

“I Go to Teacher Conferences, But I Do Not Understand What the Teacher Is Saying”: Somali Parents’ Perception of the Swedish School

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the encounter of Somali parents with their children’s teachers and how these relations “affect” their possibility of supporting their children’s attaining a successful school experience. The study is inspired by and combines the insight and concept of social capital developed by Coleman and Bourdieu. The parents realize that they lack the knowledge and expertise to support their children in their educational endeavor and have neither the material nor ideational support to compensate individual limitations to support their children in the encounter with the Swedish school.

KEYWORDS: social capital, educational support, parent-teacher relation, academic achievement, Somali immigrants in Sweden

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A substantial number of studies have examined the social inclusion and exclusion of immigrants and their descendants in Sweden and internationally. In these studies, the inclusion and exclusion are examined from different perspectives in relation to different social structures of the host societies. A critical institution in this process – the educational system – has been examined from different vantage points. International and Swedish research has underscored that educational failure (dropouts) and underachievement in some categories of immigrants as well as poor “white working class” students are attributed to their lack of relevant and privileged cultural and social capital as well as to the presence of discrimination or racism (Carlhed, in press; Wyner,

Bridgeland, & Dilulio, 2007). In addition, a number of studies have also shown that not all high achievers from marginalized communities or groups graduate from high school and attend prestigious universities or prestigious programs. In addition, they are more likely to drop out of their university education compared to high achievers from middle and upper middle class (Carlhed, in press; HSV, 2005; Wyner et al., 2007). A number of studies, though limited, have also identified immigrants' parent-teacher relationship and social connectedness to be critical in the educational performance of immigrant children (Bhattacharya, 2000; Kim, 2002).

The purpose of this article is to examine how Somali parents and Swedish teachers relate to each other and how the nature of the relationship impacts the school experience of their children. To understand the perception of Somali parents, it is important to briefly delineate the context from which the parents immigrated. This factor is critical in order to understand the nature of the relationship and the obstacles inherent in the Somali parent-teacher relationship in Sweden. Somali immigration to Sweden is a relatively new phenomenon. The majority of Somalis came to Sweden in the late 1980s as refugees and through family reunion programs. The immigration of Somalis to Sweden accelerated throughout the 1990s. This acceleration coincided with the intensification of the Somali Civil War (Jhazbhay, 2009; Melander, 2009; Zimmermann & Zetter, 2011). The impact of the Somali state is made evident when one examines the human capital of Somalis between 20 and 35 years of age. Individuals in this age cohort were either born during the civil war or were in their early teens when the civil war broke out and, as a consequence, had no or little educational experience of their own. A substantial percentage of the Somali parents in Sweden face significant obstacles in competing in the open labor market and depend on the social welfare system (Melander, 2009).

Apart from the above factors, the perception of Somali parents is also affected by the schools that the majority of Somali and other immigrant children attend. The majority of immigrant children attend schools in economically and socially deprived areas. These areas generally suffer from different social ills such as the high rate of unemployment, poor health, and criminality (Osman, 2006, 2012; Tovatt, 2013). The academic performance of the schools in these areas is lower than areas where there are few immigrants and a low rate of unemployment (Månsson & Osman, 2015). Swedish educational policy makers at different levels perceive the educational system as a critical arena to ameliorate the social ills that characterize these areas. Despite this policy, the majority of students who are at risk of being excluded from the Swedish structure of opportunity are children of immigrant origins or working class "natives" living in traditionally working class cities and rural areas (Skolverket, 2012; Vetenskapsrådet, 2014). Educational sociologists have shown in the last two or three decades how the school as a system reproduces the social order and privileges the language and disposition of a specific class in Western European democracies (see, for example, Archer & Francis, 2005; Bourdieu, 1991; Wyner et al., 2007).

The focus of this article is not to describe how the educational system reproduces the social structures of the Swedish society. Our focus is to examine the relationship between a specific category of Somali parents and the Swedish school system. Beginning with the above focus, this paper intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What kind of obstacles do the parents encounter in supporting a proactive academic performance of their children, and what strategies do they have in order to overcome these obstacles?
2. What types of social network are the Somali parents embedded in, and how does this affect their relation with the school teachers?

In the first section of the article we present the status of national and international research on the educational performance of children of immigrant background. This is followed by a short delineation of the theoretical framework of the study. Finally, we present the methodology and the main findings of the study.

Academic Performance of Immigrants' Children

Swedish research on immigration generally focuses on the obstacles encountered by persons of immigrant background in the field of education and labor market. In the field of education, Swedish and international research generally shows that immigrants and descendants of immigrants are increasingly investing in tertiary education, particularly in the field of science, engineering and medicine (Crul & Heering, 2008; HSV, 2005). Some studies attribute academic underachievement among different categories of immigrants to their socio-economical background (Willis, 1993; Obidah, Christie, & McDonough, 2004; Ogbu, 2003). Other studies stress that family and community expectation vis-à-vis education is a critical factor in the educational achievement of children of immigrant background irrespective of the parents' ethnic background (Benard, 2004; Fraser, 2004; Williams, 2012). From the 1980s and onwards, a number of ethnographic studies revealed that micro-level practices (such as teacher's practice and classroom interaction) contributed to the underperformance of migrant students in the United Kingdom (Archer & Francis, 2005). These studies generally have an interactionist perspective, focusing mainly on the distribution of classroom resources, teacher attitudes, selection processes, and labeling practices, and highlight the positive and adverse effect of these practices on the academic performance of different categories of pupils. Some studies in this genre also show how teacher practices discriminate against and disadvantage immigrant students (Gruber, 2007).

However, studies that explain the performance of the descendants of immigrants as a consequence of institutional discriminatory practices or racism have been criticized on theoretical and methodological grounds (Foster, 1990). These criticisms problematize how different researchers in these studies define

racism and label certain practices as racist (or non-racist). For instance, some researchers define racism as teacher practices that are based on, and are legitimized by, notions of cultural and biological inferiority (Foster, 1990), whereas others (Gillborn, 2002) categorize rules and regulations that marginalize certain social groups as instances of institutional racism. In contrast to Gillborn, Foster argues that institutional practices that socialize students to the norms of the dominant society cannot be labeled racist or discriminatory. Rather, they provide the student with crucial skills and dispositions to participate in mainstream society. Still, several studies have shown that immigrant students and children of working class backgrounds have difficulties in meeting the demands of educational institutions and in understanding their practices (Ball, 1998; Willis, 1993; Trondman, 2003). They adopt an oppositional identity and drop out of school. Some of these students develop anti-social behavior, while others join working class professions according to Willis (1993).

Studies that examine educational performance of immigrant children in Sweden show a mixed picture. There are studies in Sweden that show that immigrant children generally perform poorly in the field of education compared to middle-class native White children of Swedish background (Fången, 2010; Osman, 2013; Vetenskapsrådet, 2010, 2014). However, there are exceptions: for instance, Iranian and Bosnian children outperform academically other ethnic groups or even native White Swedish children (Crul & Heering, 2008; Fången, 2010; Osman, 2013; Osman & Andersson, 2011). Children of Somali refugees, compared to other similar ethnic or national groups, are at the bottom of the league (Osman, 2012). The few studies that examined the poor educational performance of Somali children attribute their poor performance to contextual factors (Melander, 2009; Osman, 2013), particularly the dysfunctional context from which the parents immigrated.

This article falls into the category of studies that use the theory of social capital in order to understand how social capital plays a critical role in identifying the mechanism at play in the academic performance of immigrant groups. Furthermore, the article attempts to borrow different aspects and understandings of the concept from Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2000). There are some similarities but also differences among these theoreticians in their conceptualization of social capital. This theoretical stance, we hope, will allow for a deeper understanding of the mechanism at play in the underachievement or success of the children of immigrants within the Swedish educational field.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of social capital (i.e., social resources) is conceptualized in different ways by different researchers and has been used by educational sociologists to explain the differential performance of different categories of

children and students (Morgan & Sorensen, 1999; Prado, 2008; Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1997).

One of the ways in which the concept has been operationalized is by quantifying the social capital parents can mobilize to promote academic disposition for their children (Behtoui, 2009). However, the notion of social capital is much more elastic and should not be reduced only to family and personal resources. The notion also includes resources that go beyond the family, such as work life and civil society. In brief, the concept is dynamic and refers to the network in which an individual is embedded, a network that he or she can make use of for specific purposes (Osman, 2012; Prado, 2008; Tovatt, 2013). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) do not stress the network in itself as a critical element in their definition and understanding of social capital, but stress instead the resources individuals can mobilize. Hence, the fact that an individual parent is embedded in a social network does not mean that the network or the resources a parent can mobilize can advantage his or her child in the field.

Theoretically, this project combines the insight and concepts developed by Coleman's (1988) application of social capital with Bourdieu's (1986) conception of social capital (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Lin, 2001; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). From studies inspired by Bourdieu, we will borrow Bourdieu's notion of *material support* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Lin, 2001; Prado, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). According to Bourdieu, there are two qualitatively different types of network resources, virtual resources and actual resources, which can be obtained by individuals in an exclusionary social network (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Virtual resources involve, in this context, the transfer of the know-how (knowledge) that is recognized and privileged in institutional practices, in order to succeed in the struggle for limited positions in assessing prestigious programs at different stages in the Swedish educational field. Here, Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes the importance of inculcation of institutionally recognized dispositions. The interchange of actual resources, on the other hand, involves a material capacity, namely the ability to afford, for example, extra private tutorials and computers and to help out with homework. These resources have been identified as crucial and provide individual children with a competitive edge in the struggle for scarce positions, such as access to prestigious educational programs. Lin (2001) has shown that access to these forms of capital is crucial for accessing prestigious programs and for developing a post-tertiary educational strategy.

From studies inspired by Coleman (1988), we borrow the notion of *ideational support*. *Ideational support* refers to the ability of parents, or significant others, to acquire the skills and understanding of school expectation and to support and inculcate pro-academic norms in their children (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Prado, 2008; Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, it involves the selective sharing of information on where to access the necessary information or expertise to allow their children to succeed in their educational endeavors. *Material support* is analytically used to capture the impact of unequal material resources that prevent

children from “getting ahead” in a competitive institutional school practice. *Bridging support* denotes the linkage between the ideational and material support. Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) stress the significance of others in the social networks and the criticality of networks in the competition for limited resources in different institutions. The term *bridging support*, on the other hand, is a common idea in both Coleman- and Bourdieu-inspired studies (Prado, 2008; Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). These notions are employed to explore how the parents compensate for the lack of social capital to advantage or instill pro-academic dispositions by mobilizing the social structures and network they are embedded in. Hence, *bridging support* points to parental ability or lack of ability to link their child to individuals that can provide them with *ideational* and *material support*.

A number of studies have shown that such networks function as sites of exchanging resources and ideas and broadening the individuals’ structure of opportunity beyond the nation state. In many, but not all cases, transnational networks of different categories of immigrants provide individuals, embedded in a transnational network, with an alternative frame of action and structure of opportunities (Osman, 2012). It is important to point out that studies that examine the success of children of immigrants by using the concept of social capital stress that social inequality and power (that is, economy and cultural distinctions) frame the context in which individuals interact and that power and social inequality are critical in the relation between the actors and their positions in a field (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Lin, 2001; Lundqvist, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between parents and teachers. This relationship is a product of a complex and dynamic interplay between the different structures in which children are embedded (Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996). Educational sociological studies have shown that the social capital in which individuals are embedded not only expands but also limits individuals’ actions, strategies, and perceptions, as noted earlier. Based upon this theoretical stance, we are interested in showing how the perception of Somali parents is a consequence of their embeddedness in a social structure that does not provide them with the “know-how” to advocate for and support their children to succeed in Swedish schools.

The participants we interviewed were recruited from parents of pupils in four schools in a relatively large city in Sweden. The respondents were in their early 30s and late 30s. All the parents interviewed had children born both in Sweden and in Somalia and have children in primary schools in the city. None of the interviewed had jobs, and all were dependent on social welfare.

In collecting the empirical data for this study we conducted focus group interviews with eight Somali parents (7 women and 1 male). The interviews took about three hours each and all the parents contributed equally to the conversation. The parents we interviewed have lived in Sweden for a minimum of five years. The interviews were conducted three times in a two-year period. All three interviews focused on pre- and post-immigration experiences, their education experiences in their country of origin, and their experience of the Swedish institutions, particularly their perception of the Swedish school system. The first interview primarily focused on the pre-immigration period, social background and position, and their school experiences. The second interview focused on their post-immigration experiences, particularly their encounters with the Swedish institutions and their own experience of the Swedish educational system such as adult education, the labor market, and the school experiences of their children. The third interview focused on the clarification of contradictions and inconsistencies we saw during the analysis of the data. The decision to conduct a three-part interview with an interval of six months was made to avoid the problem or the difficulties that can arise in a one-shot interview. One-shot interviews do not allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions that arise in the analysis of the data collected (Mishler, 1986).

The interviews were digitally recorded, later transcribed, and coded. The data vignettes cited in this paper were translated by one of the researchers. We discussed the “problem” or the empirical bias involved in using one of the researchers, a Somali, to interview the Somali parents. To ameliorate this bias, the data and the interpretation of the data were discussed with colleagues in different seminars.

The Teachers are the Experts

One of the themes that emerged in the analysis of the data was that the parents perceived teachers as experts. This perception, we like to argue, is a consequence of three interrelated factors: (a) all the parents we interviewed (except for one) were functionally illiterate in both Swedish and Somali, which limited their ability to support their children academically; (b) the schools in Sweden expected the parents to actively engage in the school activities (academic or otherwise) of their children; and (c) the language barrier. Hence, as evident in the following statements, the parents expected that the teachers and the school would ameliorate these parental deficits by providing their children with the skills and inspiration they need to succeed in their academic endeavors:

We trust the teachers to do their job. I am not in a position to judge the teachers whether they are doing a good job or not, and if our children are not performing as well as the teachers expect, I expect them to tell me.

The parents, in other words, saw their role as ensuring that the children go to school and the teachers' role as contacting them if their child misbehaved or showed signs of anti-school behavior.

This separation of roles, however, is not a product of their encounter with the Swedish school; it can be traced to the school-home relation in Somalia. In Somalia the relation between the school and the parents is distinct.

My role as a parent was to see that the children went to school with a "full stomach" and that the teachers "do their job" – teach my child. I could not help them with their school and trusted that the teachers were doing their best to teach my children. The only time parents had contact with the school is when the child risks expulsion from the school. In Sweden the teachers and the school expect the parents to be active in the schooling of their children.

The expectation in Swedish schools for parents to actively engage in different activities organized by the school is new to the Somali parents. One parent pointed out: "I have nothing to contribute in the schooling experience of my child."

This was a common perception among the parents we interviewed and was used to partly justify their self-exclusion from the schooling experience of their children. We argue that these interrelated factors are critical for understanding the relationship between the Somali parents and the teachers in the Swedish schools and for inculcating a pro-academic culture at home.

Parental Support in Inculcating a Pro-academic Disposition

Despite the challenges delineated earlier vis-à-vis the parents' encounter with the Swedish school, all the parents we interviewed had high academic expectations of their children. This expectation of academic achievement is confirmed by several studies in Sweden. For instance, all the children we talked to informally pointed out that they wanted to become engineers or doctors or to access other prestigious professions. It is important to emphasize that these professions have high prestige in both countries of origin and of immigration, in our case, Somalia and Sweden (Skolverket, 2012, 2013; Osman, 2012). Although the parents have high academic expectations, they were also aware that they lacked the knowledge and the language to help their children in their homework. Even though one of the parents we interviewed theoretically had the educational background and capacity to help her children with their homework, she pointed out that she did not know how to do so (a point that we will develop in the next section). She stressed that she had no Swedish educational experience and no understanding of Swedish teaching approaches or traditions to give her children the relevant support they required. She also pointed out that her language ability in Swedish was too weak to help her children at home with their homework.

Furthermore, the poor socio-economic and cultural environment these children are embedded in make it harder for them to get access to individuals and peers who can help them to acquire a pro-academic disposition: "I always tell my children the importance or how important education is for their future in Sweden." Despite this ambition and high academic expectations for their children, one parent stated, "I do not have the educational background nor the language ability to help my children with their homework and I have no economic flexibility or possibility to pay for a tutor." A further mitigating factor, according to the parents, is that a substantial group of these children came to Sweden in their early teen years. After a short language immersion program, they were included in the ordinary class on the basis of their biological year rather than their academic level. This means that they only had a superficial language ability and carried with them serious knowledge gaps and thus had difficulty in following the instructions.

Teacher-Parent Conference: For Whom and for What?

Once every term the schools in Sweden organize a teacher-parent conference. The objective of the conference is to inform the parents on the status of their children's schooling. The focus and the conversation in the conference are not simply to inform the parents on their children's academic status, but also to discuss their social and psychological adaptation in the school and in the class. At the end of the conference, the teacher, together with the parent and the child, discusses areas of improvements which the child needs to work on. This plan forms the basis of the next conference between the parents and the teachers.

Despite their limited prior experience with this practice as noted earlier, the parents argued that the practice is teacher-driven and based on the school/teacher perspective. According to the parents, they were not invited to suggest issues they wanted to discuss at the conference. In addition, the parents stressed that the focus of the conference was on the children's social aspect rather than the academic performance of the children.

In the conference I am often told that my child is doing well in the school and I leave the conference, often believing that my child is doing well academically. At the end of the academic year I find out that my child is not performing well academically. I am presented with a *fait accompli*. In the teacher conference I want the teacher to tell me how my child is progressing academically, how I can help him if he is not performing well, what help I can expect from the school or the teacher, etc. These are the issues I am interested in but, because of the nature of the conference, and my language ability in Swedish, I cannot communicate my concerns to the teachers.

Another parent similarly noted,

It is good that the teachers inform me that my child has adapted to the school socially, but what I want to know, what I am interested in, is to know about my child's academic performance. If he is not doing well, I expect the teachers to inform promptly so that I can do something about it.

Moreover, as noted earlier, the majority of the parents had only basic language skills in Swedish and little or no educational experience of their own. That is, the communication between the parents and the school or the teacher is exacerbated by the language barrier and the parents' limited educational experiences. The parents explained that communication was a major problem and that they avoided visiting the schools despite the fact that they were unemployed and had time during the day. According to the parents, the schools sometimes used interpreters in the teacher conferences. However, while the interpreters focused on translating what was said during the conference, they did not explain anything to the parents in a way that made them understand the school practices or norms better. Hence, according to the parents, the conversation between teachers and parents with the help of interpreters did not lead to a dialogue between them. In addition, the parents perceived the conference as a one-way communication which focused mostly on anti-school behaviors of their children.

However, the parents said that when the teachers used Somali teachers as interpreters in the teacher conference, the quality of the discussion changed. They felt that the Somali teachers explained the school practices and norms to them in a way they could understand. More importantly, the parents felt that they could present their case and make their voices heard in their own language. In other words, the Somali teachers functioned to bridge the perspectives and thus shape an intersubjective understanding of the different perspectives that the teachers and the parents operated with in relation to each other. Additionally, the Somali teachers provided the parents with concrete tips on how to help their children at home in order to improve their academic performance. In other words, the Somali teachers helped the parents to decode school practices and expectations and, at the same time, functioned as a voice of the parents. One parent expressed this sentiment: "They can talk to the teacher and present our perception in a language that the teachers understand," and added that "Somali teachers understand our situation and have had similar experiences as immigrants. They have children in the school who are doing well academically."

The parents described the relationship with the teachers as formal, business-like, and reactive. This image of teachers as an institutional authority poses a dilemma for the Somali parents. Somali parents immigrated from a dysfunctional institutional social context in which individuals had little or no trust in authority or institutional actors. Moreover, as noted earlier, school/parent relations barely existed. This lack of trust and role expectations is strengthened by the fact that schools and teachers in Sweden have the obligation to report to the authority if they believe that a child is not getting proper material support or shows signs of abuse or mistreatment at home. Unlike Somalia where how one

parents his/her child is strictly a family issue and the authorities have no say, in Sweden Somali parents are afraid of disciplining their child.

The children are aware of this fact. In our conversations, the parents referred to incidents in which the children sometimes “blackmailed” their parents to get what they want. In other words, many “myths” and stories circulated within the Somali community about the Swedish welfare system. The welfare system, according to the “myths,” tends to believe the children’s stories rather than trusting the parents’ parenting ability. According to the parents, this perception undermines the authority of the parents and has a negative impact on the relationship between the parents and the children: “One does everything to avoid conflict with the authorities, particularly not to reveal to the institutions that there is conflict at home between the parents or between the parents and the children.” Another parent similarly pointed out:

If my child does not respect me, he or she will not respect the teachers or any other authority. I am at the mercy of the children, and they know it. My competence as a parent is under suspicion and scrutiny. The social welfare service listens to the children and as consequence they undermine my authority as a parent. Some children blackmail their parent to get what they want.

To summarize, the parent-teacher relationships are problem-driven and the school as a welfare institution is perceived by the parents as undermining their authority instead of supporting them in their relation to their children. This is also a major factor that leads the parents to adopt a strategy of passivity and self-exclusion in the relation with the school and the teachers.

Discussion

The theoretical perspective in this article defines social capital as resources individuals are embedded in and can mobilize to expand their action, strategies, and perceptions in relation to different fields. Studies in different countries have identified the following factors that are significant in home-school relations: language, the community the children belong to, socioeconomic status, and years of residence (Archer & Francis, 2005; Wyner et al., 2007).

Based on this theoretical perspective, we want to show how the perception of the interviewed Somali parents is a consequence of their embeddedness in a specific social structure that does not provide them with the “know-how” to advocate for and support their children to succeed in Swedish schools. In our analysis of the empirical data, it was evident that the parents had no relevant social network that could provide them with information or knowledge to support their children in different aspects of their school life, such as providing academic assistance, contacting with the school, dealing with anti-school behavior, and identifying resources that could help their children to pursue an academic career.

The data also showed that the relation between the parents and their children was characterized by conflicts. The parents felt that they constantly had to negotiate with their children on what they could or could not have. A change of context generally implies a change in lifestyle, and children are often more open to changes than their parents. As pointed out earlier, immigrant parents, particularly the Somali parents in this study, have a precarious labor market position and thus are unable to provide their children with similar material standards to most of their peers around them. This lack of material resources makes it hard for the parents to provide their children with extra tutorials, computers, and school trips and thus disadvantages them as compared with other pupils who have the resources to access private tutorials and other material support. This insight is critical in understanding the relationship between the Somali parents and their children and has an impact on their children's school experience, as also shown by Osman (2013), Lin (2001), Portes and Fernandez (2008) and Melander (2009), to name a few.

The parents' social network consisted of persons with similar socio-cultural and material situations, and thus they are embedded in a network that cannot compensate or provide them with ideas or resources to help their children to achieve a successful school experience. Although the parents expected their children to excel academically, they did not have a strategy to realize this expectation or ambition. This discrepancy between parental expectation and their inability to support their children to succeed in their academic endeavors is thus a consequence of their socio-economic position and their lack of understanding of the Swedish school practice (cf. Prado 2008; Portes & Fernandez-Kelley, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Hence, according to the parents, the communication between teachers and the parents is not to ensure the academic performances of the children, but to ensure a smooth running of the classroom or the school. That is, the parents perceived that their children were typified as a problem, cultural or otherwise. Hence, the relationship among teachers, children, and parents is driven to address "problems," not to support academic performance.

Furthermore, our analysis showed that the relationship between parents and teachers was characterized by conflict and by lack of trust. This lack of trust is a product of parents not understanding the school norms, values, and expectations. In turn, this is partly a consequence of the parents' embeddedness in a social network that is unable to provide them with information or to transfer the norms and practice of the Swedish school to their children. According to the Somali parents, the teacher expects them to master the Swedish language and culture, a characteristic or disposition that can only be acquired if one belongs to the dominant class (cf. Archer & Francis, 2005; Wyner et al., 2007). The parents interpreted this as a lack of care and interest in the educational performance of their children from the side of the school and the teachers.

The passivity and the apparent self-exclusion of the parents are a consequence of their pre-immigration experiences of the Somali school system. In Somalia, the school and home were two distinct worlds, with different roles. The teachers in Somalia are the experts, and the role of the parents is to ensure

that the children leave home for school. The Somali parents consciously or unconsciously operate with a mindset or perception of the Somali school system in their encounter with the Swedish school system. The hands-off strategies that worked in the Somali school context are seen in the Swedish school system as a “problem.” To effectively advocate and support their children in the Swedish school requires time, language, and understanding of the rules of the game, which the parents did not have since they were not embedded in a social network that could provide with the support their children needed.

Conclusion

In this study we have examined the encounter between Somali parents with low social capital and the Swedish school system. The analytical use of social capital in this study allowed us to disentangle institutional practices and the alienation of individuals embedded in a specific system, in our case Somali parents and their encounter with the Swedish school system. We have shown that self and institutional exclusion of the parents is a consequence of the lack of material, ideational, and bridging resources as noted by Coleman (1988), Albrecht and Adleman (1987), Prado (2008), and Putnam (2000). According to the parents, this lack of ideational, material and bridging resources disadvantages the children of Somali parents as they try to accomplish a successful academic career. The passivity and self-exclusion are consequences of a dynamic interplay of three factors: (a) the context these parents emigrated from, (b) the social context they immigrated to, and (c) the lack of social capital they bring into play in the encounter with the Swedish school system. The third factor is particularly critical because social capital could provide them with know-how or bridging and ideational support to successfully advocate and negotiate the Swedish school system and practice. The parents we examined in this paper possessed low social capital. Considering that social networking as a mechanism for acculturation is critical in the process of intergenerational transfer of human capital from parents to their children, this study raises a question for further investigation: Can immigrants with high social capital form a qualitatively different relationship with the school as compared to the parents described in this paper?

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