you)
- Subax wanaagsan (good morning)
- Galab wanaagsan (good afternoon)
- Habeyn wanagsan (good night)
- Nabadhey (good bye)
- Hooyo (mom)
- Aabo (dad)
- Haa (yes)
- Maya (no)
- InshaAllah (God Willing)
Language and Literacy

- Dependent on acculturation of the family
- Somali parents multilingual (typically speak Somali, colonial language and Arabic)
- The majority of Somali children reside in homes where Somali is spoken
- Children learn English via TV and peers
- Increasingly, parents modelling Som-glish (Somali-English) for children
- Children are often exposed to Arabic literacy prior to start of school (Qu’ranic school)
Educational issues

- Expectations of teachers
- Special Education
- Culture Clash
Expectations of teachers

- Traditionally, education was the exclusive domain of teachers
- Somalis have a high level of respect for teachers
- Implications for parent’s engagement with children’s learning in the home
- Understand this, validate Somali cultural perceptions of teachers, and teach parents that in the US context children’s education is a team effort.
Prior to Somalia’s civil war, existing organizations for the disabled catered exclusively to the physically handicapped.

Similar to most developing nations, developmental disabilities was conflated with mental illness.

Families often thought children who were developmentally disabled were mentally ill, or were victims of black magic.

Due to societal pressures, not uncommon for families to keep disabled children/adults at home.
Autism in Minneapolis

- Since 2008, the Somali community in Minneapolis has voiced concerns of elevated Autism rates amongst children.

- Several reports released, culminating in 2013 report which found:
  - 1 in 32 Somali children aged 7-9 years, enrolled in Minneapolis schools in 2010 had dx of Autism
  - Average age of diagnosis was 5
  - Most children also had a dx of an intellectual disability

Source: Hewitt et al, 2013

- Elevated rates of Autism have also been reported in Sweden (Barnevik-Olsen, Gillburg, & Fernell, 2008)

- Informally high rates have also been reported in Toronto and Columbus

- There is a stigma around labels, which has resulted in families rejecting clinical and educational services
In the Minneapolis Schools, families whose children are identified as being developmentally delayed may leave the school district for local charter schools.

After a year or two, children come back to the school district with significant delays, due to the lack of early intervention.

Currently, most of the Autism Language classrooms in the school district are populated with Somali children, on the severe end of the spectrum.
Cultural clash/ issues of identity

- Due to psychological discontinuities (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004), many Somali parents have not yet mentally unpacked.
- Somali students are confronted with American culture in the classroom, and parents who are focused on what is happening in Somalia.
- Somali parents have a visceral fear that children will lose their cultural identity and language.
- This can lead to identity confusion in Somali youth, which can impact associations with education.
Recommendations

- Critically understand and confront your beliefs about different cultural groups.
- Build strong relationships with students and families and work towards bridging the gap between students home and school cultures.
- Work towards making your classroom an additive space, a space which sustains student’s home culture.
- Learn about your students funds of knowledge, and incorporate into your curriculum.
Use orality to build student’s L2 language and literacy development

Utilize culturally relevant books in your classroom, as these have been shown to improve student interest and motivation.

A core tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is to address sociopolitical issues which may serve to marginalize particular groups. Do not be afraid to address these issues in your class.
- Parent involvement: just because parents are not engaging in the ways we expect them to, does not mean they're not engaging.

- Understand that many parents do not understand the US educational system and don’t take for granted that they understand how to participate with a child’s school.
Activity #2: What did you learn?


References


US Census Bureau, 2010
Resources

- The Somali Literacy Project
  http://thesomaliliteracyproject.com/resources/
Thank you! Questions?

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