

# **Integration Experiences and Youth Perspectives: An Exploratory Study of School-Going Somali Youth in Melbourne, Australia, and Minneapolis, Minnesota\***

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## **I. Introduction**

This brief study explores Somali youth experiences and perceptions of integration experiences in the school context, comparing the differences and similarities of those who live in Melbourne and Minneapolis. Additionally, the study touches on parents' experiences with their children's attitudes in the new environment. Based on interviews with Somali youth from the cities of Melbourne, Australia, and Minneapolis, Minnesota in the United States, they are generally aspirants to, and positive about, the current and future educational opportunities they have in Australia and the United States. Those from Minneapolis tend to articulate these opportunities more clearly. Youth and parents agree that Somali girls perform better at school compared to boys. Students' preferences for post-secondary programs are varied but the most popular reason is to help Somali people who are in difficult situations because of the protracted civil war. Both student groups from Melbourne and Minneapolis mentioned several educational challenges. Girls believe that parents pushing their daughters to marry early is the biggest obstacle that may prevent them from continuing further studies and future professional work. Whether they are in or out of school, most Somali students who participated in this study are friends primarily with other Somali youth because of cultural and religious affinities, with the added benefit of pleasing their parents. Finally, with the exception of two girls, Somali youth in this study feel they have been fairly treated by their teachers.

## **II. Somali Communities in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Melbourne, Australia**

There have been few studies about young refugees' perspectives on their experiences in their new countries. Accordingly, little consideration has been given to how refugee youth themselves feel about their integration experience in the new context.<sup>1</sup> Bearing this in mind and giving consideration to hearing young refugees' voices, this study examines Somali youths' perceptions of their integration experiences in a school context in Melbourne, Australia, and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Since the civil war started in Somalia in 1991, many Somalis have fled their country seeking refuge and asylum in Western nations such as the U.S.A. and Australia. In the United States, the largest Somali communities live in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, with a combined population perhaps as high as 50,000. These two cities are regarded as the *de facto* "capital" of the Somali community in the U.S.A.<sup>2</sup> Research indicates that the "pull" factors for Somali resettlement to these cities include availability of services, educational and employment opportunity, a good social welfare system, a well-established Somali community, and word-of-mouth among the Somali diaspora about the benefits of living in the Twin Cities.<sup>3</sup>

In Australia, the large majority of Somali refugees are located in Melbourne, Victoria. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2006, the total number of Somalis in Australia was approximately 11,000, and the largest number (62.2%) lived in Victoria, particularly in Melbourne (99.1%).<sup>4</sup> Around 50% of the Somali population in Australia was younger than 24 at the time of the 2006 census.

### **A. Aims**

To reiterate, there have been limited studies on young refugees' perspectives on their experiences in their newly adopted countries. In fact, little consideration has been given to how refugee youth themselves feel about their integration experiences in the new context.<sup>5</sup> It is only recently that researchers have begun to hear young refugees' voices and understand their points of view.<sup>6</sup> Thus, this study examines Somali youths' perspectives of their integration experiences in a school context. The study will first and foremost look at existing knowledge drawn from the literature.<sup>7</sup> The specific objectives are to examine:

- Educational opportunities for Somali youth
- Somali youths' relationships with Somali and non-Somali school-mates
- Their relationships with teachers and school staff in general
- Their activities outside school
- Youths' involvement in culturally sensitive issues such as music, dancing, physical education, and sex education
- Parents' views about their children's learning in the new, mixed-gender environment
- Gender differences in education and relationships with other young people

The study outcome will:

- Facilitate or support better integration given the situation
- Help with better curriculum development for the Somali students and in the attainment of study skills
- Be useful in the assessment of the extent migration affects or supports the students' status quo

## **B. Study Design and Methodology**

The methodological approach is qualitative because the overall aim is to understand in depth the educational integration experiences from the perspective of the young people as well as their parents. Primary data has been collected through a range of methods including audio recorded in-depth unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, field participant observations, and field notes. The sampling strategy includes "snowball" and key informant sampling through community networks. This mix of sampling strategies has increased the rigor of the findings through "sampling triangulation."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to general participant observation in the two communities, a sample of twelve people (six from Melbourne and six from Minneapolis), comprising four females and four males ages 15–19 plus two male parents and two female parents, were invited to participate in in-depth interviews.

Data collection has involved mostly oral/narrative methods, which are best suited to the Somali oral society. These narrative methods,

informal discussions, and group discussions have been complemented with field observation and field notes. This combination of data collection methods improved the quality and accuracy of information obtained through data triangulation.<sup>9</sup> The interviews have focused particularly on issues of Somali youth experiences and their perceptions of the school environment in culturally diverse societies, as well as interactions with the students, teachers, and parents.

Expected outcomes are to understand refugee youth experiences in school settings, which include: educational opportunities; preferred programs of study post-high school and reasons for choosing those programs; students' relationships with other students and teachers; outside activities by Somali students; parents' perspectives of their children's schooling in the new circumstances; and gender differences in the school context. This researcher hopes the study will assist policymakers, public servants, and educational institutions in approaching these refugees in appropriate ways, providing relevant support, helping them improve their situations, and facilitating their positive integration into the mainstream.

### **III. The Importance of Education for Migrant and Refugee Youth**

Pre-migration and post-migration experiences tend to be harsh and have extreme effects on migrant and refugee youths' lives and their educational achievements.<sup>10</sup> Many have witnessed family members being wronged, persecuted, raped, or even murdered.<sup>11</sup> Many young refugees, particularly boys, are also used as soldiers, while many girls are raped or exploited as child brides.<sup>12</sup> Because of the civil war and pre-arrival experiences, Somali boys in Western countries have shown violent and aggressive behavior at school and with their classmates, especially when they think they are being victimized. Thus, education is crucial for restoring a sense of normality, social and emotional healing, and proper integration into their new countries.<sup>13</sup> Education is also essential for gaining social skills and participating in community activities in a positive way, as it is a precondition for refugee youth's occupational success in the long term.<sup>14</sup>

Teachers and school settings in particular represent the first site where refugee youth acquire the norms, cultures, and values of the host society, grasp the language, and develop their cognitive ability.<sup>15</sup> The higher the young refugees' educational achievements, the better they integrate into the new country.<sup>16</sup> It has been observed that having

a good grade point average is associated with less emotional distress.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, refugee students with sufficient English language skills are better adjusted to the school environment than those with inadequate English, as there is a strong correlation between alienation and English language competence.<sup>18</sup> It has been reported that the majority of refugee teenagers are doing well in their schools. Some studies indicate that half of them continue tertiary education.<sup>19</sup>

This view, however, cannot be generalized since migrant and refugee successes in education vary from one ethnic group to another and from one host country to another. For instance, it has been found that of all the ethnic groups, Somali students have the lowest educational performance overall in U.K. schools.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, Somali students are doing comparatively well in school in the U.S.A. Similarly, Darboe<sup>21</sup> identifies that Somali students in Minneapolis have performed better than other ethnic groups (Hmong, Hispanic, Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese) in English reading proficiency and math (apart from Laotians in math). This finding has been endorsed by another comparative study prepared by Fennelly and Palasz that focused on four main migrant groups (Somalis, Russians, Mexicans, and Hmong) in Minneapolis. Fennelly and Palasz conclude that although Somalis are the most recent arrivals, they have "the highest levels of proficiency on all measures of English ability."<sup>22</sup>

### **A. Migrants' Educational Aspirations**

Caplan and colleagues argue that educational aspiration is a reflection of the state of mind that motivates migrant youth to strive for academic success.<sup>23</sup> In other words, it is a cognitive state shaped by the expectations of young people, their parents, teachers, peers, the social situation, and other factors. In contrast, Jencks and collaborators<sup>24</sup> emphasize that the essence of educational aspirations of migrant youth is rather a materialistic issue because it is shaped by the current socio-economic circumstances of their families and communities. According to Jencks, et al., "the educational aspirations of disadvantaged youth are leveled their everyday experiences in school, on the streets, and at home."<sup>25</sup> In that sense, the educational aspirations of migrant youth are related to material wealth, meaning those from poor families have low levels of educational aspirations and vice versa. In addition, the educational aspirations of migrant and minority youth can be shaped by what Ogbu called "blocked opportunities."<sup>26</sup> In Ogbu's theory, blocked

opportunities are circumstances in which refugees, migrants, and visible minority groups become skeptical about the utility of educational success as a means to upward social mobility. This skeptical view will eventually lower their educational aspirations and achievements.<sup>27</sup> It may be inferred from Ogbu's theory that if refugees and migrants are convinced about the usefulness of education as a means of upward social mobility and occupational success, then their educational aspirations and performance will increase. The theory of blocked opportunities predicts that students from disadvantaged groups, such as refugees, tend to have low educational aspirations if they do not expect their educational successes to lead to good employment or economic successes.<sup>28</sup> Based on that interpretation, from the refugee and migrant youth perspective, education may become irrelevant. Given the disadvantageous circumstances associated with refugee and migrant youth, one might expect their educational aspirations to be low compared with mainstream students. However, other studies conducted on migrant youth show the opposite. For instance, 79% of visible minority immigrants in Canada aspire to go to university as compared with 57% of mainstream students.<sup>29</sup>

In short, it is believed that there is a strong relationship between children's sense of hope and aspirations and the social support they receive because hope and aspirations are associated with successful handling of challenging life events.<sup>30</sup>

Surprisingly, Kao and Tienda assert that migrant and refugee parents' anticipation that their children will encounter occupational challenges and discrimination implants in their children a degree of resilience. It provides them with additional strength, makes them value education, and encourages them to aspire to perform well in their schooling in order to triumph over the challenges expected by their parents.

It has been emphasized that Somali parents in the U.S.A. and immigrant parents in general have an extremely positive approach toward their children's education.<sup>31</sup> When this approach is reinforced by children's positive attitude toward education, it may result in high educational achievements and successes in students' integration into the new environment.<sup>32</sup> However, high expectations held by parents may sometimes seem unrealistic, since the expectations might exceed the children's real situation, ability, or educational performance.<sup>33</sup>

## B. Educational Challenges

Refugee youth who have suffered negative experiences before their arrival in Western countries may encounter numerous challenges at schools and in the mainstream at large. For example, it has been underlined that the major impediment to educational progress for refugee students in Western countries, such as the U.K., was the low level of academic expectations teachers held of migrant and refugee students.<sup>34</sup> Studies conducted by Carol Schmid postulate that, “students who are most at risk of academic failure are from minority backgrounds that view schools as an alienating force that provide unequal opportunities.”<sup>35</sup> In comparison, minority ethnic groups who performed well in educational settings perceived fair treatment and equal opportunities with mainstream students.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, it is critical that school teachers and administrators promote the sense of fairness and justice among refugee youth as it is the backbone of success in education and leads to better integration.<sup>37</sup>

Alongside these challenges, Somali children encounter additional problems linked to their Islamic faith, given that they observe prayers five times every day, fast for Ramadan, and need *halal* food.<sup>38</sup>

Since September 11, 2001, many Westerners have started to equate Islam with terrorism. Somali children in Australian and U.S. schools have reported being called terrorists by their Australian and American peers. Female students have experienced particular discrimination because their religion is made visible by the *hijab* (dress code for female Muslims). For instance, girls have been requested to remove the *hijab* for school ID photos, causing them to feel disrespected.<sup>39</sup> Because they came from a poor and undeveloped country, Somali students have been asked by their classmates if they were naked in Africa or lived in the jungle.<sup>40</sup> Some Somali students reported negative treatment from mainstream students as a result of doing well in school. For instance, one student observed that an American student:

[p]rovoked a fight because the Somali student had scored higher on math test than the US student. Another [Somali] student said she was confused when US students said that she was acting white for doing well in classes.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to the discrimination against Somali refugee Muslim students, Kahin identifies that the British (and generally Western) have

difficulties reconciling health and physical education with Somali Islamic culture, which is sensitive to these issues, particularly when they are presented in mixed-gender classes. Somali parents believe physical education in mixed classes violates Islamic teachings because it causes their daughters to bare their arms and legs while they are with unrelated males.<sup>42</sup>

Because of these challenges, Somali “children at school often socialise within the Somali peer group, and the older they are, the more evident this is.”<sup>43</sup> American teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) have also observed that Somali students in Minneapolis have not mingled well with those from other backgrounds.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Somali students in the U.S. may restrict the activities they engage in with American students to avoid impermissible actions, such as dating, mixed gender relationships, eating pork, drinking alcohol, and so forth. For that reason, they may prefer to spend time with other Somali peer groups.<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, all Somali students interviewed by Birman and colleagues revealed that ESOL classes were Somali students’ favorite classes because all students were migrants like themselves and had similar experiences. Additionally, everyone at ESOL classes had an accent so they did not make fun of Somali students.<sup>46</sup> The good relationship and mutual understanding ESOL teachers have with migrant and refugee students may be attributed to the teachers’ understanding of other cultures and intensive experiences with migrants and refugees. The Good Starts Studies for Refugee Youth, conducted by the Refugee Health Research Centre of La Trobe University, also finds that most female and male refugee students are generally satisfied with their English language school environment, and with their relationship with other migrant students and teachers.<sup>47</sup> The students also showed a strong sense of belonging and responsibility for their respective schools. That positive feeling, particularly with their relationship to teachers and their academic achievements, decreased, however, when students started high school.

#### **IV. Young Somalis’ Perspectives**

This section starts with young participants’ demographics and examines their perspectives on educational opportunities available for youth and the aims of their preferred educational programs. Youth views on educational attainments and challenges they face are detailed. Young



people also explain why many Somali youth do not tend to take art sessions, such as music classes. Additionally, this part examines young Somalis' relationships with peer groups that include Somalis and non-Somalis and their imitation of African American youths. Finally, it concludes with youth-teacher relationships.

### **A. Young Participants' Demographics**

The demographics of this study indicate that all participants were 15 to 19 years old at the time of the interviews. All Melbourne subjects had resided in Australia for three to thirteen years. Levels of education for all young people ranged between years ten to twelve of high school. Three out of four youth participants from Melbourne lived with both parents and only one young girl lived with her mother. Conversely, only one young participant from Minneapolis lived with his mother and father. Two lived only with their mothers and one lived with her relatives without her mother or father. The absence of one parent, particularly the father in the Muslim, African, and collective societies (such as Somalis) can be extremely negative for boys and, in general, for young people's growth and development in education, employment aspirations, discipline, and future planning.<sup>48</sup>

### **B. Educational Opportunities**

Generally, all eight young participants in this study were positive about their educational and employment chances in the two countries. The students from the United States identified more opportunities than those from Australia. They sometimes compared the greater educational options they have in the U.S. with Somali youth who may have fewer opportunities in other countries. As a Minneapolis female student put it: "I have many opportunities that many Somali girls may not have, you know...I don't think they have as many opportunities in London as we have in America." According to Birman and Trickett, Somali students are very appreciative of being in U.S. schools and having viable chances to study. Similarly, parents in Melbourne and Minneapolis talk about the great educational and employment opportunities their children have in Australia and the U.S.A., comparing them with their childhood in Somalia.

[Our children] are obtaining a lot of knowledge through the new technology such as the Internet, which they often have at home and at school. Our old time, it was hard to get information except what teachers taught us.

(A participant father from Melbourne)

Parents see their children's success in education as the major strategy to escape from poverty. For that reason, Somali parents and the community at large "have great respect for the word *jaamici*, or university graduate."<sup>49</sup>

In terms of gender differences, girls tend to be more expressive than boys in describing the choices and opportunities they have in Australia or in the U.S. This phenomenon could be attributable to the fact that females tend to have less chance to express their views and feelings in Somalia. Even though all female participants in this study, with one exception, grew up in Australia or the U.S., they are assumed to be very aware of women's social status in Somalia through conversation with their mothers and through their families' and communities' attitudes in Australia and the U.S. Therefore, young women consciously or unconsciously may like this compensation for what many females endured in Somalia.

Parents reveal that they generally discuss with children which programs they desire to study, giving consideration to their children's choices. To assist their children in achieving good scores, fathers often promise incentives and rewards to the extent that one father from Minneapolis pledges a new car for any of his children who finishes high school with the grade "A." In contrast, mothers tend to encourage their children to go to libraries and to educational institutions.

We advise them to go to libraries and study there. I sometimes suddenly go to school... just to check on them [her children]. I am monitoring them. I also don't like to let them think that no one can watch, follow or care them.

(A mother participant from Melbourne)

### C. Preferred Educational Programs

Despite the fact that (post-high school) preferred programs of study vary from one young person to another, medicine was the dominant field for which three students have shown their will to undertake the program. Additionally, students' reasons for choosing educational pro-

grams varied. However, the humanitarian impulse was clear for choosing these programs, particularly for young females. This is because they believe that Somali communities in the U.S.A. and Australia need to have their own doctors instead of being dependent on non-Somali doctors. They also argue that Somalia very much needs Somali doctors because the country has been afflicted by a protracted civil war.

On the other hand, parents may sometimes make choices for their children out of concern that the children may not find jobs if they study their first preferences. When parents make that decision, they seem to be influenced by experiences in their home country, believing that fields in which it was easy to find a job in Somalia are similarly practical in the West.

In terms of parents' preferences, some of them are uncomfortable about their daughters studying engineering. They believe that engineering work is physical, so their child's *hijab* might prevent them from carrying out their jobs properly or endanger their safety.

#### D. Educational Attainment

Young females and males from both countries express the view that girls attain higher scores compared with boys because girls usually stay at home and study a lot. A young male participant from Minneapolis explains that, "girls are learning better than boys, because they usually stay at home and learn and achieve [high] scores." In contrast, young people believe that Somali boys move around and strive to establish families and buy houses and cars.

I think boys like more sports, basketball, games, although I am not generalizing but I think they are not good in education...boys are socializing too much and I think it is hard for them to actually concentrate on their study. (A female youth from Melbourne.)

That girls' educational achievements exceeded boys' was reinforced by Mosselson's research on fifteen adolescent Bosnian Muslim girls in the U.S.A.<sup>50</sup> Mosselson found that Bosnian girls worked hard to achieve higher grades. The Bosnian girls were very cognizant that their high educational attainment shifted them from being viewed as alien and unfamiliar people into a position that allowed them to integrate well into the broader society.

Regarding age, a participant father from Melbourne identifies that his oldest children, who were raised in Africa, are succeeding better educationally than his children who were born or have grown up in Australia. He ascribes this peculiar phenomenon to the fact that the older ones recall hardship. They understand how lucky they are to be in Australia and have opportunities that are denied to their counterparts in Somalia. In contrast, those who have grown up in the West take these opportunities for granted. This view, however, is at odds with Wilkinson's expectation that refugee youth who have been in their new country for a longer time would be more successful in education, social integration, and future aspirations than those who have been in the new country for a shorter period of time.

### **E. Educational Challenges**

Young people, particularly females, feel that girls' educational achievements have been jeopardized in the last few years by pressure from parents to marry early. As a female youth from Melbourne said:

There is one major problem which is parents thinking their children should get married before they finish school, and become housewife...it is sad to see girls to get away from school and at the age of 18 to get married and stick at home instead of studying.

An essay by Kapteijns and Arman reinforces our participants' view of girls' early marriage, arranged by parents, emphasizing that it is "correlated with lower educational and income levels for the rest of a woman's life."<sup>51</sup>

Somali youth have also mentioned uneducated parents as a challenge for students' educational aspirations and integration progress. This is because poorly educated parents hardly understand the educational system in the new country. "Parents didn't go through the [educational] system which you are going through everyday...[they] don't know about school...many Somali parents have not much English either. That is very hard" (A female youth from Melbourne).

## **F. Music Classes**

Regardless of the country they live in, some youth participants note that they are not interested in attending music and dancing sessions at their respective schools. In comparison, some youth would have wished to attend these sessions, but they have not had a chance, because they are in an Islamic school where music and dancing classes are not permitted. A female youth from Melbourne recounts, "In Islamic school, we had no dance or music classes. You don't get any of that stuff in Islamic school." In addition, a male youth from Minneapolis revealed that he would have loved to participate in music classes but his parents resisted enrolling him, because they felt if he attended music classes, he could refuse to comply with their orders or develop a bad character, since music and dancing are associated with negative behavior in Somali culture. Playing music and dancing are hindered by parents because it is believed that, "music is often used in a social environment where boys and girls come together encouraging them to become sexually active."<sup>52</sup>

Conversely, recent studies have emphasized that music is an important tool for cultural transmission and language acquisition. The use of sound, rhythm, and self-expression are integral parts of promoting harmony and cultural exchange.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, "in order for migrant and refugee cultures to be recognized" by mainstream Westerners, the tangible parts of these cultures—such as traditional music, food, dance, folklore, and traditional dress—must be presented to them.<sup>54</sup>

## **G. Relationship with Peer Groups**

All eight students, with the exception of one girl from Minneapolis, emphasized that their closest friends are other Somali students. This is because Somali students understand each other culturally, share the same experiences, come from the same country, and speak the Somali language. According to a male youth from Melbourne, "Somali students come to our house because we have the same culture, same religion...and we understand better...we hang around together." In contrast, most participant students, whether from Minneapolis or Melbourne, report that they have minor relationships with mainstream students. The main factor for less interaction is that they are culturally different because the mainstream youth eat pork and drink alcohol, which are not permissible in the Islamic Somali culture. This is not sur-

prising since Somalis are known for their cultural assertiveness based on Islam, which appears to strengthen their resilience and pride.<sup>55</sup>

Some participants in this study acknowledge that if there are few Somali students or none at all in their schools, they establish relationships with students from other backgrounds. A male youth from Melbourne said, "Since I am now going to school that has not many Somalis, my friends are mostly white people." Interestingly, a female youth from Melbourne indicates that to associate and make friends only with students from your cultural background puts you in a ghetto situation. She argues that, "Australians have a different culture from us. You have to have different kind of people and see what they are doing, otherwise you will be isolated." Studies conducted on second-generation migrant women in Melbourne showed that the concept of cultural diversity is very important for their understanding of multicultural Australia and understanding their own position in the new multicultural society.<sup>56</sup>

Peer friends from the mainstream "will usually be okay...if they are invited," reports a male youth from Minneapolis. Somali students, however, do not often invite them into their homes for two reasons. The first reason consistently mentioned by our participant youth is religious or cultural differences, because "cultural and religious differences can make different commitments" (a male youth from Melbourne). The second reason is related to Somali parents, particularly mothers and sisters. Somali parents do not allow their children to invite non-Muslim friends, such as white Australians or Americans, into their houses. This is "[b]ecause...if non-believer comes to Muslims' houses, the ladies [mothers/sisters] you know as Muslims will say...you can't bring these people" (a male youth from Melbourne).

The issue of bringing non-Muslims into Somali homes is rather complicated. It seems that female students have fewer problems if they bring their non-Muslim female friends. The reason is that females are not, in general, believed to cause uncomfortable situations for Somali females. For example, when Somali females are at home with family males—such as husbands, fathers, sons, or brothers, or with females regardless of whether they are foreigners—the Somali women are allowed to take off the *hijab* and relax, and be in the living room with family members and female foreigners. Additionally, since household affairs are culturally associated with females, the females, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, are normally accepted into the Somali dwellings with the condition that they should not be girlfriends of

family males, because Islam prohibits dating. Conversely, if males who are not from the family come to the house, the family females may feel uncomfortable, even if the male visitors are Somalis. However, the presence of Somali males is accepted in one way or another, because of a shared common culture, language, understanding, and especially the sense of being a minority in the Western environment.

On the other hand, if Somali students are invited by mainstream peer friends, they are welcomed by their friends' parents. A male youth from Melbourne asserts that mainstream friends' parents "welcome you and say come in. Do whatever you like, you know, and they won't get angry." Notwithstanding that Somali youth are welcomed into mainstream friends' houses, they tend to avoid these homes or celebrations for two reasons. First, some Somali students are concerned about religious and cultural differences. A male youth from Melbourne justifies why he does not like to go to Australian friends' houses, saying, "If I go to their houses, they have pork or something and I don't eat that and I don't drink alcohol." The second reason identified by our participants is that Somali parents are unhappy if their children go to non-Muslim events. "The mainstream friends wanted to invite us into their parks or at church or at other...places I thought my mum didn't allow me to go" (a female youth from Minneapolis).

## **H. Imitation of African-American Youths**

Male Somali youth from Australia and America point out that Somali youth, particularly boys, tend to imitate African-American youth culture. While Somali boys from Minneapolis often adopt African-American youth lifestyles, including dress, walk, behavior, and listening to specific kinds of music, the boys from Melbourne listen to African-American music mostly, but tend less to imitate African-Americans' dress and general lifestyles. Both Somali male youth groups from Melbourne and Minneapolis disclose that they emulate African Americans "because people like to look like cool like gangsters. They also like to be famous...these kinds of music... seem to be cool" (a male youth from Melbourne). Additionally, they feel that African-American youth culture is globally recognized, accepted, and admired.

Somali parents from Minneapolis tend to be very disapproving and dissatisfied with Somali children copying African-American youth culture. A participant father from Minneapolis expresses his feeling about Somali boys saying, "some boys wear bigger pants than their size.

When you see them walking around, you think they are crooked or crippled.” A Somali woman poet in Boston composed a poem on how Somali youth in the U.S. have been greatly influenced by the mainstream culture, particularly the African-American youth lifestyle:

They wear pants without belts  
And drag their feet like hyenas  
They curve their arms like the non-Muslim Blacks<sup>57</sup>

In addition, three out of four youth participants from Minneapolis have affirmed that the actions of Somali boys imitating African-American youth may heighten the tension between the two groups, deteriorate relationships, and eventually lead to fighting. This is because African Americans want Somalis to retain their own culture and keep their self-esteem up, instead of imitating them, which could make them lose their identity. “They say to Somali boys, ‘Excuse me! You just came from other country we do not know about, so why do you imitate us? Take off, you know,’ [then] Somalis fight back. Somalis like fighting” (a female youth participant).

Interestingly, some youth participants relayed that African Americans may display acceptance when Somali youth call them “Negro,” but they also might become enraged if the word is used amongst Somalis, thinking it is intended to make fun of them. A male Minneapolis student concludes his remarks by saying that if Somalis greet each other with “‘How are you doing, Negro?’ African Americans feel that they have been insulted and they get very upset.”

There is general agreement among our participant youth that Somali girls’ level of imitation of mainstream students, including black Americans, is very limited and lesser than boys’ level of imitation, because “Somali girls are not like boys. Very few of them wear pants and...imitate black Americans” (a female youth from Minneapolis). On the other hand, Somali boys in Australia have their own challenges related to acting like Australian youth while they don’t really feel like them. One male youth said, “When I am with Aussies I do what they are doing—you know—in the same way, but inside me, I don’t feel the same way.”

Another point that deserves to be acknowledged is the relationship of Somali youth to the Australian lifestyle and music. When asked, “Do you listen to Australian music?,” a male youth from Melbourne responded, “I don’t think there is Aussie music.” Even though this



statement from one male youth cannot be generalized to all Somali youth in Australia or even Melbourne, it seems that some Somali youth are poorly affiliated with Australian music. With one exception, none of the youth from Melbourne mentioned Australian music. Conversely, they mentioned African-American music or Somali music. Studies conducted on second-generation Turkish and Latina migrant women in Australia and their perception of Australian culture revealed that migrant women believed that Australia has no distinctive culture.<sup>58</sup>

Similar to Somali youths' relationship with African-American youth in Minneapolis, the relationship between Somali youth in Melbourne and Aboriginal students is not positive. This is because Somali youth believe that the Aborigines have their own way, and do not see themselves as black people. Interestingly, "Even though [Aborigines] are black, they are still saying to you, you are black, and I don't know specifically the reason why they say that" (A male youth from Melbourne).

## I. Relationship with Teachers

All participant youth from both cities appreciated their teachers' support, friendly manner, treatment, and good teaching. However, three of the four female students pointed out what they thought to be acts of discrimination. Strangely, most of the discrimination against Somali female students was caused by female teachers. That treatment was related to their *hijab* and skin color. As one Minneapolis female student noted, "There was a female teacher who ignored me because she disliked the *hijab*...I was the only Muslim student in my class." Participant females made a clear distinction between individual teachers who have been rude to them, and the school setting and teachers in general, who were mostly friendly and helpful.

Similarly, some parents complained that their daughters have been discriminated against at school. The common ground between the parents' and girls' views is unfairness: unjust treatment and discrimination against girls based on their visible religious identity.

Students have observed that relationships between teachers and some newcomers are negative, because new students may "have many problems with their subjects and then with their teachers" (Minneapolis female student). The failure to master the subject matter leads students to develop discipline problems, confrontational behavior, and a negative relationship with the teachers of these subjects.

It has also been identified by students that the failure by teachers to understand students' educational problems and the difficulties they have undergone in the past is another factor that creates an unconstructive relationship between students and teachers. A student remarks, "Some teachers don't comprehend why someone who is 16 or 17 [years old] did not get to school in his life" (Minneapolis female youth). Thus, when teachers are not equipped with adequate training to understand the serious problems that refugee youth have experienced (or are still experiencing), they may develop misunderstandings and misinterpretations related to a refugee's personal characteristics or cultural background. Eventually, this might obstruct the student's success in education and integration.<sup>59</sup>

About preferred teachers by young people, two female youth (one from Melbourne and one from Minneapolis) favor female teachers to teach English language and male teachers to teach math. They argue that female teachers can explain the language better than male teachers. In contrast, male teachers can explain complicated subjects like math better than females. One male youth from Minneapolis is in favor of female teachers to teach not only the English language, but all subjects. In his view, female teachers:

[a]re more understanding than males...they help you, you know! They work a lot to help you out. They take care of you. Even if you don't want help, they come and check on your work.

## **V. Conclusion**

This study gives particular consideration to young Somalis' perceptions of integration in the school context. It is confirmed that educational settings are essential for migrant and refugee youth to gain social skills, understand the norms of the receiving society, and integrate properly into the mainstream. However, migrant and refugee students' view of schools as alienating places and teachers' negative expectations of those students may lead to mal-integration and poor academic achievement. In addition, this study found that female Somali students outperform Somali boys. Furthermore, female students are aware of fewer opportunities for women in Somalia, which encourages them to study diligently and compensate for what their mothers have missed. In addition, those young subjects from Minneapolis were more appreciative of educational opportunities than those in Melbourne. In

terms of study areas, medicine was the preferred field. Uneducated parents, early marriage (notably for girls), insufficient command of the language, and the lack of an educational background were found to be educational challenges for Somali youth in both countries. In socializing in or out of school, participants' closest friends are Somalis; however, where there are no Somalis, they generate relationships with other students. Somali youth in Minneapolis may imitate African Americans on how they dress, walk, and behave; yet, the relationships with African Americans sometimes involve fighting and skirmishing. Relationships between Somali youth and Aborigines in Melbourne are not positive either. Both groups from Minneapolis and Melbourne listen to African-American music that includes hip-hop and rap. Interestingly, while Somali youth in Australia—particularly boys—are fans of African-American music, they seldom listen to Australian music. More than that, they may even question the existence of Australian music. Finally, youth and teacher relationships were described as good, with the exception of tension between two female students and two of their female teachers.

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