Title: Identity and Belonging among Diasporic Somali Youth in the GTA
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This paper is based on a study of the self-perceptions and understandings of Somali youth in the Greater Toronto Area. For the past 28 years, the Federal Republic of Somalia, a small state in Africa that is bordered by Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, the Guardafui Channel and Indian Ocean has been struggling for political and civil normalcy. According to the UN Refugee Agency, over 810,000 refugees from Somalia are scattered worldwide. A prolonged civil war (1989-present) has resulted in a lack of security for its population, poor education system, unemployment, and unstable institutions. These issues faced by the Somali population have forced them out of their homeland and into other countries across the world, where they experience considerable stress.

Anxieties are especially severe for immigrant Somali parents. In addition to being concerned about how they will integrate into a new land, they are also trying to keep their children safe and raise them in a new country that does not understand or support their religious and cultural practices. Bowie, Wojnar, and Isaak (2017) discuss the challenges faced by first-generation Somali families in parenting their children in the U.S. due to forgetting cultural and religious identities and practices. Some children and youth who emigrate from Somalia fall prey to bad influences and become involved in criminal activities, which further alienates them from their families. Families experience other resettlement challenges and trauma too. Somali immigrants often feel unwelcome in their new homes because they do not fit the dominant culture and due to negative stereotypes associated with Somalis. Mohamed and Zhou and Collet discuss how Somali refugee students have faced difficulties within Canadian schools due to pre and post migration challenges. With regard to post migration, many Somali refugee youth find it hard to practice their religion and their cultural ways due to the lack of knowledge of their own culture, and

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clashes with the popular culture within their Canadian schools.⁴ Many youth find themselves relating more to the Canadian identity because they perceive it as having more to offer.⁵ At the same time, their children having little to no knowledge of writing and speaking the Somali language is of concern to the parents, who see their offspring as leaving their cultural values behind. Due to limited access to education and basic human necessities in Somalia, Somali refugee students struggle in their new classrooms. Some forget the literacy skills that they had acquired in Somalia. The situation is further complicated by the lack of guidance and support from school staff members and the community.

According to the 2016 National Census (2017), 62,550 Somalis live in Canada. Of those, 20,960 are in Toronto, and 10,375 live in Ottawa.⁶ These two places alone make up the majority of the Somali population in Canada. Such high numbers might lead to the assumption that the community must be very well established. However, in major cities like Toronto and Ottawa, the Somali community fails to be recognized due to lack of organization and unity (Hopkins, 2006).⁷ This, in part, is why Somali youth struggle to relate to their religious and cultural identities. In Toronto, charitable organizations, such as Midaynta Community Services, do cater to ethnic groups such as Somali immigrants through youth outreach and adult programs that offer access to various work opportunities. Somali parents encourage their children to attend such community centers to learn and gain as much knowledge from their Somali community as possible. Most parents feel this will help their children be successful in life. Being successful in school and also being connected to the Somali cultural and religious values is given great importance by Somali parents. However, some Somali parents do not feel as comfortable attending community held events, or letting their children attend such events due to tribal clashes. Some tribes

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within the Somali community find it hard to associate with other tribes, due to hatred and past issues towards one another, which date back years. The negative consequence of Somali parents withdrawing their families from community events is that they are not able to help their children, and the children are put at risk as they try to figure out things on their own. With the many challenges Somali youth face, some feel as if they do not fit in anywhere. Some feel as if they are judged by their appearance and their ability (or inability) to speak their own language. Many do not receive support from their teachers, parents, and community leaders too. And many experience racial prejudice and stereotyping within institutions. All these factors put Somali youth at risk.

It has been documented that young Somali adult men living in cities in the USA and Canada have a harder time integrating within society than their female counterparts. Ellis, Abdi, Miller, and White (2015) note that many young Somali men do not have a sense of belonging within their Somali community and this sense of alienation is associated with proneness to violent activities. This background makes it evident that we need to better understand the specific family, community, and educational experiences of Somali youth in the Canadian context. Furthermore, there is no information about the self-perceptions and self-understandings of Somali youth. Hence the need for this study in which I searched for answers to the following research questions:

1. How do Somali youth describe themselves when they speak of their identities?
2. How do Somali youth speak about their school experiences?
3. How do they perceive their relationship with their own community?
4. What are some of the goals and ambitions of Somali youth?
5. What, according to them, are some of the challenges they have faced, and the achievements they are proud of?

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Methodology

Participants in this qualitative study were five Somali youth between the ages of 18-24 years. Three were females, two were males. No other criteria were used for inclusion or exclusion. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. All participants were born in Canada and preferred to speak in English as they were proficient in it. Four of the five participants resided in middle to low-income areas within the Greater Toronto Area. One participant lived in an upper income neighbourhood. Participants were recruited through the snowball method. That is, once a participant who fit into the study criteria was identified through informal contacts within the Somali community, that participant was asked for recommendations for other potential participants.

Interviews were conducted in-person, at a public location that was convenient for both parties, typically at school, in the cafeteria, in offices, or at restaurants. Before the interview was conducted, participants learned about the purpose of the study and were assured of confidentiality, following which they signed a consent form. The interviews generally lasted between 35-50 minutes. Questions like, “Can you explain a bit about yourself?” “What is your background?” “Who do you live with?” and “Can you tell me which of your family members moved to Canada, and explain how their transition was?” were initially posed. Then, questions around identity, community belonging, support systems and experiences in high school and university were asked. All interviews were recorded on a password protected phone. Audio files were uploaded to a password protected computer.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. Transcribed interviews were coded to identify the main ideas that emerged from each interview. These codes were listed in a separate document and collapsed into conceptual categories, such as: identity, challenges of fitting in, migration and its profound impact on family, good and weak support systems, the difficulties faced in university, and benefits of university, etc. Each interview was coded according to these themes. Frequencies were counted to identify the most common conceptual categories/themes that responses across all interviews fell into.

9 This study was completed in compliance with UTM’s Research Ethics Committee.
Results

The families of all five participants migrated to Canada from Somalia because of the civil war there. In two of the five cases, the father was the one to migrate first to Canada to evaluate the living conditions. In two cases, the mother migrated on her own. In one case, both parents migrated together, which made their transition easier.

Somali-Canadian Youth Speaking about their Identity

Four of the five participants confidently claimed that they were Somali-Canadian. For instance, Yonis derives his Somali identity from the area he grew up in, but his Canadian identity comes from interactions outside his neighbourhood. Samatar also mentioned that even though he has Somali friends, most of his activities are dominated by the Canadian Culture.

*I’d say more Canadian than Somali. But, there are aspects to both ... a lot of my friends are from Somalia. But a lot of the stuff we take part in is ... Canadian... We go to a Canadian university; we speak the English language fluently. I don’t even talk usually Somali when I’m outside of my house. But yea, I’d say more Canadian identity but the Somali identity is still there.*

Despite being raised in a Somali household, being Canada-born meant that the Canadian culture was more dominant when it came to the everyday living of four of my five participants. All the participants spoke English fluently and preferred to speak that outside their homes and with their siblings. They spoke the Somali language only with their parents and older relatives. Layla, who identifies as a Somali-Canadian woman, acknowledged Canada as her birthplace but stressed the importance of her Somali ethnocultural origins:

*So ... I am Canadian. But when someone asks me ... I always say I’m Somali Canadian. Because my identity is a big thing to me ... I think you need to understand where you came from before you understand where you’re going. Yeah, I am a Canadian citizen, yeah I was born here and I respect that but that doesn’t erase my ethnicity ... Like us as Canadians were not all the same and I think I need to point out what makes me different, like I am visibly different and that is where I came from so I’m Somali-Canadian.*
Layla expressed a dual identity. Despite being born in Canada, she showed a high level of pride at being Somali because she believes it makes her unique.

Out of the five participants, only one participant, Sara, felt that she did not fit into the Somali culture, despite trying her best to form relationships with other Somalis:

...So I was actually raised in ... Region, so a lot of my identity comes from ... this isolation that I’ve faced from my peers. My peers were ... Chinese or Persian so I never really fit in. I only knew a couple Somali people and I never really fit in with them either so I always have a hard time ... identifying what I resonate more with. Cause usually it’s just ... I feel displaced in any situation that I’m in.

Growing up in a non-diverse and prosperous area, Sara faced the challenges of feeling unwelcome by the general population in her area. But she also experienced exclusion from Somalis:

And my mom always says like I wasn’t given the chance to ... be in the culture ... I didn’t grow up around Somali people, I didn’t really have that many Somali friends. And ... I tried to make Somali friends but ... it wasn’t happening. ... there was this huge disconnect ... I wanted to claim the identity, and I wish I could ... but, it’s always feeling ... invalidated or discredited by ... Somali people saying “You sound too white”.

At other times during her interview, Sara suggested that she also feels isolated due to her sexual identity:

I have tried to branch out and reach out but I always find that there’s just this ... energy where I just don’t feel like I belong, and it’s kind of like on where my identity markers are, in comparison to most Somali girls, like I’m not very feminine, I’m not like I guess straight either, and I feel like that does cause a lot of conflict in these communities because they are, they are very hetero normative and that is one of the things I’ve had to cope with.

Sexuality is a sensitive topic within the Somali community. Due to the community’s strict cultural and religious norms, expressions of sexuality are seen as deviant. Individuals expressing their sexuality tend to feel unsafe and unwelcomed. Sara constantly feels this within the community because of her looks. Despite her trying to reach out, there was always a hostility that made her feel disbarred from
the community. Her responses, as she spoke about trying to be a part of the Somali community, were filled with emotion.

Other participants also criticized the older generation within the Somali community for using tribal affairs to exclude or include individuals in the community, whereas the younger generation were seen as judging individuals based on superficial criteria.

**The Challenges of High School and University**

Out of the five participants, four attended schools in areas considered to be “underdeveloped.” In 23 instances across the five interviews, they said that their schools lacked resources and subjected them to harsh experiences. These participants experienced various forms of discrimination. They were seen as underachievers, and were not expected to succeed past high school. In Ayan’s words:

*I didn’t like the Vice-principal ... he just thought everybody wasn’t going to be s__t. Especially if you were Somali or Jamaican ... I came back after I started UTM in first year ... and he was like “Oh nice to see you back. Do you go to adult school?” And I’m like “why would you even say that as a joke?” like you really don’t rate Somali people. You don’t think we’re going to excel. And I told him that I actually go to UTM.*

Ayan felt this type of prejudice throughout high school, and highlighted that this created self-doubt in many other students too, about their future. Yonis recounted a similar experience in high school, “I know in high school, they did not encourage people to go to university for the most part, they would encourage like other jobs like the trades and stuff.”

High schools in disadvantaged areas are also known for teaching the curriculum in a poor manner. Layla remembered that students had to memorize the content because teachers were not teaching effectively. Students often looked for options such as night school and summer school to augment their learning. The participants also reflected on how staff made them feel. Sara said:
A lot of black students in my high school were taking applied courses. They were either held back or told not to go to university ... in the 9th grade ... I was taking this geography course. I never did really well in the 9th grade because I hated school (laughs). I was just ... doing something and the substitute teacher was saying something. And I think I kind of just looked away when she was talking to me, and she was like “don’t suck your teeth at me” and I was like “what do you mean?” and she’s like “stop giving me attitude” and she gave me detention for that. And I’m pretty sure I didn’t do well in the course because of that.

Although Sara grew up in an economically prosperous area, she faced mistreatment in school. She highlighted that even though what she did was minor, the staff member punished her in what Sara saw as an abuse of authority.

University brought a new set of trials, voiced by my five participants in 42 instances. Although the participants spoke about the freedom of university, the opportunity to meet new people, and feeling welcomed, they also listed challenges including: the initial difficulty in transitioning into university, the pressure put on students, the barriers of anxiety and mental health issues, the sporadic interactions between teachers and students, the expense, as well as the low expectations from students of colour. In speaking about his financial struggles Yonis said:

A struggle is finance ... A lot of schools need ... money for basic stuff like books and textbooks ... as well as ... clothes and food and stuff, it all adds up ... I do get most of it from school and stuff, but work is ... a big portion that I need to do, and it’s really tough to balance it.

Balancing working a job and attending school is one of the most common struggles faced by students. Majority of the students who work have no choice. In most cases, it is hard to earn grants and bursaries that would reduce student stress levels. Sara shared the same feeling when it came to balancing work and school:

What really sets me back is ... I worked full time ... last semester, and then I was doing school, I never got to rest, I never had a day off ... And I didn’t really have time to ... think about or care for myself. But at the end of the semester when I saw ... that I did well on top of balancing school work and all this emotional stuff. It ... gives you this idea that ...,
you're doing as good as you can for what you're doing right now. And you're balancing things that other people aren't balancing ... and you need to just be ... aware that you're doing the best that you can, and always acknowledge ... how good you're doing. Because you need to motivate yourself to do better at the end of the day.

Another challenge in University is mental health. Layla highlighted mental health, as it can become one of the greatest struggles if not taken care of:

....my biggest challenge has been ... my mental health issues, that and in regards to my diabetes I feel like that goes hand in hand ... I definitely struggle with ... maintaining my blood sugars and my insulin... that is really stressful because I am type 1 diabetic so my blood sugars are up and down a lot. I am insulin-dependent so I do have to take injections every day. And I think I been like depressed for the past 3 years. But before I used to ignore everything, and smoke heavily and do things to numb the pain....

Support Systems

The trials and tabulations in high school and university were often reduced by strong support systems. In 28 instances, my participants spoke about guidance received from family including; parents and siblings, support and extra resources received through programs, guidance counsellors and administration, and opportunities for relieving stress through joining student groups. As put by Ayan:

I loved my guidance counsellors. You know what’s funny? In grade 12 I made a fake report card and got caught for it. But my guidance counsellor sat down with me and said “You are smarter than this, I didn’t believe it would be you.” She told me it didn’t sound like me, and that I could achieve this mark that I faked.

In most cases, staff members would report this issue to the principal where the student would face consequences. But Ayan expressed how understanding her counsellor was to talk with her and to dismiss the case. In Yonis’ case, it was his parents who reassured him that he was capable. They encouraged him and kept his morale up as he went through his schooling in a non-supportive school environment. For Layla, it was the school youth worker, who saw her through:
In high school I didn’t get along with any of my teachers … it was Christy, the youth worker. She was my favourite person in high school. If it wasn’t for her, I don’t think I would even be able to get through high school. She was really supportive.

In high school, support systems are crucial. High schoolers are adolescents, trying to make important life choices while not possessing the cognitive maturity to make those choices without help. High school is important for another reason: for many young people, schools are an escape from all the negatives that are part of their lives at home and within the community. But high schools often do not end up being safe spaces for these young people. Sometimes, a guidance counselor or youth worker end up being the young person’s only support system.

Some of my participants saw the challenges of the past as blessings in disguise. Ayan mentioned that the many challenges in university had made her feel doubtful. But when she graduated university, she realized that her challenges had blinded from recognizing her real achievements:

I’m proud that I graduated … I’m happy I have good grades. I’m happy I got this job, and I am happy I got interviews. Everything is working out for me and I don’t really give myself the credit. I never thought I was going to get a job, I never thought I was going to get accepted to this … program, and I didn’t think I was going to get good marks….

Understandings About Community

Participants offered various responses when asked about what they thought a community was to them: the area one lives in, the group of people one is a member of, such as a family or ethnocultural group that shares a set of norms, or the sense of belonging that is experienced by an individual. As put by Samatar:

When you are a part of a community, any decisions that are made in that community directly affect you. I would say it has a major influence on your life when you’re a part of a community because it guides your actions and it makes you act in certain manners, but it varies from community to community on what’s acceptable. So me being a part of a community here, their norms could be different from another community’s norms.
Although all participants identified as Somali-Canadian, most of them admitted that they have not done much for the Somali community. Four out of the five participants said that they attended community events and programs such as barbeques, weddings and religious practices, but only one of them volunteered as a tutor. One participant’s many attempts at being involved were shut down by the community because she did not fit their norms. In ethnic communities, various conservative criteria around appearance, sexual orientation, and behaviors are used to offer or deny membership.

**Life in the Future**

Despite growing up within institutions that did not show much support, all participants expressed high levels of confidence in their future. Four out of the five participants highlighted that living in a disadvantaged area had made them want the best for themselves and their loved ones. Regardless of lack of support in school, all the participants expressed the need to be better in all aspects because of their experiences within the community and at school. Most of the participants were also sure about what they wanted to do in the future. As Ayan said:

*I want to be successful ... I want to just have a stable career ... that’s all I want ... I want to be able to give my mom everything back that she gave me because my mom literally paid for my tuition. My mom literally paid for everything out of pocket ... I never took OSAP once ... Anything I wanted she’ll give it to me. She even got me a car as a graduation present ... I’ll be successful when I’m able to give her all that and more, and make her happy.*

However, Yonis had a different way of thinking about what he wanted for his life in the future:

*I don’t think I had any aspiration or goals or anything. I just wanted to go out and work and just ... live. That’s it. I only started really thinking about it when I got into university and saw the possibilities, but before that I was just ... going to do university ... get a job and that’s pretty much it.*
Achieving a university/college degree and securing a job was one of the most common goals. All the participants stated that they want to work a decent job and live comfortably while providing for their families. When asked, “Where do you see yourself in 10 years?” several responses emerged. Some expressed that they are not pleased with the high living costs in Toronto, and how corrupt the government was. Three of five participants mentioned that they do not have plans to live in Canada in the future. As put by Samatar, “Not in Canada, somewhere else working where its hot…. ” Or in Sara’s words:

... just not in Canada, maybe ... somewhere in Asia, or like Europe and hopefully ... go into a field I like. Maybe being a teacher, or maybe like working in publishing. Yeah, that’s probably it, like I just don’t want to live in Canada anymore. Kind of sick of it (laughs) I know it’s not better elsewhere, but ... right now, I am personally offended of what’s going on here in Ontario. I can’t wait to just ... get a change of scenery.

Discussion

Born and raised in Toronto, the participants in this study identified themselves as Somali-Canadians. But these Somali youth in the GTA highlighted the lack of support in their schools and universities, which had caused them to feel isolated and doubt their capabilities. Although participants had received some support from staff, such as youth workers and guidance counsellors, in general, they had experienced discriminatory treatment. Low expectations for school performance and future goals had been communicated to them in various ways.

Somali parents in this study respected teachers in every aspect. Because they knew how precious it was for their child to receive an education, because they believed authority kept their children in line, in most cases the parents sided with their children’s teachers. This, no doubt, made the children feel lonelier than ever. Bowie, Wojnar and Isaak (2017) talk about how Somali parents in Somalia respect teachers and would show no less respect to teachers in North America. “Somalis value their children’s education and have a deep respect for teachers without seeing a role in this system for themselves. They consider a
child’s teacher to be an authority that acts as the second parent.” In most cases the parent would respect the teacher’s discipline, because they believe that their child is getting the best education. However, Somali parents do not realize the level of mistreatment some of their children receive and interviewing these 5 participants indicated that they have experienced various forms of that. One way around this dilemma could be to have community/town halls that inform parents that some of their children face these harsh experiences due to many factors: the school lacking various resources, staff members not wanting students to excel or not caring about them due to racial and religious prejudice, and the ineffective teaching of the curriculum. Parents should know how important their support is for their children, given that staff members within the school system have high levels of authority, which they sometimes abuse, putting the student at risk and condemning them to great loneliness in school.

In her work on racism within schools, Martha Bigelow discusses how it puts Somali adolescent students in jeopardy. The students in her study clearly stated that some of the teachers are racist and show discrimination against Muslims as well. There were several similarities between the findings from my study and Bigelow’s work. What is clear is that there needs to be serious change in the school system to address these forms of racism. For many students, school is the only place is where they can express themselves and interact with children their age. Hence, support systems for youth should be much stronger in high schools. There should be youth workers in every school who encourage youth to feel welcome and sure at school, like the youth worker Christie in Layla’s school. Interviewing these participants highlighted that high school conditioned them to face their struggles alone. These experiences seemed to set the tone for university life, which my participants experienced as difficult.

Another issue likely faced by immigrant Somali youth is non-acceptance from their community. Collet’s work (2007) about the Somali Diaspora in Toronto sheds light on how strict and culturally and

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religiously tight the Somali community is in Toronto. His study indicated that, Somalis who do not consider themselves to be Muslims are excluded. Yet, even being excluded from her own community and being hurt by such exclusion did not stop Sara from contributing to the Black community broadly, as well as claiming her Somali identity.

Despite the lack of support and guidance in high school through university and the levels of exclusion within the broader community, all my participants had nurtured clear and positive visions of their future that they shared with anticipation and excitement. Perhaps their visions are a result of the scarce but timely interventions offered by caring adults, such as guidance counselors or parents. Or they are the result of their own resilience in the face of odds. One can only imagine how their school and university lives would have been, and their futures will be if the support from adults and institutions was steady and dependable.

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