



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from The Multilingual and Multicultural Center

Donald L. Bouchard

Portland Public Schools
150 Ocean Ave., Portland, Maine 04103

Tel. (207) 874-8135
Fax (207) 756-8421 Vol. 10, No. 5

Sociocultural Issues in Language Minority Education

Characteristics of Somali Culture and their Impact on Learning

Somalis are a culturally distinct group in our community. The group consists overwhelmingly of refugees who escaped from their war-torn country on the eastern horn of Africa. Many Somalis were in refugee camps for extended periods of time prior to coming to the U.S., and they demonstrate some noteworthy cultural characteristics. This *Bulletin* examines these characteristics and their potential impact on learning in a U.S. classroom context.

The following descriptions of Somalis are *general* group characteristics and may not apply to an individual, depending upon their degree of acculturation to U.S. culture and/or specific personality profile.

CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

1. Strong adherence to a tribal or clan identity. A traditionally nomadic lifestyle and the need to survive in an arid, hostile environment has historically led to strong, authoritative kinship relationships among extended family members over countless generations. Clans are derived from a common lineage. In the Somali context clans are remarkably resilient in helping members survive in and adapt to U.S. culture.

2. Rich oral tradition. Of particular value to Somalis is oral language. This tradition is manifested in the wisdom and unique perspectives found in Somali proverbs; oral expression in poetry; and rituals in storytelling. Lengthy conversation and debate, punctuated not with the typical "ping-pong" turn-taking typical in a western context, but by active verbal jousting and emotional arguing, is the norm.

3. Commitment to an Islamic way of life. There is great variety of religious expression in the Somali community. Islam is so historically embedded in the culture that the religion pervades not only religious practice but also the Somali belief system and way of life. Prohibitions against the use of alcohol, maintenance of strict clothing codes, and gender roles are examples of common practices in Somali culture.

4. Conservative attitudes towards social behavior and cultural practices. Partly as an outcome of their Islamic tradition and partly because of a collective identity steeped in tradition, Somalis view change with a great deal of caution. Thus, they may be reluctant to learn about or engage in many common U.S. cultural practices.

5. *A highly entrepreneurial attitude.* Somalis exhibit mobility by changing geographic location to seek better economic opportunities and are inclined to negotiate about many things that U.S. Americans would consider frivolous or nonnegotiable.

6. *Those with some education in Somalia have a background that is challenged by the need to adapt to the highly literate, analytically-oriented, U.S. schooling environment.* Most Somalis value education. However, the recitation and memorization that is an integral part of their educational system and religious tradition is inadequate preparation for the critical literacy required for reading and writing in the content areas. This poses challenges for many individual learners seeking academic success.

IMPACT ON LEARNING

1. *The collectivistic perspective inherent in the authoritative family and clan structure results in the need for teachers to exert authoritative control to effectively manage classroom instruction.* Somali students often struggle with individualized, independent learning. Depending on age and schooling experience in their culture of origin, Somali learners may require a great deal more intensive, incremental practice to work individually and independently.

2. *The active communication style and extensive oral tradition demonstrates an ease with oral discourse and debate but a corresponding challenge for teachers to engage Somalis in reflective reading and writing.* The strikingly ebullient Somali oral communication style in a nonauthoritarian U.S. classroom setting can pose classroom management challenges. In addition, Somalis with home language literacy likely use their culturally-acceptable elaborate literacy style instead of a more concise and linear English written style.

3. *The socially conservative Somali way of life may result in older students*

experimenting with questionable "western" adolescent lifestyle choices in language, clothing, and behavior in the school setting. Adolescents in particular may experience a crisis of cultural identity by being exposed to U.S. mass media culture. The school setting may be one of the few places where this culturally alternative behavior is expressed, in many instances inappropriately.

4. *Somali students are often isolated from U.S. cultural practices, causing isolation from peers.* The cohesive Somali culture with its strongly-embedded traditions often results in their not participating in sports or having much knowledge of food and entertainment choices, community activities, or secular holiday celebrations. It is a barrier for connecting with native U. S. peers.

5. *With many Somali families struggling to improve their quality of life by moving from city to city, teachers often observe Somalis students with discontinuity in learning.* The ease of connecting with family and fellow clan members across the country plus a more fluid definition of nuclear family has led many Somali families to move frequently. This mobility not only results in a generally lower English language proficiency; it also results in content area gaps due to frequent interruptions in schooling.

6. *Challenging U.S. school curriculum for any learners schooled in Somalia leads to a struggle for academic success.* The critical literacy, computer knowledge and extensive reading required in our standards-based curriculum is challenging for all. Somali learners can only overcome this challenge through *massive practice in a variety of contexts* through an intensive, dedicated focus on literacy.

SOURCE:

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