

Why do Somali Pupils Achieve lower Grades in School?

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Executive Summary

This research report examines the reasons why Somali pupils are underachieving in schools in London, and to understand the schooling experiences of Somali pupils. The research aims to study the achievements of Somali pupils at GCSE level, identify reasons for underachievement, and the main barriers faced by Somali pupils. Also discover factors which contribute to the success of Somali pupils.

The purpose of my research is to find out the barriers for underachievement in schools, and which support do Somali pupils need, and to provide recommendation to schools, and local communities to give improved support to Somali children especially to those who came into the system from Somalia at late primary or secondary level who have had a very different system of education.

The methods used for my research were questionnaires and interviews.

The main findings from this research are that Somali pupils are underachieving in schools and they are the lowest achieving groups in schools. One of the main reasons for Somali pupils' underachievement identified from the questionnaire and case study is the language barrier and parents not supporting their children. It is also due to poor housing, overcrowding, a disrupted or non-existent prior education and parental lack of understanding of the British education system.

Detailed recommendations were after school classes for underachieving pupils, extra weekend classes, Somali bilingual staffs should be used to build links between schools, and Somali families.

Low cost tutoring for parents who can't afford private tuition for their children such as Best Tutors.

Chapter 1:

(i) Central aim

The central aim of this research is to identify the reasons why Somali pupils achieve lower grades in schools, and to understand the schooling experiences of Somali pupils.

The research aims to:

- Study the achievements of Somali pupils at GCSE level
- Identify reasons for underachievement, and the main barriers faced by Somali pupils
- Discover factors which contribute to the success of Somali pupils

The reason I chose this particular topic is because I've had a difficult experience at school. I came to the UK in 1990 when the war started in Somalia and I couldn't speak the English language at all. When I was doing my GCSE's I found it difficult as I had no support with my English and teachers were not supportive, and there were no after school classes at the time. My grandmother was illiterate and wasn't able to support me with homework, or be aware of how I was doing in school. I took 9 GCSEs and I achieved 1 B and C and the rest were mainly D, and E. I feel if I had more support from teachers with my English, and had private tuition I would have gained better grades.

I am quite passionate about this topic as I feel education is the key to success, and so I want to find out if Somali pupils are doing better than before, and what are the main barriers for their underachieving in schools. I also want to find out ways of improving support for Somali pupils facing similar problems as I faced 12 years ago.

ii) The purpose of your research

The purpose of my research is to find out the barriers for underachievement in schools, so that something can be changed. Also to find out which support do Somali pupils need and to provide recommendation to schools and local communities to give improved

support to Somali children, especially to those who came into the system from Somalia at late primary or secondary level who have had a very different system of education.

Education is important as unemployment is high in Somali communities in the UK.

(iii) Literature review

Since the 1960's there has been a steady migration of Somalis to Britain, but large numbers arrived in 1980s and 1990s following the civil war in Somalia. Somalis first came to Britain in the late 19th century (BBC link, 2010). The 2001 census records 43,532 people born in Somalia being resident in the UK with the largest concentration in London, Sheffield, Birmingham, Cardiff, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Leicester. However, this is only a percentage of the full Somali population as it does not take account UK born children of Somali parents.

There is a very big gap in the educational system compared to other ethnic minorities. The highest levels of achievement are those of Asian background, with the first being Chinese, and white pupils. The lower groups are mainly Black Africans, Caribbean's and the lowest as Somalis. (Demie 2006: Diriye 2006)

From as early as 1997, there was more awareness about under-achieving Somalis in schools. In 1999, just one Somali child out of 330 gained five grades A*-C at GCSE in six London local authorities. In the same year, the London borough of Camden undertook research that showed 3.1 per cent of Somali children attained five grades A*-C at GCSE, compared with 47.7 per cent of all children in that local authority (Jones and Ali 2000).

Furthermore there has been more research and information generated that shows concern:

In 2003 Somali children secured GCSE results that were 11.6 per cent lower than their local authority average and 24 per cent below the national average. But GCSE performance ranged between 16 per cent of Somali students securing 5 Grade A*-C to 40 per cent.

In two local authorities, Somali students outperformed white students at GCSE in 2003, although their GCSE results were still 11 per cent below the national average.

At 14 years Somali children secured test results 18.2 per cent lower than the local authority average in English, mathematics and science.

At 11 years Somali children secured test results 23.3 per cent lower than their local authority average, again there was not a large range across different local authorities.

At seven years Somali children secured test results 20.7 per cent lower than their local authority average.

In the six local authorities Somali students were the lowest or second lowest achieving minority ethnic group in tests at seven, 11, and 14 in the period 1999-2003, although not at GCSE.

The author (Rutter 2004) states that there is more evidence in Lambeth showing " a pattern of continuous underachievement of Somali children compared to the local authority (LA) average of white British, African, Caribbean, Indians, and other ethnic minority groups" (Demie et al 2006). The GCSE trend data in a number of London LAS also indicates Somali pupils were the lowest attaining group (Rutter, 2004)

From previous research, there is evidence that Somali's under-achievement comes down to lack of understanding of UK education system, over-crowding, their parents not having education in school in Somalia, and the kids themselves arriving with no or limited education, severe emotional problems and trauma due to the on-going war, bullying, lower rates of attendance (due to a combination of all these factors), poverty

and lack of good communication between the school and their parents. (Jones and Ali, 2000).

Newly arrived children can find themselves isolated because they don't speak the language and can't communicate with the other children and may feel like they are the outsiders and may not fit in due to the different system.

One example can be because some of their parents/ carers can't afford trips or activities outside schools. (Rutter, 2004).

Few children have access to computers or the internet at home. A community representative who works as an advocate for a Somali women's group stated that it is difficult; it is just mum at home with 5 or 6 children.

A lot of Somali men are unable to provide for their children because they can't get jobs. This affects the whole family.

Khat is also an issue. It is a legal drug that can cause family breakdown. They get home sick; they go to the community centre to chat, take it and then get hooked. They look normal but are in hell inside. They are awake all night and in bed all day. Many have mental health problems; they might be shamed and reclusive. They lose their family because of it. Sometimes boys of 14 and 15 take it (see Diriye2006).

Language issues present barriers to learning. The official language of education in the schools here in Britain is English. Therefore fluency in English is essential to succeeding in education. In this matter the Somali community in the UK are in a disadvantaged position compared to a number of former British colonies where English is the academic language and an official language used for administration, business, and politics. In Somalia the language used is Somali, so it's difficult when Somalis come to the Britain and don't speak the English language. Therefore parents are not able to support their children with homework. Some parents do not know how to help. It is the language that

is the issue; they might understand the maths but can't explain it in English. They need help with the language. The school is the main teacher. The children do not have enough language and neither do the parents (Diriye 2006)

Some community representatives feel that as far as school expectations are concerned schools that have to raise achievements. Some feel that the teachers get fed up with the issues that young Somalis present, language being one. They would like to see more Somali staff in schools, and the school and community working together.

A difficulty is that a numbers are qualified as teachers (from Somalia) but their qualification is not accepted enough to work in a teaching job. Yet there needs to be more Somali teachers in schools to act as role models to encourage the young generation to become teachers. Also "it is a vicious circle, they need experience to work but can't get the experience." (ibid.)

Community representative feel a summary of the main reasons for underachievement are:

- The lack of English language acting as a barrier to learning.
- The general lack of role models in the community for young Somalis
- A lack of knowledge about the school system.
- Lack of working together between the school and community.
-

Further Social Issues for the Somali Community

The Somali community is very tight. There is little mixing amongst the community. Often this can be a way to get jobs but it is not in the Somali community. Studies conducted in the 1990s state that unemployment rates between 70 and 97 per cent for Somali men (Ahmed, 1991).

Since then, there have been some changes with improved rates of employment (although lower paid jobs). However researchers believe the male unemployment

among Somalis is probably in excess of 75 per cent. In the 2001 census, just 13.8 per cent of adult Somalis were in employment.

One school governor commented: parents come to the UK thinking that they will have a better life. With a lack of education in Somalia they don't believe they can do it here. Many lose interest in education; the situation back home makes them hopeless. They cannot work here. They can only do security jobs and bus driving. (ibid.)

(iv) Methodology

The methods used for my research were questionnaires and interviews. The reason I chose a questionnaire is because it's inexpensive, you get higher numbers of respondents than other methods, and can be easier to analyse. The other method I chose was interviews because you can gain a lot of information from the pupils, and it's inexpensive and easy to carry out. The interviews also allowed me to get in depth insights into school performances and develop into case studies.

The difficulties I faced in carrying out the questionnaire were to get the pupils to fill out the surveys as some pupils felt embarrassed in taking part.

The interviews were successful as I interviewed 2 pupils and this gave me the opportunity to see how they were performing at school.

I did not use focus groups as I felt the pupils might not feel comfortable in answering questions in public and in front of other pupils. They also might feel embarrassed and not honest in talking about their performance in school.

This research is a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. The interviews were qualitative - this was used to try and really understand what young people go through at school (going deeper - they key idea of qualitative research). The questionnaires were part of the quantitative research - they key idea was to get statistics of the pupils.

(v) Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations I took when carrying out my research were:

- Confidentiality of the pupils so no names were required for the questionnaires and interviews. Participants were assured of anonymity. There are no names on the case studies.
- Explaining to the pupils what the research is about, and asking the pupils and their parent's consent for the interviews to be held.
- Asking parents and teachers consent before filling out the questionnaires and doing the interviews.

Chapter 2: Research findings

The main findings from the research suggest that Somali pupils are underachieving in schools, and they also form one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in London. I have carried out 20 surveys, and carried out two interviews.

I found that the 40 percentage of Somali pupils are achieving (A.C) grades, and these pupils are mainly girls, and are getting support from their parents e.g. by paying a private tuition at best tutors, and encouraging them to do their homework. The other 60 percentage of the Somali pupils were not achieving and this is due to lack of concentration due to over crowded house, and parents not encouraging them to study and do their homework.

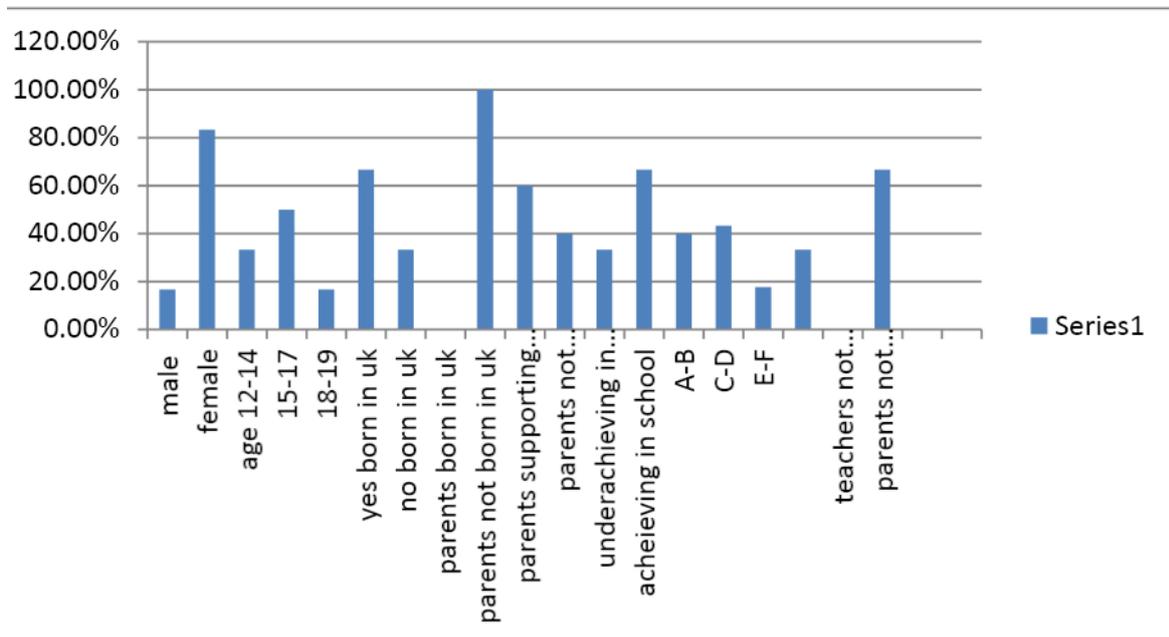
I also visited a private tuition centre where Somali pupils do get extra support from bilingual teachers. I was quite surprised at how well some of the Somali pupils were doing in Best Tutors as some of them were achieving A-C grades.

I also carried out two interviews, and developed into case studies.

Pupil A said they are underachieving in school and it's due to lack of support, and parents not pushing her enough. She also said she would like more after school classes, and her parents paying for a private tuition to achieve better grades. She also recommended of ways to help other children in future by educating parents so they know how to support their children, and holding meetings within the school.

Pupil B said he's achieving his target grades which are mainly C.

He is achieving because he feels supported in his education by teachers, and after school classes. He also attends private tuition called Best Tutors tuition once a week for extra support. He recommends that parents need to push their children more, and give them rewards when they do their homework, and doing projects within the school to help Somali pupils.



Further Responses from my research

1. Are you male or female?

From the graph, it is clear that 20% were boys, 80% girls.

2. How old are you?

60% were 12-17, the other 40% 18+.

3. Were you born in the UK?

65% were and 35% were either born in Somali or Europe.

4. Were your parents born in the UK?
100% of their parents were born outside of the UK (mainly Somalia).

5. Do your parents support you with your schooling?
60% did but this was actually more from private tuition rather than the parents directly. 40% received no support at all.

6. Do you think you're achieving or under achieving in school?
40% felt they were achieving which is very promising; 40% were worried they were not getting the predicted grades.

7. On average what grades are you achieving in school? (A-B/ C-D/E-G)
I asked what they were achieving, 40% were A to C and the rest below this.

8. If under achieving why do you think you're under achieving? No after school support/ teachers not supporting you/ parents not supporting you?
Interestingly, the pupils found their teachers did support them and were accessing other types of private support, e.g. after-school private tutors but parents not supporting them were very high at 60%.

9. Have you ever been bullied in school? Yes/ no
Only one or two pupils admitted bullying/ name-calling. I wondered if this was because they were kids and were ashamed to admit this.

Chapter 3: Discussion

The central aim of this research was to identify the reasons why Somali pupils achieve lower grades in schools, and to understand the schooling experiences of Somali pupils.

The research aims to:

- Study the achievements of Somali pupils at GCSE level
- Identify reasons for underachievement, and the main barriers faced by Somali pupils
- Discover factors which contribute to the success of Somali pupils

My research has confirmed that many Somali pupils are underachieving in schools, and that the main issue is the language barrier as some of the pupils I interviewed were not born in the UK.

Also the other main issue is parents not speaking the English language, and not being able to support their children's education which supports the points made by Jill Rutter. From the graph the top issues were parents not supporting with homework, and no after school support.

However from the graph there were 40% of the Somali pupils achieving A-C grades and this due to the extra support they receive at Best Tutors where they get private tuition and help with homework.

This means that extra tutoring is working, and should be provided at lower cost as some parents can't afford private tuition for their children.

One of the main reasons for Somali pupil's underachievement identified from the case study and questionnaire is the language barriers and parents not being to support their children's education, and parental lack of understanding of the British education system.

It's also due to poor housing, overcrowding and disruption or non-existent prior to education (from the literature review).

My research shows that the pupils were doing quite well with after-school support and private tuition but for those not accessing this, this is not the case.

From my literature review and personal experience, it is still clear to me that the Somali pupils can still be the lowest achieving in schools.

As Rutter's states (2004), there is a big difference from their peers. The gap increases at the end of primary and secondary education.

There may be a lot of research on this and interest but the situation is not changing as fast as it could.

Chapter 4

(i) Conclusions

The aim of the research was to:

- Study the achievements of Somali pupils at GCSE level
- Identify reasons for underachievement, and the main barriers faced by Somali pupils
- Discover factors which contribute to the success of Somali pupils.

The findings from the questionnaire, interviews and literature review show that Somali pupils are underachieving in schools, and they are the lowest achieving groups in schools.

One of the main reasons for Somali pupil's underachievement is the language barrier, and parents not being able to support their children's education.

It is clear that Somali pupils form an underperforming group at each stage of the national curriculum and at GCSE level. Their outcomes at each key stage are considerably below those achieved by all pupils across the LAS.

More research needs to be carried out for the future.

(ii) Recommendations

To help raise the achievement of Somali pupils, schools, policy makers, should provide:

- After school classes for underachieving pupils
- Extra weekend classes for pupils who are underachieving.
- ICT clubs where Somali pupils develop their IT skills.
- Extra English and maths classes held after school.

- A range of strategies is used to improve the English language skills of pupils at Different levels.
- Somali bilingual staffs should be used to build links between schools and Somali families.
- Teachers should concentrate on basic literacy, numeracy, and English with new arrivals.
- The LEA should provide grants to fund home tutors for underachieving pupils and new arrivals.
- Also another recommendation is setting up low cost tutoring for parents who can't afford private tuition for their children such Best Tutors.

(iii) The strengths and limitations of research

The interviews worked well as I was able to interview 2 pupils to understand their experiences of schools and what support they received. The challenges I faced during my research was to get the questionnaire filled out by some pupils as they felt embarrassed in taking part and I had to push them and reward them.

If I had more time I would have interviewed more pupils and visited schools, and interviewed parents and teachers. This would have given me more information and different perspectives from different people in the communities. I did visit the private tuition centre at Best Tutors where the Somali pupils do get extra support from other bilingual teachers but I wasn't able to interview the teachers at Best Tutors as they were busy.

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Appendices

Interview questions.

- 1) Do you think you are achieving or under-achieving in school? Why?
- 2) Do you feel supported in your educational? By who, and how?
- 3) What type of support do you think would help you do better in school?
- 4) Do you have any recommendations of ways to help other children or young people in the future?

Questionnaire:

1. Are you male or female? (Male female)
2. How old are you? (14- 15/ 16-17/18-19)
3. Were you born in the UK? Yes/ no
4. Were your parents born in the UK? Yes / no
5. Do your parents support you with your schooling? Yes/ no
6. Do you think you're achieving or under achieving in school? Achieving/
not achieving
7. On average what grades are you achieving in school? (A-B/ C-D/E-G)
8. If under achieving why do you think you're under achieving? No after
school support/ teachers not supporting you/ parents not supporting you?
9. Have you ever been bullied in school? Yes/ no

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