Socialisation, language and learning in a Somali diasporic community in Rinkeby

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Introduction

This article is based on interviews with nine Somali educators\textsuperscript{1} and ten parents on questions concerning socialisation, language and learning for Somali children in the diaspora in Sweden.

According to a report by the National Integration Office, the Somali population in the country is about 18,500 people, most of whom are either born or arrived in Sweden in the 1990s after the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia. In terms of age, the Somali community is a very young group with the proportion of children under ten years of age being approximately 35 per cent. The largest Somali community in Sweden about 30 percent live in the Stockholm area and especially in the suburbs of Tensta and Rinkeby (Integrationsverket, 1999).

The article is structured in five parts. The first part will give a short background on the linguistic situation in Somalia. The second will briefly look at socialisation, language and learning in Somalia. The third will highlight aspects on the meeting different practices in the school systems in Somalia and Sweden and in the fourth I will turn to the role of the Somali educators. I will then conclude with the changes that according to the Somali educators and parents are taking place in the diaspora in Sweden.

\textsuperscript{1} The interviews with the educators is a Master’s thesis (Rodell Olgaç, 2000) made as a part of two projects: The project \textit{Bridging home-school cultures? An ethnographic study of language and literacy socialisation of immigrant children at home and in the preschool – the case of immigrants from Somalia} at Rinkeby Institute of Multilingual Research supported by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation and the \textit{EMİLE-project} (Ethics and Teacher Education in a Multicultural Society) at Stockholm Institute of Education supported by the National Agency for Higher Education.
Background

The Somali language is a Cushitic language spoken by the Somali people living in the eastern part of the Horn of Africa. The region includes the countries of Somalia and parts of Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. The language has several dialects and regional accents. Somalia was colonised by the British and the Italians and became independent in 1960. After independence the new republic found itself with three languages: English dominant in the north; Italian in the south and Arabic, the religious language dominant in both regions. Kahin (1997, p. 21) states that from Koranic school to university one was expected to find one’s way through the maze of different languages: Arabic, Somali, English and Italian. For a long time Somali remained a non-written language. In 1972 Somali became a written language with the Roman script as the official orthography.

Despite the presence of written Somali, oral Somali and poetry (most specifically) have continued to pervade all aspects of communication from informal interactions during watering of the camels to formal interactions like political debates. There are many genres of poetry and they follow strict stylistic rules of alliteration and metre, which demands great knowledge and skill of the poet (Ahmed, 1996; Kahin, 1997). In fact, Somalia is known as a nation of poets. As the Somali professor of Literature Ali Jimale Ahmed (1996, p. 28) states:

The Somalis are still an oral people. This statement does not favour oral over written literature. It does tell us, however, that writing in the Somali context is not, to quote from Brian Stock, “the dominant form of cultural representation”.

In societies like Somalia, the poet plays the role of the commentator or critic and oral poetry has both pedagogical and epistemological import. Proverbs and narratives also play an important role. “Somali proverbs, which are structured in verse, function as mnemonic devices helping listeners remember the moral of the story” (p. 41). Most Somali narratives are didactic, for example, after oral performances a structured debate often follows. In these debates the participants discuss the hidden meanings contained in the poetry. From these performances Somali children are socialised in their culture, language and traditions of the community (Ahmed, 1996 p. 9).

Socialisation - language and learning

Socialisation is the process through which children learn the norms, values and
beliefs valid in their communities. In Somalia, like in other African communities, socialisation of children usually takes place under the mentorship of older siblings and peers rather than of parents or other adults. In African societies, Somalia included, child socialisation as Nsamenang & Lamb (1994, p.137) says, is often described as “a “project-in–progress” and stages of social integration are demarcated using social rather than biological signposts…. Socialisation is organized to teach social competence and shared responsibility within the family system and ethnic community”. According to one of my informants early socialisation of a child in Somalia is a collective responsibility among a large network of siblings in the extended family. He says2:

Imagine a mother who have come to Sweden. She grew up like this. Her childhood was like this. She had four, five siblings, neighbours, relatives, and her mother. This little girl grew up. When she was one year her mother said to her: -Go outside. Come on, you can crawl outside. And she crawls out of the house. Outside the house there are all the relatives sitting. Everyone is there. The girl crawls, walks her first steps outside, not inside, outdoors. She becomes one year, two years. All the time she is outside. The weather is hot. She plays with other children, children and neighbours. Everyone who comes, everyone who comes take care of her. The children of the neighbours, the neighbours take care of the child. Relatives, everyone.

(Somali mother tongue teacher)

This respondent confirms Nsamenang & Lambs (1998) assertion in African contexts that the adults construct the social context, shaping the behavioural settings that provide opportunities for children to learn and develop. The older children are also co-participants alongside with adults in teaching the younger children by filtering the knowledge from the adults to the younger children. This view of complementary of its members, is the mainstay of the Somali socialisation pattern.

In terms of language socialisation small children in Somalia as in many rural African contexts learn their language through interactions with peers and others around them. Unlike the Western middle-class families where children learn language by participating as conversational partners i.e. through dialogue, question-answer routines (similar to class-room interactions), the informants interviewed in this study confirmed to me that the Somali children learn their language by listening while participating in ongoing activities. The school type

2 The extracts from all the interviews are transcribed verbatim from Swedish and translated into English. They represent their spoken language forms.
of interaction involving question-answer, that is common in middle-class families in Europe and America is not the dominant style of caregiver-child interaction in the Somali community and other rural African communities. The differences in styles of interaction between the Somali and Swedish caregivers have important implications on how the Somali children eventually learn Swedish and succeed in schools (Obondo, 1999).

**The school systems – meeting different practices**

An inherent belief in the Swedish school ideology, like in other Western school ideologies, is that talking or dialoguing is an important aspect of learning. Children are expected to collaborate with teachers through active interaction involving asking questions about the tasks in which they are participating and suggesting areas of change in the content (Obondo, 2000). This may be contradictory to Somali educational practices where children by and large learn by listening to the teacher, while participating in the activities in the classroom. The Swedish school, with its emphasis on collaborative interaction and working methods involving dialoguing, can be very confusing for a Somali child as well as other migrant children who have different school experiences. The view on education in Somalia that the informants present in these interviews is that of a very structured teaching where the different roles of the students and the teachers were very clearly defined, as this extract shows:

In Somalia a pupil is a pupil and an adult an adult. There is a clear preferential right for interpretation by adults. There is always a certain inherent authority in and respect for adults. At school I am a pupil and the teacher is a teacher. Pupils’ influences on decisions do not exist. The teacher has the last word in the class. But there are also great expectations on the teacher from the pupils.

(Somali mother tongue teacher)

The differences in styles of learning between Somali and Swedish notwithstanding, the school system in Somalia, like in many sub-Saharan African countries is based on a Western school system. So it is the case that the Somali children who had been in school in their home country are familiar with some aspects of the Swedish school (Harber, 1997). Moreover, most of the Somali children have also attended the Koranic school and are therefore familiar with “the school” as an institution. As Wagner (1999, p.185) observes, the Koranic schools share features with modern secular schools, for example, respect for the teachers, use of language and recitation in unison; encoding and
decoding an alphabet; becoming a moral person and a good citizen; and, more recently, basic arithmetic. Similar sentiments are shared by the informants in this study as the response from this Koranic school teacher illustrates:

The two most important aspects is firstly that we do not have kindergarten like in Sweden where the children can go every day and meet other children. This function is fulfilled by the Koranic school, where the children can meet other children and play with them and learn to know them. The second function is as we are Moslems then the children also will learn the Koran and especially to write…

(Koranic school teacher)

Despite these points of similarities between the formal school system in Somalia and the Western education like in Sweden, there are several areas of conflict.

An area of conflict is the belief that talk or dialogue is an important aspect of the learning process and that children are expected to collaborate with teachers through active interaction involving asking questions (Obondo, 2000), a strategy that may contradict to Somali ways of learning. Let us briefly turn our attention to what the respondents’ views were regarding the role of Somali educators in the school context.

The role of mother tongue educators

According to the informants the Somali educators play a vital role for both children and parents and the Swedish staff. The interviews show that the Somali educators not only perform their teaching duties but also help the children and parents negotiate new identities and develop a sense of security, as this dialogue between me and one of the interviewees reveals:

– What do you basically do?
– I give the children security, go to different pre-schools and make the children feel secure and proud over their language. There are many prejudices about Somalis.
– Which ones?
– That they can’t read and write and that they have too many children, no jobs, live on social security (…) Then it’s the language and to play with them, rise their self-esteem, to show them that they are something. To be bridge builders and have contact with the staff and the parents. To tell about Somali traditions. To try to hinder
misunderstandings. All I do has to give something to and help the child.

(Interview with Somali mother tongue teacher)

This dialogue underscores the role of the Somali educators in building bridges between the home and school. In this role the Somali educators function as brokers negotiating between the families and the school. As the observations further show, the Somali educators have diversified roles and support the parents in several ways, as this mother tongue teacher further confirms:

Sometimes I visit the children at home and I tell the parents while the children also are listening: -Buy books for your children, which the children should take care of and that the children should write, then they will manage better when they start school. How they should hold the pencil. It is better that the children write letters and paint letters and do such things. It is important to have contact with the parents. It is the most important.

(Somali mother tongue teacher)

These interviews reveal the important role the Somali educators play in providing a sense of security for the parents. For the parents the Somali nurse in the pre-school for example, is a guarantee for the security of their children and one informant told that Somali mothers tell her that they would not leave their children in the pre-school, if the Somali nurse was not there. One of the demands frequently put forward from the Somali educators and parents, is the necessity of recruitment of more Somali staff in pre-schools and schools with Somali children and pupils.

Despite the important role the Somali educators play, the interviews and observations show that the work of these educators is generally carried out on the conditions set out for them by the Swedish teachers and staff. For example in pre-school, priority is often given to the activities which has been planned by the Swedish teachers. For example, if the mother tongue teacher arrives and finds that the Somali children are already participating in some activities, the Swedish staff may often say: “You cannot borrow [my emphasis] the Somali children today”, meaning that she owns the children and the Somali educator has a minimum role.

These observations also indicate that when the Somali mother tongue teachers participate in the general activities, it is generally reduced to the same conditions as the children, for example sitting with the children in a ring or walking last in the row on the way to some activities. One may wonder which
picture the children will internalise through this behaviour about their background, culture and mother tongue that these Somali educators represent.

**Home school co-operation**

The other issue that was investigated in this study, is the home-school co-operation. The guidelines for the relationship between home and school comprise that the teacher shall work together with the parents and continuously provide them with information concerning the pupil’s school situation (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998, p.20). This perspective of the parents as partners prevalent in the Swedish school system is not universal and may not be prevalent in Somalia (Naidoo, 1997), where home school co-operation was less formalised.

Despite the differences, the parents interviewed all agreed that parental involvement in school is important for their children’s success, as this statement by one of the parents confirms:

Parents…parents can very much improve children’s education. One can create more time so that they can work with their homework and make rules for them so that they can study in peace and quiet and have time to rest. In this way generally one can help the children.

(merchant)

While the parents in these interviews generally think that they have received sufficient information from school, most of these information is written notes brought home by the children, a media that might not be effective in Somali community. For example, Jama Ismail (1998) highlights that Somali parents being more used to word of mouth information, may have difficulties in helping their children in the new context as information from school is generally written. However it is important to underscore that this is changing in many families and the families are adopting new modes of communication. In the conclusion I will turn to the changes and adaptations that the Somali community is making towards.

**Conclusion**

There are many aspects of change that the Somali families experience. Many parents noted that the close relationship that existed in Somalia between the children and the parents is weakened in the diaspora, as the observations from this parent indicate:
[ironically] What I mean is the culture. What is worrying is that our culture is not present in this context and the first thing is that we cannot teach the children our home language Somali, because as I have said earlier, time is very limited. Children and parents can be together about two hours [per day]. The children go to kindergarten and school and sleep when they are at home. Two hours in the evenings children and parents see each other. Parents and children had stronger relations in Somalia. Their relation in Sweden is very weak either because of the culture or the education in kindergarten and at school, which makes parents less important and not as significant as they were in Somalia. There are the reasons to the weak family bonds here. There will be no real security between parents and children and the confidence diminishes. The expectations on the children one had in Somalia and the love between them [parents and children] do not become that strong, as they will move away [from home] when they become eighteen [laughs].

(parent)

The interviews further confirm that the parents are however modifying their ways to meet the demands of the new society in order to help their children succeed in school, as the observation by this parent reveals:

It’s a tradition that we have that one doesn’t read to the children so often, but now one has learnt a bit and try to give more time to the children.

(parent)

The other area of change is in the use of multimedia. Access to information in Somalia as I indicated at the beginning of this article, was based on poetry and orality. In the diaspora there is increasing access to more multimedia and local TV-channels like Öppna Kanalen. Information is also received from other countries. The library seems to play an important role for written information. Some parents also borrow books for their children and read them as this comment by one of the parents shows:

There are actually stories, stories that we tell the children, the old stories about Arraweelo and Juxa and many other stories that exist. We [also] tell those stories that they have in Swedish books in Somali.

(parent)
While the traditional Somali poetry seems to be more difficult to transfer to the children as it is so much connected to another context, the children receive new and modified forms of literacy in Somali, as this extract shows.

It is actually difficult for the children to learn the Somali poetry, as this poetry concerns another surrounding and describes other habits and values, but it is important anyway that they will have a picture about the poetry of their home country, so that they will be able to compare.

(parent)

In conclusion, information through mobile telephones, video-cassettes, internet and radio, or what Ong (1991) referred to as secondary orality, provides an alternative media for socialisation and learning in the diaspora, that combines both the orality in Somali and the literacy of the Western middle-class.

REFERENCES


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