Somali Parents and Parental Involvement in Compulsory Schools in Flen, Sweden

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Abstract: Departing from commonly held fact that parental involvement increases students’ academic achievement; The Swedish Schools and parents are required to have close relations with each other. However, low parental involvement becomes obvious norm in Swedish schools nowadays, especially immigrant parents. The aim of this qualitative study is to identify, from the participating parents’ perspective, the challenges that face Somali parents in their interaction with compulsory schools in Flen, Sweden. It will also elaborate on the role of mother tongue teacher as mediator in home-school interaction. The data collected through interviews with sixteen Somali parents in the city shows that understanding Swedish school system, language, parents’ education level, integration, social background, gender role, and communication methods are some of the main challenges that face these parents in their interaction with their children’s schools. Majority of the parents were socially excluded from major culture and lacked understanding towards different social, economic and organizational phenomenon in the Swedish society. The segregation resulted in parents’ disengagement from school and created distrust towards school, mother tongue teachers, social workers and authorities in general.

Knowledge generated from this study may give policy makers, school, and interested institutions the needed theoretical foundation to design action plans, programs and policies in order to increase the level of participation of Somali parents.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Education, Parental involvement, Multiculturalism, Social sustainability, Migration

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Summary: In the quest for a social sustainable society, family and schools are some of the most important milestones as they contribute through different practices and processes to the socialization and cognitive development of the child. These practices and processes like upbringing and teaching shapes the perceptions and behavior of the children towards the social, natural, economic spheres both on the local and global levels. Family and school are required to cooperate in order to secure children transition from childhood to adulthood equipped with needed knowledge, practical and social skills to contribute economically and socially to the wellbeing and continuity of their society. In light of this, this research focuses on identifying the challenges that may face Somali parents in their interaction with compulsory schools in Flen, Sweden.

Flen municipality launched a three phased school project aims at identifying the challenges that face schools in Flen. The project investigates the challenges that face schools in Flen such as dropping students’ achievement, bullying, and other administrative aspects. The official statistics confirms the existence of disparities in academic achievement between immigrant students and their native peers. The first phase of the school project dealt with data collection and one of the main challenges was gaining access to immigrant parents to investigate their views regarding schools in Flen. This thesis could give an insight into Somali parents’ viewpoints regarding compulsory schools in Flen and a description of the challenges that face them.

Furthermore, as Flen compulsory schools have a substantial number of Somali students and the number is due to increase because of migration and in light of the scarcity of research regarding Somali parents in local-suburban areas in Sweden and parental involvement, thus gaining access to Somali parents perspectives towards parental involvement and the challenges that effect their level of involvement could be helpful in addressing these challenges and increasing their level of involvement and thus in the long term improving students’ achievement. Mother tongue teacher, although an independent variable were discussed briefly due to the important role they play as a bridging elements in home-school relation.

This study uses qualitative approaches to collect data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 Somali parents in Flen city. The analysis of data collected shows that Somali parents face many challenges in their interaction with school. Understanding Swedish school system, integration, language, parents’ education level, social background, gender role, and communication methods are some of the main challenges that face these parents in their interaction with their children’s schools. Additionally, the findings of this study show that Somali parents consider education mainly as the function of school. Parents play a role in ensuring the existence of physical conditions for the child to learn. Mother tongue teacher could be also used more effectively to facilitate home-school communication if certain challenges are addressed.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Education, Parental involvement, Multiculturalism, Social sustainability, Migration

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Introduction

In 2012 Flen municipality launched a school project aims at identifying the challenges that face schools in the municipality, developing action plans and implementing these plans. This came after a report from the Swedish school inspectorate that identified deficiencies in school system in the municipality in form of students’ academic achievement and school management (Flen municipality 2012). For instance, municipality compulsory school students’ achievement decreased from 78.3% in 2000 to 56.8% in 2010 (Flen School project report 2012), whereas students with immigrant background have poorer academic performance than their native peers (Fig.1, Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) 2013). In this regard, the school project team conducted a number of surveys on school’s stakeholders like parents, educational staff and students to collect information regarding their views of the challenges that face schools, which number of discussion meetings between teamwork and stakeholders were held (Ibid). Despite the fact that 20% of Flen students have a foreign background, it was not possible to identify specifically immigrant parents’ thoughts and their viewpoints. This could be explained by the fact that surveys were anonymous and these parents’ participation in discussion meetings was very low (Flen School Project Report 2012). Among these groups are the Somali community, which is one of the largest immigrant groups in Flen city and consists of 628 persons in which 178 are students in compulsory schools (Matthias Pfeil, Eva Wikström, personal communication 2013). In light of this, it is vital to explore the Somali parents attitude towards parental involvement as studies links between positive parental involvement and student achievement.

To fill that gap, this study uses qualitative approach to collect data through conducting semi-structured interviews with 16 Somali parent in Flen. The main aim is to investigate the challenges that face these parents in their interaction with compulsory schools in Flen. While some research have conducted on the issue of immigrant parents in Swedish schools on the national level, yet there is a research gap regarding Somali parents and parental involvement in local – suburban context, so this study may fill that gap. Research questions for this thesis are:
1- What is the Somali parents’ attitude towards parental involvement in compulsory schools in Flen?
2- In their opinion:
- What are the challenges that affect their level of parental involvement?
- What is the role of Somali mother tongue in home-school relation?

![Average Merit Rating- Flen](image)

Figure 1 Average merit rating for Students in grade 9 with Swedish and foreign backgrounds in Flen.
2. Background:

2.1. Introduction

2.1.1. Migration to Sweden

According to official numbers, Sweden is becoming multicultural country. More than 200 nationalities are represented amongst 9.6 million inhabitants. In 2010, about 19.1 percent of residents had their roots outside Sweden. (Swedish Institute, n. d.). Migration patterns has changes since the 1970s and shifted from economic to humanitarian migration [(The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2010, p8)], and great numbers of immigrants from conflict zones in the Balkan, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria settled in Sweden. (Swedish Migration Board 2013) Majority of these immigrants settled in big cities like Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg (Statistic Sweden 2013)

In 2012 Syrian, Afghans and Somalis formed the largest non-European immigrant groups in Sweden, a 7% increasing from previous year (Statistic Swedish 2013). According to Swedish Statistics (2013), in 2012, 25% of the total numbers of immigrants to Sweden were minors. Half of immigrants from Somalia and Afghanistan were minors and the total number of minor immigrants from Somalia increased with 70% in 2012.

A study conducted by the Institute for Evaluation of Labor Market and Education Policy (IFAU) (2010) showed that there is an increasing segregation in residential areas and schools and labor market based on ethnicity in the big cities in Sweden. Discrimination, group preferences, and socioeconomic factors are the main reason for this phenomenon. The housing segregation, along with other economic and organizational factors, makes the areas with high concentration of persons with foreign background like Rosengård in Malmö and Rinkby in Stockholm more economic and social vulnerable than other areas in the same city (Social Report 2010).

2.1.2. Multiculturalism and the Swedish school

According to Roth (1999) Multiculturalism in Sweden could mean different things in different contexts. For many it implies the cultural and religious diversity in Sweden since World War Two due to immigration of labor and humanitarian refugees, while others perceive it as the “increased visibility of group identities based on gender, class, sexual disposition”. (Roth 1999, P9)

Social, cultural and religious diversity on the society level is mirrored in the Swedish schools and classrooms. The Swedish classroom has become more ethnic, linguistic, religious diverse where by 2008/09 every fifth student in compulsory school had either born abroad or had foreign-born parents. The number increases by 1% to 2% annually (Norberg 2000; Wire´n 2009).

Against that background, the Swedish parliament decided in 1985 that education in Sweden should be characterized by multicultural approach (Lahdenperä, 2004). But achieving this goal on school level is challenging since the Swedish institutions, including schools, are built upon Swedish norms and standards which are considered to have valid and universalistic values. Lahdenperä (2004) points out to inclusion and the existence of meeting places between different groups as some of the features of a good and healthy multicultural educational environment (Ibid).

Roth (1999,pp 12-35) on the other hand, lists main themes associated with multiculturalism in Swedish education like “Swedish as a second language, teaching strategies, organizational forms, religion and school, independent schools, physical education, and common and group specific subjects”, but the main challenges of multicultural education can be summarized in three categories; immigrant students’ achievement, managing diversity, and mother tongue teaching (OECD 2010; SNAE 2008; McEwan 2005). I will come back to mother tongue tuition in the sections below.
Immigrant student in Sweden “on average, have weaker education outcomes at all levels of education” (OECD 2010, p 7). According to Swedish National Agency for Education (SNEA 2008, p 9) “In the group of students of foreign background, almost every fourth student left compulsory school without basic qualifications, in comparison with every tenth student in compulsory school as a whole”. The achievement becomes lower if the student born abroad or entered school system late. Factors like isolation from accessing their cultural and social capital, which are essential in enhancing educational performance, segregation, financial difficulties, housing problems, and physiological factors hinder students' positive integration and language acquisition.

Immigrant student experiences values conflict where “the norms, values and the knowledge gained at home may not be of particular value to the child at school, at the same time as the child may face difficulties in making his parents understand the values and the knowledge he/she brings back from school” (Bouakaz 2007, p19). This is more witnessed in families with roots in authoritarian, informal, and sectarian cultures which contrast Swedish school’s guiding principles like equality, participatory approach, encouraging self-discipline, and human rights practices (SNAE 2011). Creating two-way communication could reduce such conflicts and help students shift between cultures. (Bouakaz 2007)

Furthermore, Swedish school system shows “inability to tackle diversity” (OECD 2010). This results in failing to integrate new arrived immigrant children in Swedish educational system. School inspectorate evaluation of schools in fourteen municipalities around Sweden in 2009 found that majority of municipalities assumes that all students have the same needs, regardless of their backgrounds, which is contrary to the laws mandating education in Sweden (OECD 2010, p 38).

Lahdenperä (2004) notes that parental involvement is important in a multicultural educational context, since it decreases any possible conflict between home and school, but teachers’ state of insecurity when meeting new cultures and parent’s exclusion may affect the degree and effectiveness of parental involvement. In that sense increasing inclusion and the system multicultural competence through analyzing and understanding parents’ and students' cultural and social backgrounds is very important (McEwan 2005, p 92; Lahdenperä 2004), schools should also identify and reach out to possible organizations and individuals representing immigrants on the social, cultural and religious levels which can help in deepening such relations (McEwan 2005).

Swedish school’s low ethnic diversity in teaching staff is also another problem related to managing diversity. According to OECD (2010, p 44) immigrant teaching staffs constitute a tiny percent of the total teaching staff in Sweden as there is only 2000 teaching staff with immigrant backgrounds operating in Swedish schools and majority of them are linked to mother tongue tuition programs (OECD 2010).

Teaching staffs ethnic and cultural diversity have positive results since it “allows varying perspectives to meet each other in mutual dialogue, and pupils are thus given, at an early stage, an insight into the importance of pluralism for the development of knowledge” (Roth 1999, p17)

### 2.1.3. Mother tongue tuition

Mother tongue tuition is an important feature of the multicultural education. It plays also an important role in parental involvement as it strengthens and facilitates home-school relations and increases student’s self-esteem (SNAE n.d.). Despite that, it is seldom that mother tongue teachers used effectively as a tool in building good relations between school and immigrant parents; due to organizational factors (UNESCO 2008; Liedholm &Lindberg 2006)

Sweden introduced mother tongue education for immigrants in 1977 as a mark of shifting from monoculture and assimilation ideas towards pluralism and integration. Municipalities are mandated to offer mother tongue tuition to eligible students with foreign backgrounds on optional basis (Wire´n 2000)

Mother tongue teaching in Swedish compulsory schools is regulated by Compulsory School Ordinance (Lgr11) (2011). The curriculum states that mother tongue teaching should aim at: “helping the pupils to develop knowledge in and about the mother tongue. Through teaching, pupils should be given the opportunity to develop their spoken and written language so that they become confident in their language skills and can express themselves in different contexts and for different purposes. The teaching should help the pupils to master their knowledge of the structure of the mother tongue and become conscious of its importance for their own learning in different school subjects.” (2011:3.7, p83) and stresses the importance of students developing their cultural identity and knowledge about societies where such languages are spoken. (Ibid)
Despite this position and correlation between mother tongue teaching and student academic achievement (Wire’n 2009), a study conducted by Swedish National Agency of Education (SNAE) (2008) showed that mother tongue tuition is an external activity in relation to school, mother tongue teachers complained about unsustainable conditions related to their job like working outside school hours, teaching at different schools, low status and lacking permanent classes (SNAE 2008, p17; Tuomela 2002).

Study guidance in mother tongue is also related to mother tongue tuition where the new arrival students and those with low Swedish fluency get help with contents of classes in their native language (SNAE, n. d.).

2.1.4. Somalia: Social and Educational Profile

The following part gives the necessary theoretical background to understand different aspects of Somali society like family, parenting practices, education, and also a profile of Somali community in Flen city.

2.1.4.1. Society

Somalia lacks effective central government since 1991. Brutal civil war erupted in the country since 1990 and caused a humanitarian crisis where hundreds of thousands of Somalis died and millions were forced to flee the country. South and central Somalia are prone to conflicts and unstable while Somaliland, a self-proclaimed republic in northwest Somalia, and Puntland region in northeast zone, are relatively stable and social services are functioning to some extent (BBC 2013).

Somali society is clan-based, traditional, oral, patriarchal, nomadic, and collective whereas Somali traditional culture is affected by both nomadic and Islamic traditions. Family and tribal networks play an important role in supporting the family (UNICEF 2002; Diversity Council 2007).

Somali families are large and extended. Traditionally, men are the family breadwinners but civil war in Somalia has changed partly women’s role in socio economic activities. As their traditional breadwinners died, migrated or disabled, women enjoyed increasing economic power but remained excluded from political decision making process. (Gardner 2007; CASCW 2011)

According to the Center for the Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW 2011) parent takes decisions in the Somali family and children are expected to follow. Men were placed at the top of family hierarchy while women were responsible for the household activities, children wellbeing and education. Engaging children in a dialogue about their emotions and daily activities is not part of the Somali parent’s culture. Migration to western countries, where family structure and upbringing methods are different and Somali parents are cut from their supporting networks, created a stressful situation for Somali parents and changed the relations between parents and their children due to the children exposure to western cultures-parents fear that this will lead to that children losing their identity and culture.

Degni, Pöntinen & Mölsä (2006) studied Somali parents’ upbringing experiences in Finland and found that Somali parents face challenges adopting with upbringing in their host country. In Somalia parents had a broad social network to rely on and upbringing children was a collective matter, in Finland those parents found themselves isolated from this social network and forced to take care of a big family while upbringing children shifted from being a sole family matter with minimal external intervention, to a system where teachers and social workers had a say on how to raise up their children. This led to confusion and children becoming disconnected from their families as power dynamics changed within Somali families. Somali parents admitted that corporal punishment is practiced as a main method of enforcing discipline in Somalia, but women dismissed it as it harms the children integrity. Many men on the other hand reacted against the shift in gender roles where women gained more freedom and rights, and thus roles changed within family.

2.1.4.2. Education

According to Bennaars et Al. (1996, pp.10-12) Education in Somalia passed through three distinctive eras: “traditional education, colonial education and post-colonial education”. Traditional education is represented in the mobile koranic schools that reflect both Islamic and nomadic traditions of Somali pastoralists. Colonial
powers introduced modern school system although its effect was minimal since it served a tiny proportion of Somali population. Post-colonial Somali administration created a number of schools spread across the country. The civil war that erupted in the country in 1991 affected education negatively as schools were destroyed and formal educational system collapsed. Since 1991 Schools in Somalia were either private or community managed. Education system on the other hand lacked any legislative frameworks and public administering bodies with exception of Somaliland and Puntland regions in northern Somalia (Concern Worldwide 2010).

According to UNICEF (2002) the main challenges that the Somali education sector faces concerns teachers quality, gender imbalances, low school enrolment and low literacy rate (37.8 %).

Regarding parental involvement, parent contact with school was limited and occurred only in case of severe problems (Swedish Integration Board 1999). This contrasts Swedish school model where teachers, students and parents are required to act collectively and proactive to achieve educational goals (Hessel & Ekberg 2008).

2.1.5. Somali Community in Flen

Flen city is the seat of Flen municipality, which is located in Södersmanland region in central Sweden. By 2010, Flen had approximately 6,300 inhabitants, 28% of them were with immigrant background. 628 people with Somali ethnic background were living in Flen city (Matthias Pfeil, personal Communication, 2013; Flen School project Report 2012).

There are no official information about when immigrants from Somalia began to settle in Flen, but according to Jamaal, Adam and Harun (personal communication 2013), some of the first Somalis to settle in Flen, the first numbers of Somali immigrants came to Flen in the end of the 1980s as the armed conflicts intensified in Somalia. Integration process was easy, at least in labor market, and they easily found jobs in GB Ice cream factory or Elmo motor factory in Flen. Language was not a hinder, and they learnt language through interaction with Swedish co-workers. Later migration from Somalia and within Sweden increased the number of Somalis in Flen exponentially in the last ten years. In the process of writing this thesis I asked a number of Somalis who moved from other areas in Sweden and settled in Flen (personal Communication 2013) about the reasons behind their decision. They stated that strategically positioned near Stockholm and major airports, Flen is attractive due to the existence of a mosque, Koran school, private preschool run by Somali staff and substantial Somali population.

Somalis in Flen are concentrated in Salsta neighborhood, which is one of the most multicultural neighborhoods in Flen. According to Flen municipality integrations board the main reason for this concentration is the availability of large apartments in the neighborhood, which satisfy the need of traditionally big Somali families, but other social incentives could be also assumed (Folket 2004). Unemployment rate in Flen municipality is around 13.8%, which is the second highest rate in Södermanland region (Ekuriren 2013), and many immigrants in the area live in economic vulnerable households (Flen School project Report 2012).

According to Flen municipality (2013), Flen city has four elementary schools. Lötenskolan, Nyblleskolan and Söderskolan, which extend from preschool class to 5th grade, while the fourth; Stenhammarskolan is from 6th - 9th classes. The total number of students in these schools is approximately 860, in which 21% of them have foreign backgrounds. 170 of students in elementary schools have Somali background. Three persons work in Flen compulsory schools as Somali mother tongue teachers, while two others work as study guidance in Mother tongue (Flen School project report, 2012; Eva Wikström, personal communication 2013; Ahmed Nur, Dahir Mohammed, personal communication 2013).

It is expected that the number of Somali students in compulsory schools will increase due to the high number of Somali parents who are waiting their children to arrive to Sweden as part of family reunification program (Swedish Migration Board 2012).

Studies regarding students with Somali background in Flen schools are unavailable, but Flen school project’s report (2012) highlights that the difference in academic performance between immigrant students and their native peers are higher than the national average. Nationally, students born abroad to foreign parents have more difficulty to meet educational goals than their peers with foreign background born in Sweden (Flen School project Report 2012). Swedish National Agency of Education in collaboration with SVD newspaper made a
study, which showed that upon finishing elementary school 75% of Somali children born in Sweden get high school eligibility compared with only 25% of Somali children born abroad. (Svd 2010)

Summary of the Background’s Introduction:

In the background’s introduction, different aspects were dealt with to give a theoretical background about migration to Sweden as well as the multicultural society and education that migration created. Mother tongue teacher which is an important feature of the Swedish multicultural school is also reflected upon. Somalis in Flen city and a description of Somali society and Somali educational profile was also given.
2.2. Parental Involvement

In the following section parental involvement definition, importance, legislative framework mandating parental involvement and challenges to active parent involvement will be discussed.

2.2.1. Parental Involvement Definition

According to Jeynes (2007) parental involvement is defined as “…parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children” (Jeynes 2007, p.83). This entails supporting children with home and school learning activities. The aim of parental involvement is to “increase [children’s] opportunities to progress as far as possible, both in terms of knowledge and social development” (SNAE 2012).

According to Swedish National Education Agency (2012) parents that are normally the children's guardians, have a legal responsibility for providing security, care and good parenting for the child. School on the other side should provide parents with needed information regarding their child educational activities.

Parental involvement is a very complicated process since it “can vary extensively in terms of both its manner and what motivates it” (Feiler 2010, p19). Parents in that sense could play different roles like: recipient of information, governors, helpers, fundraisers, experts, co-educators, clients and consultants (Morgan 1993 cited in Hornby 2000, p12).

Swap (In Hornby 2000) differentiates between two types of involvement; simple involvement where parents are supporters and get information from school, and more direct, positive involvement where they play a parallel role, as tutors for their children, of the school. (Hornby 2000, p2)

According to Edwards (2002) parental involvements in post-industrial societies is characterized by two processes: Familialisation and institutionalization; Familialisation captures “the emphasis on children being the responsibility of their parents. With home as a physical and conceptual space in which they are increasingly located” while institutionalization process is about compulsory schooling and addresses ”children's increasing compartmentalization in specifically designated, separate and protected organized setting, hierarchically supervised by professionals”. In light of this, parental involvement can be defined as “interaction between the Familialisation and institutionalization of childhood in various ways” (Edwards et Al. 2002, p6). Hornby (2000) lists six different models of home-school relations;

“1) Protective model, where “the main aim is to avoid conflict by separating teaching and parenting functions” where teachers carry out teaching while parents “make sure children get to school on time with the correct equipment”(Hornby 2000,p18) 2) Expert model; where teachers see themselves as total experts on children education while parents only receive information. 3) Transmission model; teachers controls and sets the goals, but transmit some of their expertise to parents regards themselves as experts but regard parents as a resource who could be used in helping children. 4) Curriculum-enrichment model; this models aims at incorporating parents contributions by extending school curriculum. This model acknowledges the parents as an important resource in school activities and curricula development to enhance learning. 5) Consumers model; parents are regarded as consumers of educational services and thus involved in decision-making processes while teachers provide required information, this, with a risk of domination over professional activity.” 6) Partnership model where “teachers are viewed as experts on education and parents are viewed as experts on their children”. Acknowledging this the education could be maximized by sharing information through “mutual support, joint decision-making and enhancement of learning””, this model is considered the optimal one in home-school relation (Hornby 2000, pp17-21).

Epstien (2001,p 44) on the other hand, lists six major types where school can involve parent effectively; “1- Parenting which revolves around family support and providing home condition in order to support learning at different ages.2. Communication a process involves school-to-home or home-to-school communication. 3. Volunteering: parents as volunteers in school activities. 4. Learning at home; helping children with homework and other school related activities. 5. Decision making; where Parents get involved in planning and decision making processes through Parent-school councils and other means. The last type is; 6. Collaborating with the community; coordinating community resources to strengthen learning, school and family”. 
In Swedish schools home-school communication revolve mainly around teacher-parent group meetings, individual development talk between the teacher and the parent, and participating in parent-school boards, a school governing body consisted of parents and school staffs (Flen municipality 2012).

According to Bouakaz (2007) Home-school relations in Sweden has been affected by different social, economic and political changes during the last century. Throughout that era discussions initiated regarding parents and school different roles, which led partly to a new paradigm where home-school relations shifted from separation and conflict to partnership. Authorities and school view of parents changes also consequently, from regarded as incompetent, lacks insight into school's task, and unqualified to upbringing their children with democratic values. This has also consequences on children where they moved simply from their position as a private responsibility of their families to become a public one. School was also one of the most important tools to create the welfare state. But since 1970 school became more parents friendly, given consumer status and authorities argued for more parental involvement (Ibid).

Parental involvement is an important factor in public participation processes, and compulsory school is an important arena for increasing participation not only for students but also for their parents as well (Swedish Integration Board 1999).

### 2.2.2. Social Sustainability and parental involvement

Social sustainability is a “positive condition marked by a strong sense of social cohesion, and equity of access to key services (including health, education, transport, housing and recreation).” and occurs when societies are “equitable, diverse, connected, democratic and provide a good quality of life” (McKenzie 2004, pp. 15, 18).

One of the main features of social sustainability is citizen participation on different levels both nationally and locally (McKenzie 2004). According to Lachapelle (2008) Active Participation increases the sense of community ownership since groups and individuals will have access to and influence different processes aimed at defining problems or situations, making assumptions about the problems and finally generating solutions. This participation contributes to the legitimacy and acceptability of later developed plans and policies.

According to Rousseau et al. (1998) (cited in Lachapelle 2008, p 56), active public participation increases trust among different groups of society which subsequently enhance learning, promote citizenship, increase dialogue, decrease conflict, build connections among citizens, and help increase the effectiveness of reactions to future crises.

Other important concept that is related to social sustainability is intergenerational justice. Social sustainability occurs when different processes, structures, and relations within any given community support “the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities” (McKenzie 2004, p 18). Parental involvement in that sense could be an integrated part of social sustainability since it deals with active public participation of parents in education (Swedish Integration Board, 1999), and aims at the same time at increasing the quality of life of future generations by increasing academic performance of students.

### 2.2.3. Legislative Framework for Parent involvement in Sweden

Parental involvement in education is the vital tool that connects school and parents in order to achieve better collaboration and understanding between these two stakeholders.

The Curriculum for Compulsory school (Lgr11) (2011) mandates school-home communication in Swedish schools. According to lgr11, the aim of communication between child guardians and school is to “create the best possible conditions for the development and learning of children and young persons” (Lgr11 2011, pp.17-18).

The curriculum for compulsory school (Lgr11 2011) identifies the responsibilities of educational staff, teachers and parents, educational staff as to: “work together with the pupils’ guardians to develop both the content and the activity of the school.” and “provide them with information concerning the pupil’s school situation, well-being and acquisition of knowledge and stay informed about the individual pupil’s personal situation and in doing so show respect for the pupil’s integrity” (Lgr11 2011, pp.17-18).
Through development meetings, parents-teacher meeting and parents boards school should “take the wishes of
the parents as the starting point, and keep pupils and the home regularly informed about study outcomes and
development needs” (Lgr11 2011, p20).

On the other hand parents are required to attend their children's development talks where they can get
information related to their cognitive and social development at school (Lgr11 2011, p20).

2.2.4. Importance of Parental Involvement

Many studies showed that parental involvement has significant contribution to student academic performance

According to Sussell et Al. (as cited in Hornby 2000) parental involvement has many positive effects on student
achievement and attitudes, teachers’ morale and school climate. Additionally, parental involvement leads to
“increased self-confidence of parents involved”, higher academic performance, a sense of accomplishment of
parents, increase likelihood of completing high school and attending college, increased likelihood of parents
deciding to continue their own education.” (Hornby 2000 pp. 1-2)

Hornby (2000, p 2) concludes that, “Reviews of numerous studies of the links between parent involvement and
children's achievement have concluded that the evidence that parent involvement improve student achievement is
beyond dispute”.

Epstien (2001, pp. 22-23) lists three perspective theories that can explain parents and teachers' different
approaches to school-home communication.

1- Separation of responsibilities perspective where families hold “personal and particularistic standards” at home
whereas school hold “professional and universalistic standards” meaning that parents’ involvement will be
minimal. 2-Shared responsibilities perspective where both home and school play a major role in upbringing,
education and socializing the child, home-school relations are based on cooperation, and 3-Sequential
responsibilities which means that family is responsible for preparing the child both socially and educationally in
critical years i.e. pre-school years.

2.2.5. Challenges to Parental Involvement

Despite the notion of correlation between positive parental involvement and student achievement discussed
earlier, but “there are clear gaps between the rhetoric on [Parental involvement] found in the literature and
typical [Parental Involvement] practices found in schools.” and lack of parental involvement is a global
phenomenon (Hornby&Lafaéle 2001,p 40; Hornby 2000,p12). Challenges that face immigrant parents both
internationally and in Sweden and contribute to the lack of parental involvement will be discussed below.

According to a survey made by Örebro university in Sweden (Eriksson 2009, pp43-50), 80% of 2000 surveyed
elementary school teachers stated that they want more involvement from parents’ side.

Despite the general belief that all parents regardless of their socioeconomic conditions, ethnicity, and gender
want their children to succeed in school (Bouakaz, 2007, p 18), but since communication between immigrant
parents and Swedish school have different patterns, dynamics and challenges than with native Swedish parents
(ibid), the focus of this section of the study will be on the challenges that face immigrant parents in their
interaction with school.

Research (Hornby&Lafaéle 2001;Bouakaz 2007; Turney&Koa 2009;Ladky&Peterson 2008;Whalley et al. 2007)
found that language, parents educational levels ,school culture, lack of understanding of the school system,
parents’ self-esteem, preferences towards parental involvement are the main factors in restricting immigrant
parents from engaging constructively in their children’ education.
Parents’ socioeconomic status and psychological conditions play an important role in determining the degree of parental involvement effectiveness. According to Sjögren (as cited in Bouakaz 2007) being refugee and unemployed creates insecurity, uncertainty and loss of confidence and lead many immigrants parents to distances themselves emotionally from the Swedish school and neglect coming to school meetings. This is not because they are not interested in their children’s education nor have a problem with the school, but mainly because they have a broader problem adopting with the system, i.e. Swedish society and its norms and regulations.

Fieler (2010 p 29) points out to parent’s cultural capital, which is reflected in available novels, books and computers in a given household, as an important factor in parental involvement. Failure to transmit cultural capital can affect children’s learning.

According to Devarakonda (2013, pp.51-59) different cultural values held by parents and teaching staff could create conflict and undermine the relationship between home and school. Aspects like school lack of knowledge or understanding to the parents’ cultural values, norms and beliefs, different ways of emotions expression, preferred involvement by parent; either formal or informal, and relationship with time.

Ghuman and Wong (cited in Guo 2006) found that Asian parents in the UK linked schools with authority and viewed British schools as very flexible and informal. They described the notion of student’s self-discipline as ineffective and wanted school to be stricter.

Lahdenperä (1997 pp. 181-182) notes that school attitude towards immigrant parents could also contribute to the problem. Guided by guidelines from Swedish National Agency of Education, teachers and school are encouraged to take a “compensatory position” where they could “compensate for parent’s inadequate care, capacity, resources, or socio-economic conditions in the child’s environment”; this position portrays parents as incompetent and problematic elements. Lahdenperä (1997, p182) suggests moving to complementary attitudes where schools play a social complementary role added to the upbringing given by the parents. Bouakaz (2007) on the other hand, points out supplementary schools, where parents, religious and social associations involves informally in children's education in order to enhance children’s cultural and social capital, as a possible approach towards empowering parents and children with foreign background.

These factors combined could undermine the sense of ownership feeling and lead to parents’ exclusion from educational activities, lack of trust and marginalization. According to McKenzie (2004, p 56) public participation based on trust in community activities has the potential to “enhance individual or group learning, build relationships between citizens, influence creative solutions, teach citizenship, inculcate civic virtue, allow dialogue to flourish, promote fairness in procedural efforts, reduce conflict, validate multiple forms of knowledge, and facilitate effective responses to future crises”.

Empowering parents through knowledge, dialogue, participation, increasing school’s multicultural competence, and better communication channels with parents (Lähdenpää 1997; Bouakaz 2007; Devarakonda 2013; Swedish Integration Board 1999) could be some of the needed steps towards integrating immigrant parents into Swedish school system.

Lareau (1989) and Vincent (2000) (cited in Bouakaz 2007) points out to knowledge as one of the most important elements in activating participation in school and citizenship matter, parents lack of knowledge regarding their children’s school is mainly due to the lack of social capital and social networks.

Summary of Parental Involvement

In the second part of the background section, parental involvement was conceptualized and its importance and organizing legislative framework were discussed. Challenges to parental involvement especially those related to immigrant parents were highlighted.
Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify, from the parents’ point of view, the challenges that face Somali parents in their interaction with compulsory schools in Flen city. This study will also partly look at the role of mother tongue teacher in home-school relations. The knowledge generated may contribute to understanding the challenges that face Somali parents in their interaction with School system in Sweden and thus could serve as a theoretical base for educational staff and policy makers in when attempting to involve Somali parents and/or dealing with students with Somali background. Addressing such issues may contribute on the long term to increasing student achievement.

Research Questions

This study focuses on the following questions to get useful resources regarding this subject. Here are the main questions that I considered the most key questions to dig out and identify challenges associated with Somali parental involvement in schools:
1- What is the Somali parents’ attitude towards parental involvement in compulsory schools in Flen?
2- In their opinion:
   - What are the challenges that affect the level of involvement?
   - What is the role of Somali mother tongue in home-school relation?

Delimitations

The study deals with parents’ preferences and viewpoints regarding parental involvement in compulsory schools in the city, i.e. grades 1-9. The study is based on data collected from interviews with 16 Somali parents in Flen city. Somalis are concentrated mainly in Flen city and less represented in the other counties of municipality. Majority of parents were living in Salsta, a multicultural and segregated neighborhood in Flen.
3. Research Methods

3.1. Methodology

This qualitative study focuses on identifying and understanding the perspectives and experiences of Somali parents in relation with schools in Flen municipality. According to Silverman (2010), qualitative research is favored when analyzing behavior or life experiences, as it involves "an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Harwell, 2011, p148). In that sense, qualitative research "has been seen to be "naturalistic," "ethnographic," and "participatory"" (Kirk & Miller 1989, p 9), and involves identifying "the presence or absence of something, in contrast to "quantitative observation," which involves measuring the degree to which some feature is present" (Kirk & Miller 1986, p 9).

3.2. Interviews

This study uses individual semi-structured interview methods. Semi-structured interviews are one of qualitative research methods where "the person interviewed is more a participant in meaning making than a conduit from which information is retrieved" (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006, p 314). Open-end questions which "are tailored to the research subject and refined as the research progresses" (Boeije 2010, p5) allows the interviewer "to delve deeply into social and personal matters" (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree p 315).

According to Kvale (1996, p 54) "qualitative research interview has a unique potential for obtaining access to and describing the lived everyday world" as it "provides a unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences and opinions" (Kvale 2007, p 9), the outcomes of these interviews "can lead to knowledge that can be used to enhance the human condition" (Kvale 1996, p 11).

Another reason, beyond descriptive quality, for choosing interviews is related to the structure of Somali society. Somalis are as many other African societies a “very largely an oral society” (Olden 1999, p 215). “The Somali situation is further complicated by the fact that the language was only written down in the early 1970s” (Ibid) which makes it hard to approach Somali population by other means like surveys and questionnaire.

Purposive sampling is used in identifying and approaching potential respondents. Somali parents with different educational and social background that stayed at least five years in Sweden to ensure a degree of exposure to Swedish organizational and social environment were selected. Secondary data is used also for analytical purposes.

To analyze the collected data, thematic analysis was used where data were divided into main themes. Repetition method was used where the topics that occurred and reoccurred most in the data were identified as the main themes (Ryan & Bernard 2003).

Being a teaching staff, both in Somalia and Sweden, and a parent with children in compulsory schools in Flen provided me with the necessary theoretical background. Additionally, originating from a Somali background helped me gain access to parents as I had the needed cultural and language competence.
3.3. Data collection process

Collecting data process initiated with identifying the respondents; in this case Somali parents. The term “parent” refers to a man and/or a women, either living together as a family or being a single parent, which have a child in one of the compulsory schools in Flen. The term “Somali” refers to a Somali parent born in Somalia and lives currently in Sweden.

Table 1. Respondents background Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years In Sweden</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Family type</th>
<th>Degree of Swedish language fluency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>5-10 yrs</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>5-10 yrs</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>20+ yrs</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Single-parent</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>10-20 yrs</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Two-Parent</td>
<td>intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>5-10 yrs</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>Advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>20+ yrs</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>10-20 yrs</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Two-Parent</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>30-40 yrs</td>
<td>5-10 yrs</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single-parent</td>
<td>Advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>50-60 yrs</td>
<td>5-10 yrs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>40-50 yrs</td>
<td>5-10 yrs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>40-50 yrs</td>
<td>5-10 yrs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>40-50 yrs</td>
<td>5-10 yrs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>40-50 yrs</td>
<td>10-20 yrs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>40-50 yrs</td>
<td>10-20 yrs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>Advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>40-50 yrs</td>
<td>10-20 yrs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two-parent</td>
<td>Advance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nine Somali families-16 parent - with different educational and economic backgrounds were chosen to form the sample of this study. Half of respondents were women while the other half were men. (14 out of 18) of the parents was living together as a family, while (2 out of 18) were single parents. 9 respondents had basic level of education, 6 had high school education, and only one parent had a university degree (Table1). These numbers were in line with the available statistics of adult Somali population's education in Sweden, where 70% of the total population has low or unidentified education (Carlson, Magnusson & Rönnqvist, 2012, p29). Additionally, 3 of the respondents had permanent jobs, 8 had temporary jobs or training programs, 2 were on sickness leave and 3 unidentified.

Prior to the interviews with respondents, a number of pilot interviews were executed with help from volunteered parents, community leaders, and two Somali language teachers. Getting feedback on interviews questions and framework was the primary aim of these pilot interviews. One of the main outcomes was to make interviews less formal.

According to Kvale (2007, p8) social relation between interviewer and interviewee defines the produced knowledge. This relation depends on the “interviewer’s ability to create a stage where the subject is free and safe to talk about private events for later public use”. In light of this, great attention was paid to creating safe environment to encourage respondents to talk freely. Detailed notes were used as many respondents felt uncomfortable with the idea of becoming tape-recorded. This made interviews time consuming. Many respondents required being anonymous because, according to them, it is not acceptable to criticize authorities openly.

Most of the interviews conducted at the respondents’ homes in order to make respondents more secure and comfortable to talk. The interviews began with introduction where the interviewer explained the purpose of the study and asked if the respondent had any questions. At the beginning, questions were asked simultaneously if parents were living together as a family. Male respondents in a number of cases talked intensively while female respondents answered shortly or even nodded in agreement. To deal with that, the method was changed and female respondents were asked every question separately, and in the same time more probes were used if short or insufficient answers provided by them.

Getting information about exact age was problematic, so approximate age was used instead. Educational level was divided into three categories basic, high school and graduate. Interviews took between 60 and 90 minutes for each respondent.
4. Results:

In this study 16 Somali parent were interviewed, the main questions were related to background information, school system, parental involvement, challenges faced by parents and integration. The themes identified within the data collected include the following:

4.1. Parents’ conception of parental involvement and education

Interviewed parents agreed upon the importance of their involvement in their children's education, although some of them did not know exactly the degree of needed involvement to guarantee academic success. According to them, there are two categories that their involvement can revolve around: education at school and helping children with their homework. For the majority of parents education at school involves classroom activities aimed at academic achievement. This excludes any other extra curriculum activities that do not fit in this area.

“(…) for me education is about mathematics, sciences and languages. They (teachers) said that my child is good in sport and crafts, but i am not interested in that at all, what matters is his achievement in the other important subjects.” (Parent 1)

Parents regarded education as the responsibility of the school, parents play only a marginal supporting role where they can encourage their children to listen to their teachers, and behave well in the school. On the other hand, helping children with homework was an activity that most of the parents were aware of but had problems with.

Parents with low education level and limited language command indicated that they lack the required skills to help their children effectively with homework due to such limitations. Even parents with higher levels of education felt restricted as their children reach higher classes and subjects become more complicated.

“I can help my child up to a certain level, and with certain subjects like Geography and mathematics, but when they reach certain level I feel clueless.” (Parent 3)

Sending children to schools’ complementary classes, where children can get help with different subjects like Swedish and Mathematics was one of the things that parents could do to help their children with education. According to the parents these classes collide sometimes with other school activities, according to parents. On the other hand, ten parents stated that they encourage their children to attend extra classes at the local mosque where they get help with Mathematics. Shortage of qualified teachers, overcrowded classes and lack of subject diversity were main concerns for children attending extra classes in the mosque.

4.2. Challenges

4.2.1. Language barriers

Most of parents agreed that language is the most significant barrier in communication between parents and school. Male respondents generally mastered the language better than female respondents. Six female respondents stated that their Swedish language courses had been interrupted by pregnancy and extended mother leave periods. One parent with a better command of Swedish language said that school either used simplistic language that make him lack proper insight into school’s activities or a professional language that make him excluded.

There was an agreement among parents that their communication is much easier during the first years of school. In the first two grades children have normally one to two teachers, and parents and teachers have a daily contact as they dropping off and collecting their children from school. As children advance in school system many of parents’ language skills are insufficient to match the complexity of different situations in the school.

To overcome language barrier and facilitate communication, schools and home use mother tongue teachers, children, relatives, and professional interpreters.
On the other hand, majority of parents indicated that they are not well integrated into Swedish society. Even those who have been in Sweden more than ten years and had jobs indicated that they are socially excluded, i.e. does not have any social networks with native Swedish.

4.2.2. School System

Of the parents interviewed 14 indicated that school system in Sweden is very complicated and hard to understand. Interestingly, parents’ staying time in Sweden did not reflect on their understanding of school system. Both women and men had equal confusion toward school system in Sweden, but those with school experiences from Somalia, either as student or parent, indicated that they understand that school in Sweden is different than the school system in Somalia and that more involvement is needed from their part compared to schools in Somalia.

Majority of parents felt excluded from education system due to lack of understanding of school's complicated system, values, and guiding policies and principles

"This is very complicated system, and although we get different information and sometimes excessive information from different formal and informal sources but we lack any tool for digesting and analyzing these information, we got only more confused, and lose our interest” (Parent 3)

Almost every interviewed parent contrasted school system in Somalia with Sweden.

“Back in Somalia, our involvement with school revolved around paying school fees... that was our main role and teachers took care of educating the children.” (Parent 11)

One of the main downsides of school system in Sweden is grading system which many parents consider ineffective and confusing.

“Grading system is very absurd here, students move automatically to next level without any exams, after many years they face the harsh fact that they do not have the required skills to finish elementary school or take high school certificate” (Parent 2)

Discipline in schools were also a concern for many parents who stated that schools have lost their ability to enforce values like discipline and respect on children since students are challenging teachers’ power.

“Every time I visit the school I don't see order and discipline, I see children playing outside during classroom time, even in classroom students use mobile phones, and disrespect teachers. I understand that teachers cannot punish children physically, but there must be some other control methods to enforce discipline.” (Parent 11)

Regarding school quality, parents acknowledge the quality of school system in Sweden compared with schools in their native country. One parent indicated that this is the main reason he does not involve in his children's education:

“Assuming the high quality of Swedish school, I tend to think that intensive involvement is unnecessary from my part, the teachers will take care of my children.” (Parent 5)

In general, parents had a positive attitude towards teachers in compulsory schools in Flen and felt that they are welcomed and respected by teachers.

4.2.3. communication with school

Of the interviewed parents 13 stated that the main channel in communicating with school is the individual development meeting where class teachers meet the parent individually. Other three parents stated that they along with development talks make spontaneous visits to school to get information from teachers.
described development meetings as formal, communication is one-way directed, and characterized by positive criticism which many found very difficult to understand.

“The problem with some teachers is that they give you a false hope. They tell you that your child is amazing and developing well. At the end of the meeting they may tell you indirectly that he is not doing well in that or that, but they put great emphasis on his positive sides and achievement and his ability to catch up. You are overwhelmed with positive aspects, so you feel that you do not have to do nothing about these small problems. If they tell me plainly what is happening I would realized how things are bad and I would take some action, but we only know when our children could not move beyond the 9th class and nothing can be done to help them.” (Parent 2)

Most of the parents attend these meeting regularly since they are individual and are of mandatory nature. On the contrary many parents express confusion towards parent-teacher group meetings, where teachers meet parents in groups to talk about educational issues generally. Due to language limitation, unclear purpose and time shortage, many parents neglect attending these meetings in comparison with the individual development talks.

One parents expressed that planning for these meeting does not take in consideration the religious backgrounds of parents.

“Sometimes these meetings collide also with prayer times, which force us to prioritize and in some cases come late.” (Parent 6)

Regarding parents-school boards, which consist of parents and educational staff and act as the schools governing body, only four of the interviewed parents participated in these boards. 8 out of 16 parents said that they do not participate because they are not familiar with these boards in their country.

“Maybe it is a problem with understanding the system and the democratic character of Swedish school which differs totally from where we came from, where principles hold the ultimate power in school” (Parent 5)

Generally, parents lack the informal access to teachers and educational staff where they can exchange information and get advice informally.

Schools on the other hand use different methods to communicate with the parents. These communication methods outlined by parents fall under three categories:
1- Conventional: like parent meeting, weekly letter, and school visit.
2- Semi conventional: like telephone call and phone messages.
3- Advanced: like Internet platforms, emails etc.

Parents with low language command said that telephone calls from teachers and school staffs are confusing since they do not perceive everything said. They preferred letters, which they could ask someone to translate.

One parent raised an interesting point related to telephone calls method:

“We got many calls from our relatives in Somalia asking for economic help. Most of these incoming calls are displayed as unknown, so we simply ignore every unknown call. And since school numbers, in most of the cases, are displayed as unknown so we ignore it as well” (Parent 12).

Parents with low computer and language skills complained about the complexity of advanced communication methods that schools use like ed-Wize, an educational platform for both students and parents which allows parents to follow their children's activities at school.

“I cannot surf the Internet or even use email, how they expect me to enter these sophisticated websites and read complicated data? That is impossible” (Parent 2).

Only three parents used municipality’s website to get updates about schools in particular and activities in Flen’s municipality in general.
4.2.4. Social and cultural factors

Majority of interviewed families were large families (had 4 children or more).

One of the challenges related to family size were that, in some cases, the time for development talk meeting and parental group meeting of different children were held at the same time.

“Sometimes our children who study in different classes has different parent meetings at the same time, that mean that we need to prioritize” (Parent 10)

When asked if there are other means of helping their children with education rather than helping them with homework or communicating with school, number of parents answered that encouraging could be one way but factors like illiteracy, inter-generational values conflict, overcrowded houses, lack of reading culture and inter-generational dialogue in the Somali family are the main hindrances:

“Look at my home, there is no one single book. I do not read so how I can expect my children to like reading” (Parent 5)

“In this home it is difficult to find a place where my children can do their homework in peace” (Parent 2)

Moreover, motivating the children was very hard due to changes in the family dynamics and children’s mentality.

“It is difficult to communicate with our children; they have totally different mind setting than ours. Sometimes I feel that we need an intermediary to understand each other. They do not understand our background, how things were in Somalia and the importance of education.” (Parent 11)

“In Somalia education and hard work were the only way to get out of poverty. Majority of us were very poor, so everyone was struggling to survive. Here (Sweden) children have everything, so they lack incentives to work hard” (parent 4)

Many Parents expressed their disapproval of school’s role in changing power dynamics between parents and their children. They said that these changes do not only affect parents and their role as rules makers but also children who misuse the new power vacuum and cross the boundaries.

“Somali family is an authoritarian family, the father takes decisions and everyone follows his rules. Here, many children challenge this position since they have been introduced to different culture where they participate in decision making.” (Parent 9)

“In Somalia rules were simple; parents had power over their children. Here teachers keep telling our children about their rights.... pure rights! Not mentioning a word about responsibilities towards their parents and society. They focus extensively on physical abuse that children end up incorporating every strict act of parents as an abuse. If you deny them TV or games they threaten us of telling their teacher that we abuse them. And as we hear stories about social services taking Somali children from their parent of suspicion of physical abuse, we choose to let them do whatever they want. With time they became more and more aware of their power and become rebellious, they end up ignoring school and society rules.” (Parent 6)

“We know that is not the right thing to do, but we panic, we are scared to lose our children, and to be ashamed among the Somali society in my city, it is the worst thing that could happen.” (Parent 6)

“And one needs to ask if schools follow the same routines with native Swedish parents and report whatever children tell them about their parents to social services” (parent 4)

According to parents, migration to Sweden did not only affect inter-generational power relations but also gender relations within the family. Gender role was very clear in Somalia but has been subjected to radical change upon arrival to Sweden. Traditionally women were responsible for upbringing children, but here in Sweden majority of the respondent said that men plays major role in communication with school due, mainly, to language command, and women involvement in household activities. Men's involvement in home-school communication does not reflect necessarily on helping children with homework.
Four female respondents stated that they accept the status quo and that their role is to provide the necessary physical conditions for the child to grow up like food, clothes and physical care. Two female respondent with higher level of education reacted against the continuity of Somali women’s traditional role in Sweden due to change in socioeconomic and political situation. When asked if they adapted with their new roles within the family, majority of male respondents pointed out that their new family role is imposed rather than a result of a natural social process.

“I am very confused by my new role, and I think majority of us (Somali men) have the same confusion. In Somalia our main job, as men, were to bring food to the family’s table, so we would leave home early in the morning and return very late without involving that much in parenting. There were many who could take that role, mother, grandmother, and female relatives. Here in Sweden, I am willing to help but I am restricted by my social norms, tradition and culture. In some cases even women, due to these traditions, discourage us from such involvement.” (Parent 15)

Interestingly, Number of parents said that the problem of low parental involvement is related to Somali society rather than the Swedish system.

“Blaming Swedish society and school is the easiest way, it is very easy claim and we can feel good because it is “them” who do things badly and not “us”. But the reality is that we, Somalis, have very serious issues. Simply we are a reflection of what happens in Somalia; we are loaded with conflict, sectarianism and anarchism” (Parent 1)

“As Somalis we face a problem both on the individual and collective levels. Majority of us lacks individual and collective solutions to overcome problems faced by our children in school due to education and social limitations” (parent 5)

Parents point out community activism as a way to raise awareness, encourage parental involvement and promote integration. Complementary stakeholders like associations, mosques and authorities could play an important role in overcoming such challenges.

### 4.2.5. Somali mother tongue teacher

Majority of respondent regarded Somali mother tongue teacher as a potential and vital element in easing communication between Somali families and school.

“As we lack any representation of Somalis in different organizational levels in our city like municipality, labor center, etc., the Somali teacher is the only component in the system which can help facilitate interaction between Somali community and authorities. They are very important.” (Parent 4)

Although this importance, a number of parents think that lack of qualification, status and organization reduced the effectiveness of their input.

“Instead of becoming a bridge that we could cross over to the other unknown side, they became part of that side; they use the same methods, language and codes.” (Parent 1)

Furthermore, number of parents brought up the subject of Somali staff in schools’ preparatory classes that intended for new arrival students. According to some of the parents, students in such classes do not have access to Somali speaking staff that could help in facilitating knowledge and social skills transfer.
5. Discussion and conclusion

Positive parental involvement increases student’s achievement. But according to many studies parents with immigrant’s background in Europe and USA face challenges with parental involvement. The purpose of this study is to investigate Somali parents’ preferences and attitude towards school and parental involvement in Flen compulsory schools. Sixteen Somali parents were involved in this qualitative study.

Knowledge generated from this study might give policy makers, municipality and school an insight into Somali parents’ attitude towards parent involvement. Based on this, all interested stakeholders could develop specific action plans to increase participation, and overcome some of the faced challenges in the schools.

This study shows that interviewed Somali parents face major challenges in collaborating with compulsory schools in Flen. Different school systems in Somalia and Sweden, technology and communication methods, language, integration, educational level, family size, gender role, and other social and cultural factors were the main variables that affected their degree of parents’ involvement in their children education (figure 2). These variables were highly dependent on each other while mother tongue teacher seemed to be an independent variable that could be a cause and effect in the same time. Parents’ lack of access to mother tongue teacher could cause lack of parental involvement as they are not able to use teachers’ linguistic and cultural competency to understand or communicate with school, meanwhile lack of parental involvement could lead to parents not interested in using mother tongue teacher as a mean of communication and/or understanding.

On the other hand, the interest that interviewed parents showed regarding their children’s education confirms the commonly held view that parents are generally interested in their children education regardless of ethnicity or origin (Bouakaz 2007).
Views towards parental involvement

Somali parents understanding of parental involvement and education were in line with separation model (Epstein 2001) where school and home has different functions, whereas parenting model was the most common form of parental involvement where parents provide physical conditions required for enhancing their children’s learning (Ibid). Parents view regarding parental involvement was related to their level of education and level of understanding Swedish school system.

Integration and school system

Parents’ lack of understanding of school system seems to be attributed to the fact that majority of interviewed parents stated that they are segregated from major culture, either by social or economic means. This is conforming to the findings of Sjögren (cited in Bouakaz 2007) that immigrant parents’ low participation in Swedish schools is caused by segregation and confusion towards Swedish system, as a result immigrant parents distances themselves emotionally from Swedish society and Swedish people and consequently from the school system. Comparably, majority of the parents in this study played a minimal role in school-home communication and felt that they are unaware of the needed approaches to influence school and education quality. That resulted in low participation level in parent-school boards, parent-teacher meetings and other school activities. Remarkably, Parents’ participation in development talks, which was one of the most used communication method by parents in this study, was motivated by the institutional power of school rather than being a form of active and voluntary participation.

One interesting observation was that parents’ stay in Sweden did not reflect on their understanding of Swedish school system as they were isolated from the historical, social, economic and political processes that shaped school in general and parental involvement in particular in Sweden. Parents on the other hand lacked any reference system to parental involvement, either theoretical or practical, from their native country.

Technology and communication

Lack of information regarding school system was not in some cases the main source of parents’ unawareness about school system, but rather the access to such information. When parents were asked if they were aware of the availability of many publications in Somali language regarding education system in Sweden, the majority responded in the negative. Similarly, Access level to Flen municipality website and school’s educational platform ed-Wise, which are important tools for getting information about different activities in the municipality including schools, among parents were very low.

This could be related directly to the parent’s technological capacity to access information which is published mainly on internet platforms, but it indicates also the authorities, schools and municipality deficiency to gain access to Somali parent. In that regard, Schools and municipality lacks the proper practices in which these materials could be used in raising parents’ awareness about education in Sweden. Technology in that sense was a mean of exclusion for many parents.

Language

Language meant different things for different parents, for parents with low language command the stress was on their language level while parents with better language command focused on school’s language use. Since interviewed parents had different Swedish language fluency levels language barrier did not affect them uniformly.

Social and cultural factors

One of the most interesting outcomes was related to capacity of Somali community in Flen to overcome challenges regarding school and integration. On the individual level parents indicated that low educational level, big family size and home environment are limiting their ability to active parental involvement. On the community level, parents gave a description of a society that affected heavily by civil war in Somalia. A prolonged clan based clashes affected negatively group cohesiveness in Somali community both in Somalia and abroad. Active social relationships and group’s task commitment (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Mullen& Copper 1995)
are some of the main affected components of group cohesiveness in Somali community, which affects the community’s ability to react collectively on shared issues and practice inter-generational social and cultural transfer. In this regard, Somali parents face two social exclusions; internal within the family and Somali community and external within the Swedish society. This cause that many parents are isolated from their cultural capital and at the same time lacks any access to the major culture experiences.

Group dynamics within Somali community is very important factor to consider when aiming at building relations with Somali associations, religious institutions and parents’ organizations. These efforts should be preceded by intensive analyses of these dynamics.

Gender role

Gender role was important in relation parental involvement. In Somalia women were responsible for overseeing children's education, but lack of driving license, language and childcare restricted many female respondents from interacting actively with the schools. Shifts in gender role along with parents’ isolation from their social networks in Somalia created differences within Somali family as it created two involuntary opposite movements; women engaged more outside home while men involved more in household activities. Since following children’s educational progress was considered traditionally as a household activity and thus women business, many men face more difficulty to adapt to their new position in their children education.

School-parent interaction

One aspect that may need more elaboration was parents’ view of racism in school, i.e. if parents felt that they were discriminated against in their interaction with school. Racism was mentioned only in relation to school and social workers’ prejudgment regarding Somali parents use of corporal punishment. Many parents felt that school and social workers assume that Somali parents abuse their children physically, and thus their handling of children’ complaints differs based on ethnicity. When asked if they felt respected at school, some parents said that they were treated dutifully. Respect had a different connotation for the Somali parents and was associated with informal interaction rather than the formal one. Teachers and parents interaction in school, which is very limited in many cases, is formal, unemotional, task-based, forced and centered solely on children’s development at school. This could lead that teachers ignore the broader cultural and social frameworks in which students and their parents operate in, and rather focuses on the classroom as the main center of the student’s cognitive and social development processes. Showing curiosity towards parents’ culture and history, learning simple phrases in their language and commenting on their traditional clothes are some of the means that teachers can gain access to Somali parents.

Mother tongue teacher

Regarding mother tongue teacher, which is one of the features of multiculturalism schools, I expected to get insight into parents’ preferences towards mother tongue teachers in Flen schools. This proved later to be challenging since many parents were cautious and preferred to talk generally and positively about mother tongue teacher’s role. One parent said that the subject is very sensitive since internal criticism is culturally unacceptable and that emphasis should be put on teachers’ potentiality not their current qualifications or situation. As a result, it was difficult to get a whole picture about how parents value the current role of mother tongue teacher in home-school communication. In order to substitute for such limitations, I conducted informal interviews with three Somali mother tongue teachers in Flen compulsory schools and asked them about their current role in school-home communication. Generally, the current main function of those teachers in compulsory schools, beside tuition, is helping schools in conveying its information to parents instead of being a channel that both home and school use to reach better understanding. From some of the parents’ viewpoint, these teachers are Somalis in the first place and from their position within the system they should serve the interest of Somali children, parents and consequently the general society. They fear that mother tongue teachers are not, currently, a bridging element between school and home but rather tools that expose Somali community to school, social workers and authorities and help them break Somali culture and identity. Contrary to this, I asked three mother tongue teachers about their view of cooperation with Somali parents and they felt that parents do not take them seriously. Parents resist mother tongue teachers’ intervention especially when children face problems at the school in fear of the spread of such information to the community. In light of this, Distrust in mother tongue teachers reflects a wider distrust in school and the Swedish system. Arguably, Somali parents’ view on teachers is related also to the low status of mother tongue teachers in school.
Parents need more insight into the function and position of Somali mother tongue teachers within the Swedish school system. On the other hand a dialogue should be initiated between Somali parents and those teachers to clarify misconceptions and gain a better understanding of each other. All that should be accompanied with capacity building, civic education, and conflict resolution programs aimed at Somali teachers to increase their capacity to work with Somali community. Municipality and Schools on the other hand needs to initiate a dialogue between parents and mother tongue teachers and also address the issue of involving Somali teachers in parental involvement issues systematically.

The previously discussed variables are to some extent dependent on each other. In the following part possible effects of these variables will be discussed and connections with the reviewed literature will be made.

Flen municipality launched in 2012 a school project that resulted in a report that identified the major challenges that face schools in the municipality. Despite efforts to assure an effective participation of immigrant parents in the conducted surveys, the report admit that it was difficult to know what these parents said about school. Additionally, level of participation in the followed workshops was very weak (Flen School Project report 2012, my own translation).

In a sustainable development context, parental involvement is an important features of public participation which is one the most important features of social sustainability (Swedish Integration Board 1999; Lachapelle 2008). Considering that, Increasing immigrant parents’ participation levels might affect positively the degree of social sustainability of the society as it involve them actively in problem identification, solution generating and decision making processes. Participation of Somali parents in Flen in such processes might not be very high currently due to exclusion motivated by internal and/or external factors. This affects the degree of legitimacy and acceptability of any future plans among this group and may contribute more to segregation and thus reduces the level of social sustainability of the community.

Additionally, as the literature reviewed in this study points out to the correlation between parental involvement and student achievement, failing to integrate Somali parents in educational, social, and economic activities might create what UK cabinet report (cited in Fieler 2010, p18) call inter-generational cycle of advantage where adolescents witness the same socioeconomic conditions of their parents. These “inherited” conditions that is witnessed in Somali community in many western countries could lead to situations where the adolescents disconnects from their families and the society and where issues like “rebellion, involvement in gang related activities, drug use, and vulnerabilities to recruitment for foreign terror activities” are of concern to their parents (CASCW 2011).

Epstein’s (2001) sex features model of involving parents could be the theoretical framework that schools in Flen use to increase parental involvement. Municipality and schools main emphasis should be put on empowering Somali parents through capacity building and inclusion programs aiming at enhancing parents’ “parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community abilities”. Additionally, adapting complementary approaches and involving supplementary stakeholders like parents’ associations (Lähdenpirä 1997; Bouakaz 2007) are another ways to involve parents more actively in their children education. This should be achieved through dialogue and mutual understanding, using the institutional power of school and authorities could be contra productive.

Moreover, these efforts should be based upon deep understanding of cultural, social and religious profiles of Somali community in Flen, which is necessary for adapting realistic, special designed plans that responds to the special needs of the community (a number of these plans will be more discussed in the recommendations section).

It should be observed though that the matter of group’s special designed methods is very sensitive in the Swedish context. Sweden does not use statistics based on race or ethnicity, (Diakite’ 2006) instead the only statistical categorization used for parents in Sweden is based on whether a parent or student have native or foreign background (Statistic Sweden, 2013) this simplification assumes that immigrants are homogeneous group, which conflict with reality. In light of this municipality and authorities should conduct a group’s specific analysis that consequently results in specific solutions. This is echoed in the UK cabinet report “it has become clearer that there are small groups of people whose needs are unique and complex and who are particularly difficult to reach. Highly localized and tailored responses will be needed to extend the opportunities enjoyed by most people to those suffering the effect of social exclusion” (cited in Feiler 2000, P24).
In conclusion, parents in this study were excluded from participating in their children education due to language, cultural, social, educational or/and organizational limitations. Additionally, parents stated that teaching is the responsibility of schools and that parents’ role is to ensure the physical conditions required for children’s to succeed in education. Data regarding mother tongue teacher was difficult to get but there was an agreement on the positive role that they could play in home-school communication.

Methodologically, one of the limitations of the study was the small number of sample size, which could pose some degree of uncertainty. It is worthy to mention that Somalis in Flen are a heterogeneous group. They differ in their education, experiences and socioeconomic conditions and thus different dynamic within this group could be given more attention. High responsiveness of interviewed parents could be a methodological strength. Additionally, this study will contribute to increasing knowledge about Somali parents in local-suburban areas like Flen where studies regarding that matter are scarce.
6. Recommendations

The data collected from conducted interviews with 16 Somali parents in Flen city showed that Somali parents have a view regarding parental involvement that separate school and home functions. On the other hand, many parents were not aware of the required level of parental involvement or lacked the competence to involve in their children’s education. This study in hand showed also that language, education level, school experiences, segregation and social conditions were some of the most important factors that affect their level of parental involvement.

As stated previously in literature review, there is a connection between academic performance and degree of parental involvement, thus working to increase the Somali parents’ involvement is vital. The matter gains special importance in light of different studies and reports, discussed earlier, that show weak academic performance among Somali students and disparities between Somali student and their peers on the national level. This may have social, economic and political complications on the long term as dropping out students may become isolated from economic, social and political activities.

In the following section different recommendations regarding the matter will be explored. Some of these recommendations were not approached empirically but through basic analytical and critical approaches.

-Municipality and Schools should increase their multicultural competence through different means like seminars, engaging Somali role models, initiating a dialogue with Somali community, and providing materials to teachers regarding cultural, social and religious aspects of Somali society. Mother tongue teacher status and working conditions should be addressed in order to use him/her more effectively in school-home communication. Inability to tackle diversity may has consequences on education quality since it hinders the development of policies, action plans and special programs to address the challenges related to multicultural education, and thus developing strategies to increase the multicultural competence of schools is required.

-Empowering parents through civic education courses, parenting education, informal parental consultations and launching inter-generational dialogue between parents and their children. Familiarizing parents with political, economic and social development that shaped Swedish society is very important. As it is hypothesized here that: this could help parents understand the different phenomena in their historical context. Moreover; creating informal arenas where native and immigrant parents can share experiences and inspiration regarding positive parenting could be a possible approach. COPE – The Community Parent Education Program- a Canadian program that Flen municipality started lately to educate municipality parents, including Somalis, could be extended to reflect previous elements and different situations within Swedish context.

-It is also suggested to build trust between parents and school, social workers, police and authorities through dialogue. Regular visits to Somali religious and community organizations could help create sustainable relations.

-Addressing the issue of power within family is very important since many parents are confused about parenting their children in Sweden. This issue was of concern to interviewed parents and they reflected on the role of school and authorities in that matter. Parents felt confusion towards the new practiced parental styles ‘children on their side used parents’ confusion and misinformation to claim power in the family, which created a position where parents were no longer in control of their children. Helping both parents and children with safe transition towards creating a functioning family is very important to prevent possible social consequences on the long term. Helping Somali families to move beyond parenting practices like corporal punishment is required. Since this is a sensitive matter and different values are involved, top-down approaches should be avoided.

-Increasing parents’ access to information through designing special channels, effective use of Somali staffs, using development talks and parent-teacher meetings to distribute available material regarding school and education aspects in Somali, making municipality website multilingual, and using multimedia methods to convey information to parents are some of the possible methods to deal with parents lack of information regarding the school system.
- Encourage community initiated solutions to challenges linked to parental involvement through supplementary schools and strengthening parents’ social and cultural capital.

- It could be hypothesized that parent participation could be increased through collaborating with community associations.

- As discussed earlier, research suggested a relation between socioeconomic conditions and parental involvement, thus adapting programs and policies that could improve parents’ economic, social and political situations may be of positive effects.

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9. Appendix

Somali parents Interviews:
1- Parent’s background Information:

Man □ Woman □

Age: -------------

Two-parent family □ Single parent family □

Level of education .........................

How long have you been in Sweden .................

Your degree of Swedish language fluency:

Basic □

Intermediate □

Advance □

Fluent □

Number of children in the household □

2- Swedish Society:

2.1. What of the following statements describes best your integration into the Swedish society?

1-Well integrated □

2-Somehow Integrated □

3-Not that much □

4-Not at all □
2.2. How do you see the Swedish school system?

1- Very easy to understand  
2- Somehow easy  
3- Complicated  
4- Very complicated

3- Interaction with the school:

3.1. As a parent, how do you see your role in the school and the education of your child?

3.2. Within your family, who bears the greater responsibility when it comes to following your child’s development at school? The father  the Mother  both

3.3. Currently, how do you evaluate the interaction between you and your child’s school?

3.4. What are the challenges that face you when interacting with the school?

3.5. How do you get information from school?

3.6. Are you satisfied with the schools’ communications methods?

3.7. If desired, what channels do you use when contacting your child’s school?

3.8. What are the things that you like least about your child’s school?

3.9. How do you see the role of mother tongue teacher in home-school commination?

Additional:

1. Are you aware about the Swedish National Agency for Education publications in Somali language?
2. Do you feel well treated and respected at school?