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## Somali Family Priorities And Perspectives Regarding Middle School Engagement

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SOMALI FAMILY PRIORITIES AND PERSPECTIVES REGARDING MIDDLE  
SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

by

Joanna Fischer

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

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

December 2020

Primary Advisor: Andreas Schramm

Content Reviewer: Laura Lenz

Peer Reviewer: Claire Sagstuen

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Overview

*Together the teeth can cut.* This Somali proverb highlights the importance of working together in order to accomplish goals. When individuals in a community work together, much more can be accomplished. This philosophy can be applied to education as well. Together, educators and parents can increase students' achievement levels. Family engagement in the schools has many benefits. As educators and policy makers realized these benefits, they have stressed the need for schools to engage families in their child's education. This idea of engagement, though, has different understandings between cultures and has resulted in a perceived lack of involvement from some English Learner (EL) families. Research has begun to investigate different cultural understandings of involvement. More research into cultural perspectives of school engagement is needed though. This research needs to prioritize hearing from the families directly about their attitudes of school engagement. Then, meaningful partnerships can occur.

This capstone will investigate Somali family priorities and perspectives of school engagement in an effort to better understand how educators, administrators, and families can work together to help students achieve academic success. This chapter will discuss my personal background in regard to the topic as well as the rationale and background for this research. This capstone will attempt to answer the question: What priorities and perspectives do Somali families of middle school students have regarding school engagement?

## **Researcher's Background**

My desire to learn from and work with parents started in my education classes in college. As I worked toward an Elementary Education degree and a Preprimary Endorsement, I took many classes focused on family engagement. I then started my teaching career as a General Education classroom teacher teaching 4th grade. I taught in a rural community where about 50% of families were from Mexico or other Central American countries and the other 50% were non-Latino white families. There was a clear cultural divide within the community, and also within the school. It seemed that teachers (who primarily were white) were relationally closer to the English speaking families. I started to realize my desire to bridge the cultural divide and to seek to understand both perspectives in an effort to increase family engagement from all families.

It was teaching within this rural school that I decided to become an EL teacher and I started pursuing my EL licensure. I also changed schools and communities and started working at a much more culturally and linguistically diverse school. The divide was not as apparent within this new community (which is my current district). As I started teaching EL and got to know the students and their families more, I was surprised to learn of the barriers, bias, and general misunderstandings that were present, but not widely spoken of. I heard about the lack of communication with EL families that was impacting students' graduation. I heard about implicit bias that was held by teachers and was impeding EL students' growth and access to enriching opportunities. I also heard EL parents' desire for their child to have a great education, and a willingness to be involved. Yet, there is still a divide. Throughout my career, I have also seen the emphasis put on family engagement within the schools through required trainings and events. It is clear

that schools want families to be involved in their child's education. There is an emphasis on regular parental contact, having families come into the classroom, and having different events for families at the school. Yet, teachers are frustrated about EL families' "lack of involvement," while these families have stated a willingness to become involved.

After I, a white female, began to learn about different cultural perspectives of education, I began to see that these ideals of involvement were not culturally inclusive. I started to learn how the structure and systems of the public school system have roots in white, middle class ideals and standards (Auerbach, 2007). In my experience with different schools and districts, I have observed that it is difficult for schools to disrupt this way of thinking as adjustment to different culturally held beliefs takes place within the schools. In my own teaching career, I have seen this as schools seek to enforce their ideals of family engagement and then become frustrated with the outcomes, rather than seeking to understand the families first and then making plans after the understanding has taken place. In choosing my research, I wanted to highlight the voices of parents and seek to understand their perspectives directly from them. Since there is a large Somali population in our community, I chose to focus on their perspectives. This research seeks to study Somali families' priorities and perspectives towards school engagement in order to promote positive and more well-rounded family engagement expectations.

### **Background of Research**

Research has shown the positive effects that family engagement has on students' behavioral and academic success. These benefits include increasing students' academic achievement, better school attendance, reduced dropout rates, and better grades and test scores (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Behnke & Kelly, 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001;

Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Due to these findings, educators and policymakers emphasize the need for families to be engaged in their child's education. With the increased effort to enhance familial engagement, many policies were made, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA).

NCLB brought family involvement to the forefront and relied on parent and teacher participation to implement its policies. It outlined and governed family involvement programs and policies in order to strengthen family involvement within the schools (Parental Involvement in the No Child Left Behind Act, 2007). Schools, then, increased their effort to engage families in the schools.

In 2015, ESSA replaced NCLB as law. Under ESSA, requirements are made for schools to communicate with English learner (EL) families regarding how they can be involved in their child's academic pursuits. In addition, it requires that states identify barriers that families may have in becoming involved and seeks to disrupt the barriers in an effort to support families (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d.). NCLB and ESSA both highlight family engagement as an integral part of a student's academic achievement. They both strongly encourage schools to disrupt barriers to familial involvement, and highlight the need for schools to prioritize family engagement within the schools.

Yet, even with the increased effort, schools are seeing a lack of progress in family engagement, particularly with EL families. Research on this topic brings up many articles targeted at helping teachers reach EL families more effectively, as there tends to be lower communication and attendance at school events by EL families (Breiseth, Robertson, & Lafond, 2011; Flannery, 2010). It is important to seek a solution.

The current body of research has shown that different cultural groups hold different expectations and understandings of family engagement within their child's education and schooling (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006; Durand, 2010; Skogrand, Hatch & Singh, 2005). These varying mindsets created by cultural expectations further the rift in school engagement and may explain the lack of progress that schools feel in engaging EL families. Unlike the belief that some parents do not care about their child's education, furthering our understanding of each other's expectations may help us adjust our mindsets and further unite to support student growth. It's imperative that educators and researchers seek to understand families' beliefs on school engagement and their role in their child's education.

As the United States population grows and diversifies, its schools are adjusting and seeking to understand and implement culturally responsive pedagogical practices. In my experience in different schools and districts, I've noticed that many districts have chosen culturally relevant pedagogy as a focus area in an effort to better serve and understand varying cultural attitudes. In my own district, we have chosen culturally and linguistically responsive teaching as our focus for the past three years. This focus created opportunities for teachers to learn more about their own bias and the different cultural beliefs that our students may be bringing to school. With this increased effort from the schools in understanding and affirming different cultural perspectives, there was also an amplified interest within research reflective of this in understanding different familial attitudes (Durand, 2010; Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). One highlighted area was that of attitudes families held of familial engagement in the schools. These studies have shed a light on the varying cultural beliefs that families hold toward family involvement

(Durand, 2010; Halgunseth et al, 2006; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Skogrand, Hatch & Singh, 2005). These studies, in large part, have focused on the perspectives of Latino families and helping teachers understand the unique attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives that Latino families hold in their ideas of family engagement. There is little research that has been done to understand other cultural groups and the unique perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes that they hold in regard to their engagement with schools. In doing this project, I hope to further the body of research seeking to understand different cultural attitudes of school engagement. The current body of research shows the need for family engagement, but is lacking in seeking to understand different cultural attitudes of engagement. This capstone seeks to build more of an understanding of Somali cultural beliefs of familial engagement held within the district where I am currently working as an EL teacher. I have chosen to specifically focus on Somali families as the state where this project takes place has a large Somali population. This capstone will explore the following research question: What priorities and perspectives do Somali families of middle school students have regarding school engagement?

By answering this question, it is my hope that teachers will build more of an understanding and empathy towards different beliefs of family engagement. Hopefully, teachers and parents can work together in order to support students and their needs. Throughout my teaching career, I have seen the need for more communication of expectations and more of an effort to bridge the divide created by cultural misunderstandings.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed my personal background and journey to this project, the background of family engagement research, and the pressure that schools feel towards enforcing family engagement, as it has been strongly tied to student academic achievement. Within this push for family engagement, schools have noticed a lack of attendance from EL families. As our schools seek to become more culturally and linguistically responsive, we must adapt our expectations of family engagement to be more culturally responsive. Researchers have begun to analyze different cultural understandings of family engagement. More research needs to be done on the different cultural perspectives of family engagement in order to gain a more in-depth view of family engagement.

In Chapter One, I described the background and rationale for this research. I also described my personal background and interest in the topic. In Chapter Two, I review the literature surrounding the field of Somali families attitudes of engagement in the schools. In Chapter Three, I describe the methods of data collection in the study. In Chapter Four, I discuss the findings of research. In Chapter Five, I reflect on the findings and discuss implications for practice.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Overview**

This section will discuss some of the literature related to school engagement and the perceived lack of involvement from EL families in their child's education. The literature has shown that EL families may have different ideas of family engagement and different attitudes and expectations than white, middle-class expectations which permeate schools. In addition, the need for additional effort and understanding is apparent as the literature has shown that academic achievement is positively affected by familial engagement. The literature also shows a need for additional research in studying the attitudes of different cultural groups towards school engagement. This capstone will seek to answer the question: What priorities and perspectives do Somali families of middle school students have regarding school engagement?

#### **Family Engagement**

Familial involvement within the schools has been a topic of interest for many years (Baird, 2015). In particular, much concern has been given to what constitutes familial involvement. In recent years, the term family engagement has been used more (Baird, 2015; Breiseth, Robertson, & Lafond, 2011; Theodorou, 2008). Baird (2015) states that the transition to using the term engagement “reflects a shared responsibility between families and schools” (p. 156). This capstone will use the terms involvement and engagement interchangeably in order to represent the literature’s intentions well.

Historically, many educators view involvement as families being present within the schools (Theodorou, 2008). The National Education Association contributes to this

view. On their website, they correlate engagement to in-school presence and regular communication (Flannery, 2010). Studies on parental involvement have failed to recognize that school involvement is a “socially constructed phenomenon” (Auerbach, 2007, p. 251). Parent involvement expectations have been constructed to favor white, middle-class ideals, and behaviors. In so doing, a gap is formed in family involvement between white, middle-class families and other ethnic groups (Auerbach, 2007; Abrams & Gibbs, 2002).

Recently, as educators and researchers learn more about the diverse perspectives on family involvement, the term engagement has been used in an effort to become more inclusive and recognize that involvement can go beyond an in-school presence. Researchers do not necessarily agree on what engagement actually entails and it seems to widely encompass a range of involvement attitudes and activities. Engagement can refer to parents’ intentions at home (i.e. reading with their child, providing direct supervision, promoting higher education, providing learning opportunities and activities, etc.) and also school (i.e. attending conferences and other school events, volunteering in the classroom, etc.) (Auerbach, 2007; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). When the range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds that EL families hold is taken into consideration, a definition of engagement becomes even more indeterminate. Expanding our view of engagement to include the different cultural considerations and outlooks that our families have would be beneficial. This capstone and study will use the terms involvement and engagement with the view that they can encompass a range of expectations, attitudes, and behaviors that families have for their children both inside and outside of school.

It is also important to note that the terms “family” and “parent” are used interchangeably. Typically, parents are the most directly involved in their child’s education. However, many families view the education of a child as a whole family’s or community’s responsibility (Durand, 2010). This capstone will use the terms interchangeably, with an attempt to specify the discussed party.

In defining engagement it is also necessary to point out that many EL families face barriers to becoming more engaged at their child’s school and with their education. These barriers are far-reaching. They include lack of childcare and/or transportation at events, lack of translation services, inconvenient meeting times, and inflexible work schedules. In addition, some families believe that they are not qualified or they don’t understand the school system enough to help, or the family is discriminated against by school staff (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014).

With increased interest from policymakers and educators to have families become more involved, it is necessary to define engagement and seek to understand how our schools and families view engagement. There is a need for more research that seeks to understand different families' perspectives of school engagement, particularly those of differing cultural backgrounds (like Somali).

### **Attitudes towards School**

The demographics of American schools are evolving, and educators are seeking to address the increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Breiseth et al, 2011). With this, researchers have taken an increasing interest in understanding the cultural backgrounds of our families and the perspectives that they bring towards education. “Attitude” refers to the perspectives,

outlook, and mindset that a person has that shapes their actions and thinking. Educators and researchers have noticed a disparity between the school's expectations for involvement and the involvement of EL families. Educators often cite that they feel a lack of involvement from their EL families and, therefore, have the misconception that EL families are not as interested in their child's education (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Auerbach, 2007; Breiseth et al, 2011; Flannery, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005). Research, however, has shown that this is not true. Rather, many EL families have differing beliefs and priorities than school culture upholds and sees as involvement.

Parent involvement expectations within the schools are often shaped by white, middle-class norms and ideals (Auerbach, 2007). These expectations value on-site familial school presence, regular communication with teachers, attendance at events, and reinforcing school policies and expectations at home (Auerbach, 2007; Breiseth et al, 2011). Teachers often view parents as partners and seek a two-way partnership in order to help their child learn. This can contrast with the experiences and perspectives that many EL families bring.

In general, many EL families come from cultures that hold differing perspectives towards the educational system and their role in it. Many families have a deep respect for teachers and hold them with high-esteem. Therefore, they are reluctant to ask questions because they do not want to undermine the teacher's authority or tell the teacher how to do their job (Breiseth et al, 2011). They also may feel inadequate or uninformed, so they are reluctant to become involved as they feel a general lack of understanding of the schools and their expectations (Breiseth et al, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005). EL

families also face language barriers, which can make them feel hesitant to become involved and contribute to feelings of inadequacy (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Zarate, 2007). In addition, many families come from a culture that values one's social behavior in a group more than academics (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). This stems from more of a community-oriented approach, rather than the individualistic approach that is often within Western culture. This mindset can create a misunderstood negative stigma towards families, as people hold different standards and expectations for success for their child within the school (Durand, 2010; Skogrand, Hatch & Singh, 2005).

With this view of cultural perspectives shaping parent's ideas of school involvement, many researchers have attempted to understand cultural groups. Much research has specifically been done with Latino families in order to understand their beliefs and attitudes towards school involvement (Auerbach, 2007; Durand, 2010; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014; Skogrand & Singh, 2005; Halgunseth et al, 2006; Zarate 2007). Research on the perspectives of other cultural groups is lacking.

Here, research will be highlighted that discusses Latino perspectives of familial involvement as a way to show how differing cultural beliefs can impact a family's approach to school involvement. The conceptualizations that people have towards parenting and child-rearing are informed by their culture and typically shared within members of a cultural group or sub-group (Durand, 2010). There is a need for research to highlight the differing perspectives that different cultural groups bring so that educators can better understand their students and their families.

Research has shown that Latino families largely hold the goals of *familismo*, *respeto*, and *educación*, and that these concepts underlie the decisions and practices that

Latino families make in regard to their parenting (Durand, 2010; Breiseth et al, 2011; Skogrand et al, 2005; Halgunseth et al, 2006). The concepts of *familismo* and *respeto* reveal that Latino families typically are more relaxed in regard to children's early self-reliance skills and children typically are more interdependent with their mothers for longer periods of time than Euro-American families (Durand, 2010). The concept of *respeto* esteems the preservation of harmonious interpersonal relationships. There is a high value within these concepts to raise a child who is well-mannered, respectful of authority, and gets along with others (Durand, 2010). The concept of *educación* differs from education in that it resembles a child's moral, social, *and* academic development. Latino parents tend to believe that their job as a parent is to give their child a strong foundation of morals and good social behavior, and the teacher will lead the way in academics. This differs from the Euro-American idea of education, as it is highly academic, with less emphasis on social and moral development (Durand, 2010; Halgunseth et al, 2006; Skogrand et al, 2005; Zarate, 2007).

These concepts held by Latino families highlight the emphasis on interpersonal relationships, rather than a child's independence and academic readiness. This distinction shows how differing approaches held by parents and schools can impact perceptions and attitudes towards school engagement and can cause people to hold misinformed views of others.

In an effort to increase engagement within schools, researchers have analyzed the perspectives that different families have of school engagement. From this research, it is seen that schools' expectations often differ from families' expectations of school involvement. It is also seen that there is a need for more research to be done across

cultures in an effort to further understand families perspectives. This research and focus on family engagement is important as many research studies have shown that academic achievement is positively affected by familial involvement within the schools.

### **Somali Families' Perspectives**

There is a clear need for additional research in studying the differing cultural perspectives that EL families possess regarding school engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Nderu, 2005). This study will be focused on people with one common first language and culture: Somali. Much research has focused on specific cultural groups, particularly Latinos. More research needs to be done to understand the different cultural perspectives that our EL families are bringing. As teachers and administrators seek to partner with Somali families and involve them in family engagement efforts, it is important to understand the perspective that Somali families have.

The Midwestern state where I live and work is home to the largest Somali population in the United States (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), so there is a large population of Somalis in our schools. Even with the large population, many Somali families feel confused, inadequate, misunderstood, disempowered, and ill-informed in regard to how to best help their child succeed in school (Bowie, Wojnar, & Isaak, 2011; Heitritter, 1999; Nderu, 2005). It is imperative that educators seek to understand the perspectives that Somali families have, so that schools and families can better serve the students (Heitritter, 1999).

Little research has been done in an effort to understand Somali cultural perspectives of school engagement. Within the research that has been conducted, Somali participants expressed some common themes related to their roles and attitudes within the

family and outside of the family. Within the family, participants expressed the importance of family strength (Hietritter, 1999). The meaning of family strength drew from Muslim teaching and Somali cultural traditions. The religion of Islam is the foundation of family organization and structure. For example, the hierarchical role structure taught in the Koran was important to stabilize the family. Participants expressed the differing gender roles due to the hierarchical role structure. For example, the women were primarily responsible for maintaining order within the home, deemed as private life. The men, on the other hand, had a more dominant role within public life (Hietritter, 1999; Nderu, 2005). According to Nderu's (2005) study, all Somali parents saw themselves as responsible for providing out-of-school support. This support included encouragement for the child to do well and behave and take care of the child's basic human needs. Some parents provided direct academic support through helping with homework assignments, but not all. In most cases, the women provided this support to their children within their home. According to Bowie et al. (2011), "Somalis value their children's education and have a deep respect for teachers without seeing a role in this system for themselves. They consider a child's teacher to be an authority that acts as the 'second parent'" (p.9). In Somalia, teachers are respected and revered much more than in America. Out of this reverence, the parent believes the teacher is responsible for shaping the child's character, teaching life skills, and educating the child (Bowie et al, 2011). While the child is in school, the teacher is the parent.

Outside of the family, Somalis typically believe in the importance of community support and interdependence within the community. The larger Somali community is seen as a key resource and families rely on each other for support. Interdependence is

expected between families and the community (Heitritter, 1999; Nderu, 2005). One of the greatest challenges that Somali parents face as they immigrate to America is the change in moving from a collectivist culture to an individualistic culture (Wolf, 2010; Bowie et al, 2011). “In Somalia, parenting is considered a collective undertaking...there is an assumption that children are safe, and that everyone in the community is watching out for them” (Bowie et al, 2011, p. 8). Many families rely on community leaders and elders to help solve disputes, clarify communication, and provide general leadership of the community (Bowie et al, 2011; Wolf, 2010). Many Somali families living in America express feelings of loneliness and isolation as they adjust to parenting mostly by themselves (Bowie et al, 2011; Wolf, 2010). In addition, parents have a fear and anxiety of losing their children. They worry that Child Protective Services (CPS) will take their children away or they will lose their children to drugs and/or gangs. Parents express that in America, children have less respect for elders and when children gain language fluency and education at higher rates than their parents, it can further decrease the power that parents feel they have. There is a widespread parental concern about American culture and systems undermining parental authority, and giving more power to children than parents would like. This anxiety of not wanting their children to be lost to American systems or to American culture leads Somali parents to emphasize teaching their children traditional values and religion. Many parents send their child to Somali school (for academics and also religion) in hopes that the child will remain true to cultural and religious beliefs and traditions. Other families may also send their child back to Somalia in order to teach respect (Bowie et al, 2011).

There are many strengths of Somali families expressed in these studies. These strengths include preserving culture and tradition and seeking to pass that onto their children. In addition, seeking wisdom from the community and relying on each other is a huge strength. As schools seek to build connections with families, it is important to acknowledge and lean into these strengths that our families bring to our schools.

Within the research that has been conducted, it is seen that ideas of education and the parents' view of their own role in the child's education can strongly impact their views of school engagement. The studies conducted have helped give a broad overview of Somali beliefs and attitudes, yet research specifically looking at parents' perspectives of school engagement is lacking. There is a need for more research asking Somali families of their perspectives regarding school engagement in order to better understand how to partner together. This is an integral first step in helping educators reach out to Somali families in an effective way, leading to students' academic achievement.

### **Academic Achievement**

The notion that parental involvement positively affects students' academic achievement is widely received to be true by educators, administrators, policymakers, students, and parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001). Many research studies have shown the positive effects of parents becoming involved with their child's education (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001). These positive outcomes included better school attendance, reduced dropout rates, and an increase in academic achievement (measured by grades and grade point average) (Behnke & Kelly, 2011; Deglado-Gaitan, 2004). In this vein, many people (including administrators and policymakers) have tried to develop parent involvement programs. Much research has been done in regard to

effective parental involvement programs. These studies differ in their approach to what involvement entails. Some researchers seek to grow on-site school presence by families, while others look at more of the social effects. Looking at involvement as not just on-site school presence, but acknowledging that involvement can mean mindsets, norms, and expectations that parents have at home is more inclusive of the EL community. Educators and researchers have also noticed, with the increased push towards parental involvement, that certain cultural groups are not as involved. This is where a definition of parental involvement is crucial. Much of the research that studied the effect of parental involvement on academic achievement did not define parental involvement or academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001). Parental involvement can mean different things to different people, so clearly defining it is crucial for a better understanding of what leads to improved academic achievement.

One meta-analysis study by Jeynes (2003) found that parental involvement affected all levels of academic achievement, including GPA, standardized tests, and other measures as well (p. 213). This increase impacted children of all races studied. These findings are consistent with many other studies that have proved that parental involvement positively impacts students' academic achievement, regardless of contextual factors (race, age, gender, etc.) (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003). One interesting finding of this research study is that some aspects of parental involvement benefited African Americans and Latinos more in regard to academic achievement than Asian Americans. This shows that more research is needed in order to determine the factors that cause a cultural disparity in academic results.

There is a clear need for additional research in understanding the different perspectives of EL families towards school engagement. The literature shows that the understanding of family engagement is expanding to be more inclusive towards EL families. However, there is more work to be done. Additional research is needed in order to understand different cultural groups' attitudes of school engagement. This is necessary as family involvement has been shown to increase students' academic achievement. When educators and policy makers seek to understand the differing cultural perspectives of family engagement, then schools can better educate and partner with families in order to promote student academic success. It is important to hear directly from these parents to reveal their attitudes. This capstone seeks to better understand Somali families' attitudes as it seeks to answer the question: What priorities and perspectives do Somali families of middle school students have of school engagement?

### **Conclusion**

This section, first, discussed family engagement and its expanding, yet still complex definition. Then, familial attitudes toward school were discussed, including how EL families often bring different expectations than common school expectations. Somali attitudes were then specifically highlighted and then familial involvement and its positive effect on academic achievement. The next chapter will discuss the participants, setting, and methods of the research study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

#### Overview

Research has shown the academic and behavioral benefits of family engagement in a child's education. However, research has also shown that different cultures view school engagement differently. There is a need for more research investigating the different cultural attitudes towards school engagement. Research that seeks to hear Somali family perspectives, in particular, is lacking. This study will focus on the perspectives and priorities of Somali families towards school engagement. In this study, I seek to answer the question: What priorities and perspectives do Somali families of middle school students have regarding school engagement? The data collected will be through a survey containing both open-ended and closed-item questions.

In this chapter, I will, first, discuss the participants (Somali parents of secondary students), setting (a public middle school), and materials (a survey questioning participants on their perceptions of the effectiveness of school engagement programs and efforts) of the study. I will then discuss the paradigm of this study which is a mixed methods study. Then, I will discuss the procedure of the research study which will consist of distributing a survey to Somali parents and then analyzing the data. I will then discuss how the data will be analyzed and the ethics of the study.

#### Methods

**Research paradigm.** This study is a mixed methods study as it utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative research, according to Mackey & Gass (2005) results in quantifiable data and a numerical analysis can be conducted (p. 2).

Qualitative research, on the other hand, is based on “descriptive data that does not make (regular) use of statistical procedures” (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 162). This study was conducted through the use of a survey that includes both quantitative data (gathered from closed item questions) and qualitative data (gathered from open-ended questions). This combination of both quantitative and qualitative data helped me gain insight that would not be possible had I only chosen one research paradigm (Mackey & Gass, 2005). This insight allowed me to see patterns in priorities and perspectives, as well as attempt to determine core beliefs that contribute to those patterns in an effort to more deeply understand parent perceptions of school engagement practices.

The goal of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of respondents’ priorities and perspectives, so a survey was chosen, as it has respondents answer questions that would reveal their beliefs and attitudes on school engagement. According to Mackey and Gass (2005), surveys are commonly used in second language research in order to gain insight into the beliefs and motivations that the respondent holds. This type of information is unique to surveys. Surveys by nature tend to be “interpretive and statistical methods” (Brown, as cited in Mackey & Gass, 2005, p.167). As my desire was to not only see what respondents believed, but why they believed what they did, I chose to include both closed questions, which would tend to reveal what they believe, and open-ended questions, which would tend to reveal why they believe the way they do. Closed (quantitative) questions will provide concrete data that can be analyzed to show parents’ attitudes of roles and efforts. Open-ended (qualitative) questions will provide insight into families’ core beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of school engagement, as

well as barriers that are present and ways the school can improve in school engagement efforts.

Throughout this study, I will be using different measures through closed and open-ended questions. Therefore, triangulation is used. According to Mackey & Gass (2005), triangulation is the “use of multiple, independent methods of obtaining data in a single investigation in order to arrive at the same research findings” (p. 181).

Triangulation increases the “credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability” of a study (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 181). It is important to ensure that the data collected accurately convey respondents’ beliefs as much as possible. So, I wanted to ensure that triangulation of data are used by using different methods of collection.

Quantitative data was gathered from the closed-item questions at the beginning of the survey. In an effort to discover patterns and communicate simple, concise findings, quantitative data was collected (Mackey & Gass, 2005). This quantitative data is appropriate to glean insight into certain patterns and attitudes that families have towards the effectiveness of school engagement practices.

The qualitative data will be gathered from the open-ended responses from the survey. Mackey and Gass (2005) describe several characteristics of qualitative research that fit the current study. This open-ended portion of the study will focus on providing descriptions of attitudes presented by the participants, rather than presenting data through measurements, scores, or ratings (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p.162). In addition, this study will focus on a few individuals in their natural setting and will not control other

contextual factors. For these reasons, the data collection is qualitative in nature and lends to a deeper understanding of attitudes.

**Participants and setting.** This study will examine the perspectives of four Somali parents. The parents involved in the study will be Somali, and have at least one child currently enrolled at a Middle School in the district I work in. In an effort to control variables, I will seek parents who have lived in the United States for about 20-30 years, and primarily lived in Somalia before moving to the U.S. Ideally, I will have equal numbers of males and females with similar educational backgrounds and of similar socioeconomic status. I will contact parents of Somali students and ask if they would be interested in participating, and then determine if they fit the criteria. A translated questionnaire will be made available for those who need it. I will also offer the option to take the survey on the phone with me. If they choose this, I will read the survey to them and write down responses. I will be conscious of any direction or clarification I give, as to contain variables in the study.

The school where this study will take place is a public middle school in a district in the Upper Midwest serving grades 6-8. The district is made up of over 18,000 students, and approximately 2,090 are EL students. The size of the town is approximately 120,000. The district has four middle schools. The middle school where this study will take place has a population of about 1,100 students. I currently work at this middle school and will contact the parents who would participate. In order to communicate with the EL families, the district employs bilingual specialists. I will ask our bilingual specialists and EL implementation associate to help me contact the families if needed. These bilingual specialists work for the whole district. There are currently four Somali bilingual

specialists. The district does not use formal translation services outside of the bilingual specialists. Teachers are aware of apps and websites that utilize translation services. The bilingual specialists are essential in communicating with families.

**Materials.** In order to better understand the perspectives that Somali families have towards school engagement, I designed a survey that asks both closed-item and open-ended questions. It was designed to better understand how Somali parents view their role in their child's education, and the school's engagement efforts. The closed questions on the survey were developed using Epstein et al.'s (2002) framework to ensure that all of the Six Types of Parental Involvement were included. These six types are parenting (i.e. parents create a home environment to support children as students), communicating (i.e. parents partake in communication with school), volunteering, learning at home (i.e. parents help with homework and other school activities and planning), decision making (i.e. parents partake in school decisions), and collaborating with community (i.e. parents are aware and can use resources and service from other community programs and organizations). In addition, I also modeled my survey after Gagnelius' (2016) research with Chinese families. In her study, a survey was given to participants in which parents rated different school engagement events and activities on a 5 point Likert type scale and then answered open-ended questions. I used the concepts of her survey and modeled mine after hers. For the first part of the survey in my study, respondents were given a variety of current school engagement efforts (i.e. attending PTA meetings, reading at home with child, volunteering at school, and attending Parent Teacher conferences) and chose whether the event or activity is important, neutral, or not important. There is also a zero option if the participant doesn't know what the event or

activity is. The second part of the survey consists of open-ended questions asking parents to explain their perspectives.

This method of data collection was chosen as it reveals respondents' beliefs of the relative importance of school engagement efforts (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The questions have participants decide on the importance of different current school engagement efforts. Respondents chose whether they believe the event or activity is important, neutral, or not important, with an added zero point if they don't know what it is. For example, participants will be asked to choose whether Open House Night is important, neutral, or not important. To see the full survey, refer to Appendix A.

While the closed questions give insight into families' priorities, I also am interested in learning about the beliefs, motivations, and rationale behind participants' opinions. For this reason, I asked questions such as: *What do you believe is the most important thing you can do to help your child in middle school? What is the most important source of your child's education?* These responses to open-ended questions helped me better understand the reasons behind parents' priorities and perspectives of school engagement, and helped gain further insight into their attitudes of school engagement.

**Procedure. Pilot Study.** A pilot study was conducted prior to releasing the questionnaire. This pilot study was sent out to bilingual specialists in the district, three of whom responded. The pilot study used a 4 point Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Based on feedback, the questionnaire was adapted to a 5 point Likert-type scale. The questions of the pilot study were sent out via a Google Form and participants were asked to answer each question honestly and only choose one

response. The questions on the pilot study were: I believe that our district does an excellent job of communicating with families; I believe that EL families face barriers to becoming involved at their child's school; I believe that EL families feel welcome at their child's school.

The survey found that participants voted favorably (Agree or strongly agree) to the first question and the third question. The second question (regarding barriers to involvement) had one person disagree (meaning EL families do not face barriers) and two people agree that EL families do face barriers.

After conducting the pilot study, a survey was formulated based on results and feedback. One major change was to adjust the closed questions to have parents identify the importance of specific school engagement efforts. This way, I could easily determine the priorities of parents. I also added open-ended questions. I then piloted the new survey, specifically looking at the open-ended questions. I sent this pilot to a Somali parent within our district who works as a bilingual specialist. I asked her to take the survey and to provide feedback on the open-ended questions. Based on her responses, I adjusted the closed-item questions to only include 3 options (important, neutral, not important) instead of a 5 point Likert type scale. This simplification is more culturally appropriate and easier for English learners to understand.

***The survey.*** After finalizing the survey and gaining IRB approval, I began calling Somali parents and asking if they would be interested in taking part in the study. I called six parents, and four agreed. Participants were given the choice of taking the survey electronically through Google Forms or on paper. The option to take the survey over the phone with me was also made available to them. A translated survey was also available

and sent out. I chose these options in order to allow respondents to take the survey in an accessible and comfortable way. This is in hopes of eliciting thorough and honest perspectives of participants.

**Data analysis.** Following the survey (made up of both closed-item questions and open-ended questions), I analyzed the findings. For the closed-item questions, I tallied responses and created graphs to show commonalities. For the open-ended questions, I read responses and coded for themes. The open-ended responses were read in hopes to gain further insight into how parents perceive their roles in their child's education and how we as educators can better partner with these parents.

I chose to include both closed and open-ended questions in an effort to better understand the priorities and perspectives of the respondents. However, analyzing survey data raises potential problems. According to Mackey & Gass (2005), one problem is that the data collected may not show a complete picture of the participants' views, particularly in open-ended responses. In order to mitigate this, I allowed respondents to have ample time to answer the survey questions. I sent it out and gave them at least 5 days to answer. I also allowed respondents to provide oral answers, which were then recorded and transcribed by me. This allowed respondents who are more orally-inclined to use that method.

Another factor in gathering insufficient data is that the respondents' first language is different from my own. In order to mitigate this, I chose respondents who have been in the country between 20-30 years and have basic English skills. I also offered the survey in Somali, and to be done orally instead of written.

## **Data Analysis**

The closed-item questions on the survey were tallied based on the number circled. I grouped responses by frequency. The open-ended questions on the survey were coded in order to determine themes. I coded in order to look for patterns (Mackey & Gass, 2005). I read through each response and noticed any patterns or themes that I could draw inferences from. I then created categories based off of the responses I received and interpreted as necessary. I used the information from both the closed and open-ended questions to analyze how parents view school engagement efforts. In learning these perspectives, hopefully teachers and parents can better partner together to help boost the students' academic achievement and overall well-being.

## **Ethics**

Since this capstone involves human subjects, certain steps were taken in order to protect these subjects. I gained permission from Hamline University and the school district in which the study took place. Participants answered questions on a voluntary basis and their identity was not disclosed at any point in the study. They are referred to either with pseudonyms or as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. and not by their names. They also signed written permission to gain data from their responses. I also provided clear communication of what I am looking for and how I interpreted, analyzed, and communicated the findings. The survey was given through Google Forms. Participants' identification (known from email on Google form) was only made known to me to ensure anonymity. The data that Google forms collects are only accessible to me through my Google account, which requires a password. No one else has access to this Google

account. The data collected will be deleted after seven years. Throughout the study, these measures were taken to ensure participants comfort and safety.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the design of this mixed methods research study, the materials (a survey), participants (Somali parents), setting (a public middle school), methods (survey consisting of open and closed questions), and procedures involved in this research study, which will focus on exploring the perspectives of Somali families towards school engagement efforts. Chapter four will present, analyze, and discuss the results of the data collection.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Results**

In this chapter I will present the results and findings from the survey that was administered to Somali parents. I will then discuss these findings as they relate to the existing field of literature. The survey given in this study consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. The closed questions consisted of two different categories: home activities and school activities. The study found several important results, including the prioritization of those events and activities that directly benefit the individual child's academics. In addition, it was found that parents desire more resources, more equitable practices, and also see the value of the education offered at school. Four Somali parents of current middle school students responded to the survey.

Through the participants' responses on the survey, I sought to find the answer to this research question: What priorities and perspectives do Somali families of middle school students have regarding school engagement?

### **Results and Analysis**

In order to find the answer to my research question, I gave a survey to four Somali parents. These parents ranged in their years of residency in the United States from 19-32 years (cf. Table 1 below). Their level of education varied significantly, from attending school from 4-20 years. Three participants were females and one was male. Two of the four participants speak English most of the time, while the other two participants speak Somali most of the time. Due to the fact that I did not involve a translator or bilingual specialists help, I was limited by who could participate in the study based on their English language proficiency.

Table 1

*Description of Participants*

Participant	Gender	Years receiving formal education	Years residing in the U.S.	Primary Language
1	Male	20	32	English
2	Female	4	19	Somali
3	Female	5	21	Somali
4	Female	16	25	English

**Part One: Closed Questions.** The first part of the survey listed 24 different home and school engagement efforts and activities. I divided these into two categories: home activities and school activities. I will, first, present the findings for home activities, and then school activities, and then draw conclusions and comparisons between the two. In the survey, with each activity that was listed, participants chose whether each was important, neutral, not important, or don't know what this is.

**Home Activities.** Four participants took the survey and chose on a 3-point Likert scale whether each school engagement effort was important or not. The table below shows the number of participants that chose that level of importance, with 4 being the total number of participants.

Table 2

*Participants' ratings of the importance of different school engagement efforts at home*

	Not important	Neutral	Important	Don't know what this is
Asking child about school			4	
Checking Skyward			4	
Reading school newsletter		2	2	
Following school social media accounts		2	2	
Emailing child's teacher updates or questions			4	
Helping with homework			4	
Ensuring child gets enough sleep at night			4	
Limiting non-school screen time			4	
Reading with child			4	
Asking child if they have homework			4	
Encouraging child to read independently			4	
Encouraging child to do well in school			4	
Reading emails or letters from school			4	

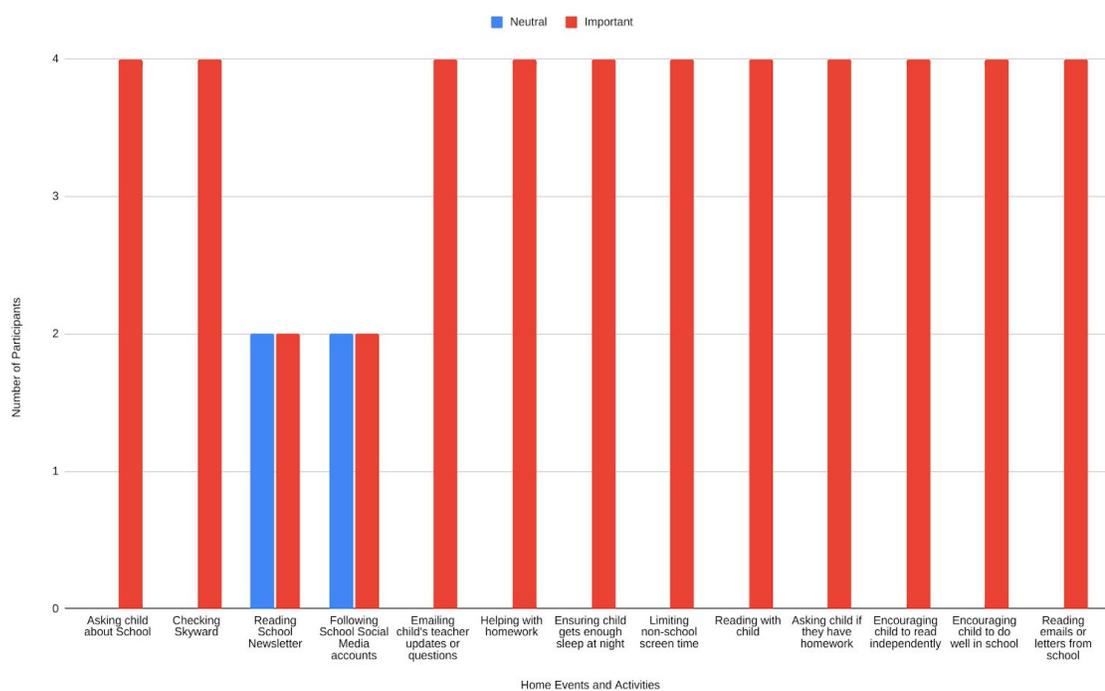


Figure 1

*Participants' ratings of school engagement efforts at home*

From these data it can be seen that, overall, home activities were seen as being important. 11 of the 13 activities had 100% (4 out of 4) of participants saying the activity was important. Two events held less importance with 50% (2 out of 4) of participants responding that the activities were neutral: *Reading the school newsletter* and *following school social media accounts*. There were no responses indicating no importance. All the activities directly correlating to the individual child's academics received a rating of "important." The two activities that held less importance were the two activities that correlate to school-wide information and involvement. Therefore, it can be seen that all home activities held importance.

Interestingly, parents saw activities that have more active involvement (i.e. *helping with homework* and *reading with child*) as equally as important as activities

which hold less involvement (i.e. *asking child about school* and *encouraging child to do well in school*). The efforts that held less active involvement did not have less importance, rather they held as much importance as efforts with highly active involvement.

***School Activities.*** The next portion of the survey had participants state whether a variety of school activities were important, neutral, not important, or don't know what this is. Table 3 below shows the number of participants that chose that level of importance, with 4 being the total number of participants. The following graph in Figure 2 displays this information as well.

Table 3

*Participants' ratings of the importance of different school engagement efforts at school*

	Not important	Neutral	Important	Don't know what this is
Parent Teacher Conferences			4	
Back to School Open House			4	
Book Fair		4		
Child attending school dance	1	2	1	
Volunteering at school		2	2	
Attending PTA meetings		1	2	1
Attending music concerts		1	3	
Attending sport events		1	3	
Attending or watching School Board meetings		1	3	
EL STEM night	1		3	
EL Art night	1	1	2	

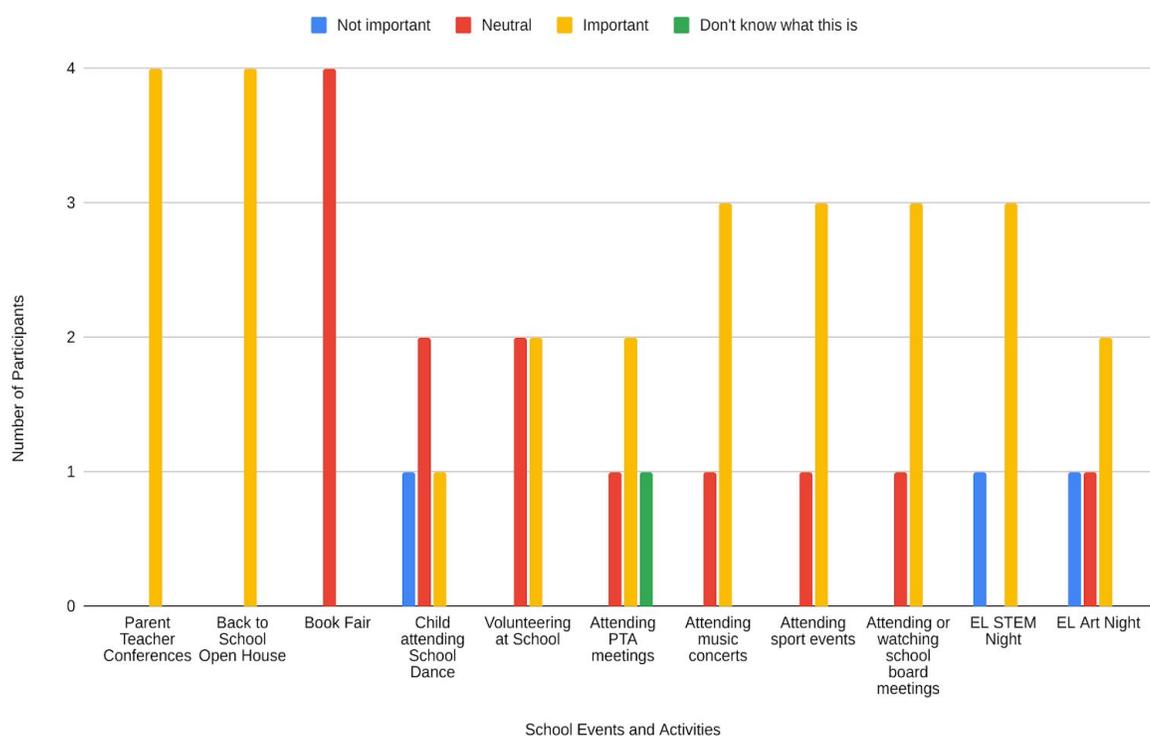


Figure 2

*Participants' ratings of school engagement efforts at school*

The school activities had much more variation in importance than the home activities. Two school events had 100% (4 out of 4) of participants respond that they were important: *Parent teacher conferences* and *Back to School Open House*, presumably because they directly benefit their child. The events with the least importance were the *Book Fair* and *Child attending the school dance*. It is also interesting to note that one participant stated that *Child attending school dance* was not important. This could have been due to cultural and religious beliefs.

The school activities also had many more neutral responses in comparison to the home activities. This may be because these items relate more to the entire school community, rather than for the benefit of the individual child's academic success. This is

supported by two participants' statements, who took the survey on the phone, and for these items they made statements such as, "If my child is in the sport, then I will go." This shows that the parents want to support their individual child, but the importance is limited to when it affects the individual child. Furthermore, these items are not directly related to the child's academics (i.e. core subjects like reading and math), so they may hold less importance. These items, rather than directly benefiting the individual child, pertain more to benefiting the entire school community.

Overall, school engagement efforts held at school had less importance than school engagement efforts at home. There were still not enough responses of not important, though, for an activity to not hold any importance. So, school engagement efforts at school are viewed as being important, but not as important as school engagement efforts at home.

It should also be noted that the parents I talked to on the phone made statements such as, "Yes they are important, but I don't do it because I don't have time." This supports the other findings of this research in that parents see the importance of family engagement, yet have barriers that impede the level of involvement. It seems, though, that they do prioritize those things that directly benefit the child's academics. They see the importance of other school activities, but do not prioritize doing them as there are barriers and the event or activity does not seemingly directly benefit the child's academics.

One important outlier in the data to note is that one participant responded "don't know what this is" to *PTA meetings*. This intriguing response will be discussed within the general discussion section.

**Part Two: Open-Ended Questions.** The second part of the survey asked respondents to expand on their thoughts of school engagement through open-ended questions. The responses give insight into the families perspectives of their child's schooling.

In response to the question, *“What do you believe is the most important thing you can do to help your child in middle school?”* all participants sought to reinforce school learning at home. Responses included wanting to help with homework and supporting their student by asking them how their day was. Responses included, “reading and helping with math,” “make sure they are doing their work,” and “Asking child how their day was is important.” All of these responses show that participants sought to reinforce school learning and help their child maintain a good standing at school.

One respondent also sought behavioral success for their child, as well as academic. They stated that monitoring behavior was important because “It's important for my culture to make sure that my kids aren't bad, make sure they grow up to be successful adults.” Responses show that parents desire their child to maintain a good standing both academically and behaviorally.

In response to the question, *“If you have questions regarding school, homework, or other school activities, what do you do?”* 50% of parents answered that they email the teacher, while the other 50% said that they call the office. These responses indicate that all participants make (and prefer) direct contact with school, either through the office or the teacher.

In response to the question, *“What is the most important source of your child's education?”* 50% of participants said school, while the other 50% said a religious group.

When asked why they believe school is the most important source, they responded, “They learn a lot in school” and “School is where they get their education.” When asked why they believe a religious group is the most important source one respondent said, “It is important for the child to learn their religion and know expectations in life. When a child has faith/religion he/she has so much respect for other religions too.”

In response to the question, “*What are ways that the school can help you feel more welcome and included?*” parents expressed the need for more equitable practices and for better communication. 75% of participants referenced a need for more equitable practices, saying things like, “Welcoming diversity inclusion,” “Having high expectations for my child,” and “Treat everybody the same. As a person, as a human being. Treat everyone equally regardless of culture and religion.” 50% of participants referenced the need for better communication, saying “Tell us everything that is going on.”

When asked if there was anything else that they would like to add about their involvement, 50% of participants said that parents need more resources to help with their child’s academics. They stated the need for additional free tutoring and more resources for children who are struggling or left behind. One participant also stated the need for teachers to “Email early on, so if there is a problem I can intervene early.”

### **General Discussion**

My research question was: What priorities and perspectives do Somali families of middle school students have regarding school engagement? The survey data results reveal four findings of parents priorities and perspectives regarding school engagement.

1. Somali families prioritize school engagement efforts that directly correlate to their individual child’s academic achievement.

2. Somali families desire individualized communication and resources that directly impact their students academic success.
3. Somali families desire educators to show more equitable practices.
4. Somali families value school and see the importance of the education that is offered. They seek to reinforce this learning at home and some supplement with a moral education.

This study helped shed light on the prioritization of Somali parents in their school engagement efforts. One of the findings is that parents prioritize those events that seem to directly benefit the child's academic performance. This finding helps fill a gap present in the field of literature on Somali families views regarding school engagement. The events that related to school-wide information and involvement were seen as being not as important as those events that correlated to the individual child, particularly the child's academic life. These activities that were less important on average included *Following school social media accounts, Reading the school newsletter, Volunteering at school, and attending PTA meetings*. All of these activities correlate to school wide information and involvement. Other activities that rated lower in importance were the *Book fair* and *Child attending the school dance*. The school dance, I would postulate, was not as important because it does not directly correlate to the child's academics. The book fair may be an outlier as reading does help an individual child's academics. However, it may be seen as less important because it costs money and is put on by a separate organization (Scholastic). The highest rated activities in importance include *Parent Teacher conferences, Open House night, and all home activities* aside from two school-wide

information sources. Each of these activities directly correlate to the individual child's academic life.

This prioritization of individualized academic support in events and activities is also seen in what parents expressed as a need in the community. One of those needs was more effective communication. In response to *Question 2: If you have questions regarding school, homework, or other school activities, what do you do?* 100% of participants answered that they make direct communication with the school. Participants could have said (but did not) that they contact community workers, friends, family, the bilingual specialist, or they don't do anything. Instead, all said that they make direct contact with the school, either to the office or to the teacher. This shows that parents desire direct individualized communication and, most likely, feel comfortable having direct individualized communication with the school. In addition, 50% of participants referenced the need for better communication in their responses to *Question 6: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your involvement in your child's education?*

Within my current district, Skyward is used as a key communicative tool in sharing grades and messages. In my study, I was particularly interested in seeing if parents were aware of Skyward, as this is a site that the district heavily uses to communicate with parents. In some personal discussions with parents outside of this research project, I have heard that some parents are unaware of what Skyward is, don't know how to log in, or don't use it. These research data show that all parents knew what it was and all participants stated that it was important. This could be due to the fact that these parents have more years of residency in the United States and higher levels of

English language proficiency than other families. Even with the knowledge of using Skyward and seeing its importance, though, parents are asking for improved communication.

Another need that parents expressed was for more individualized resources, i.e. free tutoring, particularly for those students who are struggling and falling behind. It is clear from these desires that parents value their child's education and want to help. However, many parents have barriers that make it more difficult for them to help. Many EL families, including the Somali families in this study, feel ill-informed, disempowered, confused, and inadequate (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Bowie et al. 2011; Heitritter, 1999; Nderu, 2005; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). Therefore, they are asking teachers to offer direct support.

One participant stated, "I'm sure teachers think that we don't do anything, but there is a language barrier sometimes. It doesn't mean that we don't care. We all want our kids to be good. In our community, we all want to make sure that our kids are doing good things. It's hard here and kids are struggling all the time. If a specific kid needs help and is struggling with language or whatever, make sure that they are getting help. They're not always reading emails you know?" Another parent stated, "I don't speak English well and don't know math, so I like when there is tutoring... We need help." These responses indicate that a lack of English language proficiency is a barrier that our parents are facing.

In addition to a language barrier, parents referenced their own lack of education as a barrier. Two of the parents I surveyed had a total of 4 years of formal schooling. This is not to say that they are not educated, but they may be unfamiliar with the expectations

and language of school. Both of these parents indicated wanting more help as they don't understand the homework and the language. Another parent, who has more education and speaks English all the time, also mentioned the needs of others in her community to receive more academic help.

It is clear that many people in the Somali community are facing barriers. The community seeks to help and support each other, in spite of these barriers. According to Heitritter (1999) and Nderu (2005), Somali families typically expect interdependence between their families and the community. There is a strong sense of community and families rely on each other for support. Within my study, 75% of participants spoke for their community and said that many within the community needed more help. This shows the interdependence of the community and the support that they give and receive. Educators can seek to disrupt the barriers and help the community by offering individualized academic support and improved communication.

Another key finding, which I was not expecting from the study, was that parents desire the schools to have more equitable practices. In response to Question 5: *What are ways that the school can help you feel more welcome and included?* 75% of the parents referenced a need for more equitable practices, particularly from teachers. Parents are not necessarily wanting physical things, events, or specific actions. Instead, they want the schools to show more equitable practices. When asked how they could feel more welcome, one parent stated that teachers should have "high expectations for my child." I believe that this statement is referring to implicit bias that the teachers have and having lower expectations for students who are English learners. The parents are not necessarily

looking for more events or having the parents come into school more, but for teachers to address their own implicit bias and seek to be more equitable.

Other responses to Question 5 included, “Treat everybody the same. As a person, as a human being. Treat everyone equally regardless of culture and religion.” and “[schools need to be] welcoming diversity inclusion.” It is clear that these parents are seeing inequity happen in the schools and are asking educators to address it.

Another important outlier from my data, that I believe is an equity issue, is that one participant did not know what the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) is. This is important to note for several reasons. The PTA is an organization that seeks to support teachers and students by organizing and fundraising school-wide events, as well as family engagement events. If a parent is unaware of its existence it should cause educators, administrators, and PTA members to question why this is. This should cause members to evaluate their communication and recruitment processes and call into question whether they are equitable. It could be that the PTA is favoring people of a certain cultural background (i.e. white middle class), rather than seeking to recruit parents that are truly representative of the student body. This survey response should be a key indicator to PTA members of the need for more inclusive practices that seek to gain different perspectives on school events and family engagement efforts within the schools.

The last key finding of the study was that participants value school and see the importance of the education that is offered (Bowie et al, 2011). They seek to reinforce this learning at home and some also provide a moral education. Responses on the survey indicated that parents viewed education as the academic education that comes from

schools and their role was to support this education, while also providing a moral education.

The findings of my study were similar to and would support those of Nderu's (2005) study, which found that all Somali parents saw themselves as responsible for providing out-of-school support. This support included encouragement for the child to do well in school and to encourage good behavior. 100% of the participants in my study saw providing out-of-school support as important and sought to do this by helping with homework, asking their child how their day was, and ensuring that the child was behaving in school.

In addition, it was seen that providing a moral/religious education was important to some participants. This desire to provide a moral education supplementing the child's academic education was seen in response to the question asking, *What is the most important source of your child's education?* and 50% of participants responded to a religious group. When asked why they believed that, respondents stated, "To have faith is important and you need an education for that." Another respondent stated, "It is important for the child to learn his/her religion and know their expectations in life. When a child has faith/religion he/she has so much respect towards the other religions too." This moral education also includes enforcing behavior expectations. One parent stated that one of the most important things she could do for her child in middle school was "monitoring behavior...It's important for my culture to make sure that my kids aren't bad, make sure they grow up to be successful adults." This value of a religious and moral education, however, was not necessarily stated by each parent.

It is interesting to compare and contrast this study with Durand's (2010) study and his findings of Latino families' view of education. Latino families tend to view education as encompassing a child's moral, social, and academic development. This study showed that Latino parents believe their job is to provide the moral and social education, while the teacher provides academic education. The Euro-American idea of education differs from this in that it is highly academic, with less social and moral development (Durand, 2010; Halgunseth et al, 2006; Skogrand et al, 2005; Zarate, 2007). The findings from my study would support the idea that Somali parents view education primarily as academic, and with an added emphasis on moral education as well. The academic education would come from the teacher, while the religious education would come from the families faith and religious education.

Overall, Somali families tend to value academic education and see it as the teacher's responsibility to educate and the parents responsibility to help reinforce learning at home. Some Somali families also prioritize religious education and see it as the parent's responsibility to educate and the teacher's responsibility to respect this religious teaching (Hietritter, 1999; Nderu, 2005). This reinforcement and respect, when combined with effective communication, is a solid foundation for a good teacher-parent partnership.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the data and findings from the survey. The data showed four key findings, which included:

1. Somali families prioritize school engagement efforts that directly correlate to their individual child's academic achievement.

2. Somali families desire individualized communication and resources that directly impact their students academic success.
3. Somali families desire educators to show more equitable practices.
4. Somali families value school and see the importance of the education that is offered. They seek to reinforce this learning at home and some supplement with a moral education.

After presenting the data and findings, I then discussed how the findings compare to those presented in the literature review. Overall, the current study supports much of the research that has already occurred, and hopefully can add to the research field in order to better understand Somali family perspectives and priorities regarding school engagement. Chapter 5 will discuss the implications and limitations of the study and then the recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to better understand parent perspectives of school engagement. The research question was: What priorities and perspectives do Somali families of middle school students have regarding school engagement? This study's findings and implications will help guide educators and administrators as they seek to engage families in their child's academic journey.

In this chapter I will, first, discuss the implications of the study including general recommendations regarding engagement and also implications for educators and administrators. I will then discuss the limitations and recommendations for future research.

### Implications

This study provided valuable insight into the perspectives and priorities that some Somali parents have regarding school engagement. From the findings, I was able to directly hear of parent needs and barriers that they are facing. I was also able to infer some of the other barriers and think of possible solutions for schools to disrupt these barriers and create more inclusive engagement processes and mindsets.

**General Recommendations for Engagement.** One of the first steps in seeking to engage all of our families at school is to adjust our view of engagement. Educators and administrators should seek to broaden their view of school engagement to include home and school presence, instead of exclusively focusing on in-school presence. We should pursue an understanding of how cultural viewpoints can influence school engagement expectations and seek to understand other people's viewpoints. Many parents face

barriers that make coming to school very difficult. We also need to realize that parents face many barriers at home. These barriers, like language, time, and lack of formal education, make it difficult for parents to provide significant help at home. Educators and administrators should ensure that they are knowledgeable of these barriers in order to not put unnecessary burden and expectations onto parents. Instead, they should seek to dissolve the barriers.

With this view that engagement is more than in-school presence, we can seek to empower families at home. Educators can offer resources and training for parents in order to equip and empower parents at home. Families whose first language is not English and/or families without much formal education can especially benefit from these explanations of expectations and resources that are available. Participants in this study expressed a desire for better communication and more resources, and they also discussed the barriers that they face. By shifting our view of engagement to be more inclusive of EL families, we can take meaningful steps towards dissolving barriers and improving our communicative practices.

With the events that do happen at school, some carry more significance than others. For example, Open House Night is a time for families to meet teachers, get the child's schedule, take their ID picture, and get acquainted with the school building. This event holds more significance for the child's school year and academic life than a fun carnival night. It is important to communicate this with families so that parents know which events should be attended and which are more optional.

**Recommendations for School Administrators and Teachers.** Through this research, I found many different implications for administrators, teachers, and others

involved in the decision making process for school-wide policies and expectations. First, participants in the study expressed the need for teachers to be communicating early and often. It's important to communicate before the problem is too big. For example, teachers should not wait until a child has a failing grade and 5 missing assignments at the end of the quarter to let the parents know. Parents want to know as soon as possible, so that they can help the child end successfully. Parents in this study wanted frequent communication of how the child is doing in the class. We, as teachers, cannot rely on the students to be telling their child what is going on in school. We need to also directly communicate with parents.

The survey found that participants wanted better communication and also wanted more resources, including tutoring, to help their child with their academics. It was also found that items such as *Reading the school newsletter* and *Following school social media accounts* were not as important. Herein lies a gap. Within our school newsletter and within different school social media accounts, parents can find out about the variety of resources that the school offers, which includes free tutoring. This shows that parents may need to be explicitly shown and told the importance of things like reading the school newsletter. Since the findings of this study indicate that parents prioritize engagement efforts that directly benefit the individual child's academics, teachers and administrators can show parents how reading the school newsletter can help support their child's academics. This could be a part of Open House Night or Parent Teacher Conferences, since those events were of high importance to parents and they would prioritize attending. We should ensure that parents are aware of existing programs (like after school homework help) and seek to communicate with them about these resources. This

communication needs to be two-way, meaning that the teacher needs to hear back from the parent, in order for it to count as communication. Otherwise, we can not ensure that parents are aware.

Another suggestion to offer resources and improve communication is to have an EL Back to School Night in which parents would be taught expectations and offered resources. This would be done at the beginning of the year and, with interpreters present, it would ensure that parents were aware of the resources that the school offers, and the different methods of communication that teachers use. For example, parents who may be unaware of the vast number of resources that are communicated through the school newsletter could be shown and told how helpful it is. If we can show them this and tell them how important it is, then they may be less likely to not read it.

Our schools can also seek to increase the number of support staff to ensure that children are getting help in their classes. If the child can't get help in their class, they will go home and not be able to do the homework, and the parent may not be able to help either. If we can increase the number of support staff, then it will not place undue stress on the family and the child will be more successful.

In addition to strengthening communication and offering resources for support, parents also expressed the desire for more equitable practices. Our schools can prioritize equity work in staff development sessions and form committees to address needs. Teachers should seek to build their understanding of their own biases and privilege, and put in the work to ensure that all students and their families not only feel safe in our schools, but empowered. In order to do this, teachers can start by reading books that

focus on equity, bias, and anti-racism in order to educate themselves and reflect on their teaching practices.

Within this work of equity, schools can also discuss PTA and if their PTA seeks to hear from all of the represented cultures and backgrounds of the student body. If the PTA is largely composed of one cultural group, then that cultural group will influence the events and how the money is spent. If the PTA seeks to recruit parents of all the represented backgrounds, then they may receive valuable input as to how to spend money and what kind of events to put on.

One final implication for teachers and administrators is that, overall, the survey that I gave provided meaningful insight into parent perspectives and it could easily be adapted for future use in order to hear from parents. I would encourage teachers and administrators to regularly use these kinds of surveys to informally gain insight into parent perspectives and inform their practice.

### **Limitations**

This study, although informative, had certain limitations. One limitation was the small sample size. Four parents participated in the study. This low number helps us to better understand parent perspectives, but it is harder to make generalizations when interpreting the data. This limitation in numbers was mostly impacted by the fact that I did not involve a translator. Since there was no translator, I relied on parents who either had a high enough level of English language proficiency to understand the questions on the survey and be able to answer in English or who could read and write in Somali (as the survey was offered on paper in Somali). The parents who chose to participate were those parents who were comfortable communicating in English. The parents who chose not to

participate were those parents who were not comfortable in English or reading Somali and/or did not have the technology to take the survey electronically (i.e. no email).

Another limitation that is important to note is my own standing as a teacher, who is a white woman with limited experiences within the Somali culture. My own biases and my own cultural viewpoint have probably framed the way I viewed responses and analyzed the data. I also am an employee of the district, and a teacher of these parents' children. This may have created a power dynamic with the participants that created hesitation or impacted participant responses.

Another limitation of the study was that it took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, so schools were shut down and meeting virtually and we were under orders to not see people in person. Therefore, I was limited to gathering responses electronically or on the phone and could not talk to people in person. This, then, limited the participants to those that answered the phone and/or had the technology capabilities to do the survey. Furthermore, the participants who chose to respond on the phone with me had much longer responses than those who responded electronically. Offering the electronic survey may have limited the length of responses.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As I conducted the research, some questions arose throughout the process that could guide and instruct further research in the field. As I heard from parents about their desire for more communication, I wondered what tools teachers were using to communicate (email, phone, messaging apps, etc.), how often they were communicating, and what they were communicating about. For example, what percentage of teachers communicate directly with individual parents, rather than a mass email? Of those

messages, how many are related to negative behavior vs positive behavior? How many are about school activities, events, and resources and how many are about an individual child's academic work or behavior in the classroom? Future studies could also look at different school wide communication and analyze the type of communication that is happening at a school wide level and what access is assumed in receiving the messages. For example, what percentage of communication is happening through email, which assumes that parents have and read email? What percentage is translated into other languages? What percentage contains visuals and/or audio? What percentage of administrators communication is direct communication with parents as compared to school wide communication? With this analysis of communication, it would be interesting to do a comparative study with parents, teachers and/or administrators analyzing what kinds of communication they use.

Future studies could also look at other cultural groups and analyze their perceptions of school engagement. It would be interesting to see if there are certain school engagement areas that have universals or disparities across cultures.

The information gathered from this study has been shared with the principals at my school, the equity committee at my school, and other EL teachers in the district. It will also be shared with the School Board at a future meeting. It may also be shared at a professional development training for teachers in the district. Hopefully, presenting the study and its findings will strengthen teacher-parent partnerships and will honor and empower the parents who graciously shared their perspectives with me.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed the implications and limitations of my study and recommendations for future research. I stated that the implications of this study include an adjustment of the idea of engagement as in-school presence and the importance for educators to learn of and seek to dissolve the barriers that parents are facing. It was also stated that educators should pursue communication with parents that happens early and often. This communication should ensure that parents and families are aware of the variety of resources available to help them and their child. If appropriate resources are not available, we should seek to build sufficient programming to address parent and student needs. Another implication was the need for a focus on equity in staff development and a school culture that is pursuing equity. I then discussed the limitations of the study which included a small sample size, my standing as a teacher, and not being able to do anything in person. Recommendations for future research include analyzing communication between the school and parents, and looking at other cultural groups.

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## Appendix A

### Survey

I am interested in learning more about your views. Please look at the different home and school events and activities and decide if they are important or not important. If you do not know what the event is, choose “Don’t know what this is.” Then, answer the other questions with as much detail as you can.

#### Home Activities

	Not Important	Neutral	Important	Don't Know what this is
Asking child about school				
Checking child's Skyward account				
Reading school newsletter				
Following school accounts on social media (Instagram, Facebook, etc.)				
Emailing my child's teacher updates or questions				
Helping with homework				
Ensuring child gets enough sleep at night				
Limiting child's screen time				
Reading with child				
Asking child if they have homework				
Encouraging child to read independently				
Encouraging child to do well in school				
Reading emails or letters from school				

**School Events:**

	Not Important	Neutral	Important	Don't Know what this is
Parent Teacher Conferences				
Back to School Open House				
Book Fair				
Child attending School Dance				
Volunteering at School				
Attending PTA meetings				
Attending music concerts				
Attending sport events				
Attending or watching school board meetings				
EL STEM Night				
EL Art Night				

1. What do you believe is the most important thing you can do to help your child in middle school? Why? For example: Asking my child questions about their day is the most important thing because... OR Reading at home with my child is the most important thing because....
2. If you have questions regarding school, homework, or other school activities, what do you do?
3. What is the most important source of your child's education? Choose One: Home, School, Community Groups (such as Boys and Girls Club), Religious Group (such as dugs), Social media, Television
4. Why do you believe that is the most important source?
5. What are ways that the school can help you feel more welcome and included?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add about your involvement in your child's education?

## Appendix B

### Participants full responses to open-ended questions (Pseudonyms given)

1. *What do you believe is the most important thing you can do to help your child in middle school? Why? For example: Asking my child questions about their day is the most important thing because... OR Reading at home with my child is the most important thing because....*
  - Abdurahman: To do their home works and maintain Grade A.
  - Amina: Reading and helping with math.
  - Muna: Make sure they have friends, monitoring behavior, make sure they are not skipping classes, make sure they are doing their work. Make sure they get to school on time. It's important for my culture to make sure that my kids aren't bad, make sure they grow up to be successful adults. I'm sure teachers think that we don't do anything, but there is a language barrier sometimes. It doesn't mean that we don't care. We all want our kids to be good. In our community, we all want to make sure that our kids are doing good things and in our culture. It's very hard here. Kids are struggling all the time. If a specific kid needs more help, if they are struggling with language or whatever, make sure that they are getting help. They're not reading emails, you know?
  - Hani: Asking my child how his/her day is is very important because you get to know what kind of a day your child had at school.
2. *If you have questions regarding school, homework, or other school activities, what do you do?*

- Abdurahman: Send email to the teacher
- Amina: I call the office or I come into school and ask.
- Muna: call the office
- Hani: Email the teacher

3. *What is the most important source of your child's education?*

Home	0
School	2
Community Groups (such as Boys and Girls Club)	0
Religious group (such as dugsi)	2
Social Media	0
Television Program	0

4. *Why do you believe that is the most important source?*

- Abdurahman: School is where they get their education.
- Amina: they learning a lot of stuff at school, social media is not important and is not safe.
- Muna: School, home, and dugsi are all very important. It's important to get an education so that you are successful. To have faith is important and you need an education for that.
- Hani: It is important for the child to learn his/her religion and know their expectations in life. When a child faith/religion he/she has so much respect towards other religions too.

5. *What are ways that the school can help you feel more welcome and included?*

- Abdurahman: Having high expectation for my child.

- Amina: School is very good. I like it. [Elementary school in town] and [Middle school in town] are great. A lot of homework and a lot of books are good. There's not too much drama.
  - Muna: Treat everybody the same. As a person, as a human being. Treat everyone equally regardless of culture and religion. Tell us everything that is going on.
  - Hani: Better communication and welcoming diversity inclusion.
6. *Is there anything else you would like to add about your involvement in your child's education?*
- Abdurahman: Teachers to send me emails if there is problem so I can intervene early.
  - Amina: Free tutoring would be good at school. I don't know what to do and want help. I don't speak English well and don't know math, so I like when there is tutoring. Some teachers are very nice and helping with child, but some people don't care and we don't know a lot of stuff about school. Some people on Skyward, kids hide and don't tell parents and parents don't know. If kids are in EL for awhile, it's not good because the kids stay forever. It's not good for kids to continue in EL for so long. She shouldn't be ELL. Maybe do EL for 1-2 years. Families want help to understand EL. Kids are staying in it forever. Some teachers they don't care about kids. We don't know anything. We need a lot of help from school. We're going to Kumon, getting extra help. The kids who are kinda slow are gonna stay forever. I thank the teachers, but we need help

for education. Also, for Lunch, don't want pork, ham or gelatine or anything like that. And more homework for the kids.

- Muna: no
- Hani: More resources for those children who are left behind.