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Building Bridges: Using Community-Based Participatory Action Research to Examine
Communication Between Somali Families and Teachers at a Suburban School in
Minnesota

Submitted on May 20, 2019

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this community-based action research project was for teachers and Somali families to collaboratively improve communication between parents and teachers at a suburban school in Minnesota. The project used multiple data sources to understand how to improve communication between Somali families and teachers. A teacher survey revealed the current communication practices teachers use at this school. Data was collected for attendance and behavior referrals to see how Somali students related to other students. A Somali family focus group met to discuss communication practices at the school. This group discussed what was going well, what needed to be improved, and the families recommendations to enhance communication. After analyzing the results of the data, the researcher concluded that there is not a consistent method of communication at the school, many teachers do not feel confident in their knowledge of Somali culture, and Somali families face many obstacles in Minnesota. Recommendations from the study included having family nights every few months to inform parents about what is happening at school, educating teachers about Somali culture by visiting a mosque or Somali museum in the community, and developing a consistent communication method at the school.

Keywords: community-based participatory action research, Somalis, teachers, communication

Minnesota is home to a variety of people from around the world - including a large population of people from Somalia. In fact, the population of Somali families in Minnesota is growing: the U.S. Census Bureau (2017) reported that there are an estimated 90,845 people who speak Somali in Minnesota. This is a significant increase from the 2016 estimate of 73,874 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Research has shown that teachers need to connect with families because families have such a profound impact on their children's academic and social-emotional well-being (Barnyak and McNelly, 2008, p. 34). Additionally, the beliefs parents and teachers have about a student affect the success of that child (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). Families play a critical role in the success of their child's education.

Students, teachers, and parents are affected by the involvement of Somali families in their children's education. It is essential to develop relationships and create supportive connections between school and home for students to be successful (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). Families have a pivotal impact on their child's "cognitive, social, and emotional development" (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009, p. 34). There is a lack of Somali family involvement in many schools. This lack of involvement could be the result of miscommunication between parents and teachers. Language or cultural barriers could also affect Somali families' involvement in the school. Another contributing factor could be a disconnect between what the families believe and what the teachers think the parents value. Transportation, childcare, and communication could be other contributing factors.

It is essential for educators to understand Somali culture and Somali beliefs about education in order to connect with this population and encourage them to become more engaged in their children's education. Educating teachers about Somali culture is an

important part of accomplishing this. The purpose of this action research project is to learn more about both the current communication practices at a low-income suburban school in Minnesota and Somali culture to better understand how communication can be improved between teachers and Somali families. Working with teachers and Somali parents was essential to choosing an intervention that would work for both groups and benefit this school.

There is a lack of Somali family involvement in schools, from communication with teachers to family participation in after-school functions. Very few interventions have been utilized to address Somali family involvement and communication with teachers. To this end, this study utilized a community-based participatory action research approach to involve both teachers and Somali families in the process of identifying obstacles that prevent Somali families from participating in their students' education. The project's focus was on the Somali culture and life of Somali families in Minnesota. The outcome of this study addressed how to most effectively communicate with Somali families and improve Somali family involvement in their children's education. The research question guiding this study was: *What are effective methods teachers from a diverse, low-income elementary school could use to improve communication with Somali parents about their children's academic progress and behavior in school?*

Theoretical Framework

According to Lave & Wenger (1991), learning is a social and collaborative process. Communities of practice involve a group of people who "share a common concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, &

Snyder, 2002, p. 4). Communities of practice include three important elements: the domain, community, and practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The domain creates a common purpose and topic for the group to focus on and guides their participation within the community. The second essential element is community; in order to share information and ask difficult questions, there needs to be an openness and trust built within the group. Finally, practice is the framework that leads the group into developing and sharing knowledge. These groups of people meet because they find value in their interactions with each other and learning together (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

According to the theory of communities of practice, learning should be done in collaboration with others to develop new knowledge about the topic that brought the group together. The communities of practice in this research included teachers and Somali families. Both of these communities wanted to improve communication to increase student outcomes; therefore, participation between both parties was essential to developing solutions. Moreover, communities of practice informed this research project because this theory suggests that these communities must also have trust within the group to be able to share openly and ask questions. Trust was an essential component during the focus group and teacher survey. Participants were able to share their thoughts and brainstorm solutions in a safe, collaborative way. This research project included these components because each person in the community wanted what is best for the students and there was a willingness to share and contribute right away. Ultimately, communities of practice develop knowledge together and then share that knowledge, which is the next step in this process. According to the communities of practice theory, members of the

group find value in working together and learning through their interaction. This was evident during this study's focus group as members opened up to one another and trust was built during the meeting.

Literature Review

In this section, literature related to Somalis' journey to the United States, life for Somali families in Minnesota, and a description of community-based participatory action research will be reviewed.

Leaving Somalia

Unrest and violence have been a problem in Somalia for many years (Wilhide, 2018). In 1969, General Mohamed Siad Barre led a military coup, which forced Somali communities into political, social, and economic disorder (Wilhide, 2018). Barre was forced out of office in 1991. Since then, civil war has overwhelmed the country of Somalia plaguing its citizens with violence, fear, and famine (Wilhide, 2018).

In Somalia, families are traditionally multigenerational and have an average of six members per household (UNFPA, 2016). When Somali families were forced to flee their country due to war, many people lost their loved ones, thus losing support from extended family (Bowie, Wojnar, & Isaak, 2017). Understandably, Somali families in Minnesota were looking for a safe, supportive community in which to raise their children. According to Wilhide (2018), many Somalis chose to live in the Twin Cities because there are many opportunities for employment, housing, supportive services, and education for their children. Also, many Somali families decide to live in Minnesota because of the Somali community already based in the state, including Somali shops, businesses, and restaurants (Somalis, 2018).

Uprooting their lives and moving to a foreign land can be scary and there are many unknowns, but in Minnesota there are many support systems in place from the government and local nonprofits. An example of this type of support is the nonprofit organization, Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota where Somali families can get assistance in finding housing, jobs, and education services (Hirsi, 2017). This organization breaks down the language and cultural barriers to assist new Somali families in a smooth transition to life in Minnesota. Even though their homeland is in turmoil, Somali families have hope for their future when they move to Minnesota.

Obstacles

Although there are numerous supports in place for Somali families in Minnesota, many barriers exist that impact their new lives. Language is a predominant challenge because most tasks involve interacting with someone who speaks English to receive assistance (Wilhide, 2018; Yusuf, 2013). Many Somali parents are proficient in multiple languages including Somali, Arabic, the language of Islam, and sometimes Swahili, Italian, or French (Wilhide, 2018). Older Somalis may have received education in the colonial languages; for instance, in the North they learned English and in the South they learned Italian (Somalis, 2018). Since only a limited number of Somali elders know English, this makes communication with others in Minnesota very challenging. Somali refugee, Hared Mah explained that the language barrier was a challenge that made it difficult to communicate and become independent because "you are like a little kid that cannot even speak" (Wilhide, 2018, p. 3). The language barrier is especially challenging for Somali elders; Somali youth are exposed to English at school and through popular media, but elders are not exposed to English as much, which can cause them to feel alone

or isolated from others (Bowie et al., 2017). In an article about Somali families' experiences of parenting in the United States Bowie et al. (2017) suggest, "Somali parents encounter conflicts that include lack of resources, inability to effectively communicate, feeling misunderstood, and loss of respect by children"; many of these problems relate directly back to fluency in English (p. 287).

A huge challenge for Somalis in the United States is the transition from their culture in Somalia to the culture in the United States. In Bowie et al.'s (2017) parenting article, participants of their study described the United States as the "country of freedom" (p. 275). This description of the United States had a bad connotation because Somali parents believed that this extra freedom led to their children to showing less respect for them and other elders in the community (Bowie et al., 2017).

Another barrier for Somali families is being able to openly practice their Islamic faith in Minnesota because this state is made up of predominantly Protestant and Catholic communities (Wilhide, 2018). Addressing these obstacles is essential to teachers building stronger relationships with their students. Aspects essential to the Islamic faith that Somalis and teachers need to address include having spaces for prayer during the day, fasting during Ramadan, and avoiding pork (Wilhide, 2018). One important opportunity to reduce these barriers for Somali families is to educate others about Somali culture. Brown (2015) describes the significance of learning about other cultures and bringing them into her classroom, "It's hard to fully understand a culture and the values that are important to its members at a distance. As much as possible, engage with the community you serve both in and out of school, then apply what you learn to your lesson plans" (p.

5). Teachers need to learn about their students to build relationships and to understand how to educate them best.

After 9/11

September 11, 2001 had a significant impact on the United States, specifically the Muslim community. Muslim extremists from the group Al-Qaeda led the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Governments around the United States scrutinized any activity that might be connected to the Al-Qaeda organization (Wilhide, 2018). According to Wilhide (2018):

Most Somalis strongly disagree with the ideas and practices of violent extremists and terrorist organizations like Al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS. The majority of Somalis advocate for Islam as a religion of peace. Several Somali faith leaders and organizations have supported de-radicalization initiatives and programs among Somali American youth (p. 4).

Still, there have been cases of Somali Americans being enlisted to join extremist movements. For example, twenty young Somali men left the United States and returned to Somalia to join Al-Shabaab, an extremist group (Becoming Minnesotan, 2010; Wilhide, 2018; Yusuf, 2013). There are instances that Somali people are involved in terrorist groups that create a bad reputation for the entire population of Somalis. However, these cases are limited, and most Somali Americans promote the peaceful ways of Islam and are thankful they escaped the violence in their homeland (Becoming Minnesotan, 2010). The Somali community is "deeply troubled by the radicalization of Somali youth in Minnesota" (Wilhide, 2018). Finding the balance between their Somali culture and American culture has been a challenge for Somalis. Non-Somali Minnesotans need to become better educated about Somali culture and the Islamic faith; through that understanding non-Somali Minnesotans will better understand and become more willing to accept and support Somalis in the community.

Life in Minnesota

Somali families knew they needed to leave the violence and chaos of their homeland, but they did not know what to expect when they traveled to the United States. Many have chosen Minnesota for its opportunities in education and employment and the wide range of services that assist Somali Americans (Wilhide, 2018). Much of the job training and many of the degrees that Somalis held in Somalia did not easily transfer to Minnesota jobs. However, many Somali Americans have found jobs in the education and health fields as well as the transportation sector in Minnesota (Wilhide, 2018).

Somali families realize there are advantages to both the American culture and their Somali culture. Wilhide (2018) states "as Somalis hold on to their traditional culture, they also embrace opportunities to get involved in American society through joining or creating civic, cultural, and political organizations" (p. 4). The diverse community will grow stronger when all voices are heard, and authentic conversations are had between different cultural groups. Somali Americans want to make connections with other non-Somali Minnesotans and educate them about Somali culture and lifestyle; one way to do this is learning through the Somali Museum of Minnesota (Hirsi, 2018). The goal of the museum is to preserve Somali culture and tradition and be able to share their culture with the Minnesota community (Hirsi, 2018). Also, there are many educational programs in Somali history, culture, art, and dance that educate others about Somali life (Hirsi, 2018). Life in Minnesota has not been easy for Somali families, but there is a vast Somali community that is continuing to grow and develop more supports for Somalis in Minnesota.

Discussion

In this literature review, Somali culture and lifestyle in Minnesota were addressed. First, a brief overview of the history behind why many Somali families moved from Somalia to the United States was discussed. Many Somali families chose Minnesota because there were many opportunities for their families here. Also, there were already support systems in place to help them adjust to life in a new country. Additionally, there are many challenges for Somali families living in Minnesota. The language barrier impacts their daily life and the transition from Somali culture to the American culture has been challenging for many families. Another challenge was life after September eleventh because this event had a huge, and largely negative, impact on Somalis in the United States. There have been many changes to support Somali families in schools, but it is essential to continue to learn about Somali culture to keep improving how schools help Somali students be successful. Finally, life in Minnesota was addressed and many Somalis want to share their culture with non-Somali Minnesotans. There is a large population of Somalis in Minnesota; with the growth of the population there are more services and supports for Somalis in Minnesota. Somalis have a rich, vibrant culture that they want to share with others in Minnesota. Therefore, this research question was essential to learn more about Somali Americans and understand how to best support them: What are effective methods teachers from a diverse, low-income elementary school could use to improve communication with Somali parents about their children's academic progress and behavior in school?

Methodology

The research method chosen for this project was community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) because the participation of the Somali community

significantly informed the best intervention for improving communication between home and school. To best determine the most effective ways to engage Somali families, it is essential to collaborate with them and receive their input because, according to Barbara Israel, “each person shares his/her expertise in order to enhance knowledge and to develop interventions that will benefit the whole community” (Allen, Culhane-Pera, Call, & Pergament, 2010, p. 12). CBPAR involves the community in the research process with the researcher (Allen et al., 2010, p. 12). According to Barbara Israel, one of the most significant aspects of CBPAR is that the researchers and participants are solving the problem together; this is very empowering for everyone involved (Allen et al., 2010). Interacting with the Somali community will be beneficial to continue building non-Somali Minnesotans’ understanding of the Somali experience in Minnesota and how community members can continue to support and educate each other. Collaborating with Somali families using the community-based participatory action research model was essential in order to best meet student needs and improve Somali family involvement in their child's education.

The population of this study was teachers at a low-income suburban school in Minnesota and Somali families with students who attend this school. The sample was 16 teachers who took the teacher survey and two Somali moms who were a part of the focus group. The sample was representative of the teachers and Somali families with children attending this suburban Minnesota school. A high population of Somali families attend this school. According to the Minnesota Report Card (2018), 73.33% of students at this school receive free or reduced lunch prices and the school is considered to be a high-poverty school. In one fourth-grade class, there were nine English Language Learners

(ELL students) and three students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Thirty-one percent of students in this class were Somali students. The Minnesota Report Card (2018) also provides information about the demographics at the school: Hispanic - 18%, American Indian/Alaskan Native - 1%, Asian - 4%, Black - 46%, White - 23%, and two or more races - 9%.

In this study, a teacher survey, notes from a focus group, and data related to attendance and discipline referrals were used. The teacher survey included both multiple choice and open-ended questions created to gather information about the current communication practices of teachers and their knowledge of Somali culture. In the first part of the survey teachers indicated which tools they currently use to communicate with parents and how often they use them. The next section of the survey focused on teachers' awareness of why Somalis had to leave Somalia and their knowledge of Islamic practices. The last section of the survey consisted of two open-ended questions about teachers' interactions with Somali families at the school and a question asking whether they had any questions or suggestions for the study.

A teacher survey was used in this action research project to gather information about how teachers at this school currently communicate with parents. Additionally, information was gathered about teachers' understanding of Somali culture. Data was collected related to attendance and discipline referrals from the students throughout the school year. Lastly, notes were recorded during the focus group where questions focused on current communication between parents and teachers and suggestions for improving communication between parents and families.

First, the researcher collected data from the secretary related to attendance for students separated by ethnicity. Then the researcher contacted the dean of students who provided information about the number of student referrals based on ethnicity. The researcher presented information about their project at a staff meeting to inform colleagues about the project. Then, the researcher sent out the optional teacher survey to the staff for feedback from teachers in the building. In addition, the researcher reached out to Somali families in the community letting them know about the opportunity to engage in conversation related to improving communication between teachers and parents. Next, a time was set for the meeting. The researcher developed a list of questions to ask the Somali families. At the meeting, the facilitator asked these questions to better understand Somali culture and discuss beneficial ways to communication with Somali families. The researcher reviewed the teacher survey to gauge the general communication style of teachers at this school and identified themes. A general consensus of the staffs' knowledge about Somali culture was also identified. Finally, the researcher analyzed the notes from the Somali family focus group to better understand the challenges Somali families face and to summarize the ideas presented for improving communication between families and teachers.

Analysis of Data

This action research project included both quantitative and qualitative data. The researcher collected data from a teacher survey, a focus group, and attendance and behavior referrals. The quantitative data included the closed-ended questions on the teacher survey and the attendance and behavior referrals. The data was organized according to the information collected; the first multiple-choice question about current

communication methods for teachers was organized into a table. The information regarding how teachers communicate specific behavior or academic concerns was then transformed into pie charts. The linear scale questions were represented by bar graphs to help readers understand the meaning of the information in the bar graph. According to Hendricks (2013), after gathering the data and creating graphical displays of this information the researcher needs to examine the data to describe important points in the data. The researcher used the results from data analysis to answer the research question.

The qualitative data were the notes recorded during the focus group and the open-ended questions on the teacher survey. The researcher developed questions for the Somali focus group based on research completed for the literature review and incorporated questions about how to improve communication in the school. The researcher used thematic analysis to break the data into smaller categories (Hendricks, 2013). After finding patterns in the data, it was reassembled into themes for the researcher to interpret. The researcher then determined how the themes helped to answer the research question. Hendricks (2013) also states that, “The goal is to investigate reality so that it can be changed” (p. 7). It is a collaborative endeavor; each person in the research study shares their knowledge about the project to improve the understanding of the group members and the researcher (Allen et al., 2010). The interventions that will later be implemented were developed within the research group. The quantitative and qualitative data was used to develop more effective methods for teachers and Somali families to communicate about their children’s academic progress and behavior in school.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to learn more about current communication between teachers and Somali families. Community-based participatory action research was used to conduct this study. A focus group was conducted to learn more about the Somali culture and to brainstorm ideas to improve communication between Somali families and teachers. Teachers were surveyed with multiple choice and open-ended questions to measure current communication practices.

Current Communication Practices: Teacher Survey

The research question that this study addressed focused on finding effective methods for teachers to improve communication with Somali families about their children's academic progress and behavior at school. To answer this question the researcher conducted a survey with the teachers at the low-income school to develop an understanding of the current communication practices.

There were many communication resources at this school for teachers to use to interact with families about their child's academic progress and/or behavior. The researcher learned that most teachers do not use any of the communication resources daily (Table 1). According to the survey, some teachers emailed individual parents about their child, but the frequency of when this was done varied (3 teachers did this more than once a week, 2 teachers did this weekly, 3 did this every two weeks, 1 did this monthly, and 7 teachers indicated they did this rarely or not at all). Many teachers also included a letter to inform parents about information happening at school. There was no consistency as to when teachers gave out these newsletters. In addition, the language line, a resource that provides live interpretation over the phone, was being utilized by about half the teachers who took the survey. Many of other district resources were also not being

utilized by teachers, including the district website, a group texting tool, texting individual parents, and Infinite Campus.

Table 1

Results of the question: Which of the following tools do you currently use to communicate with parents or guardians of your students?

	Daily	More than once a week	Weekly	Every two weeks	Monthly	Rare or not at all
Individual emails about specific students	0	3	2	3	1	7
List serve emails	0	0	2	2	2	10
Moodle, SeeSaw, or other LMS	0	1	1	1	1	12
District website	0	0	0	0	1	15
Group texting tool	0	0	0	0	0	16
Text individual parents	0	0	0	0	1	15
Infinite Campus	0	0	0	0	1	15
Letter in student folder or backpack	0	0	2	2	8	4
Language line	0	0	1	0	6	9

According to the survey, the majority of teachers (75%) call parents when there is a behavior concern for a student (Figure 1). Each of the other four options was selected by one teacher, indicating that teachers typically want to communicate with parents over the phone to discuss a behavior concern because they are able to receive feedback from the parents and have a conversation about how they can help best support the child. Overall, the other resources available at this school are not commonly used by teachers.

If you have a behavior concern for a student how do you typically contact their parents?

16 responses

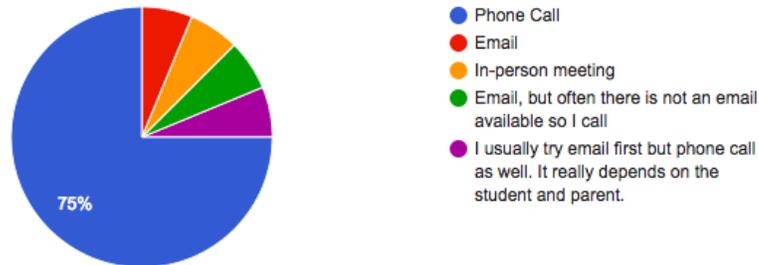


Figure 1. Results of the question: If you have a behavior concern for a student, how do you typically contact their parents?

Survey responses also indicated that some teachers communicated differently with parents when there was an academic concern rather than a behavior concern (Figure 2). Sixty-two point five percent of teachers still make a phone call when there is an academic concern with one of their students (Figure 2). However, unlike a behavior concern, more teachers (18.8%) will communicate with families by doing an in-person meeting to address their concerns (Figure 2).

If you have an academic concern for a student how do you typically contact their parents?

16 responses

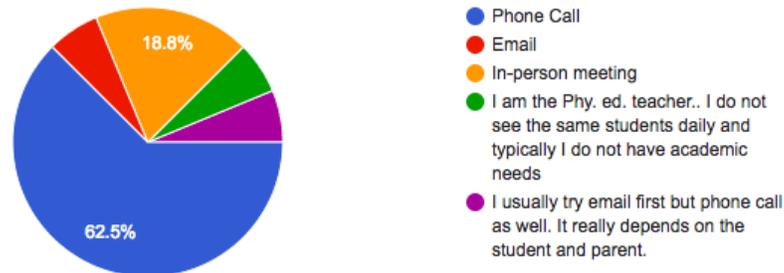


Figure 2. Results of the question: If you have an academic concern for a student how do you typically contact their parents?

About half (56.3%) of the teachers surveyed suggested that they have an average understanding of why people were forced to leave Somalia (Figure 3). Thirty-one point three percent of teachers answered with either not at all or a little bit to describe their understanding of why people left Somalia (Figure 3). None of the teachers answered with a score of five; indicating that they could teach a lesson on this topic.

To what extent do you feel you understand why many people have been forced to leave Somalia?

16 responses

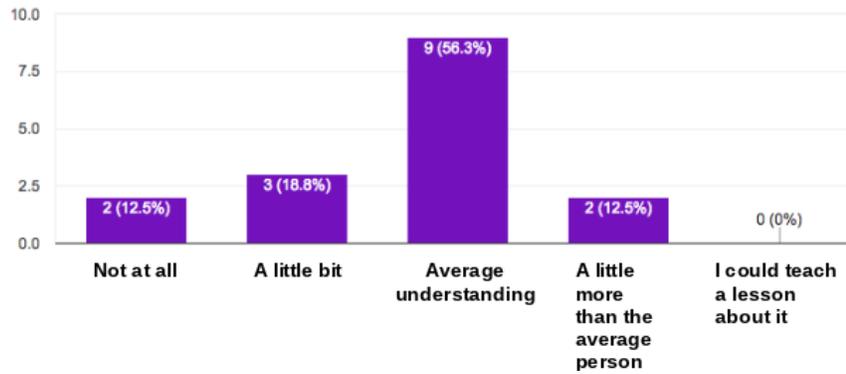


Figure 3. Results of the question: To what extent do you feel you understand why many people have been forced to leave Somalia?

Fifty percent of teachers have an “Average Understanding” about Islam and cultural practices (Figure 4). Further, the findings of this question mirror the previous one in that five teachers chose the “Not at all” or “A little bit” categories. Eleven teachers felt that they had at least some understanding of Islam and Somali culture.

To what extent do you understand Islam and cultural practices associated with it?

16 responses

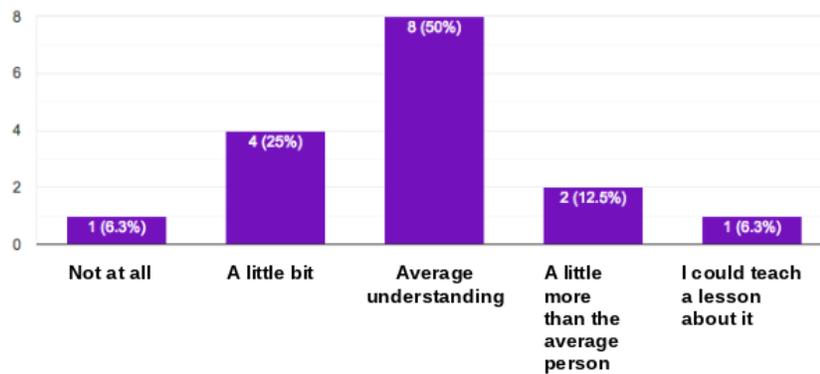


Figure 4. Results of the question: To what extent do you understand Islam and cultural practices associated with it?

The last two questions on the teacher survey were open-ended questions. The first question was “What have you noticed in your interactions with Somali parents or guardians that might be useful to note here?” Patterns that the researcher found were related to: cultural customs, Somali parents wanting their children to be successful in school, and Somali parents trusting the teachers at school. Twenty-five percent of teachers mentioned different cultural customs that they observed when interacting with Somali families. For example, one teacher mentioned how Somali parents like to speak face-to-face and will show up unannounced at their child’s classroom to discuss how their child is doing academically or behaviorally. Teachers also noticed that Somali families are very invested in their children's education and that they highly value education. They want their children to be successful and the parents want to be as supportive as possible. Finally, 19% of the teachers surveyed suggested they think Somali families trust the teachers at this school because the teachers care about their students.

The final question on the teacher survey was “What questions or suggestions do you have for this research project?” The researcher found that 31% of the teachers are interested in the findings from the action research project. Thirteen percent of the teachers wanted to know more about the parents perspective; how parents feel the parent-teacher communication is at this school. Two of the teachers acknowledged the challenge in answering the questions because one was an art teacher and the other felt each situation and family is different. Thirty-eight percent of teachers had no questions or suggestions at the time of the survey.

Somali Family Focus Group

The researcher reached out to Somali families in the community inviting them to a focus group about improving communication between teachers and these families. The data at this meeting helped the researcher understand more about Somali culture and the challenges Somalis face in Minnesota. Additionally, Somali families brainstormed ways that communication between themselves and teachers could be improved.

There were three themes identified in the notes from the focus group: challenges Somali families face, Somali cultural norms, and positive and negative experiences involving parent-teacher communication. First, there are many challenges Somali families face when living in Minnesota. Multiple parents from the group described coming to the United States when they were in high school or their early twenties. Many had parents who came here first to make money and the rest of the family joined later on. One woman's husband and daughter were still in Somalia; many explained it was common to have family spread across the world. The researcher learned that, typically, Somali families are very large; one of the women at the focus group said she had two sisters living in Europe, three sisters in Kenya, and four siblings living in the United States. Another woman described how she had a sister in London, a half-brother in Ohio, and a brother and half-sister in Somalia. When many of the Somali parents arrived in the United States, they described feeling a sense of culture shock. One major challenge was the language barrier. Most Somali moms were the individuals involved in their children's lives at school, but the language barrier made interacting with school officials and teachers difficult.

There were a variety of cultural norms the group discussed that impacted their everyday lives. Somali people are very communal, like to live near other Somalis, and

want to support one another. However, many Somali families are separated from their extended family. One challenge brought up at the focus group was the difficulty of teaching their children about Somali culture while living in Minnesota. One woman indicated that she took her children to the Somali Museum in Minneapolis to learn about the history and culture of Somalia. She also mentioned taking her children to the Minnesota History Center to see the Somalis + Minnesota exhibit. These cultural practices impact Somali's lives in Minnesota because they want to support each other and families want to educate their children about their culture.

Finally, positive and negative parent-teacher communication was identified through the sharing of numerous stories about experiences with the school. The parents expressed their appreciation for teachers who told them directly about academic or behavioral concerns that arise. Parents shared a few stories where teachers waited until conferences to address an issue or concern, and indicated they would have appreciated if the teacher had told them sooner. Parents valued teachers who sent home a newsletter or email to communicate what was happening in the classroom. Somali parents from the focus group were adamant that they wanted to know about important changes and events happening at school from school officials, not their children. The Somali parents said they heard a lot about changes from their children, but they thought it would have been beneficial to hear it from the administration with opportunities to ask questions about why specific programs were being implemented. For example, after lunch a new practice where students participated in Yoga Calm exercises was implemented in the school. Parents at the focus group would have appreciated being told about this before it was

implemented. For major changes, parents talked about having a meeting with interpreters to ensure Somali families understood the change and why it was happening.

At the time of the focus group, there were a few Somali women who spread the word about changes or events happening in school, to prevent language from acting as a barrier. The parents suggested they would like to see more meetings happening throughout the year; there was typically one Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting in the fall specifically for Somali families. They also discussed having a parent information night before the open house in the fall. This could serve as a beneficial time to explain changes happening at the school and announce upcoming events. According to the focus group, many Somalis families did not consistently use their email, but one woman suggested sending a robocall with important information to parents because these calls could be sent in English, Somali, and Spanish. Receiving newsletters, emails, and phone calls with updates were also helpful for Somali parents. All in all, the focus group identified many improvements that could be made to ensure better communication between Somali families and teachers.

Attendance and Behavior Referral Data

The researcher compared the number of absences and behavior referrals Somali students had compared to other students at the school. In both of these data sets Somali students are part of the African American subgroup because, in Minnesota, there was not a subgroup specifically for Somali students. Based on the data, the average number of absences by African American students' is average to low compared to other students at this school (Figure 5).

Average Absent Days vs. Race/Ethnicity

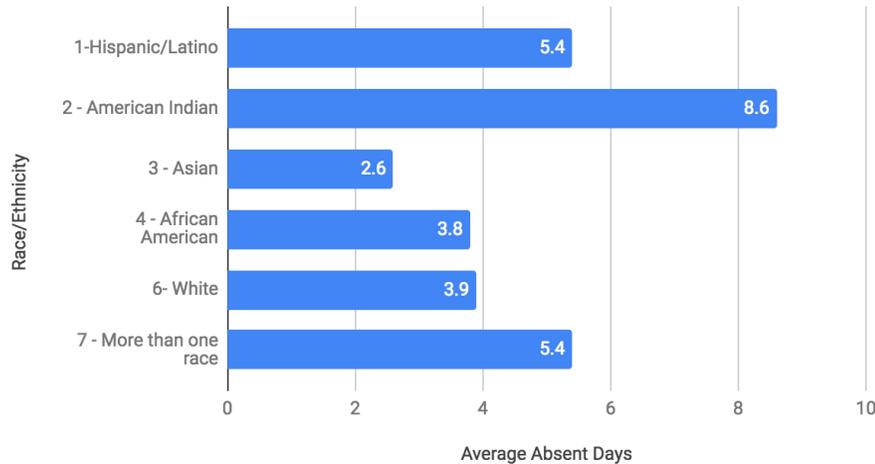


Figure 5. Results of average absent days vs. race/ethnicity

At the time of the study, there were a total of 71 major behavior issues for the school (Figure 6). Forty students were involved in these events, and some had been involved in more than one event. Of the forty students, 14 of them were Somali students, which was 35% of the total students involved in major behavior events. According to the data, African American students have the highest major behavior incidents, followed by Somali, more than one race, White, and Latino students (Figure 6).

Percent of Major Behavior Issues vs. Race/Ethnicity

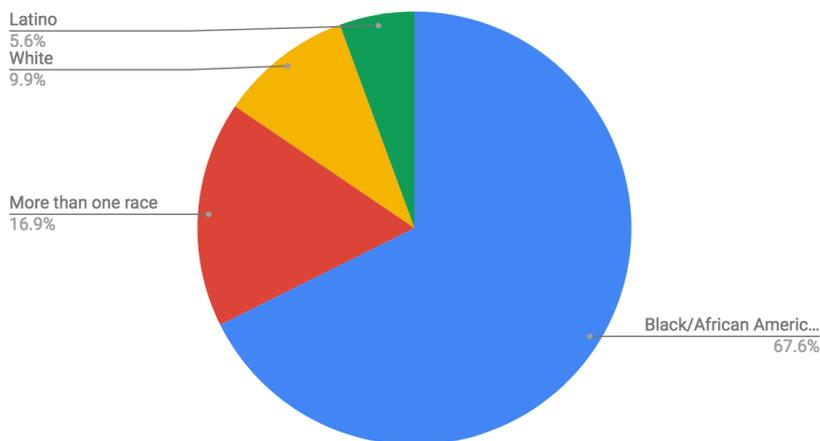


Figure 6. Results of behavior issues vs. race/ethnicity

Conclusions

Parent and teacher communication is essential for students' success in the classroom. According to Barnyak & McNelly (2009), a supportive connection between school and home impacts students' academics and behavior in school. Therefore, it was critical to investigate effective methods to improve communication between Somali parents and teachers in order to enhance students' success at this small, Midwestern school. Results of this community-based participatory action research study revealed that there are a variety of ways that teachers communicate with parents at this school.

When a behavior concern arose, many teachers made a phone call to the student's parents. Teachers did recognize the language barrier with many of the school's families, but 38% of teachers mentioned using the language line monthly to assist in communicating with their students' parents. The teacher survey also revealed that there was not consistency throughout the school building with how teachers communicated with parents. There was also not daily communication between parents and teachers in most classrooms. There were many communication/technology tools available at this school, but teachers were not utilizing most of them. It is necessary to figure out which communication tools are the most effective and focus on using those to improve communication between families and teachers. The majority of teachers did not feel confident about their understanding of why Somalis left Somalia, the Islamic religion, and/or Somali cultural practices. Finally, teachers emphasized positive perspectives related to Somali families and focused on how supportive Somali families were of their children's education.

The Somali parent focus group showed that Somali parents were very invested in the education of their children and wanted them to be successful. Parents talked about many of the challenges Somali families face in the United States and emphasized the importance of teachers having an understanding of these obstacles and Somali cultural norms. Parents had many ideas about how to further educate teachers about Somali culture. It was suggested that teachers go to the Somali museum in Minneapolis and learn from the tour guide at the museum about the culture and history of Somalis. Additionally, one parent suggested visiting the Somalis & Minnesota exhibit at the Minnesota History Center to learn more about Somali immigrants and their journey to Minnesota. The parents had recommendations about how to improve communication between families and teachers. Recommendations included initiating group meetings more frequently, having a back-to-school meeting to address any changes happening that year, using emails to share information, and using a robocall to share information since robocalls could be translated into Somali. The parents also stressed the importance of both being flexible and knowing each family in order to communicate with them in the most effective way. Overall, Somali parents expressed their desire for teachers to be very honest and open with them about their children's academic achievement and behavior in the classroom.

Action Plan

Improved communication between Somali families and teachers will require continued collaboration and flexibility between the groups to implement changes and discuss how to continue to improve communication. It would be beneficial to have a beginning of the year meeting with administration, teachers, and Somali families. At this

meeting, the administration could introduce any new initiatives that will be implemented that year. A translator should be present, and at the end of the meeting, there should be a time for questions and answers. It would be beneficial to hold a similar meeting every few months to keep the parents up-to-date with what is happening at school. This meeting could be run similar to the focus group in this study. It should be very collaborative in nature, where teachers and parents work to educate each other about school events and ways in which teachers could best support the Somali children in school.

It is also important to educate teachers about Somali culture and the obstacles Somalis face in Minnesota. It would be beneficial for teachers to visit the Somali Museum in Minneapolis and the Somali exhibit at the Minnesota History Center. This could be integrated into a professional development day. Additionally, it would be beneficial to invite a few Somali parents to share their experiences at a staff meeting. Teachers could ask questions and begin to develop a better understanding of Somali culture. Finally, a mosque in the community offers an event called “Bridges for Peace” that focuses on educating people about the Islamic religion and Muslims, this would be another opportunity for teachers to immerse themselves in Somali culture.

Although there are many technology tools available for teachers, it would be helpful to research the most effective tools and have teachers use these to simplify the communication process for parents. It would be beneficial to start the year off by talking about how teachers communicate with parents and establish a standard, school-wide system to follow. Somali parents would appreciate the consistency and knowing what to expect from all of the teachers. Many parents have multiple students in school, so this system could help alleviate any confusion between how different teachers communicate.

This system could be communicated with parents and followed throughout the year.

Halfway through the year, parents and teachers could come back together and talk about what is working well and what needs to be changed.

Ultimately, the goal is for improved communication between Somali families and teachers. This is essential for students to succeed and needs to start with understanding and open-mindedness from both sides. Improved communication will benefit students both academically and with their behavior at school. This will be an ongoing process. As the above action steps are taken, there will be successes and areas that still need to be improved. Throughout the process, both teachers and parents will need to support one another and be honest about how the interventions are working. Teachers and parents both want what is best for the children; collaborating and being flexible will improve trust between teachers and parents and improve overall communication within the building.

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Appendix A

Teacher Survey

3/23/2019

Teacher Survey

Teacher Survey

I am doing a community-based participatory action research project based on improving communications between Somali families and teachers as part of my Master of Arts in Education at St. Catherine University.

This survey will help me understand how teachers at our school currently communicate with parents and what teachers already know and do to make communicating with Somali families successful.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and confidential. If you choose to participate or not, there are no consequences. I will not know who has participated. If you choose to participate and want to talk to me further I am happy to have you collaborate with me on this project. You could help me analyze the data and attend family meetings discussing this topic with Somali families.

* Required

1. Which of the following tools do you currently use to communicate with parents or guardians of your students? *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Daily	More than once a week	Weekly	Every two weeks	Monthly	Rare or not at all
Individual emails about specific students	<input type="radio"/>					
List serve emails	<input type="radio"/>					
Moodle, SeeSaw or other LMS	<input type="radio"/>					
District website	<input type="radio"/>					
Group texting tool	<input type="radio"/>					
Text individual parents	<input type="radio"/>					
Infinite campus	<input type="radio"/>					
Letter in student folder or backpack	<input type="radio"/>					
Language line	<input type="radio"/>					

2. If you have a behavior concern for a student how do you typically contact their parents? *

Mark only one oval.

- Phone Call
- Email
- In-person meeting
- Other: _____

3. If you have an academic concern for a student how do you typically contact their parents? *

Mark only one oval.

- Phone Call
- Email
- In-person meeting
- Other: _____

3/23/2019

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Language line	<input type="radio"/>					

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Mark only one oval.

- Phone Call
- Email
- In-person meeting
- Other: _____

3. If you have an academic concern for a student how do you typically contact their parents? *

Mark only one oval.

- Phone Call
- Email
- In-person meeting
- Other: _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Somali Family Focus Group

1. Tell me what school was like for you.
2. What does your child say our school is like for them?
3. Did teachers contact parents at the school you went to? Do you remember having your parents visit your school with you at all growing up? What do you remember about that?
4. How do you want to be involved in your child's education?
5. What opportunities are available for teachers to learn more about how to help Somali students do well in school? Or, what would you want all teachers to know about your child's culture and family?
6. How can teachers best support you and other Somali parents?
7. Our school invites all parents to visit with teachers about their children's progress in school twice a year for conferences. These meetings happen in October and February. Would you be able to attend conferences during this time? Why/why not?
8. Do you have an example of when a teacher effectively communicated with you? Why do you think it was effective?
9. What do you think is working best at this school?
10. What would you recommend to be improved at this school?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add? Thank you for participating in this study!