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# From Orality To Literacy: Funds Of Knowledge Of Somali Newcomers

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FROM ORALITY TO LITERACY: FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE OF SOMALI NEWCOMERS

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts  
in English as a Second language.

Hamline University

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# SOMALI NEWCOMER FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

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# SOMALI NEWCOMER FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Introduction

“We read this yesterday--I already know it.”

Yasir is in fifth grade, but reads at a first grade level. The poem I have given him is above his reading level, but after looking at it together during one class session, he returns the next day able to recite it almost perfectly.

When I show him a book that uses real photographs instead of drawings, he asks me where the pictures were taken and where the kids are now. I tell him I don't know, but he assures me that they go to our school. One is in his class, he says. Yasir's sister, a kindergartner, was the first student the school had seen who responded to the standardized writing test question, “Write the word *dog*” by drawing one.

Yasir's family arrived in the United States from Somalia one year ago. On their first day of school, the children screamed, cried, and tried to run away. Everything was new to them. None of them had ever been to school and now they were thrown into a world with such wonders as music class, SMART boards, line orders, and milk cartons. Although no longer running or crying, this family is taking on enormous changes as they cross into a world of a new language, new culture, new economic status, and of print literacy (Watson, 2010). In this massive upheaval, we expect brand new immigrant students to sit at their desks, walk in straight lines in the hall ways, and catch up to their grade-level peers. When they first come to me, many of these students do not know any English at all. Without an interpreter, I can only guess what schooling they have had, what they think of this huge brick learning institution, what they hope to become one day, or what kind of home they have just left. But without knowledge of where they came from, how they learn, and who they are, my colleagues and I cannot effectively guide newly

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immigrated students into this world or help them to learn the numerous and life changing lessons necessary to navigate it.

Those who come into our schools from oral societies face numerous challenges, especially if they have not had previous formal schooling. With little to no formal education, it might seem that these students come to our schools with nothing, but this is not the case. This study addresses the following questions: What funds of knowledge do newcomer students from oral cultures, specifically Somali students, possess? How does this knowledge relate to orality and literacy? This information will help educators form relationships with these families and more successfully teach students from oral cultures. In an effort to investigate and address their funds of knowledge, I have interviewed three Somali newcomer families and one Somali outreach worker.

In this chapter, I will discuss the meaning of literacy and orality, as well as the immense difference between the two. Then I will discuss the danger of deficit discourse and the need to learn about the funds of knowledge that Somali households possess. Following this, I will provide an overview of the context of Somalis in my area along with a description of why I have chosen to conduct this study using these participants. Next, I will describe my own context and the potential challenges of my research. Finally, I will state the question driving my research and provide a summary of this chapter and an overview of the chapters in this study.

### **What is literacy?**

A wide range of terms are used in dealing with cultures that use print, texts, and alphabets, and those that use primarily voices. The terminology most often used exposes a bias toward those who read and write over those who use the art of oration. Often those of us who live in the print literate world use terms like “illiterate” or “pre-literate” to describe those who do



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not use text. Shapiro and MacDonald reject these terms, arguing that those from oral cultures are “orally literate,” and that terms like “illiterate” imply that print literacy is the only kind of literacy (2017). Let us go one step further. In its truest sense, *literate* comes from the Latin *litera*—or letters, and so refers specifically to knowing the letters. However, the superiority complex of the literate world is so strong and so completely unchallenged that the first definition for “literate” in the Merriam Webster dictionary is “educated, cultured” (Literate, 2018) While Shapiro and MacDonald skillfully dismantle deficit discourse while building a solid asset discourse, their use of phrases like “oral literacy” demonstrates the widespread acceptance of literacy—reading and writing—as the standard by which all other methods of communication are measured. Orality is its own entity, independent of literacy making phrases like “oral literacy” not only inaccurate, but strongly biased and degrading to the rich world of orality.

Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar (1999) and Tarone, Bigelow, and Hansen (2009) argue that the notion of literacy is largely social, depending on various contexts and interpretations. Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar (1999) define literacy as “accessing and conveying information in meaningful acts of communication” using any number of modes, whether print or oral (p. 91). As they discuss home, religious, and school literacy that Somali students bring, it is difficult to decipher whether they are actually talking about reading and writing, or referring to all manner of communication - oral and print. It seems that those from literate cultures are unable to conceive of communication separate from reading and writing, which is demonstrated and perpetuated by our lack of words available to describe orality. Setting aside the issue of terminology, the point that Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar make is that educators are often detrimentally ignorant to the wide variety of skills and experiences their students from oral cultures bring. They teach reading and writing from a Western, literate lens without recognizing

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that Somali students bring their own ways of learning and a vast skill set built on orality.

Furthermore, those in power determine what kind of knowledge and ways of knowing are seen as valid. This is an apt description when considering the chasm that Watson (2010) describes, as newly arrived oral students begin a new life in a Western, text-based society. Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar (1999) explain that the modes of behavior of the newly arrived Somali students are rarely seen as valid by Western school systems. Educators often ignore the Somali students' extensive skills and background, and instead focus only on assimilation. This kind of approach leads to deficit discourse.

### **Deficit Discourse and Funds of Knowledge**

Deficit discourse is a dangerous and ongoing issue when it comes to describing any non-dominant people group. The language used to describe Somali students or their families often places blame on them and assumes a lack on the part of the family (a deficit) rather than taking into account the nearly insurmountable obstacles they regularly face (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). A lack of schooling becomes a lack of knowledge and the inability to read and write becomes equated with a lack of education. This perspective tragically devalues the rich orality which permeates the lives of the Somali diaspora (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). Regarding Somalia specifically, the entire nation has been declared a "failed state," a dangerous place for both its own citizens and for other countries (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). These words say nothing of the ingenuity, courage, and persistence the Somali, and others from a similar context, display every day.

Failure to see the enormous assets that these students bring means missing out on what could be a significant boon to U.S. society. Bigelow goes so far as to name orality "one of the most important cultural artifacts of Somalis in the Diaspora" (2010, p. 35), and yet this artifact

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has gone largely unnoticed and unappreciated by educators. One correlation to deficit discourse is the high drop-out rate of immigrant students (Fry, 2005; Mitchell, 2016). Although this is a complicated issue with many causes, it can certainly be argued that if students do not feel valued in school, they will be less likely to stay. If negative assumptions about students lead to losing them from the school system, along with all of their abilities, experiences, and skills, then knowledge about the real assets of these students is needed to create an educational community in which all thrive together.

Assets, skills, and background information are all part of a family's funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2012; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992). Funds of knowledge are the "bodies of knowledge and skills that are essential for the well-being of an entire household" (Esteban-Guitar & Moll, 2014, p. 31), and may include the ways a family earns money, skills that have been passed down through family members, strategies for survival, and knowledge gleaned through a social network (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992; Moll et al., 1992; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2012). These funds are connected to culture, inasmuch as culture is part of the natural fabric in every household, but unlike culture, funds of knowledge are local and specific to individuals (Moll et al., 1992).

Deficit discourse comes out of assumptions regarding Somali families, but through learning about these families' funds of knowledge, educators can start to see the strategies and abilities Somali families bring to U.S. schools. When it comes to newcomer families, learning these stories can be a great challenge. Recently arrived refugee families often speak no English and are overwhelmed by culture shock and the enormous job of getting settled into a new country (Almond, 2017; Bigelow, 2010; Schuchman & McDonald, 2008). However, taking the time to learn about them and to create relationships with these families is paramount to educating

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Somali children and to helping them make the enormous journey into reading and writing in U.S. schools.

As described by Moll et al. (1992), learning about a student's funds of knowledge must be an open-minded process, which educators approach without pre-developed judgement. Previous to conducting my own interviews, I have studied the background of Somali students in my community as well as traits often found within oral cultures. The goal of this research is to better inform the questions that I will ask and to give some context for my participants' responses. This is similar to the background and context that Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg (1992) provide before delving into funds of knowledge that Mexican American students possess.

### **Somalis in the Local Context and SLIFE**

Somali refugees first started coming to the United States in large numbers in the 1990s when a bitter and ongoing war broke out in Somalia. Because Minnesota is home to several large refugee resettlement organizations and has had considerable success in helping refugee groups, many Somali families came to this frozen North-land and their children started pouring into the schools (DeRusha, 2011; Roble & Rutledge, 2008). Nearly 100,000 Somali refugees have been resettled into the US (Goodenough, 2016). Of these, around 40,000 currently live in Minnesota (The Associated Press, 2016). According to U.N. estimates from 2015, the total number of Somalis living in Minnesota is around 150,000, including refugees and non-refugees (Almond, 2017). Because of the instability within Somalia, public education there is not consistently available meaning that many people lack formal schooling. Therefore, many Somali students are classified as students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE).

The Minnesota Department of Education defines SLIFE as those who have entered the United States after grade six, have had at least two years fewer experience in a school than their

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grade level peers, are at least two grade levels behind in reading and math, and may not be print literate in their native language (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016). Because I work in an elementary school that serves kindergarten through fifth grade, none of my students arrived in the U.S. after grade six and so do not meet this definition of SLIFE, though many have older siblings who do. My students are at an advantage because they have more time to catch up to their peers. It should be noted that the term SIFE is also used to refer to these students (Students with Interrupted Formal Education). I will use the term SLIFE in my research because I find it to be more inclusive of my students in its reference to limited, and not merely interrupted, formal education. In general, I will use the term “students from oral cultures” because the students in my research do not qualify officially as SLIFE and because the focus of my research is on oral cultures in which the learning that takes place outside of formal education.

The process through which families immigrate to the United States is rarely simple, especially for refugee families. Many of the families in my school came in stages. Often, one of the parents is able to move to the U.S. and start making preparations for the rest of the family. Then they send for the other parent before bringing the children over, often one child at a time. This whole process can take years and so it is not uncommon for the parents in a family to have lived in the United States for five or more years when a child arrives and begins attending school. This arrangement creates its own set of stressors because many of these children were raised by other family members in a household with siblings or cousins. When they come to the U.S., they leave this family behind to join parents that they may not have seen for many years. In this study, I will be working with parents who have lived in the United States for less than ten years. In each of these families, the children have lived in the U.S. for less than two years.

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When Somali students come to US schools, they experience culture shock on many levels: They may be attending formal schooling for the first time in their lives. They must also navigate the numerous expectations and norms inherent in the Western school system. The gap between them and their grade level peers, who have years of both academic and social/behavioral experience, can seem nearly insurmountable. The fact that these students undergo such enormous challenges while recovering from the trauma of war is truly staggering (Watson, 2010; Woods, 2009).

### **My Context**

I am the elementary newcomer teacher for a district in a first-ring suburb of a Midwestern city. The school where I teach serves 752 students from kindergarten to 5th grade, 24 % (191) of whom are English Learners. Students receiving free or reduced priced lunches make up 57% of the student body (446) and 12 students are homeless. Racially, the student body is mostly White and Hispanic/Latino with 38% White (300) and 26% Hispanic/Latino (201). The rest of the students are Black/African American (16% or 123 students), Asian (7% or 56 students), or two more or more races (12% or 95 students). Fewer than ten students are American Indian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. It is difficult to say how many students are Somali or immigrants from African countries because the data groups African Americans and African immigrants together. Test scores for my school have shown that consistently about 50% of students are proficient in Reading, Math, and Science over the past five years (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017).

My position is the elementary school newcomer teacher in my district and I am responsible not only for teaching basic English to students who have been in the US for less than two years, but also for their adjustment into our school system. I see students from 30-45 minutes

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each day, during which time I use a highly structured basic English curriculum to teach oral language, reading, and writing and support students in content areas. Students who enter our school system in the lower grades are mostly able to participate in classroom activities because the educational gap between them and their English-speaking peers is not so great. However, when students enter school in 3rd grade or higher, the gaps in education often require extra interventions due to a lack of formal schooling.

In the first few months of school, when students are struggling to adapt to a new country, a new language, and an entirely new school system, I spend much of my time developing relationships of trust and helping them to feel comfortable and safe. I speak often with families, using language translation services and home visits when needed. My goal in communicating with families is to create an atmosphere of trust and safety, but also to learn from parents and guardians about their students' history and abilities. Many of these newcomer families are unfamiliar with the school system in the United States. Even if the adults have lived here for a few years, they may not have had interactions with the school system. I provide an orientation for them near the beginning of the year to discuss expectations for such things as homework, meals, and communications with families. The differences for these families are large and the context of the school unfamiliar. Virtually all communication between the school and the families is written and, even if families are able to read their language, notices are generally only available in English and Spanish. Even so, these families are resourceful and resilient. By the end of the year, most of them have begun to understand things like library books, permission slips, and homework.

Teachers of newcomers, within my own school and in others, often report feeling frustrated and confused (Roxas, 2011; MacNevin, 2012; Windle & Miller, 2012). It is their role

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to bring these students to grade level standards specifically in the content areas of math, reading, and science, and yet newcomers pose an entirely new challenge and require new strategies.

Refugee students come with enormous social and emotional needs, and, if they are SLIFE, wide academic gaps to be filled. Many teachers report that they have received little or no professional development on reaching students who have large gaps in their formal education and who come from an oral culture (DeCapua, 2016). One of the foremost jobs of the school is to teach print literacy. The older a student is, the more troubling this issue of print literacy can become especially since many upper level teachers, even ESL teachers, do not have the resources or training to teach students how to read and write (DeCapua, 2016; Bigelow, 2010; Woods, 2009). These challenges can be paralyzing for classroom teachers, especially when there are thirty other students in the class to tend to (Roxas, 2011; MacNevin, 2012; Windle & Miller, 2012). More support is needed.

### **Relationship of the Researcher to Subjects and Potential Research Challenges**

The work that I am taking up in this paper is to learn the funds of knowledge that students from oral cultures have as well as how this knowledge relates to orality and literacy. Classroom teachers need to know this information in order to effectively utilize students' prior knowledge in their teaching and so that they can understand what is really at stake for newcomers crossing from orality to literacy (Akinvaso, 1981; Watson, 2010). Yet from similar studies, I have come to appreciate the challenges inherent in this task. First is the issue of informed consent and trust among the subjects and myself as the researcher. Tarone, Bigelow, and Hansen also worked with Somali newcomers and describe the difficulty of gaining valid informed consent, since this requires a member of the Somali community who understands both the world of the oral families



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as well as the world of academia (2009). This person must bridge these worlds and explain the nature and the use of the study.

I will be working closely with my school's Somali outreach worker, who is able to perform this delicate task. She shared with me more about the challenges I might face throughout this project. Newcomers may be wary of researchers who ask personal questions and, to some families, the use of audio recording equipment may be taboo. Before beginning their research, Tarone, Bigelow, and Hansen spent an entire year working within their community of participants (2009). I too have worked for a year with my subjects, although in a less direct way. The participants I hope to use in my study are the families of my students. The relationship I have built with them is as a teacher, which differs from the relationship of a researcher. However, both are based on trust and goodwill.

The other major challenge strikes at the nature of the research. In working with newcomer subjects from Somalia, Watson describes the differences between literate and oral society, between the home society and the society of the western school system, between a developing and developed nation, between a first language and a second language as chasms that make up "an abyss so wide and deep that it can hardly be imagined" (2010, p. 3). She aptly calls her research "interpreting across the abyss," a task she approaches with awe and humility. My task is similar. I am a middle class woman of German descent and Christian background, who has lived my whole life in the United States, except for a short time in Eastern Europe. While I have traveled in East Africa and have dear friends from the region, I have not spent any considerable time there. Is it possible for me to reach across this abyss and begin to understand the knowledge of orally literate Muslim families, newly arrived from East Africa? Even if I am able to glean the information I seek, can I present it to others in its true form? It is a task that I

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can only begin to approach with utmost humility, through the close guidance of Somali advisors and researchers who have gone before me. I present this research, hoping to share the stories of my subjects as clearly as possible but knowing that what I present will be an interpretation that has passed from Somali into English, from oral telling into print, and through my own innate biases and perceptions. I ask for grace and patience as I set out on what is an essential, but precarious undertaking.

### **Questions**

This study addresses the following questions: What funds of knowledge do newcomer students from oral cultures, specifically Somali students, possess? How does this knowledge relate to orality and literacy? This information will help educators form relationships with these families and more successfully teach students from oral cultures. In an effort to investigate and address their funds of knowledge, I have interviewed three Somali newcomer families and one Somali outreach worker.

### **Summary**

Given the civil war in Somalia, refugees have been coming into the US and other countries in great numbers. Due to the instability of the country, many Somali children have not had access to formal education which means that when they arrive at school in the US, they are far behind their classmates. These students must learn to read and write for the first time, while learning English and adapting to an entirely new culture. Teachers often lament the lack of resources and instruction in successfully reaching these students (Roxas, 2011; MacNevin, 2012; Windle & Miller, 2012). These teachers want their students to succeed but may feel at a loss or that they do not understand their students' behaviors or attitudes. Similarly, Somali families want their students to succeed in school, but may not know school expectations or how to meet them.

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All too often, discourse surrounding SLIFE and oral cultures focuses on deficits - what students and their families lack, rather than what assets students and their families bring into the school. The education system in the US is built solidly on print literacy, and so does not transfer well into orality. More must be done to understand the oral background these students bring and to help them gain literacy. This project aims to bridge this gap through interviews with Somali students and a Somali outreach worker to find out what funds of knowledge these students bring. Information in this project will help other educators effectively apply culturally responsive teaching methods.

### **Chapter Overviews**

Chapter one described the context of orality and literacy as well as my connection to Somali newcomers and my interest in learning about their funds of knowledge. In chapter two, I will further explore the background of the Somali diaspora, literature on orality and literacy, and the needs of orally literate students coming into the United States. I will describe my research methods in chapter three, and in chapter four will analyze the results of the research. Chapter five describes the conclusions I have drawn from this research.

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## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Overview of the Chapter**

This study addresses the following questions: What funds of knowledge do newcomer students from oral cultures, specifically Somali students, possess? How does this knowledge relate to orality and literacy? This information will help educators form relationships with these families and more successfully teach students from oral cultures. In an effort to investigate and address their funds of knowledge, I have interviewed three Somali newcomer families and one Somali outreach worker. This chapter explores the historical background of Somali refugees in the Midwest, along with the effects of the Somali civil war. It provides a description of the role of family, education and language in Somalia. Then, this chapter describes three main differences in ways of learning between oral cultures and literate cultures, namely oral vs. literate, concrete vs. abstract, and collective vs. individual. Finally, this chapter discusses the specific needs of students from oral cultures. After synthesizing this information, the current lack of resources for students and the need for information from Somali families themselves are described.

### **Historical Background and Effects of the Somali Civil War**

To understand the Somali families who come to U.S. schools today, it is important to understand the many changes that have taken place in Somalia over the past 50 years. Before arriving in Minnesota, many Somali refugees experienced bitter civil war. According to Williams, (2001) as of 2001, 35 percent of Somali refugees had been tortured, while all of them had lost everything they owned. It is safe to assume that this number has decreased in more recent years because instead of growing up in the violent climate of civil war, many Somali children are now growing up in refugee camps. Nevertheless, memories and guilt over the

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atrocities of this war torment Somali people, affecting everyone from the adults who lived them to the children who were too young to remember or who were born in the US (Farid & McMahan, 2004; Schuchman & McDonald, 2008). Instances of mental illness, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression are understandably much higher among Somali refugees than in the general population (Schuchman & McDonald, 2008), though stigma surrounding mental illness can make it difficult for them to get help (Williams, 2001).

**Family structure.** It is difficult to say anything about a “typical” Somali family experience because the civil war has, in many ways, destroyed the fabric of this community. In refugee camps, children may run and play as they would outside of a war environment, but often without supervision because the adults are busy with the burden of finding a way to leave the camp. Parents are not able to be present mentally or emotionally to teach values. This gives rise to a fear that children from refugee camps “may be a lost generation” (Farid & McMahan, 2004, p. 50). Traditionally, in Somali families men are responsible for teaching Muslim values to their children, and, as children grow older, the fathers guide sons and mothers guide daughters (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Because of the war, many men are no longer able to be present through death or separation, and so women have been left as single mothers, often unsure of how to guide their children. Women do not receive as much Qur’anic teaching as men, and so many feel ill equipped to teach their children religious values (Farid & McMahan, 2004). And yet, Muslim values and the family system are the foundation of ethics and relationships for Somalis.

When faced with Somali students’ misbehavior in U.S. schools, the Somali adults that Farid and McMahan describe explained that these problems are caused by “the destruction of the family and the erosion of Islamic values through the war and refugee experience” (2004, p. 48). And yet such misbehaviors are common among all refugee children, and not only Somalis. It is a

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part of what Farid and McMahan call “refugee culture” (2004, p. 48). The life of refugees is full of uncertainties: separation, violence, and often hunger. In many cases, families are not able to stay together, and attending school is impossible. Coming out of such a climate leaves families disoriented and, because adults have not been able to teach their children, lacking the foundation of traditional values (Farid & McMahan, 2004).

**Somali language.** The story of the Somali language is part of the tumultuous political climate of Somalia. This history can be broken into pre-1972 and post-1972, which was the time of Somalia’s independence from colonialism. Before 1972, English was the official language of school and government while Italian was the language of higher education (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999). As the language of the Qur'an, Arabic was used in religion and Somali was used informally, but had no written script. In 1972, a written script for Somali was developed and Somali became the language of school and government. Arabic is still the language of religion (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999).

After the Somali script was created, there was a large push for literacy throughout the country. In fact, 60% of the rural population passed the first literacy exam (Kahin, 1997), with basic literacy increasing from 5% to 50% among Somalis over 15 years of age (UNICEF Somalia, 2003). However, in 1977 the Ogaden War quickly halted this massive literacy push, leaving schools with few resources. By 1990, school enrollment rate was one of the lowest in the world and when civil war broke out in 1991, 90% of Somali schools were destroyed. According to UNICEF Somalia (2003), virtually no formal education took place in Somalia between 1991 and 1993. By 2008, the literacy rate had fallen to 37.8%, with 49.7% male and 25.8% female (Bigelow 2010).

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**Somali Schools.** The idea of formal education is still relatively new to Somalia, with the first public schools coming about only after World War I (Kahin, 1997). The majority of Somali people are nomadic with an oral culture and so education comes in different forms from that of formal schooling. Instead of learning from books, they learn the tasks necessary for daily life from people (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). True to Ong's description of oral cultures (1982), Somalis use the spoken word to teach values or wisdom, and apprenticeships or demonstrations to teach skills (Kahin, 1997).

Refugees, Somali and otherwise, often have limited access to schools, which means that when schools are available, the ability to attend is seen as a rare privilege and students have a high respect for school (Flaitz, 2006). If there is a problem with a student, that student will be expelled and another will take his or her place. But Farid and McMahan explain that "in a system where all participants share culturally and religiously defined sets of expectations, and where those who fall short of those expectations are denied access, there are no discipline problems to speak of" (2004, p. 9).

The expectation of responsibility is different in Somali schools than in Western schools in that parents do not worry much about their children's school and instead expect the teachers and principal to take care of everything (Farid & McMahan, 2004; Kahin, 1997; Flaitz, 2006). In fact, some Somali parents have remarked that in the U.S., they must spend much more time tending to their children's education (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Both in school and out of school, children in Somalia are able to be more independent than is often possible in the U.S. Because of the collective culture in Somali, children could run and play in their neighborhood, and parents knew that "aunts" and "uncles" - friends within the community - would watch them (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999; Farid & McMahan, 2004;

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Nilsson, Barazanji, Heintzelman, Siddiqi, & Shilla, 2012) In the U.S., this sort of community rarely exists, and parents often feel isolated in caring for their children (Farid & McMahan, 2004).

Both before and after arriving in the United States many Somali children attend Qur'anic school, also called madrassa or *duksi* (alternatively, *dugsi* or *duqsi*), although preference for enrollment is often given to boys over girls (Bigelow, 2010). As is true with many non-western schools, and especially schools in oral cultures, Qur'anic school uses recitation and memorization as its main method of instruction (Fliatz, 2012; Gunderson, 2000). The language of these schools is Arabic, and students learn to recite and write without necessarily understanding the words (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999). In these schools, as in public schools, some students learn basic literacy and text/sound correspondence although they are not taught to analyze or discuss texts (Bigelow, 2010). In times of unrest when other schools were not available, Qur'anic schools have provided basic number sense and literacy to children in Somalia (Abdi Farah Saeed "Juxaa," Minister of Education of Puntland, a self-governed region in Somalia, qtd in Bigelow 2010). However, the goal of these schools is not to teach literacy but to teach Muslim values and increase memorization of the Qur'an.

### **Ways of Learning**

Orality does not just denote communicating through listening, speaking, orating, and reading poetry; in the deepest sense, it refers to a way of life entirely organically fashioned on face-to-face human relations. (Bigelow, 2010 p. 54-55)

Orality and literacy are not just two different ways of approaching words. The introduction of literacy changes the people relate to others and the way they process abstract and concrete concepts, not to mention how people communicate. DeCapua and Marshall (2011;



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DeCapua, 2016) describe three points of difference in the ways that students from oral cultures experience the world: oral vs. print, concrete vs. abstract, and collective vs. individual culture. These three points represent cultural orientation: more than just the way a person learns, but how that person positions him or herself in the world and in relation to others. The differences between oral, concrete, collective culture and print, abstract, individual culture are all part of the abyss that Somali students must find a way to cross when they enter U.S. schools (Watson 2010). DeCapua and Marshall (2011; DeCapua, 2016) refer to cultural dissonance that comes about because of such immense differences, a phenomenon which they believe is largely responsible for the high dropout rate among immigrant students and SLIFE. In the following sections, I will discuss each of these three key differences.

**Oral vs. print.** Ong describes two means of instruction that are common in oral cultures: discipleship and apprenticeship (1982). Discipleship is the practice of listening and repeating as a way of conveying information (Ong, 1982). Schools in oral cultures often operate through a system of rote memorization and recitation (Flitz, 2012). There are several reasons for why this method is so common, one simply being the lack of available textbooks and in this way, orality and literacy are a bit of a chicken and egg issue. Within an oral culture, there is, understandably, very little text. Because of this, incentive to become literate is small: even if someone could read, there would be nothing *to* read (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). One point of cultural dissonance for students from oral cultures is this switch from a world in which print is found only in textbooks into a world in which print is everywhere—from menus and warning signs to instruction manuals and advertisements—and constantly informs life (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Printed word must take on new meaning to these students. Teachers often become frustrated with students who do not read directions, but for Somali students more than others,

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continually reading for information and instruction is a foreign practice that includes a new way of seeing the world. In this instance, as in many others, it is not the task (i.e., read the directions) that must be learned, but a worldview that gives meaning to the task (i.e., recognize that text contains relevant information) (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).

Those from literate societies tend to see the inability to read and write as a great lack, but fail to recognize the skills that flourish in its place. Akinnaso makes the distinction between oral and literate societies this way: an oral culture is one in which the art of oral narration is still alive and well, while in a literate culture this art has been replaced by books (1981). For societies that have long since lost this art, it is difficult to appreciate the skills it entails, including strong aptitude to create and recite poetry, and the ability to recall and produce information orally.

People from oral cultures are able to recall information without the assistance of text by weaving together a wide variety of mnemonic tools. These tools, including rhythm, alliteration, proverbs, and thematic structures, not only make ideas memorable, but also turn speech into an art form (Ong, 1982). Somali families have strong oralities of songs and poems, which are created and refined in collaboration with the community (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999). In fact, Somalia has been called a nation of poets, with many intricate kinds of poetry used in all aspects of life, from politics to entertainment (Kahin, 1997). A great deal of respect is paid to community members who are able to add to this oral tradition of poetry, built on generations of rich artistry. The Somali oral tradition “extols the virtues of memory,” relies on “the existence of a pool of memorizers” and “a constant repetition of the ‘word’ for its survival” (Ahmed, n.d., p. 1). The introduction of print brings with it unique ways of thinking, communicating, and conducting business, but we must not lose sight of the fact that it diminishes this pool of memorizers and limits recitation. Literacy kills the art of narration. The vast majority of teachers

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have not had the art of orality as part of their heritage for many generations. While memorization and recitation was a hallmark of American education for decades, we've moved so far from it that we no longer consider its absence a loss, and yet our Somali families are in the midst of this transition (Gunderson, 2000). To teach literacy is to participate "in the extinction of a way of life that is based on orality, relationality, memory, and context" (Bigelow, 2010, p. 55). We must not belittle this conflict between orality and literacy. Literacy opens up many opportunities, but it is also a one-way street. To become literate is to lose orality (Ong, 1982; Bigelow, 2010).

When people learn to read and write, they begin to think about spoken and written language in ways that people who are from oral cultures do not. For example, they can recognize and process phonological elements, and visualize words (Reis & Castro-Caldas, 1997, p. 445). But the opposite is also true. Those from oral cultures think about language in unique ways as well, and little research has been done in the field of SLA into the ways in which people from oral cultures learn languages although large numbers of those from oral cultures are multilingual (Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009). We can deduce that virtually all teachers within the U.S. are using strategies accessible to the print literate even when teaching oral students (Bigelow, 2010). More research must be done into language learning strategies for learners from oral cultures.

**Concrete vs. abstract.** The transference of information in an oral culture is done through discipleship, while the transference of skills is done through apprenticeship, for skills are not taught through description, but through demonstration (Ong, 1982). Literacy opens the door for abstractions while orality is immediate, concrete, and connected to what Ong calls the "human lifeworld" (2002, p. 42). Apprenticeships use a "cycle of observation, practice, and feedback" (DeCapua, 2016). Students learning to make bread, for instance, would watch another person mix the ingredients and knead the dough, practice it themselves, and then receive feedback to

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improve their actions. This type of learning both depends on and fosters intimate relationships with elders in the community, who are seen as storehouses of wisdom (Watson, 2017). By working with elders on projects that may take years, young people gain skills not by reading or hearing, but by watching and practicing. Through this type of education, youth create something meaningful and useful to their community (Watson, 2017).

Methods of learning in the US are far less concrete (DeCapua, 2016). Instead of learning by practicing alongside elders in their community, students read about skills that they may not actually use until years later. They are expected to be content that this knowledge will serve them on some nebulous day when they grow up (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Watson, 2017). Instead of creating something with an elder to be used in their community, in Western education students prepare to work for a company to which they will probably have no emotional or spiritual connection (Watson, 2017). Akinnaso calls this the difference between “*telling* out of context” and “*showing* in context” (1981, p. 177). It can be difficult to say the least for students from oral cultures to value information that cannot be put to use immediately, which may not benefit their own community, and which may never be put to use at all.

Reading and writing are acts removed from time and context. Even for children growing up in literate societies, learning to write presents a challenge because it is by nature abstract. Vygotsky explains that when children first learn to write, they see very little need for it. “In conversation, every sentence is prompted by a motive,” but in writing we must create the context (1962, p. 99). It is a step removed from the “human lifeworld,” and so removed from community.

It is hard to think of a concrete way to explain the development of “critical thinking skills,” so valued in Western schools, the goal of which is not to produce anything, but rather to

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turn students into better thinkers. Indeed, Western teachers tend to believe that learning *how* to learn is more important than learning a specific skill, but for many immigrant students, success in education is determined by the amount of information memorized and the number of skills acquired (Gunderson, 2000). In Gunderson's study of refugee high school students and their families, the majority of students said that Canadian school was far easier than schools in their home countries because there was no memorizing (2000). Parents and students reported feeling disappointed that in Canadian schools, students were asked not to memorize, but to analyze, question, and discuss. In these student-based learning environments, parents felt that teachers were not doing their jobs because they were not telling students what to think.

What is valued as high quality teaching in Western schools was seen as the opposite by these families. Rote memorization and recitation are generally seen as illegitimate teaching methods in the US, and yet people all over the world receive their entire formal education through this method. Any teaching champions one set of social and cultural expectations and values over all others: literacy over orality, abstraction over pragmatism, critical thinking over memorization (Bigelow, 2010; Gunderson, 2000). When students struggle in US public schools, it may be that they value a different system. Such methods as culturally responsive teaching and DeCapua and Marshall's Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) calls for teachers to recognize these value structures and, at the very least, to acknowledge that students may not share the same values (2011; DeCapua, 2016).

The entire Western education system is set up on scientific, abstract reasoning and students are expected to function out of an abstract world view (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; DeCapua, 2016; Watson, 2017). If students from oral cultures measure educational success by the amount of information memorized and skills developed, Western schools measure success

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through oral and written tests. However, much of the questioning done in U.S. schools simply makes no sense when considered from a concrete perspective. True or false questions are silly: there is no reason to make false statements. They are abstract concepts with no connection to the real world. Similarly, defining objects is meaningless. Why answer a question like “what is a tree?” when trees are all around and someone can go and look at one instead of hearing a description (Luria, 1976; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Standardized testing has become the main way of determining student success in many schools, and yet it is hard to think of an assessment method that is further removed from the context-based learning of oral cultures (Bigelow, 2010). Even U.S. born teachers have difficulty explaining the reason for such tests. Students from oral cultures may struggle with taking them not because they don’t know the answers, but because they fail to see the point in spending several hours answering questions that have nothing to do with real life or community and do not demonstrate memorization or a skill that results in a product.

When students do not see any connection between the information being taught and their real lives, they experience cultural dissonance (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Again, the problem is not in the inability to answer a question, but rather a difference in worldviews that makes the question meaningless. For many students from oral cultures, learning means working with elders to create something that will benefit their community, while in western schools, learning means thinking critically and independently finding more information. When students of oral backgrounds join Western schools, “they must also learn new ways of learning, and new ways of considering what counts as knowledge worth learning at all” (Watson, 2010, p.13).

The consequences of failing to make learning concrete and applicable are quite serious. If students do not see anything in their schooling that would be useful in their current or future

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lives, what is to keep them from dropping out (Akinnaso, 1981)? And, indeed, a huge percentage of students who come into U.S. education from oral cultures do drop out (Fry, 2005). Teachers must make explicit connections between their lessons and students' lives (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).

Connecting information to current life is an essential piece of teaching students from oral cultures, but connecting new information to their past experiences is also important. Educational theory says that students must be able to connect new concepts to prior knowledge in order to learn. For students coming from an oral, concrete world view, it may be very difficult to connect knowledge from their life before coming to the U.S. to new learning in U.S. schools (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Watson (2010) describes the abyss that exists between oral and literate cultures, between languages and between styles of learning. And yet, if students are to make these much-needed connections between prior knowledge and new information, they must regularly cross between the two sides. Literacy is by nature social in that it connects people, albeit far less directly than oral communication does. Because this connection does exist, teachers must teach literacy within the social context of their students' lives (Woods, 2009; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Akinnaso, 1981). By using students' funds of knowledge in the classroom, teachers can begin to create a natural bridge between students' lives and the information being taught.

**Collectivism vs. individualism.** Another characteristic of oral culture noted by DeCapua and Marshall (2011) is collectivism, in which people see themselves not as independent agents, but as connected to groups. Sefa (1994) describes the dichotomy in the African context "between the competitive individual isolated from his or her community and the cooperative individual enriched by community" (p. 12). Collectivism does not mean doing everything together, but rather consistently acting in the best interest of the group rather than the individual. Students

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from collective cultures see knowledge as deeply interconnected with people, while students in the U.S. are encouraged to make their learning their own. As they progress through the U.S. school system, students are expected to become more and more independent, to the point where graduate students work independently from a class and rarely even meet with professors (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). But within an oral society, learning is much different. It is by nature connected to others within the community. Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar found a deep need for togetherness in their research (1999). It is rare and unfavorable for a Somali person to live or work alone. They find strength in group membership. In an oral society, information and learning does not exist apart from people. All wisdom, knowledge, and skills are learned from elders within the community for the purpose of supporting the community (Watson, 2017). Even thinking is a communal process because in order for thoughts to be recalled later, they must be organized into memorable chunks and mnemonic patterns. It is possible to write down your thoughts independently, but talking to yourself can only take you so far. Developing long, complicated thoughts requires oral output and an interlocutor (Ong, 1982). While literacy is a means of communication and so can be social, it is by nature individual. Reading and writing are done alone, directed to “an imaginary person, or to no one in particular” (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 98-99). Orality is communal.

In the poem, “The Bridge,” Lebanese poet Kaissar Afif, conveys this sentiment. The poet also uses a similar metaphor to that which Watson uses to describe the transfer that students must make when they cross the chasm between their home culture and U.S. culture:

Poetry is a river

And solitude a bridge.



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Through writing

We cross it,

Through reading

We return. (Berry & Lucas, 2002)

Writing is solitary, as is reading to one's self. But poetry is traditionally an oral art, and so reading—or reciting—is a communal activity.

The difference between learning within a collective society and independent learning is another point of cultural dissonance for students from oral cultures. Even when they are learning as part of a class in public school, most immigrant children will learn from someone who is not part of their community and to whom they do not have a personal connection. U.S. schools are diverse communities and teachers work with many students who are different from them. However, students from oral cultures are different from their teachers in unique ways. While many teachers can remember “how it felt to be monolingual and then learn a second language, it is practically impossible for teachers to imagine what it felt like to lack print literacy and then become literate” (Bigelow, 2010, p. 42). Empathy extends only so far, and the cultural dissonance between orality and literacy, concrete reasoning and abstract reasoning, and between collectivism and individualism is a long path to travel. And yet, teachers must attempt this path and create a learning community with their students. It is the goal of this study to inform teachers of the realities of their students from oral cultures, and so to enable connections and points of empathy.

***Transition to an individualistic society.*** Coming to live in the highly independent culture of the United States, separated from their collectivist network of family and friends, many

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Somalis feel isolated (Farid & McMahan, 2004). In their research, Betancourt et al. found that many Somali families felt they had left the trauma of war in Somalia to enter into a different kind of trauma in the United States—a war of isolation and strain within their own communities (2015). Family roles change as both children and adults navigate new identities. Parents may feel they are losing authority in the home as their children change to suit their U.S. school environment (Nilsson et al., 2012). Children may learn English faster than their parents, leaving their parents in the often awkward position of relying on children for translation. All of this leads to a sense of helplessness and isolation within the family (Nilsson et al., 2012).

In this new society, away from their community, Somali elders in Bigelow's study stated that identity is their greatest worry for Somali youth (2010). They spoke of these youth being torn between two very different cultures, forced to find a new way of being that lies somewhere within this binary. A large part of this identity shift is that when they come to the U.S., Somalis have the new and shocking experience of being a religious and racial minority (Bigelow, 2010). Racial identity is tricky because, while Somalis are black, they are very different from Black Americans. But race and racism have little to do with where a person was born, or even a person's own identity, and everything to do with how others perceive that person. Often, racism comes about because a person is mistaken for something they are not, whether that is a mistaken assumption about heritage and culture, or about personal temperament (Bigelow, 2010). Bigelow recounts the experience of many Somali young people of being mistaken for Black Americans, especially by the police. These youth must decide how they will fit into this new individualistic system, and how they will relate to other racial groups. On the one hand, some Somali youth, perceived as Black Americans, take on this identity and embrace such elements as hip-hop

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culture. However, many Somali adults see this as signaling a loss of Muslim values and urge their children to stay away from Black Americans (Bigelow, 2010).

Islam also presents a challenge for Somali youth, because, if they choose to practice Muslim values, they are outwardly representing a religion that is feared and villainized. Somali youth have no easy path before them: they must learn how to be black, but without Black American heritage; Muslim, but not terrorists; teenagers, immigrants, and English language learners, while somehow still managing to reflect their own personalities (Bigelow, 2010). This challenge of identity is compounded by the fact that Somali youth are crafting their identity while learning a new language and new school system, and recovering from the trauma of war (Watson, 2010).

For all students, but for immigrant students in particular, school meets more than simply academic needs. Schools care for their students' general well-being and help them find a social identity (Woods, 2009). Both Hos (2016) and Alitolppa-Niitamo (2002) outline the numerous challenges that face refugee families including poverty and discrimination, not to mention recovery from past trauma. They need understanding, caring teachers who will give them time to adjust. School is the chief exposure these students have with their new society, and through it they form their new identity. Refugee students must determine how they fit into this new community (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002; Woods, 2009; Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999; Bigelow, 2010). Alitolppa-Niitamo goes so far as to call school "one of the most critical integration measures" for immigrants. It's true they can provide students with the tools to navigate a new society, but schools might also present a worldview that conflicts with a student's own (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002). Western schools represent Western values. Students are faced with the task of learning to thrive in a new system without losing the one they have come from.

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This complicated process of navigating one's identity puts a strain on families and increases stress for parents (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002). This is particularly troubling for African immigrants, given the centrality of family in the African context, as described in Sefa (1994). How can these families maintain strong a collective community while succeeding in an individualistic society?

### **Specific Needs of Students from Oral Cultures**

These three points of differences in worldview—oral vs. literate, abstract vs. concrete, and collective vs. individual—make students and families from oral cultures unique assets to our communities. Far too often, students who come to U.S. schools from oral cultures with little or no formal education are seen as a burden. Because they do not read and may not see any reason to answer abstract questions, teachers may assume they know nothing (Woods, 2009; DeCapua, 2016; Bigelow, 2010). But the deficit is not in these students, who have faced staggering obstacles before even walking into a U.S. school. The problem is in the schools that fail to recognize and value the experiences and skills these students and their families bring (DeCapua, 2016; Bigelow, 2010; Watson, 2010; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). When the U.S. is faced with deep divisions, when those with differing perspectives fail to communicate with each other, and when so many relationships are broken through differing ideologies, we could stand to benefit from the art of orality, from concrete thinking, and from a collectivist mindset. It is imperative that schools find ways to provide education to these students so that our society may be improved, and possibly healed, through the experiences and perspectives they bring.

These students come with unique learning styles and unique needs, along with specific life experiences and skill sets. They arrive in the US knowing little to no English, having recently suffered the trauma of war. Because they may have moved from place to place before coming to

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the US or spent years in refugee camps, many of them have not had access to consistent education. This lack of formal school poses even more of a challenge to refugee students than the lack of English. Educators must teach these students the structure of Western schools and help them to gain literacy (Woods 2009 p. 92). One of the greatest skills that the education system is to provide is that of print literacy, but traditional ESL programs may not be equipped to teach middle or high school students to read (Woods, 2009 p. 92; Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002). According to Bigelow, the field of SLA has relatively little research into language acquisition by people from oral cultures, while the majority of language learners in the world learn then apart from literacy (2010).

If schools are not able to find a way to reach these students, the stakes are quite high. After all, "kids would rather be bad than stupid" (Tim MacKay qtd in Stewart, 2011, p. 69). When students from an oral culture are put into a school situation in which they cannot succeed, "they will find identity, success, and welcoming elsewhere"—which may mean joining a gang or becoming involved in illegal activity (MacKay qtd. in Stewart, 2011, p. 69). Although the education system may be flawed with biases toward literacy and Western styles of learning, succeeding in school is the best chance these students have of thriving within their new country (Stewart, 2011). Educators have the imperative responsibility of finding a way to make this possible.

**Trauma.** It would be short-sighted and unfair not to mention the ongoing impacts of trauma, especially as it affects the ability to learn. Nor should it be assumed that simply because a family has left a warzone that they are no longer experiencing trauma. In fact, the Center for Victims of Torture presents The Triple-Trauma Paradigm, in which they describe the three areas of stress—pre-flight, flight, and post-flight—that are part of the refugee experience (Healing the

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Hurt, 2005). Pre-flight, families live with the danger of war and other societal breakdowns. They may experience threats, torture, death of family members or friends, arrests, and other forms of violence. Studies are disrupted and life goals must, at the very least, be out on hold. During the flight phase, families make the difficult decision to leave their home. They may face long waits in refugee camps, or may need to separate from other family members. Violence, hunger, and uncertainty about the future are all part of flight. Many of the Somali students coming to schools today have spent their whole life in flight mode, being born in refugee camps. Once a family has been relocated, they enter into the post-flight phase, which includes a new set of traumas. Unemployment, lack of adequate housing, discrimination, loss of identity and physical or emotional separation from family members are all part of life post-flight (Garcia-Peltoneimi, Tschida & Ziemer, 2005).

Living with this sort of prolonged strain leads to physical, mental, and emotional consequences. Those who have lived with or are currently experiencing trauma may find it difficult to concentrate or participate in class (McDonald, 2000). They may lack self-esteem or struggle with feelings of guilt. Within a language class, progress is most often monitored by oral or written output. However, students recovering from trauma may lack the confidence necessary to present what they know and the ability to focus enough to participate in class (McDonald, 2000). Often, survivors of trauma are unable trust for fear that they will be hurt or humiliated (McDonald, 2000). Students with a refugee background may test teachers to see whether the teacher will give up on them, or will be a positive, caring resource (Abraham & Slayhi, 2018).

This trauma, especially when paired with the need to master the art of “schooling,” the English language, and to catch up on missed content, can create dramatic cognitive overload (Woods, 2009; Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002). All of this leads, quite naturally, to instances of

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disorganization, frustration, forgetfulness or off-task behavior. Alitolppa-Niitamo describes a group of students who had a class in Somali once a week. While students often forgot materials or displayed disruptive behavior in their other classes, these Somali classes were peaceful and soothing (2002). Removing cultural dissonance goes a long way. In these classes, students were able to learn in styles that made sense to them without the added stress of a new language and a new school system. This study demonstrates that the problems these Somali students were having in school were not inherent in them, but rather were the result of the shift in circumstances and ways in which the new school responded to them.

### **The Need for Increased Communication between Somali Families and Schools**

The first step in bridging Watson's abyss, or decreasing cultural dissonance for students from oral cultures, is to begin to understand their funds of knowledge, values, and systems of learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; DeCapua, 2016; Gunderson, 2000; Farid & McMahan, 2004). Akinnaso suggests that the best way to do this is to "fund research that will be directed toward ascertaining the learner's career aspirations and orientations, as well as community goals and values" (1981, p. 183). Educators must hear directly from families. Without hearing directly from these families, they have only one side of the story and rely on assumptions. They may be left only with a deficit understanding of their students.

Several studies have found that when Somali students struggle in school, the reason is often given that families just do not value education (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shapiro & MacDonald 2017), and yet Farid & McMahan (2004) state that to Somali families, "education is considered invaluable." Religious education is a means of improving life and providing access for others to reach heaven is valued highly. Secular education is seen as a privilege because it is so limited in Somalia. Farid and McMahan describe Somali parents as wanting very much to be involved in

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their children's education, but being hindered by the language barrier and simply by not knowing how best to help (2004). Only through learning about Somali families would educators be able to correct this false belief that Somali families do not value education, and only through relationships can schools find ways for parents to become involved in their children's education, as they wish to be.

While well-meaning, teachers of SLIFE and other students from oral cultures often report a need for more resources or time in professional development (Woods, 2009; Montero, Newmaster, & Ledger, 2014; Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002). Roxas and Roy (2011) explain that when teachers are given little information about refugees or the backgrounds of their specific students, they are left only with deficit-oriented perceptions of their students with no other stories to combat these ideas. Shapiro and MacDonald argue that the best way to establish an asset understanding of a group of people and do away with deficit discourse is to hear the story of these people. In many studies, teachers, and ESL teachers in particular, expressed the importance of hearing directly from families and a desire to create relationships with these families (Brubacher, 2013; Woods, 2009). Limitations in time and the language barrier can keep these conversations from happening.

In their study Roy and Roxas (2011) interviewed teachers and Somali families at the same schools. They discussed problems that had been happening in the school with both parties and found enormous disconnects in communication. In one instance, teachers became frustrated because their Somali students were not finishing their homework or making progress in their classes. The teachers attributed this to a lack of motivation and support from home. When researchers spoke to the parents of these students, they heard a much different story. Parents talked about the time they spent working on homework with their children and how much they



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wanted their children to earn high grades in school. Although sometimes difficult to facilitate, a conversation between these two groups could have helped teachers to acknowledge the deeper issues at stake. Likely, the challenge in this situation had to do with cultural dissonance. Many high school assignments are abstract, and yet oral students do best with tasks that are concrete and immediately relevant to life (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; DeCapua, 2016). It was also likely an issue with expectations. Gunderson warns that many students from oral cultures “are at risk for failure due to the vast differences between their expectations and the realities of how and what they are being taught” (2000). Students from oral cultures come with their own ways of knowing and learning, and Western teachers need to start acknowledging these differences and adjusting their teaching styles accordingly (Watson, 2010).

In their projects involving funds of knowledge, Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2012) equip teachers to become researchers into their students’ lives. They encourage teachers to make home visits in order to learn what knowledge, skills, and networks families utilize for their own well-being, and so to find out what kind of education the student has been receiving from their community. Following these visits, teachers are then able to create lessons that draw upon these funds. This method eliminates deficit discourse because it focuses on and utilizes families’ resources. This method also brings learning back to a student’s community by involving community members and real life projects that a student may be involved in. Meeting personally with families to learn about funds of knowledge is one step to bridging the many differences between students from oral cultures and the U.S. school system. It is one step toward creating a learning community in which these students may use, celebrate, and build on the knowledge and experiences of their communities.

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### **Research Question**

This study addresses the following questions: What funds of knowledge do newcomer students from oral cultures, specifically Somali students, possess? How does this knowledge relate to orality and literacy? I hope to start educators on the path to decreasing cultural dissonance and successfully teaching Somali students through interviews directly with Somali families. By understanding the skills, knowledge, and learning styles that these students bring, educators can start to create more effective teaching methods. The history of Somali refugees is tragic; yet, this group of people brings unique assets yet to be fully recognized. Few studies like this have been conducted, and most have not been with newcomer families. Over the past year, much has changed for all refugees in the US, including Somalis. My research will address refugee perceptions and situations in this new era of hostility toward refugees, different from the previous research that has been conducted.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed the background of Somali students in Minnesota, along with the effects of civil war, Somali family structure, Somali language, and Somali schools. I have also described three main differences in ways of learning between oral cultures and literate cultures: oral vs. literate, concrete vs. abstract, and collective vs. individual. I have reviewed the specific needs of students from oral cultures and have presented the need for increased communication between Somali families and schools. In chapter 3, I will describe the methods that will be used in my research.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This study addresses the following questions: What funds of knowledge do newcomer students from oral cultures, specifically Somali students, possess? How does this knowledge relate to orality and literacy? This information will help educators form relationships with these families and more successfully teach students from oral cultures. In an effort to investigate and address their funds of knowledge, I have interviewed three Somali newcomer families and one Somali outreach worker. I used two tools in designing my interviews: methods of researching funds of knowledge developed by Moll et al. (1992) and DeCapua and Marshall's (2011; DeCapua, 2016) framework of the three major differences in worldview that students from oral cultures often present, namely, orality vs literacy, concrete vs. abstract, and collective vs. individual. To effectively teach students from oral cultures, teachers need acknowledge that these students carry funds of knowledge which utilize ways of learning and managing information that may be different from their Western counterparts (Gunderson, 2000; Marshall & DeCapua, 2013; Watson, 2010). Through this study, I have explored these funds of knowledge and their relationship to a worldview specific to oral cultures.

### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter describes the methods used in this study. I will begin by describing the qualitative approach I will use and the framework around which I will organize my interviews. Then, I will describe the details of the data collection techniques and will present each group of participants. Following this is a description of the procedure for analyzing data and the data analysis itself. Finally, I will explain the methods used to verify the data and the ways in which this project adheres to ethical treatment of subjects.

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### **Qualitative Research Paradigm and Funds of Knowledge Framework**

Mackey and Gass (2016) define qualitative research as “research that is based on descriptive data that does not make (regular) use of statistical procedure” (p. 216). Qualitative research can take many forms, but it is characterized by rich descriptions of subjects who are observed in natural settings (Mackey & Gass, 2016). Moll et al. (1992) explain that qualitative research is most appropriate for exploring funds of knowledge because the skills, strengths, strategies, and wisdom of a household are so complex and nuanced. This form of research allows numerous different methods of acquiring information “that, when combined analytically, can portray accurately the complex functions of households within their socio-historical contexts” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). In my research, I have utilized open-ended interviews.

In their work, Moll et al. (1992) explore four different approaches to their students’ funds of knowledge: 1. sociopolitical and economic context; 2. history and formation of the household; 3. work history of the household; 4. ways in which the household uses their funds of knowledge to respond to “changing, and often difficult, social and economic circumstances” (p. 133). In my own research, I have explored these areas through family interviews as a way of learning how Somali families relate to DeCapua and Marshall’s three points of worldview (2011; DeCapua, 2016).

In chapters one and two, I have already touched on the broader sociopolitical and historical context of Somali refugees in Minnesota. This background gives insight into the historical relationship between orality and literacy for the Somali people. In my interviews, I addressed the second approach, history of the household, which gives general background into the family, experience with formal schooling and literacy, and insights into family networks and connections as part of a collective vs. individual society. The third approach, history of labor,

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involves the skills and knowledge often passed on to the youth of a community. I am specifically interested in the means by which this knowledge is passed down, whether it is through concrete demonstrations or through abstract forms such as written text. The last approach presented by Moll et al. (1992) involves the ways that families use their resources to respond when their situations change. Somali families who have recently moved to the United States are in the midst of major changes, starting a new life in an individual rather than a collective society and navigating new identities. This change of entering the U.S. also includes entry into the U.S. school system and introduction to literacy and the world of abstract thinking, perhaps for the first time. Through these four approaches, I have gained insight into these families' relationships with orality vs. literacy, abstract vs. concrete thinking, and collective vs. individual society (DeCapua, 2016; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).

**Interviews.** Data was collected through four semi-structured interviews as described by Mackey and Gass (2016). Three interviews were with newcomer Somali families, specifically three mothers of my students, and one interview was with the Somali outreach worker in my school district. I created a set of interview questions based on the funds of knowledge structure, described above, and used these questions as a guide for each interview. Because it was not possible to know how these conversations would proceed or what information would come up, I allowed what Mackey and Gass describe as “freedom to digress and probe for more information.” Moll et al. (1992) explain that at times during their family interviews, it was important to stray from the questionnaire in order to probe more deeply into a topic. By doing this, they were able to gain deeper insight into their participants. I took this same approach. Because I was working with a translator, I carefully crafted a set of interview questions, then added a list of possible follow-up questions. I gave all of these questions to my school's Somali

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outreach worker, who helped to form the questions and make sure that they were well stated and culturally appropriate. She also wrote a Somali translation of all questions.

### **Data Collection**

**Participants.** Participants in this study represent two categories: Somali families with children who have lived in the US for less than two years, and the Somali family outreach worker at my school district. I interviewed the mother of each family because this is the person with whom the school has the most contact and, in each case, I had a previous relationship with her. I have given each a pseudonym. Approval for human subject research was granted by the school district and by the Institutional Review Board at Hamline University in February, 2018. Documents for the Human Subjects Protocol are found in the Appendices D, E, and F.

**Faduma.** Faduma arrived in the U.S. with her children in the fall of 2016. Since they arrived, I have worked closely with these children to help them adjust to school and continue in their English language development. While she was born in Somalia, Faduma had spent many years living at a refugee camp in Kenya before moving to the United States. She attended a little school and a little duksi (Qur'anic school) in Somalia, but she wasn't interested in it and so she says, "I used to run away." She got married young and then needed to look after her family. Before coming to the U.S., her children did not attend school or duksi. Faduma's interview was conducted through the use of an interpreter.

**Hodan.** Hodan arrived in the U.S. in 2008, but her oldest daughter was not able to join her until 2016. This daughter became one of my students. Hodan's family lives in the two biggest cities in Somalia: Mogadishu and Hargeisa. She left Mogadishu because of the war when she was a teenager and spent six years in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. Then Hodan sent her two-year-old daughter back to Somalia to live with mother and moved to the U.S. Eight years later, this

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daughter joined her. Hodan attended some school in Somalia, but, as she told me, she didn't get far because, like Faduma, she used to run away and no one forced her to go to school. After leaving school, she helped her mother with the household and with the younger children. In Somalia, her family made money by selling dates and lanterns. Hodan's interview was conducted through the use of an interpreter.

***Jamilah.*** Jamilah arrived in the U.S. in 2013, and her oldest daughter joined her in fall of 2017. This daughter was one of my students. Jamilah attended both duksi and secular school in Somalia until grade nine. After leaving Somalia, she lived in refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda for eight years before leaving her oldest daughter with her family in Somalia and moving to the U.S. Jamilah's father runs a furniture business in a Somali city. It was a high priority for her parents that she and her siblings go to school. Jamilah's interview was conducted in English without an interpreter present.

***Outreach Worker: Khadija.*** Khadija was born in Somalia, then moved to Ethiopia before her family moved to the U.S. when she was five years old. Khadija's brothers, who were living in California at the time, sponsored Khadija, her siblings, and her mother to come as immigrants. Khadija began attending duksi in Somalia but did not start school until coming to the U.S. where she finished high school and some college. Now Khadija has two school aged children, both of whom are enrolled public schools. She has worked for my school district as an outreach worker for the past two years. She regularly interprets for teachers and Somali families in my school during conferences as well as phone calls. She is a cultural liaison and I and my colleagues regularly consult her for support in working with Somali students and families.

**Location.** Each of the participants has children who attended the elementary school where I teach in a first-ring suburb of a Midwestern city, although children from two of the

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families no longer attend this school. The school includes grades K-5 and is 24 percent English Language Learners. Of the four elementary schools in the district, this school has been designated the newcomer academy with the goal to service all newly arrived English Learners (ELs) in the district. Generally, interviews concerning funds of knowledge are conducted in participants' homes and I was able to follow this procedure in three of the four interviews. Prior to my research, I learned that a home visit could seem like an invasion of privacy for some families (F. Aided, personal communication, November 22, 2017). Because of this, I worked closely with Khadija to communicate sensitively with families so that they would not feel threatened by having us visit their homes, but also free to say so if they did. The interviews with the outreach worker as well as two of the newcomer family interviews took place in their homes, while one family interview took place at the library.

**Pre-Interview Home Visit.** Prior to the official funds of knowledge interview, I conducted informal visits with the families. The goal of these visits was to establish trust, to get to know one another, and to clarify any question regarding the research project. Consent forms were also signed at this time. This preliminary visit did not contain any recordings or pre-determined questions. Because I have a previous relationship with Khadija and because she is familiar with my study, I did not conduct a pre-interview visit to her home.

I visited both Jamilah and Hodan at their homes for preliminary meetings. Scheduling meeting times was one of the greatest challenges of this study because I had to not only find a time that would work for both myself and the families, but also find a time when Khadija could secure child care and join us when translation was required. Because of this, Khadija accompanied me to the pre-interview meeting with Faduma, but not with Jamilah or with Hodan. Jamilah does speak English and opted out of having a Somali interpreter present during the



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interview, and so translation was not needed for visits to her home. Hodan is a progressing English learner and, for the purposes of this informal meeting, we were able to communicate. In both cases, Khadija was available by phone if the need would have come up. I spent about an hour at each families' home, getting to know the family members. During this time, I presented the consent forms to the families. We discussed the English and the Somali versions of this document side by side, I answered any questions, and the interviewees signed the forms. They were given the option to talk with Khadija for further explanation or translation regarding the study.

The pre-interview meeting with Faduma took place at the local library with Khadija present. During this meeting, Faduma explained to us that it was very difficult for her to find time to meet and she would not be able to meet again. Because of this, I did not conduct both a pre-interview and an interview meeting with Faduma. She signed the consent form, and then we moved directly into the interview questions.

**Data collection technique 1: Family interviews.** The families that I approached to participate in this study have been attending my school for the past year and a half. During this time, I have worked closely with the students and have spoken numerous times with the parents, both in person and over the phone. When Moll et al. (1992) conducted interviews with families, they found that the teacher in their team was welcomed into homes in a spirit of trust because of her position and relationship with the family. I found that my position earned me similar trust with each family and, because I am their children's teacher, each mother expressed a desire to help me as well as she could. Before the interviews, I carefully crafted the interview questions and met three times with my school's Somali outreach worker, here called Khadija, to receive her recommendations on how best to frame the questions so as to glean the information I seek. These

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meetings were invaluable to me in helping me clarify my own research motives and also helping me to formulate affective questions. Khadija also translated all interview questions and consent forms into Somali.

The consent process was important in establishing trust and outlining the project. I have learned from this colleague and from other researchers that Somali families can be hesitant to participate in research projects, sometimes feeling that researchers are probing into their personal business. The consent process described the nature of my research as learning about Somali families to help educators know them better and honor all that they bring. It was important for families to understand that this research is not connected to the school in any way and contains no identifying information. Because of Khadija's help in translating the consent forms into Somali and in explaining this research orally, families felt comfortable sharing information, knowing they would not be identified.

All interviews lasted between one to two hours. Aside from presenting consensual information, Khadija accompanied me to interviews with Faduma and Hodan. Jamilah opted not to have a translator present, but instead to conduct the full interview in English. Interview questions were carefully prepared under her guidance so as to be culturally sensitive while still providing the information I seek. These interviews were delicate situations because, as Mackey and Gass note, open-ended interviews can be difficult to conduct because participants must feel comfortable enough to express themselves freely (2016). It is common for Somali families to be hesitant to share private information, particularly with someone who is not Somali (F. Aided, personal communication, November 22, 2017). Because of this, I asked questions about Somali families in general and followed these by asking about the participant's family in particular. For example, I first asked "How do people in Somalia make a living?" and then "How does your

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family make a living?" Through this method, participants were free to speak about their own experiences if they wished, without feeling that I was encroaching on their privacy. One participant did ask whether I was looking for information about her personal life—her family specifically—or whether I wanted to know about Somali families in general. Through the structure of my interview, she was able to comfortably share about life for Somali families without feeling that I was prying into her personal life.

There was a risk of the halo-effect because families will be telling me, a teacher, about their perceptions of school. It is possible that they will alter their responses to what they think I want to hear, or that they will fear that honest responses negatively affect their children's school experiences. I believe that the strategy of asking participants to speak about Somali families in general as well as their own families in particular mitigated this effect. I also countered this effect by conferring with the Somali outreach worker and by asking a wide range of questions around similar topics. It helped to have Khadija present at two of the interviews because these families are familiar with Khadija and have a positive relationship with her. When I told them that she would be accompanying me to the interviews, both families were excited to have her. Khadija's presence was an asset in building trust with these families. Also, because I have worked closely with this colleague, she is familiar with my study, and she was interviewed herself, she could accurately explain my work and my questions to each family. With each families' consent, all interviews were recorded on my iPhone, with my laptop as a backup recording device. I carefully went over the questions with my colleague to be sure they are well-worded so as to elicit honest and open responses.

**Data collection technique 2: Somali outreach worker interview.** My school district's Somali outreach worker, here called Khadija, was born in Somalia, but has lived in the United

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States for many years. As someone who made the transition from orality to literacy through the U.S. school system, and now works for this system, Khadija presents a unique perspective. She is years removed from the newcomer experience that the Somali families are currently undergoing. She also works closely with all of the Somali families in our district, through all grade levels. Conversations with her give another point of reference from someone who has lived through her own transition into U.S. schools and has worked with many families undergoing the same.

I met with Khadija three times previous to our interview to discuss my project and to determine the best ways to form the questions and to approach each family. For the formal interview, we met at Khadija's home. I asked her the same questions directed to the families, along with several others concerning her experience working with both schools in connection with the families. Because I have a prior personal relationship with her, I was able to ask Khadija more personal questions about her family history and her perspective on the experience of Somali students in the U.S. school system. Similar to the family interviews, I recorded my interview with Khadija using both my iPhone.

### **Procedure of Data Analysis**

My study is qualitative, utilizing open-minded reflection and open-ended questions relayed through narrative. Following the interview visits, all interviews were transcribed in English and coded. Live translation during the interviews made this English transcription possible. My coding methodology follows that described by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). First I reviewed the transcripts for any text relevant to my research concerns—in this case, any text that relates to DeCapua and Marshall's framework. Then I compared specific portions of the relevant text to find repeated ideas among the three family interviews and the interview with the outreach worker. I further analyzed the repeated ideas to find themes. The themes I identified

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were school, duksi, family/identity, background information, poetry and other skills, and use of literacy. I created a separate word document for each of these themes. I read through the relevant text from each interview and copied and pasted pertinent information into each theme document. I also used a spreadsheet to record summaries of each participant's response to key interview questions so that I could easily compare and contrast across the interviews.

After establishing themes, I began making connections between what my clients have said and the research frameworks I have created by drawing connections between the themes and my research. This is what Auerbach and Silverstein call “theoretical constructs.” At this point, I printed out all interview transcripts and re-read each of them and hand marking sections that are especially relevant to my research questions. In a notebook, I outlined areas of funds of knowledge and made connections between these funds of knowledge and characteristics associated with oral cultures, namely oral vs. print dependency, concrete vs. abstract ways of thinking, and collective vs. individual social connections (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). From these theoretical constructs, I have developed a “theoretical narrative”—a retelling of what my participants have said (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

### **Verification of Data**

I have employed several strategies to verify this research. I have interviewed members of three different Somali newcomer families and one Somali school staff member. These different points of data collection lend credibility to the study as the information received from each participant were compared and contrasted. The families spoke to their own experiences and perceptions, while the Somali outreach worker served as a “culture broker” (Jezewski, 1990), someone who is familiar with both the Somali culture and with Western culture, and so is able to mitigate communication breakdowns and speak to both sides (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

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Mackey and Gass state that one way to verify qualitative research is to make sure that the research population finds the data credible (2016). I discussed my research findings with the outreach worker, who also translated the family interviews. Together, we reflected on the data. As someone who is both Somali and an educator in the U.S. school system, she helped me to draw out conclusions that accurately reflect the Somali community and the information shared by the research participants. I have also performed an extensive literature review, taking into account the context of the Somali people and research into oral cultures, as well as specific insights and methods for teaching students from oral cultures in U.S. schools. Data received through interviews was analyzed in light of this literature.

### **Ethics**

In order to protect client rights, I have gathered written permissions from all subjects. I also provided a full description of the project, privacy methods, and audience of this research to the families involved, in both Somali and in English. All participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study in both English and in Somali. It is important to ensure anonymity, and as such I have concealed all identifying details of my clients. Finally, all identifying information was destroyed following the study.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have described the qualitative nature of this study, as well as the framework which informs the interviews. I have described the way in which I used the four approaches to funds of knowledge from Moll et al. (1992) to explore the three worldviews that DeCapua and Marshall (2011; DeCapua 2016) present. I presented the participants of this study and the methods that I use in interviewing Somali families and a Somali outreach worker. I also discussed the ways that I analyzed the data, the means of data verification, and the precautions

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taken to ensure ethical treatment of all subjects. In the next chapter, I will describe the results of this study.

## **Chapter Four: The Results**

### **Introduction**

This study answers the following questions: What funds of knowledge do newcomer students from oral cultures, specifically Somali students, possess? How does this knowledge relate to orality and literacy? This information will help educators form relationships with these families and more successfully teach students from oral cultures. In an effort to investigate and address their funds of knowledge, I have conducted interviews with three Somali families and a Somali outreach worker. The methods I used in conducting each interview, along with the procedures used to analyze the data, can be found within chapter three. I found the data collected to be consistent with the work of DeCapua and Marshall (2011), indicating a preference for orality over literacy, concrete over abstract thinking, and communalism over individualism.

### **Overview of the Chapter**

Funds of knowledge are described as the “bodies of knowledge and skills that are essential for the well-being of an entire household” (Esteban-Guitar & Moll, 2014, p. 31), and may include the ways a family earns money, skills that have been passed down through family members, strategies for survival, and knowledge gleaned through a social network (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992; Moll et al., 1992; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2012). As I analyzed each interview, four categories of funds of knowledge came to light: ability to mentally process detailed information, poetry as an oral art, caring for a household through familial roles, and caring for others through fostering relationships. Each is deeply connected to oral culture. The knowledge cannot be separated from the oral, concrete, and communal, worldview DeCapua and Marshall (2011) describe as part of oral cultures. In the sections that follow, I will describe both each fund of knowledge and how it relates to orality and literacy.



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### **Fund of Knowledge: Ability to Process Detailed Information Mentally**

"[My mom] never - she remembers everything. She never forgets. She does math in her head. She's a calculator!" (Interview, March 25, 2018)

Ong (1982) describes the importance of memory within oral cultures as well as the intricate art required to “think memorable thoughts” (p. 34). When I talked with my participants, it became clear that the ability to recall information in unique ways is a valuable skill that adds to the well-being of their households. It is a fund of knowledge. Evidence for this came out in the ways that they rely on memory over writing in daily life and in the legacy of memorizing the Qur'an.

I asked each participant about specific uses of writing in everyday life. Do you keep a calendar? Do you write down shopping lists? What about directions? Do you read recipes? The answers to these questions revealed an ability to recall information. None of the participants reads recipes. All of them said that they just remember. "When I do one time or two times. I get it. I record," Jamilah told me. When it came to shopping lists, only Jamilah writes hers down. The others just remember. The use of calendars demonstrates a shift away from relying strictly on mental processing and toward reliance on text. Both Khadija and Jamilah use calendars on their phones. Hodan does not keep a calendar, though she admitted that she doesn't always remember her appointments. She knows the doctor's office will call her to remind her. Khadija, the outreach worker, commented on Somali usage of writing in general. When I asked if her mother uses a calendar, this is what she said:

Khadija: She does not write anything on a calendar. That's the thing with my Somali people, like, we do not write or plan...I don't know. It's—I don't know why. And that's every Somali family. (laughing) No. We—she doesn't use it at all.

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Researcher: So if, like, what does she do instead?

Khadija: To remember?

Researcher: Yeah.

Khadija: She'll remember in her head. Like she'll—she never, I never saw her write.

She'll tell me. I never see her write anything. She will just remember it.

This ability to "just remember" also came up when talking about Hodan's mother. When Hodan lived in Somalia, her family had a business selling dates and lanterns. Her mother cannot read or write, though her father can write in Arabic. But her mother did not need literacy.

"Everything's in her mind," Hodan told me. "She remembers everything. She never forgets. She does math in her head. She's a calculator!" I asked Hodan if she thinks that is how a lot of Somali people are – able to do everything in their heads. "Yeah. Most of them."

Beyond the use of memory for everyday tasks, participants also talked about the special task of memorizing the Qur'an. In duksi, students memorize the Qur'an by copying down words or phrases, then reciting them to a teacher (Interview, February 25, 2018). This task is made more difficult by the fact that it is all done in Arabic. Khadija told me that her husband has completed the entire Qur'an three times. "He can memorize it, he knows, he can read it," she said (Interview, February 25, 2018). This remarkable ability to memorize long, complicated passages is a fund of knowledge that most members of literate cultures have lost.

**Relationship between memory and literacy.** All of the women reported the ability to easily remember items in their everyday life, and it could be easy to assume that they have to memorize because they are not able to write. After all, most people from literate cultures depend largely on writing as a substitution for memory. But Khadija graduated from high school and some college. She reads and writes in English and in Somali. She could certainly write if she

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wanted to, but, while she acknowledges the utility of writing when it comes to things like shopping lists, she does not see writing as an assistant to memory in all cases. I asked her how she would want to learn something new and this is what she said:

Khadija: Whatever we're talking about, I remember, and I will remember it tomorrow, and I will remember it the next day, so. By showing me, and telling me, and you know. That way. I rem—I can—it's easier for me. But let's say, you say—you give me all this information, and I write it down. I'm not gonna remember it to—I'm not gonna keep this paper with me. I'll just leave it somewhere. (Interview, February 25, 2018)

Ong describes this ability to memorize without writing down information as “thinking in mnemonic patterns” (1982, p. 34). This kind of recall is not an act of rote memorization, as a literate person would memorize text word for word, but rather an ability to mentally organize, categorize, and form information into memorable patterns and structures (Ong, 1982). Formulating thoughts into such patterns is itself, a deeply communal process. While reading and writing can occur in isolation, you can only talk to yourself for so long. Processing and recalling ideas orally requires communication with others (Ong, 1982). This way of processing information gives rise to oral art forms, including poetry and storytelling, which is stored by a community of people without the need to constantly access a text. But this beneficial fund of knowledge poses a cultural disconnect. It is deeply rooted in relationships and in the immediate context of the situation. Recalling information and then repeating it when it is needed is an immediately relevant task (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). By contrast, in Western schools students are expected to read and write independently as a means for both learning and conveying information, often removed from context. This is a switch into literacy, abstraction, and individualism (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).

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Both Hodan and Khadija mentioned a decrease in their ability to remember details after moving to the U.S. Hodan blames stress for this. "No stress in Somalia," she said, "so we remember. America is just...stressful!" (Interview, March 25, 2018). Khadija and her children have attended *duksi* in the U.S, and she says that it is more difficult to memorize the Qur'an here than in Somalia (Interview, February 25, 2018). Here, it is important to consider the vast amount of information bombarding people in a literate context. In an oral society, the only information being shared comes from another person's mouth in immediate communication, or through the sound of a recording (J. Watson, personal communication, April 27, 2018). In a literate context, the amount of information people are expected to process and remember can be staggering. The weight of stress, information overload and trauma impacts memory (McDonald, 2000). While Jamilah did not talk about a shift in the use of memory, she relies more on writing for everyday tasks than the other women do. This type of oral processing through community is not a part of life for most people from literate cultures, and there is evidence that, within the context of a literate culture, it is slowly diminishing for Somali people as well.

### **Fund of Knowledge: Poetry as an Oral Art**

Somali families have access to a rich oral cannon, including songs, poems, proverbs, and stories (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999). Each of the research participants spoke at length about the tradition of poetry and the wide variety of contexts in which it is used. While my interviews brought up any skills and talents inherent in orality, none so clearly represents what Akinnaso calls the "art of oral narration" as this strong tradition of poetry (1981). When I asked about why Somali people, in particular, use poetry while people in other places do not, Hodan's response was simple: "It's the tradition. It's about your culture and we love it" (Interview. March 25, 2018).

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I tried to pinpoint the exact uses of poetry. Is it a way to remember history? To remember people from the past? But over and over again, participants told me that it can be used for anything and everything, from weather and war to peace and politics. The most common responses were that poetry is about love—used both in weddings and during the marriage proposal process—and about peace. But these women also explained that it can be used for fighting, or to warn that there is a fight coming, or to describe the beauty of the land, or significant events in weather, and, yes, as I had suspected, as a way to remember historical events and history. Much poetry is currently about the war in Somalia and the undying hope for peace. The usage seems so ubiquitous, so much a part of life, that I began to wonder whether the Somali people even notice when poetry is happening. If Ong is correct, and in oral cultures people “think memorable thoughts” by organizing them into mnemonic, and often poetic, patterns, then it seems it would be almost impossible to avoid poetry (Ong, 1982, p. 34).

**How poetry is passed on.** Since poetry is such a large part of life, how do people learn it? Is it taught in schools? According to Khadija, poetry is oral and communal, practiced by family and friends who come together and teach each other. “They learn it from their great grandparents or their grandparents, or their fathers, and their mothers. So. Generation to generation passed on” (Interview. February 25, 2018). In this way, poems are deeply connected to the specific people who created them or who were known to recite them. Khadija reported hearing family members say things like “Oh, well your dad used to sing this, and your brothers knew this, or they would say this” (Interview, February 25, 2018). Poetry becomes a connecting point for families and a way to keep heritage and history alive.

When I asked the women whether they knew poems that their parents or grandparents had taught them, they all said they did not, although Jamilah recited a poem about mothers that

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she had learned in school (Interview, March 9, 2018). Hodan's mom and dad know poems, but she doesn't know that much (Interview, March 25, 2018). While Khadija did not know any poems from her family, she did say she knows songs from her tribe. Each tribe has songs and specific dances that go with those songs (Interview, February 25, 2018). Jamilah also described poetry performances in which poets would work on pieces, write them and perfect them for a show. Although these women said that they do not possess the talent for poetry themselves and did not know many poems, three out of the four interviewed either referred me to a current Somali poet or pulled out their phones to show me a video of Somali poetry on Youtube. Just as Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar (1999) describe, this is a tradition of rich songs and poems, passed along, refined, and created within the community.

There was some discrepancy among participants regarding the way in which poetry is composed and recorded. Khadija and Jamilah explained that sometimes poets memorize their poems ahead of time, and sometimes they compose spontaneously. This as a particular talent, which depends on the situation (Interview, February 25, 2018; March 9, 2018). But Faduma was adamant that when poetry is composed, it must first be written down (Interview, February 24, 2018). Khadija also explained the process of thinking, writing, and then reading the poems (Interview, February 25, 2018). When poetry is shared, however, or passed down from generation to generation, Khadija explained that it is passed orally. There are no written papers that would contain the poems (Interview, February 25, 2018). Whether writing is used in the composition or not, poetry is a rich piece of Somali oral culture, which celebrates both memory and community (Kahin, 1997; Bigelow, 2010; Ahmed, n.d.).

**Change in the usage of poetry.** When I asked the women whether they or their family create poetry, they all said, "No, we don't have that talent." Jamilah explained it this way:

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I don't think everybody knows how to do the poetry. It's just, it's a gift from God, you know. So. But when they grow up in the village, mostly they have that talent—that talents. Saying the poetry, or doing the... those, you know, words. Looks like the poetry, but most of the people, they don't have a...that talent.

Each woman did say that she does, or used to, write poetry, but when asked what they teach their children, none of them mentioned poetry. Faduma specifically said that she does not teach her children poetry. She would rather teach them the Qur'an because it's more important (Interview, February 24, 2018). Jamilah explained how older people would talk to each other using poetry and proverbs, but younger people, under 40, are simply not that interested in it (Interview, March 9, 2018).

Jamilah spoke about the beauty and complexity of poetry, how it can present nuances of meaning and touch on many different areas to convey deeper meaning. She so also lamented the decline in its usage:

But the elder people, I think they know better much than this people right now. Even this younger. They no that interesting even the language. You know the language has so many, um, what do you, meanings. There's a word that has so many meanings, so. It's getting lost, those, you know. (Interview, March 9, 2018)

Ahmed (n.d., p. 1) states that Somali oral tradition “extols the virtues of memory,” and relies on “the existence of a pool of memorizers” and “a consistent repetition of the ‘word’ for its survival.” Jamilah believes that the survival of the ‘word’ is in jeopardy.

If my small group of interviewees is any indication, the pool of those who memorize poetry is shrinking and will shrink even more in the next generation. Perhaps this is due to increase in technology or a decline in language usage within the diaspora, but there does seem to

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be a connection between a decline in poetry and the presence of schools. Jamilah told me that in villages, there are no schools—sometimes not even duksis. But she also said that in the village, most people have that rare gift from God: the talent of poetry. It would seem that something about these places, which are least influenced by literacy, enables poetry to thrive. Bigelow (2010), Ong (1982), Akinnaso (1981) and Watson (2010) all warn that literacy brings about the death of orality and Jamilah sees it happening in the decreased use of poetry.

### **Fund of Knowledge: Caring for the Household through Familial Roles**

The girls...we teach them at a young age, like at age six, to clean and cook and to do everything in the household, housework. (Interview, February 25, 2018)

Women stay home and then men go out and try to buy things. Or go out and look for jobs. (Interview, February 24, 2018)

When participants talked about the types of knowledge that are most important to them and the sorts of things that they want to teach their children, they did not talk about school subjects like math or science. They talked about their role within the family and the skills required for them to fulfill that role. The well-being of a Somali household relies on relationships and dependence upon the community, made possible through family roles (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Women, my participants said, are expected to care for their households by cooking and cleaning, while men are tasked with providing financially for the family by getting jobs, selling things, or managing livestock (Interview, February 25, 2018; Interview, March 9, 2018).

Every participant stated that for women, the most important thing to learn is how to cook, clean, and take care of the family. This kind of knowledge is passed along through what Ong describes as apprenticeship (1982) and is immediately useful for the community. These skills are oral, concrete, and communal (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). When asked what her parents or



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grandparents taught her, Jamilah replied “They taught me, like, how every girl learn from her mom to cook,” and further described learning to care for children, milk cows, and watch over goats (Interview, March 9, 2018). Faduma explained how girls are taught these skills:

The girls...we teach them at a young age, like at age six, to clean and cook and to do everything in the household, housework. And what we do is we will see an older girl in America here who can't cook or clean, and that's kind of a shame.... Girls are taught to be stronger and more responsible back home. (Interview, February 24, 2018)

The ability to care for a household is more highly valued than a formal education or the ability to read and write. Both Faduma and Hodan attended school for a time, but dropped out to care for their households.

The role of men is different from the role of women. It is one of provider. When her mother first moved to the United States, she had no job and no financial resources, but Khadija's brothers cared for her. “They have to,” Khadija told me. “Since she has—it's really important to take care of a mother—a widow mother” (Interview, February 25, 2018). All teachers in duksi and in secular schools are male and within the family, the man's role would traditionally be to manage discipline. Khadija described the relationship between her husband and her children, and also the relationship between her father and her siblings.

Like, you know, my husband will be very, like - too strict on the children. Like “No!” (slaps hands) ...and they never ever ever say anything. But when it's me, “But why me? Why this? Why?” You know? “Why not?” Always talking back to me, and not listening, and.... Because they can say what they want to say, and we are more like, with the dad it's just, you know, my—I remember growing up, like, my dad? Everybody was afraid of him. (Interview, February 25, 2018)

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Everyone is supposed to have a role, but just as Farid and McMahan (2004) indicate, the war has upended this system. Parenting roles are particularly affected because so many men have been lost to the war, and women do not feel confident in taking over the duties a father would normally perform (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Khadija told me that it is a belief in Somali culture that women cannot raise boys by themselves (Interview, February 25, 2018). “What happens now?” I asked, since so many women are now single mothers and have no choice but to raise their sons. The answer comes back to the community at large and the consistency of these roles. Without a father in the home, women need to involve the community, especially other family or tribe members (Interview, February 25, 2018).

**Relationship between household care and literacy.** In Somalia, the most essential skills of cooking, cleaning, and caring for children are taught through apprenticeship, or demonstration. This is common practice in oral cultures (Ong, 1982; DeCapua, 2016). Jamilah was sent to the village to learn how to milk cows and care for livestock. Hodan and Khadija were left to care for their siblings with specific instructions of what to do. “They teach you, showing you first, and then they make all the stories, telling you the stories,” Jamilah said. These stories would not be in books, but instead would be oral stories about the experiences of other women or stories from the religion (Interview, March 9, 2018). Hodan did not learn through stories, but through demonstrations and through oral instruction. “We just talk,” she said (Interview, March 25, 2018). In all cases, instruction was oral, immediately relevant, and done to benefit the community (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Watson, 2017).

With the exception of Khadija, who completed high school and some college in the U.S., all of the women interviewed left school early. Both Faduma and Hodan explained that they went to school, but did not like it, so they left. “I used to run away,” said Faduma (Interview, February

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24, 2018). Both women said that their parents did want them to go to school, but when Faduma and Hodan left school, no one forced them to return (Interview, February 24, 2018; Interview, March 9, 2018; Interview, March 25, 2018). “Over there, there’s no force,” Hodan said. “If you don’t go [to school], they’re gonna be like ‘go ahead’” (Interview, March 25, 2018). Instead, Hodan helped her mom cook, clean, and take care of her younger siblings. Faduma got married young, and so had her own household to care for.

Khadija told me directly, “Women don’t have [formal] education back home,” and described the tie between this and economics.

There is education. It’s really, like, it’s not free. Neither. It’s—you have to pay for it. It’s expensive. So. That’s why it’s kind of—that’s why we women stay home and then men go out and try to buy things. Or go out and look for jobs. Cause we don’t have a free education system. (Interview, February 24, 2018)

Jamilah echoed this and also indicated that it is changing. “But in the town right now, they learn—they trying to send the girls. Most of the girls go to school. Right now. But if they can’t afford it, the girls stay home. They guy go” (Interview, March 9, 2018).

When asked how important it is for women to know how to read and write in Somalia, participants said that literacy is not essential. “I mean, it is important,” said Hodan, “but you can live without those education and schools” (Interview, March 25, 2018). “Everybody’s off...off to the life,” Jamilah said, “To provide for the family, so. They don’t have a time for the education” (Interview, March 9, 2018). Just as DeCapua and Marshall found, in this society where informal education is the main way to learn, “there is little use for reading or writing. Literacy skills are viewed as nonessential, even peripheral, to learning” (2011, p. 3). In Somalia, going to school gets in the way of making a living. In the U.S., the opposite is true. Formal education provides

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the best chance of survival (Stewart, 2011). What a major shift Somali students in Western schools must undergo. In Somalia, these women left school to contribute something concrete to their communities by helping with cooking and cleaning. In the U.S., their children are expected to stay in school, learning through written text, so that one day in the future they might do something that may not be at all connected to their community (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Watson, 2017).

The participants I interviewed did see a benefit to formal education in Somalia. With the ability to read and write, Jamilah and Hodan said, people can get better jobs and make more money. Jamilah also described the abstract benefits of learning to read and write. “Even they will not see this is the life. They will try to seek a better life and see the world, you know, but now they are closed. They see this is the best thing” (Interview, March 9, 2018). But in a country ravaged by war and constant political instability, education does not always have the payoff it should. If people do manage to pay the fees and to finish their education, they don’t get the jobs they deserve, Jamilah explained. So few jobs are available and employers often hire people they know. Which is, she said, why so many people have to leave.

For all of these reasons, the issue of formal education in Somalia is one of tension. Jamilah told me a story that demonstrates this complicated relationship. Her uncle, who lives in the village, arranged marriages for his daughters against their wills. Jamilah and her mother opposed the marriages, and so her mother brought these girls to the city to live with her. Jamilah’s family, in contrast to Hodan and Faduma’s families, has the means to cover school fees and her father “loves us to finish the...education.” Here, the value of formal education comes in conflict with the village lifestyle. This is what Jamilah’s mom told these women:

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“Come here, go to school. Try to, you know, educate yourself.” And they say, “Okay.”

When they stay like two month, three month, they go back. What can you do? It’s a grown woman. So. But in that village, the village, there’s no education. You grow up, you get married, like, you—generation to generation, no education. (Interview, March 9, 2018)

For these women, attending formal school was not natural or relevant, even if it could have provided a way out of an unwanted marriage. The transition from village life to life as a student in a city in Somalia proved too large a change for them to maintain, and so they returned to the village. For students who move to a different country and begin school for the first time while learning a new language, the change is, as Watson states, unimaginable (2010). And yet these students do not have the option of returning to their former lives.

This emphasis on informal education separate from literacy skills creates a different way of thinking, a way of thinking that focuses on immediately relevant, context-based tasks (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; Watson, 2017). In asking about Somalia, I asked my interviewees to tell out of context rather than doing what Akinnaso calls showing in context (1981). Sometimes this led to confusion about the questions, especially when I was envisioning an abstract answer. I asked Hodan to describe how life in the village is different from life in the city. She replied, simply, that the village is like a farm and smaller than the city. When I pressed further, she said, “Can I take you with? To Somalia? So you can learn to see?” (Interview, March 25, 2018). Learning to see is exactly what I, and other educators of Somali children, need to do. But since we cannot take a month vacation in Somalia, as Hodan suggested, we must find a way to bridge the gap between abstract descriptions and concrete demonstrations (Watson, 2010).

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### **Fund of Knowledge: Caring for Others through Fostering Relationships**

Well, in our culture...we help each other. Even if, you know, you don't have family here. People will help you just because you're Somali. Even if they don't know you. If they see someone who's Somali, or is a Somali person, or any human being who's struggling or who needs help, they're willing to help. (Interview, March 25, 2018)

When asked what non-Somali people should know about Somalia, Jamilah talked about community. She told me they have a good culture, that they are friendly, welcoming, and eager to help anyone. Somali families are good at helping others, she said. It's in their DNA and taught by elders and by religion (Interview, March 9, 2018). Hodan echoed this same idea. If she sees someone who needs help, she cannot pass without helping them (Interview, March 25, 2018). The way of life described by these women reflects strong communal ties through traditions and religious values that extend beyond individuals helping one another to create a thick social bond. This fund of knowledge leads to the ability to establish this bond through relationships. Part of this is established through traditions and family roles, but part of this is a need to care for one another, established by the collective practices of oral culture and through religious values.

Engrained in a culture that does not depend on written word is a much greater use of oral language and human contact (Bigelow, 2010). Each human interaction is an investment into the well-being of the community. When asked how they teach their children, give someone directions, or share a recipe, all four women said that they would do it orally, through relationships and connections to people. Hodan doesn't need to keep a calendar because she knows that if she forgets, her doctor will call and remind her of her appointments. Khadija specified that she wants to be on the phone with the person as she gives or receives instructions. The information she gives is not to be stored and used for later, but immediately practiced. The

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approach is concrete rather than abstract (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; DeCapua, 2016). She explained how she learns new recipes:

When I want to learn something new, like, my girlfriend will teach me something different, she'll be on the phone with me. She'll direct me through. She will never—she'll never send me a recipe. Or she'll just say, “Do this, do this, do this” and then I call her the next day again, and I'll say, “Hey - can you help me do that thing again?” She's like “Do this, do this, do this” so...we never write. (Interview, February 25, 2018).

In this way, Khadija's learning is oral, concrete, and communal. Even if she can't be physically present with her friend, the two are working together. It's not surprising that all the women expressed that they would rather talk on the phone than send text messages. If she does send a message, Hodan told me, it is just a quick one to say she's busy and will call back (Interview, March 25, 2018). Khadija, who works in my school district, said that if she needs to communicate with someone, she might even go and talk to them face to face instead of calling or writing an email (Interview, February 25, 2018). In their research, Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar also found a deep need for Somali people to be together. One of their participants went so far as to say Somali people cannot live or work alone. They need to have a friend or a group (1999). This is apprenticeship, as well as collective living (Ong, 1982; DeCapua, 2016).

In small and large ways, the community that is established by this thick network of relationships makes life easier—and more fun—for its members. Hodan and Faduma spoke with longing of their lives back in Africa. They used the word “freedom” over and over:

Somalia's actually happiness...Outside, it's freedom. And it's not like you're keeping your kids in the house, you know. If we were in Somalia, they would be outside.

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Freedom, have fun, no one's gonna be in the house. And they're not gonna be far.

Everybody knows each other. No one steal your kids. (Interview, March 25, 2018).

When Faduma spoke of the contrast between her life in Somalia, Uganda, and Kenya in comparison to her life in the U.S., her words were heavy with homesickness. It's safe there, she told me. Her kids didn't go to duksi or to school. "When they wake up, they just play outside and we didn't have to worry about anything. And then what women do is they cook and they...or they sit outside, watch your kids." Not so in America. Here, she said, you have to drive your kids from place to place so they can explore, so they can have somewhere to play. "And then you have to watch them and supervise them." But, by contrast, "in Africa, we don't worry about children....Africa, totally is freedom" (Interview, February 24, 2018). Nilsson et al. found this same sentiment in the Somali women interviewed in their research (2012). Their participants also spoke of the freedom they had in Somalia to let their children play in contrast to life in the U.S. where they worry that something will happen to their children if they are not watching (Nilsson et al., 2012).

Hodan's words were consistent with other researchers when she explained that it is the ability to foster relationships that makes this freedom possible (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999; Farid & McMahan, 2004; Nilsson et al., 2012). Even though a war is happening in Somalia, the collective society makes it safe. Surrounded by family members, the children are free to play without their parents' constant eye because wherever they go, family will care for them. Hodan lived with her children in Ethiopia before coming to the U.S. and, even though she had left most of her family behind in Somalia, she said there was still freedom. Everyone knew everyone, and the community cared for the children. "But where you could just sleep and let them play outside and know they're good," she relayed, "it's in Somalia" (Interview, March 25,



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2018). It is not surprising that all four women I interviewed spoke of dreams, if not actual plans, of returning to Africa with their families.

While Faduma and Hodan spoke longingly about their lives back in Africa, Jamilah and Khadija described the outings they enjoy with their family in the U.S. Jamila raved about going to malls, amusement parks, and zoos. On the day I spoke with her, she had accompanied her children on a field trip to go snow tubing, despite being three months pregnant. “You know back home we don’t have all this opportunities in here,” she said, “So I like my kids to experience all the chance that they can. With them.” (Interview, March 9, 2018). Before she moved to the U.S., Jamilah said it was just “normal life”—“Cooking, and washing. Just...circle” (Interview, March 9, 2018). Jamilah continues to foster relationships with her family, but does it in a new way in the U.S. She was the only interviewee to talk about plans to apply for citizenship, but she also voiced the most concern that her children would lose their Somali identity. In Jamilah there was a tension between a zeal for opportunities in the U.S. and a strong connection to her culture. She explained that once she is a citizen, she plans to take her family back to Somali to visit and to show her daughters where they are from. Jamilah is finding a way to foster relationships within the U.S. while still maintaining ties to Somalia.

**Care for others and family roles: Taught through religion.** When I asked Hodan what non-Somali people should know about Somalia, she said “The religion” (Interview, March 25, 2018). Jamilah echoed this sentiment and explained Somali people learn to be kind and helpful through elders and through religion (Interview, March 9, 2018). The religion teaches families how to relate to one another and to fulfill their roles. Faduma stated that rather than teach her children poetry, she would rather teach them the Qur’an, “which they need to learn” (Interview, February 24, 2018). Khadija said that learning the Qur’an is, in Somalia, more important than

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any other subject (Interview, February 25, 2018). Religious education forms the bases of Somali identity and values (Farid & McMahan, 2004).

Jamilah learned how to be a good wife and mother through stories of about other women, but also through stories from the religion (Interview, March 9, 2018). Khadija explained that the Qur'an and hadith, additional stories of Mohammed and the prophets, teach how to be a husband, wife, parent, or child (personal communication, April 14, 2018). Jamilah described how she teaches her children through religion.

All the nice stuff comes from the religion. So. Try to teach the religion, show the stories...I make them watch the stories from the prophets, his companions...Here, there's no...you know, different culture, different people, so, always try them to make around the religion and the culture. So. You know. That's how I try to teach them, but I hope they'll get it. (Interview, March 9, 2018).

While family members do teach the lessons of religion, the main institution of religious education is duksi, or Qur'anic school. Khadija described it this way:

Duksi means, like, you're learning Arabic, and you're learning how to recite and how to say words of the Arabic language because it's very important for you to learn, you know. Like reason's why is because in my religion, as a Muslim, when the afterlife, no one is talking in English, or Somali. You will be asked questions in Arabic. That's why, you know, it's important for us to learn. (Interview, March 9, 2018)

In a later conversation, she added that in duksi, people also learn the teachings and practices of the religion: how to live, how to respect, how to fulfill their familial roles, as well as such practices as Ramadan and fasting. "Lots of positive things," she said (personal communication, April 14, 2018). It's more than just memorizing the Qur'an, you have to understand it too.

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Khadija left Somalia at the age of five and at that time was too young to attend secular school, but did have to go to duksi. She explained that in Somalia, learning Arabic and studying the Qur'an is more important than any other subject, "like reading and writing, and speaking." "I learned that when I came to America," she said, "you know, how to read and write, and—I didn't learn it back home" (Interview, February 25, 2018). Hodan also described the importance of duksi over other types of formal education. She left school and was not forced to return, but duksi is seen as much more important. Khadija assured me that within duksi, learning is compulsory. "Duksi is forced," she said. "You're forced to learn" (Interview, February 25, 2018).

Both Khadija and Jamilah complained that the government does not support education in Somalia. While there is a fee to attend both secular schools and duksi, Khadija thinks that duksi is cheaper "because they want everyone to learn the Qur'an more than schools, or education" (personal communication, April 3, 2018). Jamilah's comments supported this idea. She took it for granted that even if people could not afford to attend school, they would attend duksi. She described the villages in which her relatives live where there is no school and sometimes, unbelievably, not even a duksi. Clearly, duksi and religious education have a high priority for Somalis because through these venues, Somali values are taught.

**Role of duksi in literacy development.** Ong (1982) describes two methods of instruction in oral cultures: discipleship and apprenticeship. Duksi falls in the realm of discipleship, as it is marked by memorization and recitation (Fliatz, 2012; Gunderson, 2000). In duksi, children learn to copy and recite words in the Arabic language (Interview, February 24, 2018). Khadija and I discussed this in the following conversation:

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Researcher: So when they're copying every word, do they tell them, like, "Okay - This is what it means in Arabic, this is what it means in Somali"?

Khadija: Yes. They tell you because you won't understand if you can't—if they can't—we have, like I know a little words. I know "la" means "no" and, you know, and, you know "Allah" means "God." Yeah, they tell you those words. We were taught those words.

Researcher: Yeah. Um, can a lot of Somali people speak Arabic?

Khadija: Not a lot. Some. Not a lot.

I asked Jamilah about this as well. "We speak Somali back home," she explained. "No Arabic. We read and we—some of them can speak. But most of the kids, no. They just read it. Write it. All the copying." Because memorizing the Qur'an is so highly valued, duksis may encourage students to memorize first before talking about meaning (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999; Abraham & Slayhi, 2018). The goal of duksi is different from the goals of a literacy program, although, according to Khadija, these schools do start at the level of the alphabet and then work up (Interview, February 25, 2018).

Bigelow (2010) also found that in duksi, some text/sound correspondence is taught, but students are not taught to analyze or discuss texts. I asked my participants about discussion and asking questions, and responses were consistent with Bigelow's findings. In duksi, the teacher tells the students what the Arabic means in Somali, but, unlike Western education, there is no discussion about interpretation. It is the students' job to memorize and receive the information (Interview, February 25, 2018).

Duksi provides familiarity with the Qur'an through a very specific type of memorization and it is mandatory, to the point where physical force can be used to make students do the work.

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Plus, it's hard work. Khadija drew up a contrast between learning Arabic in duksi and learning English in an American school:

The American schools and the public schools, it's, you know, it's something you want to learn because that will benefit you and, I met a lot of woman that wished, you know, they spoke the English language...Cause we have—America's free, and you can go learn the language, and so—and no one's going to force you. They like it. They want it. You know, so it's different. (Interview, February 25, 2018)

When learning English, the benefit is immediately realized and obvious. In duksi, students learn the values essential to Somali identity and life within their community, but the full benefit of this kind of education is not fully realized until the afterlife. It has an immediate relevance, but also an abstract relevance. For children, Khadija said, duksi is not seen as relevant because they don't understand the Arabic or the importance of going (personal communication, April 14, 2018). It's similar to newcomers in the U.S., she said. They don't understand the language yet, so to them going to school is irrelevant. Later, when they do understand, school in the U.S. will be more relevant than duksi because in school, they study subjects that they like. In duksi, it's only Arabic and the children don't understand it. Back in Somalia, the attitude toward school is different. In Somalia, duksi is more important than school (personal communication, April 14, 2018).

### **Maintaining Somali Funds of Knowledge in the U.S.**

Amidst the huge change that comes with moving to the United States, these families strongly value their Somali identity. By maintaining this identity, they maintain their funds of knowledge. Perhaps Khadija understands the major challenge that children of immigrants experience in navigating their identity in their new country (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2002; Woods,

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2009; Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999; Bigelow, 2010). When asked what she teaches her children, Khadija said, “What I do is I tell them, first they know who they are” (Interview, February 25, 2018). It’s important that they understand their tribal identity. Not being from a tribal society myself, it is hard for me to grasp the weight of this. Khadija’s children also have a hard time appreciating this. “They don’t understand, it’s like whatever,” Khadija said. “You know, they don’t get it” (Interview, February 25, 2018). But tribal identity is important. Tribes can be identified by their own music, their own dances (Interview, February 25, 2018). Tribal members have a special connection and obligation to care for one another (Interview, March 25, 2018). Employers are more likely to hire people from their own tribe (Interview, March 9, 2018). And tribal identity is at the root of much of the conflict happening in Somalia (Interview, February 25, 2018). Even in the United States, Somalis tribal differences sometimes cause division (Interview, February 25, 2018). Somali identity is an asset that connects to a fund of social networks. Through this identity, Somali families can maintain their use of mental processing, oral art of poetry, care for the household, and ability to foster relationships.

All participants said that a major challenge in coming to the U.S. is the language, but Jamilah added “And the culture. The religion. Those challenges are bigger. Then mostly, like, new life you coming. So you have to learn everything. You are from the beginning” (Interview, March 9, 2019). Khadija expressed this same sentiment. When kids come to the U.S. from Somalia, she told me, “They have to start over” and language is just one piece of the huge change (Interview, March 9, 2018).

Jamilah described her concern that as her children adjust to life in the United States, they would lose their identity.

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You know, it's the environment is more powerful for kids. So as a people, we worry our kid is like "What are they gonna be like—us, or they?" We know they gonna be different, but not that much different. We don't want them—you don't want your child to go to another religion.

She sees tension between adults, who are secure in their Somali identity and are wondering about their children, and children who are still trying to find their way.

Some of them go with the flow, or some of them, you know, still with their culture and ...foot strongly. But I think when they young, very young, they don't see that much they culture is important. Because the much they grow, the much they see the school, the friends, you know. But when you are like adult, you gonna say, "Yes, I know where I come from" and I know where I am right now." But when they are like [my children who were born in Somalia], they don't know nothing. After two years, they gonna forgot all of Somalia. Where she was. So that's why we go back to—back home. And they get much, you know, strong culture, and they see, and they say, "Oh wow. This Somalia?" Yeah. "This where you grow up, Mom?" At least gonna see where we come from. (Interview, March 9, 2018)

This tension between old and new, between oral culture and written culture, and this longing to return to Africa came up in each one of the interviews.

Khadija, who has lived in the U.S. longer than any of the other participants, spoke about watching her mother navigate parenting in the U.S. and trying to teach her own children about their identity. Her mother doesn't let her brother grow his hair long. "You're not a gangster," she tells him (Interview, February 25, 2018). "No, you're Somali. He's supposed to – you better follow your roots. Be straight" (Interview, February 25, 2018). This instance demonstrates the

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tension that many Somali youth experience between racial and cultural identity, the connection to Black or hip-hop culture, but the ties to Somali culture (Bigelow, 2010). Khadija, like Jamilah, spoke specifically about teaching her own children about their identity: “their Somali roots and where they came—you know, where I came from, and what I—what they are. You know, they’re born here, but they’re Somali. And they need to learn that, they need to value that” (Interview, February 25, 2018).

But Khadija sees that her own children’s lives are completely different from her own. As children grow up in the U.S., some of Jamilah’s fears prove to be well founded. Khadija’s children have only known life in the U.S. “I tell them stuff like, ‘Oh back home...and that-that.’ They’re so Americanized. You know, like. ‘Well, in America-‘ that’s what they tell me.” And while Khadija longs to return to Africa, her children fear Somalia because of the stories they have heard. Even though she moved to the U.S. when she was five years old, Khadija struggled to adjust to life in the U.S. and to learn the language. Her children do not experience this.

It was hard for me, when I was younger. Coming to America. I did not know - I had to learn. Learn, learn, learn, everything. And that’s what I tell my kids. I’m like, “Oh no, I learned when I was back, coming from Africa. It was hard, you know, I didn’t know how to read, write - forget reading and writing! I didn’t even know how to speak English!”

(laughing) I and to learn all of that. And now that my kids are just talking in English.

(Interview, February 25, 2018).

When Khadija speaks to her children in Somali, they respond in English (Interview, February 25, 2018). Many Somali families experience tension as both children and adults navigate life in the U.S. (Nilsson et al., 2012; Betancourt et al., 2015). Inevitably, life will change for these Somali families living in the U.S. Each of them is in the midst of this shift. They must find a way to



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adapt their funds of knowledge to fit this new life, or these funds will be lost. If they hold strongly to their Somali identity, these families hope they will weather the change and, as each of them expressed to me, return one day to a peaceful Somalia.

In talking about the challenges that life in the U.S. presents, Hodan told me a Somali saying. “Wherever you go, you just gonna get used to it,” she said. “Thank God wherever we’re living” (Interview, March 25, 2018). I was surprised at her nonchalance. “But your life will change,” I said. “You have to *change* to get used to it!” She laughed. “Yes! There are a lot of changes!” she said and told me that in the U.S., the family is stuck in the house! (Interview, March 25, 2018). Hodan considered the concrete, physical changes that have happened for her family (Interview, March 25, 2018). Faduma commented on the same (Interview, February 24, 2018). They used to be able to play outside all the time, now they have to stay in the apartment. Khadija and Jamilah talked about abstract changes—shifts in identity and Americanization. Perhaps the difference between these two responses themselves represent changes brought about by literacy. Faduma and Hodan attended only a little school before leaving to help take care of their families. These women described minimal use of reading and writing in their everyday lives. Jamilah finished grade nine, while Khadija finished some college. Both of these women were confident enough in their language to conduct the interview in English and are also able to read and write in English. In his research, Luria found that even a little exposure to literacy increases the use of abstract thinking (1976). Perhaps these two very different approaches to the same issue are evidence of this shift along the continuum away from concrete and toward abstract reasoning, a shift that is likely to increase with more exposure to literacy (Watson, 2010; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).

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### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented five areas that demonstrate funds of knowledge as evidenced by the interviews I conducted with four Somali women. These areas are memory, religious education, poetry, secular education and life skills, and community and identity. Each area is deeply connected with oral culture and represents the oral, concrete, and communal worldview that DeCapua and Marshall (2011) describe as inherent in oral cultures. In the Chapter Five, I will discuss the implications of this research as well as areas of future study.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### Introduction

This study addresses the following questions: What funds of knowledge do newcomer students from oral cultures, specifically Somali students, possess? How does this knowledge relate to orality and literacy? This information will help educators form relationships with these families and more successfully teach students from oral cultures. In an effort to investigate and address their funds of knowledge, I have interviewed three Somali newcomer families and one Somali outreach worker.

### Major Findings

Funds of knowledge are the “bodies of knowledge and skills that are essential for the well-being of an entire household” (Esteban-Guitar & Moll, 2014, p. 31), and may include the ways a family earns money, skills that have been passed down through family members, strategies for survival, and knowledge gleaned through a social network (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992; Moll et al., 1992; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2012). The funds of knowledge I discovered through my interviews are the ability to process detailed information mentally, poetry as an oral art, caring for the household through familial roles, and caring for others through fostering relationships.

**Ability to process detailed information mentally.** All women described their reliance on memory for items such as recipes and shopping lists. Khadija and Hodan explained how their mothers remember or mentally process everything they need to—appointments as well as information relevant to their businesses—without the use of calendars, calculators, or notes (Interview, February 25, 2018; Interview, March 25, 2018). Even though these women described a decrease in the usage of memory since coming to the U.S., life for Somali families such as

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these is still one in which writing is sometimes beneficial, but not necessary. The preferred method of processing thoughts is not through paper and pencil, but through speech and community.

**Poetry as an oral art.** Somalia has a strong tradition of poetry, which is used for all manner of topics from weddings and love, to war and conflicts. This art is practiced within the family or tribe and passed down orally from generation to generation. The women I interviewed stated that while they are proud of the poetry in their culture, its usage is declining and younger generations are not as interested in it.

**Caring for the household through familial roles.** Each member of a Somali family has specific responsibilities. It is the females' job to cook, clean and take care of the children. Girls learn to do this from a young age through the words and actions of the women in the community. Managing a household is the most important thing for a girl to know how to do and, back in Somalia, this is more important than knowing how to read and write. Males in the family are the providers and they are responsible for making money. Going to school is seen as a privilege that may yield some benefits, but is not essential. Instead, the most important thing to learn is how to fulfill one's familial role in caring for the household.

**Caring for others through fostering relationships.** Somali people develop deep relationships which create a thick social community in which members are able to depend on one another. Learning is done through demonstration and, whether it's giving a new recipe or directions to a new place, the instructor's role is not just to say what should be done, but to be a present guide in every step along the way for as long as it takes. Where these women lived in Africa, these relationships create a community in which children can play freely outside without parental supervision. Caring for others as well as family roles is taught through the religion. It is

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very important for Somalis to go to duksi, where they learn about their religion and memorize the Qur'an in Arabic.

**Maintaining Somali funds of knowledge in the U.S.** Somali identity is extremely important, especially for Somali children growing up in the U.S. The women I spoke with could see the change that is happening to their families. Both Jamilah and Khadija said that Somali children need explicit teaching about who they are and where they come from. In particular, they fear that their children will change to a different religion (Interview, February 25, 2018; Interview, March 9, 2018).

### **Limitations**

Perhaps the greatest limitation of this study is the number of participants. Conversations with these four women present only a small glimpse into Somali life, and all conclusions must be taken for what they are: they experiences and perceptions of four women. Interviewing more women would provide a wider pool and so a greater ability to make predictions about the Somali diaspora at large. As it is, I have no way of knowing if the differences among the individuals represent a broader rule, or simply outliers. However, while these women cannot be expected to speak for the entire Somali diaspora, their experiences are generally consistent with the body of research on this community and therefore add to a growing conversation surrounding life in the U.S. for the Somali diaspora.

Language also proved to be a limitation in this study. Our school's family outreach worker performed all of the translations and, while she is well known among the families and helped to build trust between the researcher and participants, she is not a professional interpreter. Because of this, some details were lost and the translation was not a true as it would have been if there had been resources to hire a professional. When the interview was conducted in English, I

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was able to connect more deeply with the participant and to dive into greater details. It seemed that the English-speaking participants and I understood one other better, apart from the translation. I believe there might be something more at play here than simply a language barrier. The women who spoke English also can read and write in English. They have more experience with the ways of thinking and expression that are part of the literate, abstract, individual world of print. The others, who had less literacy, spoke to me from their place further down the continuum of concrete, collective, oral reasoning. Aside from interpreting language, we were trying to do what Watson describes as interpreting across the abyss between oral and literate ways of being (2010).

Time constraints also proved to be a limitation. I was only able to meet with participants twice or, in the case of Faduma, only once. This was because of a misunderstanding in which I did not realize until our meeting that Faduma would only be able to meet one time. Because of this, I was not able to ask her all of the planned questions. But as I transcribed the interviews, I discovered many more questions I wanted to ask or points I wanted to clarify. I did have a follow-up conversation with Khadija after our interview, but it would have been helpful to have at least one follow-up meeting with each participant.

### **Implications**

Each one of the funds of knowledge should be considered as educators work with Somali families. These funds of knowledge represent a worldview that determines how Somali students best learn, as well as the unique abilities that they bring to the classroom. The following are my suggestions to educators for discovering, celebrating, and accessing these funds of knowledge in the classroom.

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**Get to know Somali families.** The life experience, perspective, and expectations of my research participants are deeply grounded in the oral, concrete, collective world found within oral cultures (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Even my interview with the family outreach worker, who moved to the U.S. when she was five and currently works in my school, revealed a culture very different from the abstract, individual, print-dependent world of literacy. The first step in both welcoming these families into our schools and in teaching their students is to learn about their lives. Only by doing this can we decrease deficit approaches and begin to recognize the amazing benefits Somali families bring to our communities (Farid & McMahan, 2004; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). It is not only unfair and ethnocentric, but also misguided to expect Somali students to acculturate to Western ways of doing school. Somali families like those I interviewed are proud of their cultural identity and hold to the hope of returning to Somalia. They will not easily give up their own values and ways of doing things to take on Western practices. Instead of expecting recently arrived students to change, educators need to learn about these families and implement culturally relevant teaching practices that celebrate their funds of knowledge.

**Ability to mentally process information.** In an oral culture, information is processed orally, communally and through mnemonic patterns. Many Somali students may be able to easily recall information that they have heard, especially when it is presented using forms such as rhythm, alliteration, or thematic structures. Like Khadija, students may have trouble remembering information written texts (Interview, February 24, 2018), and so they should be given the opportunity to access information through audio or through video. I suggest that teachers present information in memorable ways, not only as a benefit for students from oral cultures, but as a way to help all students recall information. A teacher might ask students from

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oral culture to create mnemonic patterns out of content material and then to teach these patterns to the entire class.

These students should be given space in which they can speak to each other, sometimes loudly. In an oral culture, processing information requires community, as Khadija needed her friend to talk her through a new recipe (Interview, February 24, 2018). Each interviewee stressed the importance of talking within the Somali community, and students should be allowed to do this. This will likely create a cultural disconnect because Western educators often expect students to learn independently through reading or writing, to raise their hands, and only to speak when it is their turn. However, processing information in an oral culture requires community and noise. Somali students may not be used to hand raising or waiting their turn to talk and, within their community, talking over another person may not be a problem (Abraham & Slayhi, 2018). It is important for Western educators to realize that students from oral cultures may not understand why they are reprimanded for speaking out of turn when they are simply following the speech patterns they have always known. When educators do give students from oral cultures the freedom to orally process, the result may be a mnemonic art form that benefits the whole class.

When it comes to remembering information, students from oral cultures may not see any reason to write notes or bring home printed reminders, such as calendars or class letters. Educators should not see this as lack of responsibility or respect, but instead should look further into the situation. Students might not be taking notes because they are able to store it in their minds, which they can access at any time while the notebook stays in one place (Interview, February 24, 2018). They might not take home newsletters because their parents may not be literate in English, and the student may simply be able to recall and explain the information with no need for paperwork. Students from oral cultures should be given ways to orally demonstrate



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that they have “recorded” academic information. In Somali schools and in duksi, students are asked to memorize texts and recite it later (Interview, February 24, 2018; Interview, March 9, 2018). This same practice could be used in the classroom, although the text should be one which follows those mnemonic patterns which are used in oral cultures (Ong, 1982).

**Poetry as an oral art form.** Somali poetry covers all aspects of life and is an important source of cultural pride. The history of Somalia is rich with the power of poetry to settle conflicts and bring people together. Through conversations with Somali students, outreach workers, and families, educators can determine appropriate ways to bring this rich history and ongoing tradition into the class, perhaps through Youtube videos or Somali community members. Because of the spread of the Somali diaspora, there are now Somali poets who perform poetry in English and these pieces can be used in Language Arts lessons. Even if educators do not specifically use Somali poetry in the classroom, students from oral cultures may respond well to the use of songs or rhymes as teaching tools in class. Students may also thrive at creating and teaching their own songs or rhymes on the lesson topic.

**Caring for the household through familial roles.** For Somali women, the ability to cook, clean, and care for family is often seen as more important than the ability to read and write (Interview, February 24, 2018; Interview, March 25, 2018). There are two implications of this. First, Western educators need to foster an appreciation for this ability to make a household flourish. House work is often belittled in American culture, but through these skills, Somali women create a solid foundation for their families. Educators should be intentional about honoring these skills and, when possible, including them in academic lessons.

The second implication is that Somali students, particularly women, may not consider literacy to be relevant to their lives. In Somalia, many females leave school because it is more

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important for them to be caring for their families than learning reading, writing, or math. Schools in the U.S. must find some way to connect to the immediate reality of their students' lives, or SLIFE dropout rates will continue to increase (Akinnaso, 1981; Mitchell, 2016). Again, including skills such as cooking, cleaning, or child care in academic lessons may create a relevant connection between school and life, especially for Somali females.

**Caring for others through fostering relationships.** Somali people learn from others within their community by working together and fostering relationships through numerous oral encounters. Effective educators will create this same kind of network both within the classroom and within the school community. Schools can get to know their Somali families by performing home visits and spending time with them. Text-based methods of data collection, such as intake forms or family background surveys, are not sufficient especially when it comes to students from oral backgrounds. Within my research, I found that my Somali colleagues and research participants were unlikely to respond to emails, text messages, or letters. Instead of growing frustrated by this, I had to remember that writing is not used in Somali culture as a means to communicate. I had to train myself to make phone calls. When I did call, I was richly rewarded with long, lively conversations that deepened these relationships. Many educators will need to learn, and relearn, this same lesson. All my research participants insisted over and over that Somali people like to talk. Joining in this conversation is not only a rich, rewarding endeavor, but it is also the only way to effectively communicate. Given the massive difference between the culture of our Somali families and the culture of Western schools, there is much potential for communication breakdown. Using the correct form of communication, talking over writing, clears one of these hurdles.

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Schools must establish a network of relationships and use these relationships as a basis for instruction (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013). Research participants described learning and teaching in community, with a friend or family member close at hand to walk them through the new skill step by step. This method should also be used in classrooms. In U.S. schools, teachers generally describe tasks before releasing students to work independently. This “guided instruction,” often includes a “think aloud” in which the teacher orally narrates what they are doing as they complete the task. One way to implement a more collective teaching style could be to perform this oral, step by step description of the task as the students are completing the task themselves. At times, the teacher could take this role as mentor/instructor, but at times this role should go to student peers. In this way, the network of relationships in the classroom extends beyond student to teacher and among peers. The women I interviewed did not describe telling a friend how to make a recipe and then checking back with her to see if she succeeded, but instructing step by step in the midst of the process. I believe Western educators would do well to try the same.

Religious education is highly valued within Somali communities and instructs relationships and roles. Educators at U.S. schools should be aware that their Somali students likely attend *duksi* on the weekend in which writing in Arabic and memorizing the Qur’an are highly valued. Teachers might ask students what they are learning in *duksi* and then praise their work. Connections can be made between English literacy and the Arabic memorization and writing that happens in *duksi* by including Arabic translations of words, or even Arabic quotations from the hadith within the school day. Memorization and recitation are rarely used in American styles of teaching, but this method will likely be familiar to Somali students because it is used both in *duksi* and in Somali schools. Implementing call and responses and oral recitation

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into the school day will create connections to Somali students' prior knowledge and tap in to the fund of knowledge that is the ability to memorize.

**Other resources.** DeCapua and Marshall (2011) have created the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm, or MALP, as a method of reaching students from oral cultures. This structure includes three components of learning: “the *conditions* for learning, the *processes* for learning, and the *activities* for learning” (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013, p. 26). The conditions establish both relationships in the classroom and concrete, immediate relevance to real life, tapping into collective society and concrete thinking. The process is oral communication and shared responsibility, while the activities should be concrete, relevant tasks (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011; DeCapua, 2016). I recommend using this framework as a method for integrating Somali funds of knowledge in the classroom.

Although his work focuses on students of color who are born in the United States, I recommend Emdin's work as a practical guide to utilizing the art of oration in the classroom through creating tight communities (2016). Because of his focus on communal work and on orality, much of what Emdin offers can be tailored to fit the oral, concrete, and communal worldview of students from oral cultures. His recommendations concerning rap battles, in particular, might be adapted for the purposes of Somali poetry and other types of oration familiar to students from oral cultures.

### **Further Research**

The current study is but a small glimpse, a taste of Somali funds of knowledge. By increasing the sample size and following families for a longer time, the scope and reliability of the study would be increased. This study presents pertinent perspectives of four oral families and adds to the existing body of research. These interviews give rise to many more questions around

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the tradition of poetry, the effects of literacy on Somali families, and the place of duksi in oral society.

**Use of poetry.** One topic for further research is the use of poetry in Somali and within the Somali diaspora. Research participants reported that they do not use poetry much and that their families do not use poetry either. However, this question was formed from a literate, individual context. Poetry is often done in community with a tribe. Has the use of poetry decreased among the diaspora because tribal gatherings have decreased? And when participants said that their families do not do poetry, did they mean that their family does not create poetry or perform poetry? Participants talked about knowing songs from their tribes. How are songs related to poetry, and is the use of songs also declining? A study on the specific uses of poetry and its contexts could answer these questions and reveal the reasons and nature of the decreased usage of poetry.

**Effects of literacy.** Another useful study would be specifically one on the effects of literacy on families from oral cultures. Differences in perspectives emerged within my four participants, and I have speculated that these differences are due at least in part to differing levels of exposure to literacy. A study which documents the correlation between the amount of literacy a family has and its use of such skills as concrete thinking, memory, poetry, and adjustment to life in the U.S. would provide a more accurate picture of the effects of literacy on people from oral cultures.

**Relationship between orality and duksi.** Finally, the participants in my study spoke about the importance of duksi, but they did not say much about attending duksi or about using the skills they learned. It seems as though the teachings of duksi, to memorize and recite the Arabic of the Qur'an, are not immediately relevant, but rather have delayed benefit in the

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afterlife. This delayed teaching style does not fit within the concrete, collective, oral worldview of an oral culture. Another study could look at the relationship families from oral culture have with Qur'anic school, the methods used within these skills, and the way these families use the Qur'an in their daily lives.

### **Summary and Reflections**

Through this study, and the gracious generosity of each participant, my eyes were opened to the splendor of a lifestyle different from anything I had known. It is a lifestyle rich in relationship and artistic language in which priority is given to those tasks that are immediately relevant. When I first heard Faduma speak about the freedom she experienced in Africa, my heart ached not only for her, but also for myself (Interview, February 24, 2018). Both she and Hodan spoke of a place in which communal bonds are thick enough to keep a child from danger, even as its mother sleeps (Interview, February 24, 2018; Interview, March 25, 2018). Both Hodan and Jamila talked about walking everywhere they needed to go, and picking up fresh food at the market each day (Interview, March 9, 2018; Interview, March 25, 2018). Their memories were sharp and clear because, Hodan explained, there was no stress (Interview, March 25, 2018). Of course, the irony in this is that these women spoke of this safe, stress-free life in Somalia as refugees who were forced to flee because of the dangers of war. Life was certainly not perfect in Africa.

Now, these families have joined our schools in the U.S. They carry with them these amazing abilities to care for others, to memorize, to craft art out of words, and to manage a household. Faduma said that she cries when she meets a girl who cannot cook or clean, and I wonder what she would say if she saw my kitchen (Interview, February 24, 2018). Would she find value in the document I am writing, as the dirty dishes tower in the sink and my family eats

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frozen pizza? Or would she believe that in the development of my literacy, I have lost some essential connection to what Ong (1982) calls the human life world? Perhaps through knowing one another, through celebrating the funds of knowledge that oral cultures have, we can begin to cultivate the values of community, memory, and immediate, relevant skills. At the same time, literacy skills are essential for survival in the U.S. We must find a way to gain the latter without losing the former. The women in this study have given me hope that, through relationships between oral and literate peoples, this can be done.

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### **Appendix A: Questions for Somali Family Members**

#### **Sociopolitical and historical context of Somali refugees in Minnesota: orality and literacy for the Somali people**

- How did your family come to live in Minnesota?
  - How long have you lived here? Where were you born? Where did you live before coming to Minnesota?
- How many children do you have? Do you still have family members living in Somalia?
- What do you like to do with your family?
- Tell me about education in Somalia.
  - What does school look like? What does it sound like? What do you learn there?
  - How is *Duksi* the same or different from school?
  - Does it cost to go to school? Who gets to go?
- How do people make a living in Somalia?
- What do you think non-Somali people should know about Somalia?

#### **History of the household: literacy vs. orality, collective vs individual**

- Tell me about typical Somali families. Tell me about your family.

#### **History of labor: literacy vs. orality, concrete vs. abstract**

- What do Somali families like to do? What does your family like to do?
- What kinds of things are Somali families good at? What about your family? How did you learn to do those things?
- What is something that your parents or grandparents taught you? How did they teach you?
- What kinds of things do you teach your children? How do you teach them?



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- Did you attend school? How important is it to know how to read and write to support your family?
- How many people in your family can read and write?
- What is the use of reading and writing? How important is it to be able to read and write?
- How do you use reading and writing? For example, do you make shopping lists? Do you keep a calendar? Do you send text messages?
- Do you read Somali or Arabic, other than the Qur'an? What do you read?
- Do you think it's important for students to read and write in Somali?
- What part does poetry or other oral art forms play in Somali families? In your family?
- What are the most important things Somali students learn in school? Do you think the schools effectively teach these things?

### **Use of resources in changing situations: collective vs individual with new identities**

- Are Somali people able to use their skills in the U.S.? How?
- If Somali people in the U.S. need help, who do they ask? Is this different from what Somali people would normally do in Somalia?
- What challenges do Somali students face when adjusting to life in the U.S.? What challenges do Somali adults face?
- What is the greatest challenge for Somali students attending U.S. schools?

**Appendix B: Questions for Somali Family Members – Somali Translation**

**Sociopolitical and historical context of Somali refugees in Minnesota: orality and literacy for the Somali people**

Sidee bay qoyskaaga u yimaadeen inay ku noolaadaan Minnesota?

Ii sheeg waxbarashada ku saabsan Soomaaliya - dugsiyada dadweynaha iyo sidoo kale Duksi

Sidee bay dadku ugu noolaan karaan Soomaaliya?

Maxaad u maleyneysaa dadka aan Soomaalida ahayn inay ka ogaadaan Soomaaliya?

**History of the household: literacy vs. orality, collective vs individual**

Waxaad ii sheegtaa qoysaska soomaaliyeed ee caadiga ah. Ii sheeg qoyskaaga.

**History of labor: literacy vs. orality, concrete vs. abstract**

Maxay qoysaska Soomaaliyeed jecel yihiin inay sameeyaan? Maxay qoyskaaga jecel yihiin?

Maxay yihiin noocyada kala duwan ee qoysaska Soomaaliyeed ee ku wanaagsan? Ka waran qoyskaaga? Sidee ayaad

Maxay tahay wax ay waalidiintaada ama awoowayaashaada kuu baray? Sidee bay kuu barayaan?

Maxay yihiin noocyada waxyaalaha aad baraneyso carruurtaada? Sidee baad u baraysaa?

Miyaad iskuul dhigatay? Sidee ayey muhiim u tahay in la ogaado sida loo akhriyo oo loo qoro si loo taageero qoyskaaga?

Immisa qof oo qoyskaaga ka mid ah ayaa akhrin kara oo qori kara?

Waa maxay isticmaalka akhriska iyo qorista?

Sidee u isticmaashaa akhriska iyo qorista? Tusaale ahaan, miyaad samaysaa liisaska wax iibsiga?

Ma haysataa jadwalalka? Ma soo diraysaa fariimaha qoraalka ah?

Sidee ayey muhiim u tahay in ay karti u yeeshaan akhriska iyo qorista?

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Ma akhrisaa Soomaali ama Carabi, oo aan ahayn Quraanka?

Miyaad u maleyneysaa inay muhiim u tahay ardayda inay akhriyaan oo qoraan Soomaliga?

Muxuu qeyb ka yahay gabayada ama foomamka farshaxanka ee afka laga ciyaaro ee qoysaska Soomaaliyeed? Qoyskaaga dhexdiisa?

Maxay yihiin waxyaalaha ugu muhiimsan ardayda Soomaaliyeed ee wax ka barta dugsiya? Ma kula tahay in dugsiyadu si waxtar leh u baraan waxyaabahan?

### **Use of resources in changing situations: collective vs individual with new identities**

Ma yihiin dad Soomaaliyeed oo awood u leh in ay xirfadooda ku adeegsadaan Mareykanka?

Sidee?

Haddii dadka Soomaaliyeed ee ku nool Mareykanka u baahan yihiin caawimaad, yaa weydiisanaya? Tani miyuu ka duwan yahay dadka Soomaaliyeed ee sida caadiga ah ku shaqeeya Soomaaliya?

Maxay yihiin caqabadaha ardayda Soomaaliyeed ay la kulmaan marka la qabsashada nolosha Mareykanka? Maxay yihiin caqabadaha hortaagan dadka waaweyn ee Soomaalida?

Waa maxay caqabadaha ugu badan ee ardayda Soomaaliyeed ee dhigata dugsiyada Mareykanka?

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### Appendix C: Questions for Somali Outreach Worker

#### 1. Sociopolitical and historical context of Somali refugees in Minnesota: orality and literacy for the Somali people

- How did your family come to live in Minnesota?
  - How long have you lived here? Where were you born? Where did you live before coming to Minnesota?
- How many children do you have? Do you still have family members living in Somalia?
- What do you like to do with your family?
- Tell me about education in Somalia.
  - What does school look like? What does it sound like? What do you learn there?
  - How is *Duksi* the same or different from school?
  - Does it cost to go to school? Who gets to go?
- How do people make a living in Somalia?
- What do you think non-Somali people should know about Somalia?

#### 1. History of the household: literacy vs. orality, collective vs individual

- Tell me about typical Somali families. Tell me about your family.
- Tell me about your family's educational history. Did your relatives attend school? Did they attend *Duksi*?

#### 1. History of labor: literacy vs. orality, concrete vs. abstract

- Before moving to the U.S., did members of your family work?
- After arriving in the U.S., how did your family make a living?
- What is something that your parents or grandparents taught you? How did they teach you?

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- What kinds of things do you teach your children? How do you teach them?
  - What kinds of things are Somali families good at? What about your family? How did you learn to do those things?
  - What are the most important things your student is learning in school? Do you think the schools effectively teach these things?
  - What is the use of reading and writing? How important is it to be able to read and write?
  - How do you use reading and writing? For example, do you make shopping lists? Do you keep a calendar? Do you send text messages?
  - Do you read Somali or Arabic, other than the Qur'an? What do you read?
  - Do you think it's important for students to read and write in Somali?
  - What part does poetry or other oral art forms play in Somali families? In your family?
- 1. Use of resources in changing situations: collective vs individual with new identities**
- Are Somali people able to use their skills in the U.S.? How?
  - If Somali people in the U.S. need help, who do they ask? Is this different from what Somali people would normally do in Somalia?
  - What challenges do Somali students face when adjusting to life in the U.S.? What challenges do Somali adults face?
  - What is the biggest challenge for Somali students attending U.S. schools?
  - What part does poetry or other oral art forms play in Somali families? In your family?

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**Appendix D: IRB Approval**

TO: CHARITY KROEKER CALUBAYAN

FROM: Hamline University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

re: IRB APPROVAL (02/05/2018)

Your proposal entitled “From Orality to Literacy: Funds of Knowledge of Somali Newcomers” is approved. It requires no further revision or review.

Good Luck with your project, and thank you for registering with the IRB.

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### **Appendix E: Consent Forms in English and Somali**

You are being asked to participate in a study examining the experience, skills, and knowledge of Somali families who have recently moved to the United States.

**Purpose of the study:** The goal of this study is to educate teachers about the knowledge and skills of Somali families so that these teachers might more effectively welcome, celebrate, and teach these students.

**What I will ask you to do:** If you agree to participate in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about education in Somalia, oral skills of Somali people, ways that knowledge or skills are passed on to Somali children, and life for Somali people within the United States. The interview will take three to four hours to complete and will be completed on one day. Interviews will be conducted with a Somali interpreter. Each question will be translated into Somali and your response will be translated into English. Please pause often when you speak so that all of your words can be translated accurately. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview.

**Risks and Benefits:** I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. The information you provide will be used to help educators understand how they can best welcome Somali families and teach Somali students. The information collected may not benefit you specifically, but what I learn from this study should generally benefit Somali families and students in the U.S. school system.

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Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you do choose to participate, you may skip questions that you choose not to answer and you may decide to withdraw from the study at any time.

**Confidentiality:** The information you provide will be anonymous. The research paper will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Notes from interviews will be accessible only to myself and the translator. If I do audio record the interview, I will destroy the recording after it has been transcribed and translated, which I anticipate will be within two months of its taping.

This research is being conducted by Charity Kroeker Calubayan of Hamline University, with translation help from [name redacted]. Charity (Ms. KC) is also an English teacher at [redacted] School and [name redacted] is the Somali Family Outreach Worker for [redacted] Public Schools. However, please note that this research is not connected to [redacted] Public Schools in any way and your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Ms. KC, [name redacted] or with the school. Information you provide will not be shared with the school, except if members of school staff choose to read the finalized research paper, which will not contain any identifying information.

**If you have any questions** please contact Charity Kroeker Calubayan at [ckroeker01@hamline.edu](mailto:ckroeker01@hamline.edu) or [number redacted], or [name redacted] at [email address redacted].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may



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contact Matthew Olson, chair of the Hamline Institutional Review Board (IRB) at [mholson@hamline.edu](mailto:mholson@hamline.edu).

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I consent to take part in the study. I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked.

\_\_\_\_\_ In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview audio recorded.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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### Appendix F: Consent Form in Somali

Waxaa lagaa codsanayaa inaad kaqaybqaadato daraaseyn ku saabsan khibrada, xirfadaha, iyo aqoonta qoysaska Soomaaliyeed ee dhawaanahan u soo guuray Mareykanka.

**Ujeedada daraasaddan:** Ujeedada daraasaddan waa in lagu baro macalimiinta aqoonta iyo xirfadaha qoysaska Soomaalida si macallimiintani ay si wax ku ool ah u soo dhoweeyaan, u dabaaldegi lahaayeen, una baraan ardaydaas.

**Maxaan ku weydiin doonaa inaad sameyso:** Haddii aad ogolaato inaad kaqaybqaadato daraasaddan, waxaan kula socodsiin doonaa waraysi. Wareysiga waxaa ku jiri doona su'aalo ku saabsan waxbarashada Soomaaliya, xirfadaha afka ah ee dadka Soomaaliyeed, siyaabaha aqoonta iyo xirfadaha loo gudbiyo carruurta Soomaaliyeed, iyo nololsha dadka Soomaaliyeed ee ku nool Mareykanka. Waraysigu wuxuu qaadan doonaa seddex ilaa afar saacadood si uu u dhamaystiro oo loo dhammeeyo hal maalin. Wareysiyada waxaa lagu qaban doonaa turjubaan Soomaali ah. Su'aal kasta waxaa loo turjumi doonaa soomaali jawaabtana waxaa lagu turjumi doonaa Ingiriisi. Fadlan inta badan ka jooji markaad hadlayso si dhammaan erayadaada loogu turjumi karo si sax ah. Iyada oo ogolaanshahaaga, waxaan jeclaan lahaa in aan duubo codka wareysiga.

**Khatarta iyo Gargaarka:** Ma rajeynayo halis kasta oo aad ka qayb qaadato daraasaddan aan ahayn kuwa la kulmay nolol maalmeedka. Macluumaadka aad bixiso waxaa loo isticmaali doonaa in lagu caawiyo barayaashu inay fahmaan sida ugu wanaagsan ee ay u soo dhaweynayaan qoysaska Soomaalida ah ayna baraan ardayda Soomaaliyeed. Macluumaadka la uruuriyay lagama yaabo inaad faa'iido gaar aheyn, laakiin waxa aan ka baranayo daraasaddan guud ahaan waxay ka faa'iideysanaysaa qoysaska Soomaaliyeed iyo ardayda nidaamka iskuulada Mareykanka.

Ka qaybgalkaaga daraasaddan waa mid iskaa ah. Haddii aad dooratid inaad kaqaybqaadato, waxaad ka boodi kartaa su'aalaha aad dooratid inaad ka jawaabin waxaadna go'aansan kartaa in aad ka baxdo daraasada wakhti kasta.

**Sirta:** Macluumaadka aad bixiso waxay noqon doontaa qarsoodi. Warqada cilmi baarista kuma koobnaan doonto wax macluumaad ah oo macquul ah si ay kuu aqoonsadaan. Qoraalka waraysiyada waxaa lagu heli karaa oo kaliya aniga iyo turjumaanka. Haddii aan qoro cajaladda codka wareysiga, waxaan burburin doonaa qoraalka ka dib markii la qoray iyo tarjumay, kaas oo aan ku rajo gali doono laba bilood gudohood.

Cilmi-baaristaan waxaa sameeya hay'adda Charity Kroeker Calubayan oo ka tirsan Jaamicadda Hamline, oo leh turjumid caawinaad ka timid [redacted]. Hay'ad samafal (Ms. KC) sidoo kale waa macalin Ingiriis ah oo ku yaal Dugsiga [redacted] School, [redacted] waa Shaqaalaha

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Qoyska Qoyska ee Dugsiyada Dadweynaha [redacted]. Si kastaba ha ahaatee, fadlan ogow in cilmi-baaristaan aysan ku xirnayn Dugsiyada Dadweynaha [redacted] si kasta oo go'aankaaga ah ama haddii aanad ka qayb qaadaneynin saameyn kuma yeelan doonto xiriirka aad la leedahay Ms. KC, [redacted], ama dugsiya. Macluumaadka aad bixiso looma wadaagi doono dugsiya, marka laga reebo haddii xubno ka tirsan shaqaalaha dugsiyadu ay doortaan inay akhriyaan warqadda cilmi baarista oo dhammeystiran, oo aan ku jiri doonin wax macluumaad ah oo aqoonsan.

**Haddii aad qabtid wax su'aalo ah:** fadlan la xiriir Hay'adda Charity Kroeker Calubayan at ckroeker01@hamline.edu ama [redacted], ama [redacted] ahaan [redacted]. Haddii adiga aad qabto wax su'aalo ah ama walwal ah oo ku saabsan xuquuqdaada maadada daraasaddan, waxaad la xiriiri kartaa Matthew Olson, guddoomiyaha Guddiga Dib u Eegista Xeerarka (IRB) at [mholson@hamline.edu](mailto:mholson@hamline.edu).

Waxaa lagu siin doonaa nuqulka foomkan si aad ugu hayso diiwaannadaada.

### Qoraalka Oggolaanshaha:

-----Haa, waxaan oggolahay inaan ka qayb qaato daraasadda. Waan aqriyey macluumaadka kor ku qoran, oo waxaan helay jawaabaha su'aal kasta oo aan weydiistay.

-----Marka lagu daro oggolaanshaha ka qaybgalka, waxaan sidoo kale oggolahay inaan haysto codka wareysiga.

Saxiixaaga \_\_\_\_\_ Taariikhda \_\_\_\_\_

Magacaaga (daabacan) \_\_\_\_\_

Saxiixa Cilmi baadhaha \_\_\_\_\_ Taariikhda \_\_\_\_\_

Magaca daabacaadda Cilmi baaraha  
\_\_\_\_\_ Taariikhda \_\_\_\_\_

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