



# Immigrant Children, Educational Performance and Public Policy: a Capability Approach

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## Abstract

This article reports on the relationship between the educational performance of second-generation students, the attitude of majority society towards immigrants and integration policy in the destination country. It argues that the educational underperformance of second-generation students is to some extent a product of an inequality in different students' abilities to materialise educational opportunities provided by the destination country's education system. This inequality in abilities is generated by the human diversity of the different groups: immigrants vs. non-immigrants; voluntary immigrants vs. refugees. Depending on the integration context, the human diversity may exacerbate the inequality and cause the performance gap to get wider. The article uses data from two qualitative studies with the Somali community in Finland and employs the capability approach. Due to their background as the children of refugees from Somalia and the attitude of people in mainstream society, Finnish-Somali students face more challenges in materialising educational opportunities. The Finnish context in which they find themselves puts these students in a less encouraging position for two reasons. First, prejudice and discrimination may weaken their will and confidence to learn and reduces their parents' will to cooperate with their schools. Second, their parents—due to their lack of knowledge of the school system and proficiency in the Finnish language—are also relatively less effective in the Finnish schooling system. To deal with the performance gap between immigrant and native children in schooling, public policy should focus on how the integration context is shaping diverse students' abilities (capability sets) to succeed.

**Keywords** Finland · Finnish-Somalis · Educational performance · Capability approach · Immigrant integration · Public policy

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## Introduction

Compared to their native counterparts, immigrant children perform relatively poorly at school. For instance, PISA findings indicate that in most OECD countries, native students outperform students with an immigration background (OECD 2015; Jacobs and Devleeshouwer 2015). Understandably, this is likely to lead to a lack of social cohesion and economic integration as well as the emergence of a parallel life and socioeconomic segregation in the receiving country (Lüdemann and Schwerdt 2010). A significant number of scholarly findings have illustrated that parental involvement has a positive impact on the educational success of their children (Jeynes 2005). Research has also found that minority parents, including immigrant parents, are less involved in their children's schools, because they face more barriers to getting involved in schools than the majority of parents. In addition, refugee and asylum-seeker families are less effective in supporting their children, compared to voluntary economic immigrant families (Coll et al. 2002). Furthermore, depending on their socioeconomic background, there are differences between the refugee groups in their role as parents. For instance, the children of parents from rural Somalia face more challenges at school compared to the children of educated Iraqi parents, although both groups of parents are forced migrants or asylum seekers (Crul 2007). Thus, the background conditions of the immigrant child, i.e. refugee background with weak parental human capital (such as parents' knowledge and experience of the educational system), may be negatively related to the educational performance of the second-generation immigrants.

Research findings indicate that students of Somali descent in the West are underachievers compared to both the native populations of the settlement countries and other ethnic groups in these same countries (Rutter 2006; Demie et al. 2007; Strand et al. 2010; Rasmussen 2009; OSF 2015).

Somali parents' school involvement has received particular attention in this literature, and several factors were found to hinder their direct involvement in their children's schooling. These factors include a lack of understanding of the school system, a lack of language proficiency, a lack of trust between parents and schools and cultural differences that create confusion between parents and teachers (Nderu 2005; Kapteijns and Arman 2008). However, it has been suggested that it might be part of stereotyping to assume that Somali parents are lacking agency when it comes to their involvement in their children's schools and noted that there has been 'no evidence to suggest that Somali parents attend school meeting and events less than other populations' Rutter (2006:193).

In Finland, previous research has shown that although students of an immigrant background have a positive attitude and high aspirations towards education, they often face learning and studying difficulties (Kalalahti et al. 2017; Kilpi-Jakonen 2011).

Integration policy and the education system are vital for the success of the second generation. The Finnish education system is renowned for its internationally outstanding quality and to its provision of that quality education to all. However, a recent study has highlighted that in Europe, Finland has the widest performance gap between its immigrant and native students. The study was based on results of the PISA 2012 survey that assessed the competencies of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science in

65 countries and economies. The study concluded that Finnish basic education<sup>1</sup> does not provide all immigrant students with equal opportunities and it highlighted that in some groups, the second-generation students at the Finnish schools are doing worse than the first-generation immigrants. According to the report, Finnish-Somali students are faring worse than other immigrant groups in the extent of this gap (Valtionlouden tarkastusvirasto 2015).

Another recent policy report argued that the lack of a proper integration policy played a role in an emerging parallel life in Finland such as noticeable inequalities in society and a heightened risk of social alienation among second-generation immigrants. The study also has highlighted a disturbing fact that the proportion of young second-generation immigrants without post-primary education qualifications is the highest among the OECD countries (Laitinen et al. 2016).

This article investigates the sources of educational underperformance of second-generation Finnish-Somalis at lower and upper secondary schools and respective transitions to secondary and higher education. It particularly focuses on the role of human diversity that generates performance inequality between different student groups. It also looks at how the social context of the immigrant receiving country may increase inequalities faced by certain groups, and thus contribute to the educational underperformance of these groups. By doing so, the article employs the capability approach and links the weak educational performance of second-generation Somali students with the performance of the integration policy in the context of the receiving country.

## Somalis in Finland

In 2016, some 354,000 foreign language speakers lived in Finland. Since the early 1990s, a large group of Somali asylum seekers, escaping the civil war, started to arrive in Finland. In 2016, Somalis formed the third largest immigrant group in the country, after Russians and Estonians. As Chart 1 shows, more than 60% of the 19,059 Somalis were 24 years old or younger. Gender-wise, 9090 were female and 9969 were male. Most of the Finnish-Somalis (14,510) live in the Uusimaa region, particularly in Greater Helsinki<sup>2</sup> (Statistics Finland 2016).

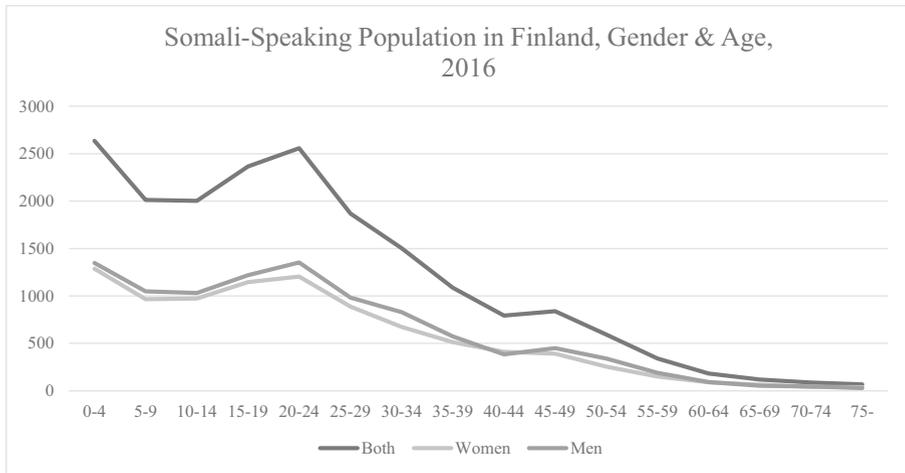
Source: Statistics Finland 2016, Population Structure.

However, Somalis in Finland face many challenges: adults face a harsh situation in the labour market and their children have the highest school drop-out rate and the lowest educational achievements compared to other communities. Identity crises and belonging are also major problems among Somali youth and children (OSF 2013).

In some countries, the unfavourable trend of Somali students has started to change. For instance, in the UK, although Somali students form one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups, their school achievement levels are below those achieved by other ethnic groups. However, studies also indicate that Somali students are making significant improvements in UK schools, perhaps due to policy responses by local authorities (Demie et al. 2007;

<sup>1</sup> Following UNESCO's definition, Finnish Basic Education primarily encompasses 9 years of compulsory schooling. There is also additional instruction that falls under the basic education, such as a voluntary 1-year education for primary school leavers, classes preparing immigrants for basic education, and instruction provided for persons aged over 16 years (Basic Education Act 628/1998: 1).

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Finland, Population Structure.



**Chart 1** Somali-speaking population in Finland, Gender and Age, 2016

Rasmussen 2009) and in some cities, Somali students have started outperforming many other ethnic groups (OSF 2014a, b). However, as Table 1 indicates, although the number of Somali children entering high school education in Finland is rising, due to the growing number of high school-aged children within the community, their access to higher education institutions is almost stagnant. According to official figures, in 2015, 49 Somali-speaking students were doing university degrees (32 bachelor's degrees and 17 postgraduate degrees), and another 172 were studying at universities of applied sciences (UAS) (168 bachelor's degrees and four master's degrees).

## Research Background

By employing qualitative content analysis, this article draws on material from two projects. The first is a 4-year study, “Transnational Somali families in Finland:

**Table 1** Somali-speaking students in post-comprehensive schools

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
General upper secondary education	255	390	509	597	680	743
Vocational education and training	486	574	692	915	1317	1665
UAS degree	102	131	133	130	153	168
UAS Master's degree	5	5	5	3	4	4
Bachelor's degree	19	17	19	21	29	32
Master's degree	11	11	11	11	13	10
Specialist degree in medicine	2	3	6	4	6	0
Doctoral degree	6	5	5	9	9	7
Total	886	1136	1380	1690	2211	2629

Source: Vipunen—Education Statistics Finland (<https://vipunen.fi/en-gb>)

discourses and lived realities of marriage,” the main sub-study of a large research, “Transnational Muslim marriages in Finland: wellbeing, law, and gender (2013–2017),” funded by the Academy of Finland<sup>3</sup>.

A large dataset amassed from several sources, including individual interviews, focus groups, participatory observations and life stories, was collected for this project. However, as the core theme of that project is somewhat distant from the specific goal of this article, I have drawn on the data from four focus groups of young people and children. Two of the children and youth focus groups were arranged for girls and two for boys. Twenty-eight out of the total 33 participants were between 15 and 18 years old and the remaining 5 were in their early to mid-twenties. All but one were single and lived with their parents/siblings and the married one lived with his wife. All but four were born in Finland. Occupation-wise, two were employed, three were neither employed nor were students, and the remaining 28 were students (19 high school students, 6 lower secondary school students, 1 higher education student, 1 adult high school student and the remaining 1 was studying in a combined vocational training and high school programme). The focus of these interviews was child wellbeing, primarily in education. In addition, data from four focus group discussions with adults, who were predominantly parents, also informed the analysis. Data were collected from September 2013 to July 2016 and the informants were recruited through personal networks and organisations. Mulki Al-Sharmani and I conducted the four focus group interviews with adults. I conducted the four child/youth focus group interviews. All interviewees were immigrants of Somali background and all interviews were conducted in Somali. The interviews were recorded and all but one were transcribed. (The exception was a child/youth focus group interview<sup>4</sup>).

In Finland, parental consent is not required for children aged 15 or older,<sup>5</sup> but this research has followed the ethical recommended by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity’s ethical guidelines. For instance, each participant was adequately informed about the research and how the data would be used. They were also asked to give their informed consent. Furthermore, the anonymity of informants was assured by removing the original names and all other identifying information and by using pseudo names.

The second source is a dataset collected for a research project funded by the Open Society Foundations (OSF). The main body of the OSF data was collected in the second half of 2012 and the first half of 2013. Twenty-eight key stakeholder interviews were conducted, including nine national government officials, seven community leaders, three city officials, three social workers, three civil society actors, two teachers and one journalist. Most of them were experts in public policy (i.e. education and integration). All interviews featured a set of semi-structured questions, except for the one with the journalist and one with one of the teachers. However, child wellbeing, particularly education, was at the heart of most of the discussions. In terms of gender, 13 out of the 28 interviewees were women. Some of the

<sup>3</sup> The larger project, “Transnational Muslim marriages in Finland: wellbeing, law, and gender” (2013–2017), is being funded by the Academy of Finland and led by Dr. Marja Tiilikainen at the Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki. The main sub-study, “Transnational Somali families in Finland: discourses and lived realities of marriage,” is designed and led by Dr. Mulki Al-Sharmani at the Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki. The overall research project investigates how Muslims in Finland organize and experience marriage in transnational space and how the Finnish legal system and state institutions meet their needs and enhance their wellbeing.

<sup>4</sup> I prepared a summary of the last focus group interview rather than a full transcription.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.tenk.fi/en/ethical-review-in-human-sciences>.

interviews were conducted in pairs. One of the interviews was conducted by telephone, and the rest were face-to-face interviews.

In total, 102 people participated in the 12 thematic focus groups. Only one focus group was specifically on education; however, almost all the data from these focus groups were relevant for this article for two reasons. First, all the themes were in one way or another relevant to child wellbeing. Second, child wellbeing was at the centre of all discussions. About 40% of participants were women.

All focus groups were conducted in Somali and lasted between one and two and half hours. All focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed and translated into English.

This article is also informed by the previous literature, policy reports and official documents, such as Finnish education acts and the EU and Finnish integration policies.

## Educational Performance and Capability Approach

A major factor influencing the first generation's adaptation and thus their descendants' educational performance is the context of the receiving country or the mode of incorporating immigrants into the receiving society (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and MacLeod 1996). One aspect of the context is the attitude of the mainstream society towards the immigrant. For instance, favourable societal reception generates 'faster socioeconomic mobility, a more positive self-image, and better integrated immigrant communities' and conversely, immigrants who find themselves in a less favourable situation, such as being subjected to widespread discrimination, are expected to experience less economic progress, and a tough process of social and psychological integration (Portes and MacLeod 1996:257). Furthermore, the contextual advantages or disadvantages experienced by the first generation influence the wellbeing of the second generation, particularly their educational performance (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Therefore, the unfavourable social context has a negative impact on the educational performance of the second generation.

A related contextual factor is public policy,<sup>6</sup> such as the integration strategy of the receiving country (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and MacLeod 1996). For instance, due to its intrinsic and instrumental value, education is understood as being central to human flourishing and social equality. Accordingly, the Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the European Union (EU) states that 'Efforts in education are critical in preparing immigrants, and particularly their descendants, to be more successful and more active participants in society' (Council of the European Union 2004). However, ultimate success in the education of the second generation is contingent upon the success in the integration of the first generation and the creation of a tolerant majority society. Hence, the gap between the educational performance of second-generation children and their native counterparts is a proxy for the success or failure of the integration policy and the effectiveness of the educational system.

Studying the relationship between the education of an immigrant child and the social context, the capability approach has been employed for this article. The capability approach, as Ingrid Robeyns puts it, '... a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and

<sup>6</sup> Following Leslie Pal (1997:2–3), Public policy is understood as "A course of action or inaction chosen by public authorities to address a given problem or interrelated set of problems."

proposals about social change in society' (Robeyns 2005:94). In addition, on the one hand, it can bring together individual wellbeing, social context and the public policy and, on the other hand, it provides a frame to design and evaluate our public policies. In particular, this approach provides rich resources for understanding the relationship between social justice and education (Unterhalter et al. 2007). According to the capability approach, in order to secure social justice and equality, public policy needs to focus on the variations in individuals' capability sets, rather than levels of resources or levels of happiness.

Sen (2003:43) has highlighted that functioning and capabilities are two central concepts of this approach: 'If life is seen as a set of "doings and beings" that are valuable, the exercise of assessing the quality of life takes the form of evaluating these functionings and the capability to function'. For him, a functioning is 'the various things a person may value doing or being' and a capability is 'the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible' for a person to achieve (Sen 1999). For example, being educated is a functioning for a person who values education and has a reason to value being educated. Capabilities are the real freedoms or opportunities that this person has to be educated, or in other words, to achieve valuable functionings. Put simply, capabilities represent 'various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another' (Sen 1992:40). Therefore, the distinction between functionings and capabilities is between what is realised and what is effectively possible, or said differently, between achievements, on the one hand, and freedoms or opportunities, on the other. In this approach, the goals of both human wellbeing and social justice, both of which are core objectives of public policy, are to be conceptualised in terms of individual's capabilities to function. The effective opportunities that people have are important, to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in and to be the kind of person they want to be (Robeyns 2003). Thus, in terms of policy objectives, the equality of capabilities is important (Terzi 2008). However, this does not mean that resource inequality is not an issue at all. The point is that (re)distribution of resources alone is not enough to solve the problem and that it may sometimes mask the real inequality. Therefore, the core issue should be equality of the capabilities.

Another major concept of the capability approach is the notion of human diversity and its consequences on social equality (Sen 1992). Sen insisted that this diversity may be a source of inequality even in the case of equal distribution of resources, such as equal formal access to education. The problem arises when these individual diversities generate differences in people's abilities to convert the resources into a valued outcome or functionings (Walker 2006). Understanding how human diversity may generate different outcomes and thus inequality, the concept of conversion factors is useful. Conversion factors is a generic name for all factors that influence the development of the individual's capabilities to convert available resources into functionings. In other words, conversion factors are factors that affect an individual's ability or freedom to convert the resources that are available into a valuable outcome. These factors are divided into three main categories (Sen 1999; Robeyns 2005): personal, social and environmental conversion factors. Personal conversion factors are internal to the person, such as gender, mental and physical condition, intelligence and learning skills. A low level of intelligence or ineffective learning skills have an impact on the individual's capability of converting the good-quality education that is provided to them. Social conversion factors are factors that are from beyond the individual's realms. They are a product of the societal environment in which one lives, such as school, family, public

policies, social norms, race and discrimination. Environmental conversion factors are the product of the physical/ecological environment that surround the individual.

A growing number of studies dealing with issues related to educational (in)justices are employing the capability approach. See, for example, Saito (2003), Terzi (2008), Walker (2006), Walker and Unterhalter (2007), Hart (2012), and Hart et al. (2014).

Wilson-Strydom (2015) found that the will to learn, the confidence to learn and home language are the three main personal conversion factors that are relevant to one's capabilities to access higher education and to be successful in it. She highlighted the importance of recognising that an individual's will to learn and confidence to learn act as conversion factors that can help us to understand differences in educational success. She also noted that a lack of the will to learn or confidence to learn 'can become corrosive disadvantages, while having a will-to-learn and confidence-to-learn are likely to be fertile functionings.' (Wilson-Strydom 2015:140). However, she has stressed that although these are individual characteristics, they are advanced or undermined in contexts at which the individual is situated. 'This means that we cannot see the absence of a will-to-learn or confidence-to-learn as something inherent to a given person, or as an individual fault that needs to be corrected. This understanding is what underlies deficit approaches to readiness. Rather, we need to understand the social conditions that enable or constrain their development, and this can be done when we consider these abilities as capabilities' (Wilson-Strydom 2015:140). She also found that students for whom the language of learning of their institutions was not their home language were experiencing a range challenges not experienced by their peers for whom the language is their native. She has also noted that one's language competence has a considerable impact on students' confidence to learn.

Regarding social conversion factors, she also found several important factors. The school context within which the student was located was the most important conversion factor. For Wilson-Strydom, 'the concept of school context operates at the intersection of socio-economic background as well as learning cultures within different types of schools' (Wilson-Strydom 2015:142).

Hart (2012) found that parental cultural capital, such as their knowledge and experience of the educational system, and support, such as practical, financial and emotional support, are the main family-related conversion factors advancing or constraining their children's achievement of their educational aspirations, particularly in relation to higher education.

To investigate how inequality of ability generated by human diversity impacts education performance of the second generation and the role of the public policy, following Wilson-Strydom (2015), this article has scrutinised the personal and social conversion factors that Finnish-Somali children and their parents see as the main factors constraining the Finnish-Somali students' capabilities to achieve valuable functioning: being/becoming well educated.

## **Social Context, Somali Parents and their Children's Schooling**

### **Personal Conversion Factors of the Finnish-Somali Students and the Attitudes of Mainstream Society**

Children/youth interlocutors were asked about when they feel happy and successful. They stressed that they felt successful when they achieved their goals and felt

unsuccessful when they failed to achieve them. In the discussions, they identified a very strong association between being successful and good performance in education.

The educational performance of immigrant students does not depend on their attitude towards education alone, but also on the attitude of the majority of society and how the receiving country's education system responds to it (OECD 2015).

Research findings indicate that: 'Bullying, isolation and rejection by the mainstream has made some Somali children adopt strategies to help gain them greater acceptance. These survival strategies comprised an abandonment of an ethos of hard work and self-improvement through education' (Rutter 2006:191).

Being a Somali (having a Somali background) in Finland is in many ways being an exceptional other. In a 2002 survey, Finns were asked 'When speaking about resident foreigners in Finland, what groups come to your mind?' Fifty-two per cent of the public responded that Somalis are the first that comes to their mind. However, at that time, only 6% of the total foreign population in Finland were Somali speakers (Säävälä 2008). In addition, previous research has shown that Finnish-Somalis are among the more discriminated-against groups in Europe. For instance, according to a survey conducted in 27 EU countries, some 47% of them reported incidents of discrimination over a period of 12 months (EU-MIDIS 2009). These attitudes also seem not to have changed (OSF 2013). This attitude is also reproduced by teachers, peers and other actors, in the school context. At Finnish schools, compared with other students, Somali students suffer from a lack of close friends, face more problems arising from educational institutions and confront more physical threats and a higher rate of school bullying (Matikka et al. 2015). Therefore, the attitude of the mainstream population towards Somalis, reproduced in the school environment, would undermine both the will to learn and the confidence to learn of the Finnish-Somali students. The following quote, by a young female university of applied sciences student, highlights how this negative attitude impacts both the will to learn and learning confidence of the Finnish-Somali students.

What is the most important thing for me ... is to get an education so I can work in a job fitting my education. The other concern, is that if I achieve the position I am looking for and get the job that I want, then will the Finnish society accept me ... If they say that today we have a new doctor and they see a black, Somali woman in head scarf, how will they take it? That's something that worries me. Even if I have what is required and I am educated but I cannot help the colour of my skin and that worries me. (Focus group discussion, February 06, 2013)

Senior government officials agree that attitude of the majority society towards Somalis is problematic. A senior officer at the City of Helsinki highlighted that

[W]e can't underestimate discrimination and racism in what it comes to Somalis. I think that in Finland ... Somalis are suffering a lot of discrimination in the labour market. If you look at the educational level, and I've looked at those very carefully, in my previous research, there are so many Somalis who have done their secondary or even university education in Finland, excellent capabilities, lots of youngsters coming into the labour market, still their position [access to employment] is slow ... So the biggest issues are xenophobia, discrimination and scapegoating. (Stakeholder interview, December 4, 2012)

After noting that discrimination against Somalis is unique, a senior officer at the Ministry of Education and Culture said

To some extent, all immigrants have a problem with language, but that is not a big thing. I think that is the more politically correct thing to talk about. If you don't want to hire one [an immigrant] you would say they do not know the language, you don't say they have the wrong colour, you understand that you cannot say that even if you think so. (Stakeholder interview, January 3, 2013)

Parents who participated in the focus group discussions expressed their deep concerns about how their children are treated at school. In the following quote, a mother stresses her concerns and how that would impact the children's wellbeing and more specifically how these attitudes would obstruct the children's will and confidence to learn:

[T]he children are born and raised here, and they have their rights, but I don't think that they are equal to the Finnish children. ... it has happened that a teacher asks his students "how is it possible that an immigrant child receives these grades and you can't?" it has happened. They use it against the Finnish children. Then how will that child continue his education? (Focus group discussion, February 14, 2013)

Furthermore, these concerns and attitudes partially create uncomfortable relationships between the school and the family. Particularly, it fades the parents' trust towards the school. A father in the focus group of education shared his experience by noting:

The racism in this country is not hidden, it's openly out there. I have a child in the kindergarten and he said "father, at the day care the Finnish children don't play with me". I told him that the problems are not children but their parents who must've told them not to play with the little [N-word used], so don't touch their toys and don't play with them. (Focus group discussion, January 22, 2013)

Here, in addition to the child being discriminated against, another major issue is his father's lack of will to notify the day-care staff, due to lack of trust, about the situation.

Moreover, a strong theme that emerged among our interlocutors was that Somali children and their parents are not respected at school. However, a father, who happened to be a long-time teacher, noted that most of the school staff considers the law even if they hate you. But, he also confirmed that there are events that take place in which Somalis are not respected. For instance, he noted cases in which school principals refused to meet with Somali parents.

Another long-time school teacher with a Somali background noted that some schools do not cooperate with immigrant parents and emphasised that this is influenced by the school principal's attitude towards cultural differences: Some ignore challenges generated by the multiculturalism at schools, and this gives some teachers to misbehave. He also noted that this lack of cooperation could be a source of school underachievement of students. (Stakeholder interview, December 20, 2012).

In some situations, the problem becomes very damaging. According to a well-informed senior national government officer:

Somali kids, when they are alone in a majority school, I have personal experience, they might have slight problems in the integration of the school, although they learn Finnish, they might have Finnish friends, but in the very lower classes of the school ... when somebody thinks you are different, “you are the black guy of dark skin here, you are different”- and the teacher doesn’t help, usually they do, but if not – Somalis may start to underachieve at school and become restless and become scapegoats. (Stakeholder interview, January 25, 2013)

Previous research indicates that Finnish-Somalis are discriminated against by their teachers. For instance, Juva and Holm (2016) noted how in some Finnish comprehensive schools, some teachers were tolerant of some students’ racist actions/attitudes towards other students with an immigration background, particularly against Somali students, and how some racist teachers were openly making negative remarks against Finnish-Somali students and by observing how some teachers treat their students noted that:

For example, in one class, there was a Somali female student who asked the teacher a question about the topic of the class, but the teacher silenced the student and scolded her for not raising her hand to ask for her turn, at the same time the teacher did not intervene when other students, especially ethnic Finnish boys, were talking about topics unrelated to the class. (Juva and Holm 2016:223)

According to both the EU’s Common Basic Principles for immigrant integration policy and Finland’s Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (1386/2010), integration is understood as a two-way process of mutual accommodations with three main actors: immigrants, receiving societies and state institutions in the destination countries. State institutions are expected to facilitate the process and to create opportunities for immigrants to adopt. However, integration instruments were criticised by placing integration responsibilities on the immigrants while ignoring the role of mainstream society. Although the vital role of the majority society is acknowledged, no guidelines have been developed for their participation (Saarinen and Jäppinen 2014; Miera 2012; cf. Berry 2001).

This kind of approach masks the challenges generated by the attitude of the majority on the integration process. For integration strategy to succeed, there must be widespread acceptance of the value of cultural diversity within the larger society, and a minimal level of discrimination and prejudice (Miera 2012). In the Finnish context, the actual practices of public sector authorities, including teachers, let alone the general public, are far from that and their attitudes towards their clients are ‘selective and rather ethnocentric’ (Pitkänen 2008:38).

Our informants, particularly stakeholder interviewees, linked the integration problem of the Somalis with the attitude of the mainstream society. For instance, the Ombudsman for Minorities spoke about what she termed as ‘structural obstacles’ and for her, integration policy:

[S]hould focus more on looking at what the obstacles in the society for integration are. You know, a little bit of tradition is, you look the immigrant and say you should change, you should know better Finnish, ... you should be more like us ...

it's time to focus, you know, what obstacles are there? ... integration now needs to focus on ourselves, on our society on general level and we think this is very important to sort of remove also the racist attitude. (Stakeholder interview, January 3, 2013)

A related aspect that was emphasised particularly by the stakeholder was the divergence between the goals of the integration policy and the actual practices of individuals in the positions of power in the integration process, such as employers and public sector authorities (OSF 2013; Pitkänen 2008).

To conclude, in the Finnish Education system, although resources are distributed equally and students have equal formal access to education (i.e. they are in same school and class), being a descendant of a former Somali refugee generates inequality that hinders the Finnish-Somali students' real capability to convert the resources, high-quality education, into a valued outcome, and become a well-educated citizen. Understandably, a context like this is detrimental to the educational success of the child in question by the waning of her will to learn and confidence to learn. Apparently, here, the problem with the Finnish-Somali children is not inherent characteristics, but the main issue is that in the Finnish context, the attitude of the majority society undermines the personal conversion factors of the Finnish-Somali students. Therefore, better integration strategies capable of effectively addressing these obstacles are needed.

### **Social Conversion Factors and Parental Involvement**

Here, the article has used 'the concept of school context'—which in our case operates at the intersection between the socioeconomic background of the parent (including parental cultural capital, such as their knowledge and experience of the educational system) and children and the school system—as conversion factors constraining the Finnish-Somali children's educational achievements.

In the Finnish education system, home-school co-operation, with active parental involvement, is assumed to be inevitable for the educational success of the child. Parents' aspirations for their children's achievement are a vital driver of the parents' involvement in their children's wellbeing (Halle et al. 1997). Previous research findings indicate that Somali parents in Finland have high aspirations and support their children's schooling (OSF 2013; Alitolppa-Niitamo 2002; Liebkind and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000).

Among the parent interlocutors, a strong argument that emerged was that Somali parents aspire for their children to succeed in education. A father in the focus group discussion on health noted that he has no worries in the health sector, but with the children's education:

The biggest concern that we have is such because we see that our children are not getting education like we would want them to. The reason might be difficulties they encounter in the places where they study, or where they live and what comes from the young people in their neighbourhoods. It seems the biggest problems Somalis have regarding education. (Focus group discussion, February 07, 2013)

Non-Somali stakeholder interviewees also acknowledged that point. For instance, a senior officer from the Ministry of Education and Culture noted

The parental generation of the Somali seem very concerned and want to do a lot of good deeds for the younger generation (Stakeholder interview, January 3, 2013).

The children/youth participants agreed with that and believed that their parents paid all they could for their children to succeed in education. For instance, a high school student in one of the focus groups explained how it is a joyful moment for the entire family and how amazingly her parents are proud of them when she or her siblings get good scores in tests.

However, in some contexts, the parents' interest and aspirations are not fully transformed as a valuable resource for children's school achievements (Strand et al. 2010). In the youth/children focus group discussions, it has been highlighted that Somali parents' strong involvement in schooling is less effective in practice. As one high school female student noted, the parents are good in what they know and not as good in what they do not know. Here, several challenges that impede Somali parent's involvement in their children's education have emerged.

**The Knowledge of the School System Is the First Challenge** The education system in Somalia is very different from the education system in Finland. Therefore, Somali parents are not well-equipped with the tacit knowledge that native parents take for granted. By not fully comprehending their role in their children's schooling, Somali parents may not be aware of when and how to intervene (Kapteijns and Arman 2008). Child/youth informants are aware that, generally speaking, first-generation Somali parents face this problem. As a young man in a child/youth focus group put it,

Yes, parents are very involved in their children's education but there are situations that they don't know how to support ... I mean they don't understand how to help the children. Parents got their education in Somalia and they may not understand how the (educational) system in Finland works. (Focus group discussion, December 13, 2014)

A high school student noted that her mother, although having attended two grades of junior high school in Finland and speaking good Finnish, has no clue about the Finnish high school system and highlighted that her mother hesitates to attend school meetings and other activities, simply because she feels uncomfortable about being engaged in something that she does not understand.

**The Lack of Language Proficiency Is the Second Challenge** In the child/youth interviews, informants emphasised that their lack of language is a major obstacle preventing parents from directly supporting their children in school-related home activities, such as homework, reading teacher reports, etc., and engaging in school activities. They have noted that due to a lack of Finnish language skills, parents often need their help, including at the parent-teacher meetings.

**Cultural Difference Is the Third Challenge** In addition to differences in school systems, discrimination, and language problems, other factors related to cultural differences are mentioned as barriers preventing Somali parents participating in school activities. In the child/youth interviews, it had been stressed that since parents do not fully understand what is going on in schools, in many times, they take a defensive position, by deciding not to attend meetings or prevent their children from participating in non-class school activities. A high school student noted that her parents used not to attend the ‘parent-evenings’ at schools simply they felt it was *ceeb* (shame) to be there. Others mentioned that parents feel uncomfortable being the only different people in that crowd. Others said parents feel unwelcome in the school meetings. It has also been noted that parents feel comfortable in attending these meetings when there are other Somali parents attending the same meeting. An overarching factor here is the lack of experience and comprehension of the Finnish school culture and climate by the Somali parents.

Evidently, Finnish-Somali parents face enormous challenges in becoming involved in their children’s schooling. Because the cultural capital accrued in Somalia is less relevant in the Finnish context, they lack key aspects of cultural capital, such as Finnish language skills and an understanding of the Finnish education culture and system, which are vital for the success of their children’s schooling in Finland.

All the above-mentioned challenges faced by the Finnish-Somali parents could be associated with the level of integration of the first generation. As noted above, the focus of existing integration policy is on immigrants, rather than mainstream society; however, our informants have questioned the effectiveness of the Finnish integration policy. A senior officer from the Ministry of the Interior noted:

One problem is that in Finland we don’t have a good integration policy ... first we didn’t have actual policy at all, and then we had ... a foreigner policy... and then suddenly we needed an integration policy or an immigration policy and at the same time there was this, you know, started this discussion about immigrants in Finland linked to the popularity of the Perussuomalaiset (Finns Party), so it was totally, we were very confused and it was very difficult to develop immigration policy at same time when all the politicians, in a way, didn’t know what to say in this new situation. (Stakeholder interview, January 15, 2013)

An unemployed father in the focus groups sharing his view on the Finnish integration policy and after highlighting the differences between the performance of the integration policy and the expectations of the labour market said:

I received [undertook] an eight-month language course. In those eight months I understood how things are here, how I can continue to university, to high school or to vocational school. I didn’t acquire enough language to enable me to do so, however. When I received the certificate, it was very low, and they gave up on me then. (Focus group discussion, February 19, 2013)

Among the matters raised in the children/youth focus group discussions was that the integration policy has failed Somali parents, reducing their ability to contribute better in their children’s educational success.

## Conclusion

The analysis above illustrates that educational underperformance of the Finnish-Somali children is to some extent produced by the human diversity between the Finnish-Somali children and the native-Finnish children in the Finnish schools. This diversity generates inequality between the two groups in their abilities to convert the high-quality education provided to them by the Finnish education system into a valued outcome. Due to their background, as the children of refugees from Somalia, and the attitude of the majority society, Finnish-Somali students are less capable in converting the educational opportunities into a valuable outcome. The Finnish context in which they find themselves puts them into a relatively less-encouraging position, as prejudices and discrimination may weaken their will and confidence to learn and their parents' cooperation with schools. Furthermore, although their parents are supportive, due to their background as refugees from a civil war-engulfed least developed country, are also relatively less effective in the Finnish schooling system.

The failure of the integration policy contributes to the emergence of social conversion factors that hamper the Finnish-Somali children's educational achievements in two ways. First, the integration policy, to a large extent, ignores the role of mainstream society. Yet, the attitude of the majority society may obstruct the development of the will to learn and confidence to learn of the second-generation students, and thus undermines their capability to convert the high-quality education into a 'valuable functioning', i.e. to become well educated. The majority of society's attitude also affects their parents' cooperation with schools. Second, the integration policy is less effective in supporting first-generation Somalis in developing the cultural capital that is essential in the Finnish context. Comprehension of the Finnish culture and language are vital for their involvement in the schooling of the second generation.

Public policy, to address the performance gap of immigrant children in schooling, particularly to those from a humble background, should realise that the provision of equal resources is not enough to solve the problem, and that far worse, the provision of equal resources may sometimes mask the real inequality. Therefore, public policy should reconsider students' capabilities and how these capabilities are shaped by the diversity or the basic heterogeneity of the students and their families. Therefore, integration policy should be serious in generating a suitable social context, by fashioning a mainstream society that is open and inclusive in its orientation towards diversity. Additionally, integration policy should improve its strategy towards first-generation immigrants, keeping in mind the aspects that would have intergenerational influences on the wellbeing of the second generation (Laitinen et al. 2016).

A positive aspect that has been made repeatedly is that Somali parents are catching up through improved language skills and comprehension of the school culture. In addition, there have been certain initiatives by the authorities to improve the situation. In September 2016, the Government of Finland approved a new integration programme. This programme clearly acknowledges the failure of previous integration policies and aims to tackle the weaknesses of preceding programmes (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2016). One of the objectives of the programme is to create a Finland in which 'everyone can feel at home' (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017:3).

In addition to accelerating the integration process in more flexible policies and comprehensive practices, the aims of the new programme include measures that seek to develop proper educational strategies to enhance the integration of adult immigrants with a poor educational background and parents facing learning obstacles, such as mothers caring for their children at home. Another aim of the programme is ‘that more and more young immigrants will complete at least secondary level studies and achieve capabilities for applying for a place in further studies or transitioning to the labour market’ (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2016:45).

The new programme to shape the attitudes of the majority population gives a greater focus to improving the general atmosphere of the society for integration and seeks to devise acts and other measures to enhance mutual respect and understanding between and among the majority population and immigrants and minorities, to tackle racism and discrimination. With this in mind, the Ministry of Education and Culture devised a ten-point comprehensive action plan to tackle hate speech and racism and to promote social inclusion. One aim of the plan is to educate ‘people who work with children and young people. It gives new skills for working in a multicultural environment. Teaching staff and other professionals are trained to spot signals related to hate speech, racist behaviour and radicalisation and how to address these issues’ (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017:5).

All this clearly indicates that integrating immigrants is a serious business in Finnish public policy; however, to succeed, public policy needs a deep understanding of how the social context may influence the integration of different immigrant groups.

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