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\*Corresponding author: Paul Thomas,  
Faculty of Education & International  
Studies, Oslo & Akershus University  
College, Falbes gate 5, Oslo, Norway.  
E-mails: [paul.thomas@hioa.no](mailto:paul.thomas@hioa.no),  
[hpaulsilas@hotmail.com](mailto:hpaulsilas@hotmail.com)

Reviewing editor:  
Yvonne Xian-han Huang, Hong Kong  
Institute of Education, Hong Kong

Additional information is available at  
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## STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Norwegian-Somali parents who send their children to schools in Somalia

Paul Thomas<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** The perplexing numbers of Somali children withdrawn from schools in Norway and sent to Somalia is the concern of this study. These students are often brought back and re-enroll later as adolescents with concomitant educational challenges. The findings are critically analyzed employing John Ogbu's cultural ecology of minorities and a CHAT-based inquiry that approaches the Somali community and Norwegian schooling as interconnected activities that share commonalities and yet evince several contradictions. The findings reveal the need to engage with Somali symbolic cultural artifacts (e.g. deen (religion), dhaqan (culture), gaal (the infidel or "Other"), and hisho (female modesty) and arrive at interpretations/understandings that are more amenable to educational success. It is argued that given the gravity and scale of the conundrum, both sides will have to think creatively if the aim is to safeguard the educational integrity of Somali children.

**Subjects:** Culture & Development; Islam; Multicultural Education; Race & Ethnic Studies; Sociology of Religion

**Keywords:** academic risk; adolescents; at risk; disadvantaged; diversity

### 1. Introduction

This study concerns itself with the following question: Why do some Somali parents in Norway opt to send their children to schools in Africa (Somalia in particular) and the Middle East? Often withdrawn from primary and lower secondary schools, these students experience enormous difficulties when

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Thomas has a PhD in Education from King's College, London. He is an associate professor at the Faculty of Education and International Studies, Oslo & Akershus University College, Norway. He has experience teaching in high school and undergraduate level in Norway. His research has focused on the manner in which multicultural categories, such as religion, ethnicity, language, and gender have intersected with education.



Paul Thomas

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

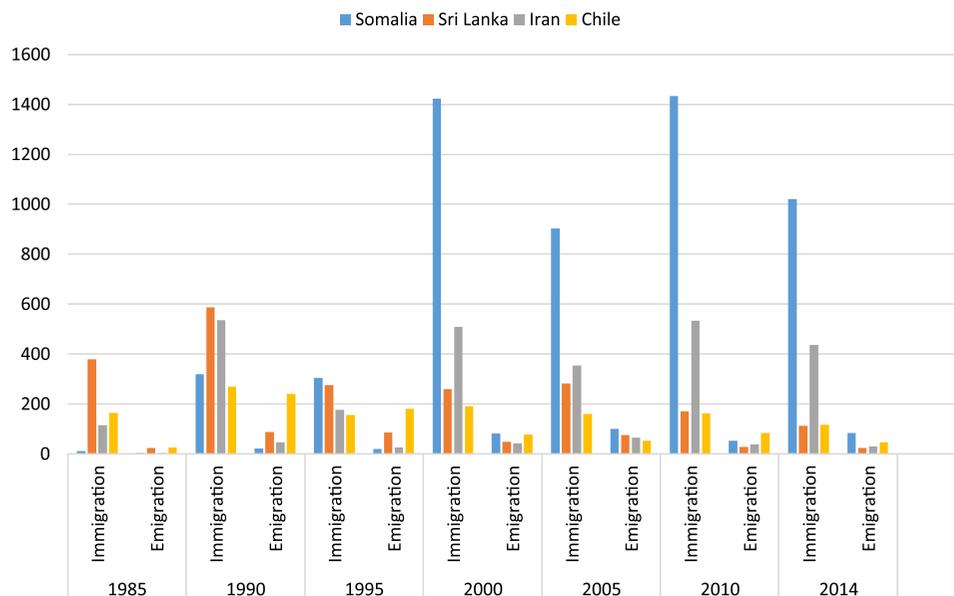
This study concerns itself with the issue of Norwegian-Somali parents who withdraw their children from schools in Norway in favor of schools in Somalia. A CHAT methodology that takes cognizance of the individual's embeddedness in diverse social contexts and maps the cultural and historical underpinnings of these multiple contexts and their interrelatedness is privileged. Twenty-eight individuals were interviewed, seven of which were students at the high school where I worked. John Ogbu's cultural ecology of minorities is employed as a conceptual toolkit to explore the encounter between Somalis and the educational/bureaucratic apparatus in Norway. The findings reveal the existence of a trust deficit between Somali parents and Norwegian officialdom—the educational and Child Welfare Services in particular. It is argued, in the interest of the children whose educational development is hampered, that efforts at building trust will necessitate serious efforts at exploring new and genuinely multicultural avenues.

they re-enroll years later as adolescents. I was spurred on to examine this phenomenon when, as an upper secondary teacher, I discovered that roughly four of the seven Somali students in my class, had been sent to Somalia as children and returned as adolescents with concomitant challenges of poor Norwegian skills and general cultural competence. As of 1.1.2102, there were 14,789 Somali children (0–17 years old) registered in Norway—the highest among immigrants from non-Western backgrounds. The gravity of the phenomenon can be gauged from a study published by the Institute for Social Research (Lidén, Bredal, & Reisel, 2014) which has compared the emigration and return rates of children from 15 countries in Norway.

If we look at the proportion of the children who have emigrated, Somalia is conspicuous with 13% in the category “emigrated/not returned children”. The corresponding figures for Pakistan and Iraq, which have the second and third highest numbers of registered children, were 6% and 5% respectively. While 50% of children from Pakistan and Iraq who emigrated in 2004 returned by 1.1.2012, only 25% of Somali children returned. (Lidén et al., 2014, p. 7)

A large percentage of the Somali population in Norway arrived as asylum seekers/refugees in the aftermath of the collapse of former autocrat Siad Barre’s dictatorship (1969–1991). Refugees are understood as those who because of persecution or war, for instance, apply for protection in another safe country, while asylum seekers are already in the host country when they decide to apply for residence on the same grounds. In 1988, a détente was reached between Barre and Ethiopia’s erstwhile dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, which triggered a military onslaught by various anti-government forces, such as the Somali National Movement in the north, spearheaded by *Isaq* clansmen inimical to Barre. The encounter between an acephalous, egalitarian society primarily based on agnation or patrilineal descent and an autocratic, centralized government proved deleterious for the nascent Somali state (Hoehne & Luling, 2010; Lewis, 2008). Successive upheavals, such as a full-fledged civil war, crippling famines, flooding, and the rise of extremist militant groups like Al-Shabaab, have seen waves of exodus to the West that continues to the present. From 2008 to 2013, Somalia has consecutively topped the list of the world’s failed/most fragile states, slipping into second place behind South Sudan in the last two years. The foremost expert on Somali affairs, Ioan Lewis writes, “The human cost was terrible. Thousands of civilians fled their homes seeking asylum across the border in Ethiopia and in the Republic of Djibouti. Thousands of refugees eventually found refuge in Canada, Britain, Scandinavia, Italy and the USA” (Lewis, 2008, p. 71).

**Figure 1. Immigration to Norway between 1985–2014 (Somalia, Sri Lanka, Iran, and Chile).**



Whereas only 12 Somalis immigrated to Norway in 1985 (see Figure 1, Statistics Norway, 2015), the figure has barely dropped under 1,000 in the last five years, making this category the largest among non-Western backgrounds. Sri Lanka, Iran, and Chile were selected as comparative categories. Although different in several ways from the Somali population, these three groups began to arrive in Norway fleeing socio-political problems around the same time as Somalis.

### 1.1. Educational challenges facing Somalis

The lifestyle choices of Somalis, that seem to challenge the “civilizing” project of a modern liberal state such as that of Norway (Engebritsen & Fuglerud, 2009, p. 9), has engaged several academics in recent years. In terms of education, Somalis are struggling with 12.5% registered without any formal education. In its strategic five-year plan (2004–2009) for improving education for minorities, the then Minister of Education and Research (2003), Kristin Clemet, stated:

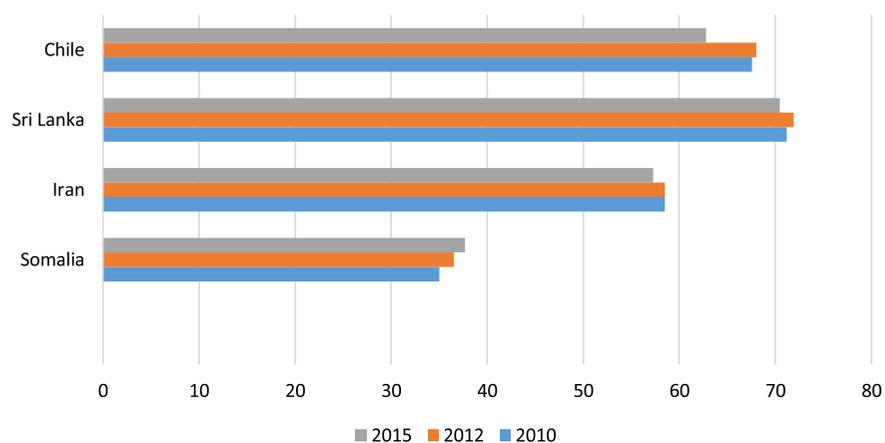
We want the gap in educational achievement between minority and majority language pupils to be reduced. We want more young people from language minorities to complete upper secondary and higher education. We want minority language adults to have a good command of the Norwegian language that will facilitate their inclusion in working life and enable them to help their children with their schooling.

The latest figures (2015), however, give no cause for optimism. While the numbers for those over sixteen completing upper secondary school in Norway is 33% for Sri Lankans, 24.6% for Iranians, and 36.6% for Chileans, Somalis were registered with just 9.4%. With respect to figures for employment in 2015, the Somali category underperforms in comparison to the other three (Figure 2).

The Norwegian educational authorities (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010) call for more research that sheds light into the differential educational levels and competence of minorities, which is commensurate with the aim of this study. According to Larsen (2011), European studies on education and ethnic minorities have privileged educational attainment without paying due attention to issues that facilitate or impede educational progress. The issue of why some Somali parents resort to the drastic measure of withdrawing their children from the safety of Norwegian schools and send their children to schools in war-torn Somalia and other unstable regions in the Middle East appears all the more baffling given that Norwegian schools are second only to Iceland when measured on “happiness” in PISA tests. According to the OECD (2012):

In Norway, 87% of students feel happy at school compared with 80% on average across OECD countries. In the other Nordic countries, students in Denmark and Sweden feel happy at school at a similar level as in Norway, whereas in Finland only 67% of students feel happy at school. (OECD, 2012)

**Figure 2. Percentage of employed immigrants 15–74 years with 7 years of residence (2010, 2012, and 2015).**



In teasing out some of these latter issues, Ogbu's (1993) taxonomy of minority status is salient as a theoretical framework to situate the findings, which is considered next.

## 2. Theoretical framework

John Ogbu's research on the cultural ecology of minorities was conducted in the USA and, as such, cannot be extrapolated to the Scandinavian context without nuances. Even in the US context, Ogbu's typology is not without its detractors (for a more thorough critique see Foley, 2005; Foster, 2005; Hamann, 2004). For instance, his proposition that Black American youth employ the pejorative "acting White" (Ogbu, 1990, p. 53) as an oppositional cultural frame to deter other blacks who emulate white repertoires for achieving educational success, is, to say the least, controversial. This said, I find Ogbu's taxonomy germane to the task of making sense of the encounter between Somalis and the educational/bureaucratic apparatus in Norway. Ogbu rightly observed that while some minorities performed well, and even on par with mainstream students, others struggled considerably. Black Americans appeared to face severe challenges as a whole when compared to Africans from West Africa in the USA, or the Japanese Buraku, who perform poorly in Japan, but do well in the USA (Ogbu, 1993, p. 484). Most studies, to his mind, did not adequately account for the differential results *within* and *across* diverse minority groups.

For Ogbu, voluntary immigrants are those who of their own free accord migrate to another country in the persuasion that their life chances will improve. This unforced volition feeds into an abiding ethos of good will and desire to succeed toward the host society. Buoyed by this positive mindset, they soldier on regardless of the challenges they may face in the new country (Ogbu, 1990, 1992). Crucially, in terms of education, the onus is placed on the children and not the school to negotiate and overcome any impediments that may jeopardize educational success. Ogbu is critical of studies that seek to explain minority educational achievement through an ahistorical lens. Ogbu seems to suggest that successful minority communities are both voluntary immigrants and successfully inculcate their children with the aforementioned positive affective traits vis-à-vis the host society. Examples of this taxonomy are Jews and Mormons (Ogbu, 1992, p. 290).

On the other hand, involuntary immigrants encompass those groups who consider themselves to be in the country against their will. Historically oppressed groups, such as Black Americans and Chicanos are examples Ogbu furnishes (Ogbu, 1993). They are characterized as harboring a strong resentment toward mainstream society. Having been on the receiving end of state-sponsored racism, injustice, and belligerence for a long time, they have developed an oppositional cultural frame of reference. They have cemented the view that the state apparatus is rigged in favor of whites and so education is a waste of time. Constantly suspicious of state machinations, Ogbu argues that their antipathy subverts their chances of educational success (Ogbu, 1992). This antipathy is inculcated in the younger generation which perpetuates educational underperformance.

The two categories described so far must also take cognizance of what Ogbu calls "primary and secondary cultural differences" (Ogbu, 1993, pp. 489, 490). Primary differences are those cultural traits a group possesses prior to emigrating from the sending countries. These mannerisms undergo certain transformations once they have had the opportunity to incubate in the crucible of the receiving country. Immigrant communities demonstrate a plethora of coping mechanisms in the interstices of the encounter. The response to this encounter is what Ogbu calls the "secondary cultural differences," and impact upon the group's educational performance.

However, and relevant to this study, is the category of refugees. The overwhelming majority of Somalis arrived in Norway as refugees/asylum seekers. Ogbu is careful to make the distinction that refugees are not voluntary immigrants, but have been coerced into seeking asylum due to war or persecution in the home country (Ogbu, 1992, p. 290). Yet they adopt a tactical "tourist" outlook in their encounter with the host country in order to succeed, imitating "White" ways of speaking and behaving. As his typology on refugees in the US context shares commonalities with the status of Somalis in the Norwegian context, it is worth quoting him at length:

Refugees who were forced to come to the United States because of civil war or other crises in their places of origin are not immigrants or voluntary minorities. They did not freely choose or plan to come to settle in the United States to improve their status. However, they share some attitudes and behaviors of immigrant minorities which lead to school success. For example, they come to the United States with already existing differences in languages and cultures and with a tourist attitude toward the cultural and language differences. Like tourists, they knew before coming to the United States that to accomplish the goal of their emigration they would have to learn new, that is, white American, ways of behaving and talking. (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, pp. 164, 165)

Contra Ogbu, the refugee crisis of 2015 has demonstrated that whereas refugees are obliged, as per the terms of the Dublin Treaty, to apply to the first country they arrive in, thousands fleeing the civil war in Syria, made it explicit that they had no desire to reside in East European countries, like Hungary, but were on their way to Germany, Austria, and Sweden. Obviously, there is an element of volition in the choice of many refugees. In fact, the majority of Somali respondents conceded off the record that they were in relatively safe countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia, India, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa) but took advantage of the crisis in Somalia to apply for asylum in western countries that were perceived to be prosperous and hospitable to foreigners.

The challenges of detecting fraudulent applications are now herculean. Almost all EU and EEA (of which Norway is a member) countries administer some form of fraudulent detection: e.g. linguistic analysis tests, age analysis and knowledge of politics, society, and geography of the home country. Biometric tests have now become de rigueur to expose those who make multiple asylum claims in several countries. According to the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, Eurostat estimates that of the 14,470 applications for asylum from Somalis to the EU and Norway, 5,465 were considered bogus, representing a 38% rejection rate. The above has been labored to show that Ogbu's suggestion that refugees do not freely choose to live in their host societies appears incongruous in the light of the statistics. The latter indicates that, rather than being a passive and helpless group, refugees from Somalia and other countries in the Global South show agency and courage in their resolve to settle in the countries of their choice.

A community's historical and cultural legacy is a vital component of Ogbu's theory of cultural ecology in explaining minority educational achievement (Ogbu, 1992, p. 289). The next section briefly considers aspects of religion and culture (Somali *dhaqan*)—e.g. the concept of “infidel” (Somali: *gaal*), and “shame” (*hisho*). It will be argued later that educators serious about engaging with Somalis must pay closer attention to the manner in which these historical/cultural elements intersect with highly centralized and homogenizing Western educational apparatuses rooted in secular epistemologies (Thomas, 2015). In unpacking these complex cultural repertoires, I reach deep into the universe of my own Somali upbringing and conversations with over 50 Somali informants.

### **2.1. The role of religion and culture**

There is a growing recognition of the salience of religion in the public sphere although it has not been extensively explored in relation to education. In multicultural studies, the sphere of religion is approached as a “historical product of discursive processes” (Bauman, 1999, p. 22) shot through with issues of power, authority, and legitimacy (see Thomas & Selimovic, 2015). *Dhaqan* is an all-encompassing term that, to a Somali, brings to mind the essence of “Somaliness.” It includes, but is not limited to, Islam, the Somali language, clan allegiance, and sundry customs crystallized through centuries of practice, such as female genital mutilation (FGM). According to UNICEF (2015):

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has a prevalence of about 95 per cent in Somalia and is primarily performed on girls between the ages of four and 11. This traditional practice is embedded deep within Somali culture, and the belief is widely held that FGM is necessary to “cleanse” a girl child. In some communities, girls cannot be married without it.

Islam is the preeminent identity marker among Somalis. An apostate is pejoratively labeled *gaal*. In the Somali consciousness, the term conjures up images of an iron-clad curtain beyond which is no redemption—a condition remedied only through a return to *dhaqan* (particularly Islam). Somalis have long secreted occidentalist loathing into *gaal*. Christianity, white people, and the West in general are subsumed here. For a Somali to become a *gaal* is to espouse the characteristics of the irreconcilable “Other”—it is to be stripped off “Somaliness.” It must be borne in mind that although the pejorative’s most damning verdict is brought to bear on religious apostates, it is often extended to those who show a fondness for Western practices considered “decadent.” Thus, Somalis who have boy/girlfriends (especially white ones) and females who unveil themselves and dress in revealing “western” attire may be castigated as *gaal*. While *halal* and *haram* restrict themselves to the sharia law based on the Qur’an and Hadith, *gaal* is inchoate and can be confusing to Westerners. For instance, a Somali may say that she has married a *gaal* (white man) who has converted to Islam. Hence, while her hearers may respond with *Mash’allah*—an Arabic phrase used to show appreciation for a person or happening, the converted spouse may be baffled to still hear the label applied.

*Hisho* is another of those much bandied about terms I became familiar with, but learned not to fear as it was addressed to my sisters and female members of the Somali community. The term is often foregrounded with *naya* (loosely “girl or woman”). *Hisho* can be roughly translated “have shame or show modesty.” If *gaal* denotes the ultimate “Other,” *hisho* is the constant reprimand hurled at females throughout their upbringing to temper any deviance that may lead to the dreaded *gaal* dénouement. Injected at frequent intervals, it functions like a Foucauldian panopticon of sorts (Foucault, 1990; Thomas, 2012), molding a docile female body. A female who is modestly dressed (long-flowing *abayas*), discreet, and pious in her dealings with men—e.g. lowers her eyes, avoids been seen alone in male company, and helps with the domestic chores, is the ideal woman.

Edward Tylor’s (1871) definition of culture, although penned almost 150 years ago, is still apposite: “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” At heart is the issue of the extent to which acculturation in one community aligns or deviates from that of the majority, and the response from a majority that feel their culture threatened. The tensions thrown up in the encounter may be met by more demands, tolerance, or inaction for fear of offending minorities. The latter was the case in the early 1990s when the Norwegian authorities looked the other way as the 300 strong Romani community failed to send their children to schools because of the perceived disjunction in the values imparted. At the time, the Child Welfare Services were accused of failing the children (Eriksen & Arntsen Sørheim, 2000). For some, contemporary migration piggybacking on the forces of globalization has spawned parochialism, or what is called *Simmel’s Law* in sociology. Simply put, when groups feel threatened, they tend to look inwards and seek to demarcate boundaries, sometimes aggressively (Eriksen & Arntsen Sørheim, 2000, p. 115). The “father of Somali studies,” Lewis (1994, 2002), long observed that the main unit of analysis of Somali culture is the clan. Ever since independence, Somalis have found themselves caught in the interstices between an autocratic state in Somalia and, for those who have sought refuge in the West, democracy and secularism, both different from the clan-based system that predated statehood (Hoehne & Luling, 2010). It is still too early to say in which direction the aforementioned factors will influence Somali identity formation in Norway. The current tense climate, which saw its apotheosis in the anti-immigration/anti-Islam mass murders committed in 2011 by Anders Breivik, may lead to parochialism following *Simmel’s Law*. Paradoxically, however, the Somali clan-based identity which transcends the nation state may yet thrive despite the tensions in the encounter with Western societies. “If globalization is all about networks and connectivity, Somalis find themselves rather well equipped to operate in a global world, with or without a state” (Hoehne & Luling, 2010, p. 367).

### 3. Methodology

This study employs CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory) as the key unit of analysis given its aptitude for analyzing an issue by considering its genesis and development rather than a reductionist focus on its current appearance.

It implies analyzing individual development and learning in the contexts of social contexts and social practices. Individual development is interpreted as a trajectory of the individual's inclusion (or exclusion) in cultural contexts, and the context is interpreted in the perspective of its history and its interrelatedness with other contexts. (Havnes, 2010, p. 493)

In exploring why Somali parents withdraw their children from schools in Norway and send them to Somalia, this study is interested in two activity systems, namely the Norwegian school and its perception through the lens of the Somali community. CHAT has its gaze on the *activity*. "The activity is constituted by the joint and coordinated actions of more than one actor, often a wide range of persons with diverse roles and expertise...the activity is driven by a collective motive" (Havnes, 2010, p. 494). CHAT is deemed an appropriate method for this study for several reasons. As a multipronged method, it accounts for the complexity of the subject under study more than any other method. For example, the decision of Somali parents to send their children to schools in Somalia, as the findings indicate, is distilled in the interstices of several factors: a diasporic community that invests in education in Somalia and encourages Somalis in Norway to send their children to the homeland; Somali Mosques and elders in both countries who serve to reinforce the salience of religion and culture; the meeting with the Norwegian education system which is perceived to be threatening to Somali values, and an abiding suspicion of the role of teachers and the Child Services, to name a few.

CHAT takes a "holistic" approach by seeking to account for the phenomenon under study by first delineating the two countries into two "activities"—the collective motive that drives what happens in Somalia and Norway, respectively, and comparing and contrasting the two. The actors and their roles are mapped out with the following dimensions considered: Who are the actors? (subjects); in what ways do the subjects' cultural beliefs and practices impact upon the phenomenon under study? (cultural artifacts); in regard to schooling, to what degree do the parents aims align with that of the school? (object); what do the tensions and conflicts say about the discourses of the two "activities"—i.e. the collective aims of the Somali and Norwegian repertoires? (contradictions) and, finally, how do the two activities perceive the role of government representatives in official institutions such as schools and the child welfare services? (division of labor). This study identified the aforementioned five dimensions as representative of the findings but a larger study could just as well as be operated with less or more dimensions of CHAT depending on the complexity of the context.

In mapping out the interrelated aspects of the activity of each system, parents and children above the age of 18 in the conurbation of Oslo, Norway, were first identified through a snowballing method. These constitute what in a CHAT approach are referred to as *subjects*. An Imam and two well-connected members of the Somali community played the role of gatekeepers establishing contact with 10 parents and 15 youth (28 in total). In addition, I have employed the ethnographic method of participant observer immersed in a high school in East Oslo where I have studied seven Somali students over the course of a year (2015). Permission was secured first through the Headmistress of the school where I worked. None of the students in the study were minors and hence there was no need to apply for ethical clearance through the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. There is a general perception among other immigrants that Somalis are well connected and helpful. This proved to be true in accessing key people and relevant participants. It cannot be denied that my own entrenchment in the community, not to mention the assistance forwarded due to kinship ties, which are salient among Somalis, facilitated the data gathering process. The Imam was known to some of my Somali students as they attended the Mosque where he presided. He was contacted and agreed to participate. Given the social capital sketched above, the challenge I faced was in avoiding going "native." A semi-structured interview format went some way in countering complacency, as the sight of a fellow-Somali constantly reading questions from a document served as a reminder of my role as

researcher. The main challenge faced in this regard was precisely the fact that some of the participants asked me to talk without the guide—a testament to the abiding lack of trust in officialdom. I was often asked if I was using an audio device to record the conversation, which was not welcome. Kvale and Brinkman (2006, p. 124) highlight the salience of semi-structured interviews and the advantage of having a sequence of themes that are covered while retaining the option of pursuing responses further. The Somali culture is highly oral and dialogic (Lewis, 2008) and it soon became clear that I had to often gently intervene in order to avoid digressions and return to the topics to be covered. Interviews were conducted in the Mosque, in classrooms, over the phone, and in houses. In each instance where religious-cultural terms were employed, I made it a point to ask the respondent to refine and sharpen the manner in which the term was being used (e.g. *dhaqan*, *gaal*, and *hisho*). Two individuals known in the community as cultural “experts” were also consulted during the data processing phase to solicit their expertise.

The above method was subsumed under an overarching ethnographic approach where through the use of a multiplicity of complementary methods—participant observation in my capacity as classroom teacher, classroom and campus discussions, memos, and diary-keeping, sought to gain some understanding of the worldview of the participants in a hermeneutic process). For instance, the citation below in the findings occurred during what is called “Dignity Day” when all high schools in Norway set aside one day to raise awareness and money for a nationally agreed specific issue in a particular country. As the lead teacher for my class, this was an issue that was robustly debated last year with the majority in the classroom asking for their money to be returned. Clearly, as a teacher-researcher who is embedded in the environment this ethnographic lens adds a particular authenticity not easily available to outsiders.

Parent 8 (female): We have lost trust in the Norwegian schools. The other day, my son came home upset because the whole school was forced to collect money for gays in South America. The school should stick to education and not such things which are opposed to our religion and culture.

The school has a high intake of students from minority backgrounds with a significant number of Somali extract. The second aspect is the notion of *cultural artefacts*. CHAT understands cultural artefacts to refer to mediational cultural tools in which “the activities of prior generations are cumulated in the present as the specifically human part of the environment” (Cole, 1996, p. 145). The role of Islam and the aforementioned symbolic mediators—*dhaqan*, *gaal*, and *hisho*, are significant in this regard.

A third dimension is the *object* or motive of the activity. Every official curriculum has certain learning outcomes as the objective. The general object of a school is teaching. Teachers act on the object of teaching to achieve an outcome of student learning. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 67), *habitus* seeks to approximate the state’s desire of inculcating certain dispositions (a manner of being) and qualifications deemed useful through educational institutions. CHAT seeks to make sense of this *object* or motive underpinning schools and how Somali students and parents interpret this. Just as *habitus* has congealed through societal impression for many years making it durable, similarly, any pedagogic action that seeks to alter *habitus* must be exerted in a sustained manner over a durable length of time (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

The fourth aspect of CHAT explored in this study is that of *contradictions*. The importance of exploring contradictions to understand challenges in several types of collaborative practice have been highlighted in several CHAT-based studies (Edwards, Daniels, Gallagher, Leadbetter, & Warmington, 2009; Engeström, 2001; Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003). In CHAT, contradictions are understood as being *within* and *between* activity systems; given their systemic moorings, contradictions cannot be observed directly, but only through their discursive manifestations as conflicts and dilemmas in human interactions. Finally, the fifth aspect, *division of labor*, constitutes the hierarchical distribution of roles, functions and tasks within the activity system. Here, the manner in which the close collaboration between the Child Welfare Services and schools in Norway informs Somali perception of the

objectives of the educational enterprise is significant. At the core of such a CHAT-based inquiry are questions that throw up contradictions that feed into the quest for building more trust between the communities.

#### 4. Findings

The findings have been categorized according to religion, culture (*dhaqan*), and experiences with Norwegian schools. Commensurate with a CHAT methodology, attention is paid to the social, cultural, and political situation in Somalia to better situate some of the responses elicited. Where appropriate, I refer to discussions and opinions from the wider Norwegian society (e.g. media and politicians).

##### 4.1. The salience of religion

When asked, “Why do you think Somali parents withdraw their children from schools in Norway and send them to Somalia and countries in the Middle East?” the lion’s share of the responses evoked Islam with the all-encompassing *dhaqan* not far behind.

Parent 1 (male): I sent my children to Somalia to draw closer to their religion (*deen*). I wanted them to grow up in a Muslim country.

Author: Were you not concerned for their need to learn Norwegian and develop the competence needed to live and work in Norway in the future?

Parent 1: What good would that be if they go to hell (*adaab*)? I would have failed in my duties as a father if my children lost their religion and culture (*dhaqan*).

Parent 2 (female): As Somali parents, our greatest fear living in the West is the fear of apostasy. Personally, I haven’t sent my children to any Muslim country, but I envy those who did, and I know many. The worst thing is for them to become *gaalo* (Christian, backslidden).

Author: But wouldn’t the security situation in Somalia concern you?

Parent 2: It would be preferable for our children to at least die as Muslims in a Muslim country.

Parent 3 (male): The schools in Norway seek to inculcate values that are opposed to Islam. They teach for instance that some children are genetically predisposed to be gay. Such indoctrination makes Somalia an attractive option.

Author: Would Somalia lose its attraction if Norway were to open for Muslim schools?

Parent 3 (male): On the surface yes, but then again, this would not be viable in the long run because the media will hound Muslim schools. Perhaps you are aware of the how the media in Birmingham, UK, blew the whole thing about Muslim schools out of proportion. They call any form of religious instruction “terrorism”.

When I asked parent 3 about how he came to know about the Birmingham (“Trojan Horse”) affair, he quizzically replied, “Well don’t you know that there are many Somalis there? The ‘jungle telegraph’ works efficiently among Somalis”. Imams are highly regarded among Somalis who are *sunni* Muslim. Abdi (not his real name) came to Norway when he was 15 years old in 1988. Having completed upper secondary school, he speaks Somali, Arabic, English, and Norwegian fluently. When he decided to look for a spouse, he travelled to Somaliland and brought his wife over to Norway. Solidly embedded in both worlds, he is well placed with his experience to make sense of the topic of this study. Abdi confirms the responses of the interviewees above.

Imam: I cannot count how many times Imams from Turkish, Moroccan and Kurdish backgrounds in Norway have told me: “Had it not been for you Somalis, our Mosque would have been empty.” Somalis are a very religious people by nature. There is nothing more precious to them than Islam.

Author: How much of the issue has to with fear of the Child Services in Norway?

Imam: Look, though the Child Services does spook Somalis, trust me, even if such a department was yet to be invented, Somalis take the task of educating their children in the Qur'an very seriously. I have often heard parents boast that their child has now memorized a certain percentage of the Qur'an. They are actually in open competition with other Somalis about whose child can recite more of the Qur'an from memory. The West has yet to appreciate the religiosity of the Somali.

Another parent (4) made a distinction confirmed by other sources: "Understand that while the Somali-Norwegians from the north (*reer waqooyi*) generally send their children to Somaliland because of the security there, it is the southerners (*reer konfoor*)—the majority in Norway currently—who send their children to the Middle East." The next segment considers typical answers from youth who were schooled in Somalia.

A1 (female, 20 years old and wearing a long-flowing black *abaya*): I was sent to Syria, Egypt and Somalia. I was just 7 years old when I left Norway.

Author: Why were you sent away? What do you feel now that you have returned?

A1: I am very happy for the experience I had. My parents wanted me to understand the importance of Islam. I studied the Qur'an and learned to appreciate my religion. Obviously, I wish I spoke Norwegian much better, but religion, like anything else of value, comes at a cost. *Inshallah* I will catch up and do well.

A2 (male 18): all one hears on the news in the West is that Somalia is breeding ground for extremist like Al Shabaab. I don't support these fanatics, but one forgets that it was the Islamic Courts which finally brought some semblance of peace to the south of Somalia after years of mayhem and anarchy. But the world did not appreciate this. It's about Islam; they seem to be forever ill-disposed against our religion.

Author: Would you one day consider sending your children to Somalia to study?

A2: Of course, I would. Every Somali knows that Norway is not his home. This is the country of the *gaal*.

A3 (female, 19 years old): I am very angry that I was sent to Somalia. (With tears in her eyes)... Upon returning, I met my classmates who are high achieving students at the University while I am struggling in the second year of upper secondary.

Respondent A2 makes reference to the 2006 home-grown local association of Islamic clerics who formed what came to be known as the Islamic Courts in Mogadishu. Although their contribution was generally appreciated in war-torn Mogadishu, the courts enforced a Saudi Wahhabi inspired interpretation of Islam on a population that was generally tolerant and looked askance at lashings for a litany of contraventions: women who were unveiled, those who chewed the mild narcotic *qat*, cinema-going, public dancing, singing, and even watching football matches (Lewis, 2008, p. 87). In summary, all but one of the informants in this category supported sending Somali children to school in Somalia/Middle East on religious grounds. The next segment considers the second most important rationale for schooling in Somalia—*dhaqan*.

#### 4.2. The salience of culture (*dhaqan*)

Parent 5 (female): In 1994, my son who was a teenager experienced problems at home. He and his sister began to take on the decadent ways of the *gaal*. The Child Welfare Services intervened. My daughter went missing for two months and was, sadly, found dead. This changed everything for the family. My husband decided to send the rest of the children aged five and seven to Jordan. They were all told that they were going on a trip to the USA. Four years later, they all returned from Jordan to Norway.

Parent 6 (male): My daughter aged 14 began to hang out with her classmates, some of whom were smoking, swearing and hearing suggestive music. She was losing her *dhaqan*. What Norwegians do not understand is that such children are a nuisance to them also—their schools

and society in general, but strangely, they think this is what it means to be “modern.” She finally agreed to visit her grandparents in Somalia and, once there, agreed to stay on for a few years. She has turned out so different now—full of respect and a credit to her family.

Author: What about her education in Norway? I mean the language and cultural competence.

Parent 6 (male): I say first save the soul and all else follows. She could have become a drug addict today barely standing on her feet as they do around Oslo Central Station. At least I don't have to see her corpse before I die Inshallah.

Parent 7 (female): It is really irritating and humiliating how the authorities stop us at the airport at Gardermoen (Oslo's main airport) and interrogate us about FGM. Why is it that they are not more concerned with the discipline of our children? How come they think it is fine for a child to have consensual sex at the age of 16? They send people to the schools and encourage them to have “safe sex”. I tell you this country's *dhaqan* is dead, and they want to corrupt our children too.

Whereas the parents were on the offensive trying to validate their actions, the above contrasts with the more subdued response from the youth who were on the receiving end.

B1 (male 31 years old): This was years ago in 2001 when I was young and stupid. I became involved in Oslo's underworld of drugs and crime. Things spiraled out of control and I became a hard-core criminal. As a last resort, my brothers sent me back to Somaliland where I was for 6 years. I returned a changed man mainly because there were no drugs in Somaliland. I actually decided to return of my own free will after a short stay in Norway.

B2 (male 35): In 1999, I was on the verge of joining a gang of criminals in Oslo. My older brother sent me to Mogadishu right in the middle of the civil war. I experienced terrible atrocities there and was admitted into a mental institution for several years. After that, I was discharged and my brother helped me to return to Norway in 2013.

Author: What about schooling and education? Were you able to re-enroll and continue with your studies?

B2: That was the furthest from my mind. Somalis believe that *dhaqan* is the silver bullet that restores order and equilibrium. You can have education and be successful, but what is the use if you turn out to be an Amal Aden?

Of note is the mention of brothers who sent B1 and B2 back to Somaliland. Somali culture and Islam endows the eldest son with the necessary authority to conduct affairs as per the dictates of the sharia and tradition. This son can even overrule his mother in the absence of the father. This endowment is waived aside if the eldest son becomes apostate (*gaal*). B2 makes reference to Amal Aden. Aden is a Somali-Norwegian author who is openly lesbian and Muslim. She has criticized Norwegian politicians for not doing enough to champion the cause of Somali women in Norway. One of Norway's national newspapers wrote in 2013, “After a gay parade in Oslo in summer, she (Amal Aden) woke up the next day to find 146 threats stored in her mobile phone. Many of them death threats” (Sandvik, 2013).

#### 4.3. Experiences with Norwegian schools

Parent 8 (female): We have lost trust in the Norwegian schools. The other day, my son came home upset because the whole school was forced to collect money for gays in South America. The school should stick to education and not such things which are opposed to our religion and culture.

Parent 9 (male): More and more Somalis are convinced that schools in Norway are eager to take away their children. The neighbors, teachers and Child Welfare Services conspire to seize Somali children so they can indoctrinate them with decadent values.

Author: Actually, I am a teacher and I can assure you that we have no such agenda.

Parent 9: How long have you been a teacher? How else do you explain that Somalis are overrepresented in these statistics?

Imam: Did you know that the nurseries in Norway teach about “sexual diversity”? I call it state-sponsored brainwashing. I know a Somali couple from Bærum Kommune (county adjacent to Oslo) who were high-flying professionals. One day, they came home to find a “*bekymringsmelding*” (a note of concern about the child/ren) from the Child Welfare Services. You don’t need me to tell you that this spooked this resourceful couple who relocated to Somalia.

Author: Was there perhaps some legitimate concern in regard to the children?

Imam: Right now, across the world, in countries like Australia, USA, Romania and the Baltics people are demonstrating against the Norwegian Child Welfare Services. This is an arrogant organization that operates with impunity. They are in cahoots with the schooling system. They have been getting off for years because Somalis have no one to champion their cause, but now, Russia, Poland and these East Europeans are breathing down their necks.

Author: So is this why they send their children to Somalia?

Imam: As I said earlier, religion is the main reason, but I shouldn’t be too harsh on the Child Welfare Services either. There was this fellow who met me on the street the other day. He just said, “I need to see you about my children. They have taken them without warning.” I asked him what he did for this to transpire. “Well, I hit them now and then like every Somali does. Isn’t that normal?” So there are these individuals who arrived recently and don’t have a clue about the system here. On the other hand, the Child Welfare Services recently had plans to set up an office in Somaliland which terrified Somalis in Norway. They are really something!

With the influx of EU labor migrants, especially from the former Eastern Bloc countries, differences in child-rearing practices have led to some families losing custody of their children. Backed by politicians in their home countries (e.g. Russia, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, and the Czech Republic), the Norwegian authorities have had to answer for the actions of the “*Barnevernet*” (Child Welfare Services) with increasing frequency in the last few years. The media in Norway runs screaming headlines highlighting the conundrum: “President of the Czech Republic compares the Norwegian Child Services with Nazi-program” (VG, 09.02.2015); “Polish newspaper: Embassy employee calls the Norwegian Child Services Hitlerjugend” (VG, 30.06.2011); “Russia’s Ombudsman for children accuses Norway of ‘Child terror’” (VG, 15.11.2014); “Mass demonstrations against Norwegian Child Welfare Services in 19 countries” (VG, 09.01.2016). Some have even called for the Services to be closed down. Last year a group of over 100 experts from different fields delivered a “note of concern” about the Services to the government:

We know that there are incidents where it is necessary for the authorities to intervene in families and take responsibility for the care for the child. The Child Welfare Services handles this enormously demanding task to the best of their ability. At the same time, we note increasing examples in which the department appears dysfunctional and undertakes comprehensively erroneous judgements with serious consequences. (Skogstrøm, 2015)

In this section, I will draw on a couple of my own research and experiences on the chalkface level. Once when sitting in the staff room, a disconcerted Somali female (17 years old) with an *abaya* asked to see me. Through a tear-streaked face, she narrated that her fiancé wanted her to drop out of school as he deemed it inappropriate for her to rub shoulders with males and *gaalo*. What should she do? Perturbed I asked her to prioritize her education and urged her to talk to the school advisor. When I found her the next day, she was a different person altogether. She changed her story to say that she was asking on behalf of a friend—this was not her story.

Once a year, upper secondary school students all over Norway must “work” for one day and collect money to show solidarity with poor students in selected countries. Crown Prince Haakon of Norway started this initiative called “Global Dignity Day” as part of the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2006 in Switzerland. All teachers are required to show a centrally produced video link explaining why a certain country or group was selected. Last year, as soon as students (especially the Somali students) heard that part of the proceeds would be earmarked for helping gay students who were persecuted in Argentina, there was a crescendo of angry voices demanding their money back. Such was the din that I had to report the matter to the school leadership. One Somali student, who was aware of my interest in Somalis and schooling, said: “You do not need to look any further to understand why Somalis distrust schools in Norway.”

## 5. Discussion

Somalis appear to defy any categorization. Despite being refugees, they must be considered voluntary immigrants who have shown fortitude in persevering through myriad hardships to make it to Norway. Once in Norway, however, the findings indicate that many do not espouse the upbeat ethos associated with voluntary immigrants with respect to educational achievement, as suggested by Ogbu (1990, 1992). In looking for answers, Ogbu’s (1993, pp. 489, 490) primary and secondary differences help flesh out the latter contradiction. It appears that the encounter between Somali primary cultural differences and the Norwegian schooling experience morphs into one of belligerence and distrust. This distrust is captured in the Imam’s phrase, “state-sponsored brainwashing.”

From the viewpoint of CHAT, my gaze has been on the *activity* of Somali educational repertoires as an interconnected whole. What this means, among others, is the need to consider the matrix-like interconnectedness between Somalis in Norway and the Somalia that always looms large and beckons across Europe. The two coexist in tension. In particular, I argue that the symbolic cultural artifacts of *deen* (religion), *dhaqan* (culture), *gaal* (infidel), and *hisho* (female modesty) combine to varying degrees to either enhance or impede Somali educational attainment in Norway. Regrettably, the findings above suggest that these cultural artifacts are currently employed as oppositional cultural frames. If Somalis have come to stay in Norway and concur that cultural/linguistic competence and academic qualifications are essential (all respondents affirmed this), then the community, as autonomous meaning-making *subjects*, must interrogate how these artifacts can be positively recruited in enhancing the educational experience.

Furthermore, from the perspective of CHAT’s *object*—that is the orientation of the activity, it is clear that the Somali predilection for mobility again obstructs learning outcomes. Though both activities—the Norwegian educational system and the Somali community—converge with respect to the salience of academic qualifications, the high mobility rates among Somalis frustrates this object. As Lewis notes, “The nomadic instinct that is so distinctive of Somali mainstream culture remains strong even in the diaspora, as is the predilection to coalesce around clan, in consequence of which the degree of mobility is high” (Lewis, 2008, p. 134). He offers the metaphor of the pastoral nomad whose psyche is shaped by the unpredictable fortunes of the camel trade. Reared in a society where clan allegiance trumped the alien notion of statehood, nomads relied on their clan affiliations to ameliorate the state of insecurity that was their lot. While an individual herder may possess 100 camels worth about £10,000 (1980s values), “...in this uncertain environment a man’s riches may disappear almost overnight in the wake of some natural calamity. Thus the Somali nomad is by temperament and practice a gambler who appreciates the transitory nature of success and failure” (Lewis, 2008, p. 55).

Almost all my informants knew someone who had upped sticks and relocated elsewhere in Europe or the USA because a family or clan member goaded them on. One 18-year-old Somali student of mine who was quite upset that her mother had left Norway for the UK and returned 4 years later, told me, “I had ambitions, but I think this senseless moving about has killed them off.” A 40-year-old Somali man, now settled in Norway, shared: “When I was growing up in Saudi Arabia, my parents moved almost every year. It was so bad that I recoiled from making new friends because I dreaded

saying goodbye to them soon.” I can personally vouch for this high rate of mobility among Somalis in Norway where I counted 30 acquaintances who have in the last 10 years relocated to the UK, USA, and Australia, among others, after securing Norwegian citizenship. Inculcating a habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) of educational success requires prolonged periods of pedagogic gestation. Unfortunately, the high rates of Somali mobility upend this.

The findings reveal *contradictions* systemic to both the Somali community and the Norwegian educational project. In the first instance, I am referring to the mismatch between Somali cultural artifacts and Norwegian schooling, while the second highlights the contradictions inherent in the machinations of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services. Whether warranted or not, the growing local and international critique of this agency perhaps signals the need for some reform. Somalis perceive, rightly or wrongly, that stakeholders in education and the Child Welfare Services are two sides of the same coin. I was often asked who I really worked for. Two candidates refused to be interviewed on the grounds that my name wasn’t Somali, although I speak the language. A CHAT-based inquiry puts the spotlight on *division of labor* which in this study reveals deep-seated distrust of the hierarchical distribution of roles, functions, and tasks within the activity system. The breakdown of trust between the communities is the crux of the problem. When asked about the source of Somali entrepreneurial success, one businessman told Harper (2012, p. 116): “I think you need to be a Somali to understand this! One thing that is unique about Somalis is the issue of trust. People will come to you, they will give you their money without signing any document, they will say, “Here is my money, help me, and five or six people will come together entirely due to trust.” Harper (2012) cites Richard Burton, the nineteenth-century British explorer, who called Somalis “a fierce and turbulent race of republicans” and argues that the world has much to learn from Somalis who, left to their own devices, find their own unique and creative ways of solving their problems. She mentions the example of Somaliland in the north which has been relatively peaceful and functioning for the last two decades and the burgeoning telecommunications industry. Speaking of Somali resilience, business acumen and unconventional social/political organization based on clans, which frustrates the world order, Harper concludes, “It is as if the Somali community somehow floats above the world, having reached a postmodern stage of development, beyond the nation-state” (Harper, 2012, p. 200).

## 6. Conclusion

If the above is anything to go by, educators in Norway will need to go back to the drawing board and think creatively. Writing about similar challenges in the UK, Gundara (1997) states:

A major problem in education systems is the distance between teachers and students. This gap between teachers’ and students’ cultures has many manifestations, ranging from language, religious, social class and age differences to differing views about the role of education. Teacher education needs to address these issues. (Gundara, 1997)

Thus, intercultural education places the onus on the host society’s educational system creating spaces that include different cultures and identities. For instance, the authorities ought to encourage students with multicultural competencies to consider careers as teachers and educators. With over 40% of the primary and lower secondary students in Oslo now coming from immigrant backgrounds, staff rooms do not reflect this sea change in the demographics. Statistics Norway predicts, based on the figures for 2010, that 22–28 percent of the population of Norway will be from immigrant backgrounds in 2060 (Statistics Norway, 2010). During one interview for a high school teaching position with a student body that was over 80% non-white, the author was told by the school head, “As you can clearly see, the school desperately needs teachers who aren’t “chalk-white” (Norwegian *kritthvite*) as we are.”

Educators in Norway have often critiqued the assimilationist policies of the government. Such were the concerns about integration in 1994 that the then Minister of Education, Gudmund Hernes, appointed a committee to look into the issue. Although the resulting white paper (NOU 1995:12 *Oppfølging i et flerkulturelt Norge*) recommended a right to learn through the use of the mother

tongue, studying school subjects from a multicultural perspective and the recruitment of teachers from minority cultures, these measures were not followed through because of the economic costs involved and the understanding that Norway was only obliged under international conventions to safeguard the educational rights of the official national minority, the Sami people, and not immigrants. According to the government, “The main responsibility must lie with the home and the diverse minority language groups.” (Aasen, 2012, p. 69)

Several ethnic Norwegian colleagues have shared with me that the teacher training college had ill prepared them for the experiences they encountered at this high school. Terms like “multicultural pedagogy” were really platitudes in the textbooks lacking any robust connection to the “chalkface,” in their opinion. The above would warrant a new look at the syllabus in teacher training colleges. Placing teacher-students in schools with high rates of minority background students for a part of their practical training ought to be mandatory (teacher-students spend 100 days in roughly 3 different schools). This would also furnish an opportunity for the colleges and universities to capitalize on students’ experiences and trigger new pedagogical approaches.

In his contemplations about what he calls the “multicultural drama” Scheffer (2011, p. 333) writes, “The question that has preoccupied me all these years is how we can guard against new forms of inequality and segregation, so that Western nations remain open in their dealings with migrants”. One arena which warrants particular attention is employment. There have been countless reports in the media and official documents drawing attention to the challenges Somalis face in the employment market. Figure 2 demonstrates that those with Sri Lankan backgrounds appear to do very well in the job market along with Chileans and Iranians not far behind. This would rule out simplistic explanations based on pigmentocratic notions. The generalizability of this case study is limited, but it nevertheless raises issues that perhaps have not been seriously engaged with from the perspective of the Somali community. As the CHAT methodology employed in this study sought to show, a multipronged, “holistic” approach must be considered in seeking to ameliorate the growing gap between this segment of the population in the national fabric. Reference code: 2210Project: 191036

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#### Author details

Paul Thomas<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [paul.thomas@hioa.no](mailto:paul.thomas@hioa.no)

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1366-3781>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education & International Studies, Oslo & Akershus University College, Falbes gate 5, Oslo, Norway.

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