
Adult learning, gender and mobility: Exploring Somali refugee mothers' literacy development and empowerment through engagement with their children's education

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore Somali refugee mothers' acts of becoming literate in order to support their children's educational success. The literature on parent support and involvement makes fleeting reference to the forces of globalisation; it also pays little attention to refugee parents as being agents of, or subject to, such forces. Research into education and development, as it relates to adult learners, focuses mainly on higher education, economics and labour market issues (Kenway & Kelly, 2000; Blackmore, 2014). The local–global dialectic of school–home relationships has a particular bearing on my research into the refugee parent experience. Accordingly, I reason that parents' engagement with their children's education is interwoven with their own histories of educational disruption, displacement and mobility. For this reason, I engage with their cultural and historical contexts as tangible influences on their present-day engagement with learning and education.

In this narrative enquiry, I researched the life experiences and beliefs about education of four refugee mothers, analysing their testimonies or 'narratives of political urgency' (Bernal, Burciaga & Carmona, 2017) in order to probe the intersectionality of gender, language, ethnicity and power. I investigated their personal empowerment and the community cultural wealth that the women accumulated on their journey to becoming literate.

KEYWORDS

adult learning; mobility; community cultural wealth; illiteracy

Introduction

Researchers in the sphere of education identify the home environment as a critical pedagogical context for shaping not only children's literacy skills and identities (Cameron & Gillen, 2013; Levy, Hall & Preece, 2018), but also their social and emotional development (Vandermaas-Peeler, Sassine, Price & Brillhart, 2011). The South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 encourages parent–educator partnerships by authorising parents to share the responsibility for governing schools with educators (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Lemmer, 2007), and facilitating the extensive engagement of parents in the broader educational agenda (Epstein & Associates, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed, 2002; Daniels, 2017). In the past, education confined the parents' role in the education of their children to a support role. The SASA redefined the role of the parent as a collaborator of education who serves on school governing bodies and who has decision-making powers together with educators about the governance of their children's schools. The research on parent involvement and support reflects three clear foci: 'how' parents need to be involved in education; the quality of that involvement; and the centralisation of the parent–school relationships. What most of the research shows is that strategies for involvement are defined by individual schools (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein & Associates, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Jeynes, 2007) and that the theorising is informed by middle-class European–American cultural practices.

The acknowledgment of the parent's role as collaborator with the educator, and the home as an additional pedagogical space, heralds a welcome shift in the scholarly writing about parent support in the context of education. Since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, the country has become home to many refugees from East Africa who fled wars in their countries, and to immigrants who have seen a future for their families in the newly democratic South Africa. However, many of these adult refugees lack a formal basic education or speak world languages that differ from South Africa's. This situation renders these parents extremely vulnerable as educational collaborators. Most of the scholarly research and writing on parent–school collaborations seems to misrecognise the heterogeneous educational backgrounds of parents and the effect this has on collaborative efforts. This happens despite research which indicates that these parents have different ways of showing caring, ways that are often not recognised by schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; López, 2001; Orellana, Monkman & MacGillivray, 2003). This happens because there is a lack of will to acknowledge that multi-ethnic educational backgrounds introduce challenges into the structure of the home as a pedagogical space. One such challenge is to the literacy status of parents. Teachers often take it for granted that their students come from homes where parents are functionally literate in the languages of the school that their children attend. Furthermore, educators assume that literacy development in the home context will mimic the vertical trajectory of literacy development in the school, that is, as a movement from immaturity and incompetence to maturity and competence (Engeström, 1996). While the potential exists for literate parents to be socially capable of interacting with their children and of bridging the gap between what the child already knows and does not know by helping the child to make the appropriate associations, an illiterate parent might face many challenges in trying to do so.

As an educator and a researcher, I experience the inclusion discourse as one that pays limited attention to ethnicity, culture and language as barriers to educational inclusion (Freeman, 2010; Bower & Griffin, 2011). South Africa's history of inequality and segregation in education makes it important for educators to be sensitised to learners' diversity, ethnicity, cultural background and educational experience (Walton, 2012). The multi-ethnic classroom requires teacher reflexivity about the cultural, ethnic and linguistic home barriers to learning. This is, however, not the case in reality: teachers seldom reflect on how the heterogeneity of their learners' family backgrounds influences the learner and their parents' engagement with local educational practices. My review of the literature has shown that the challenges which refugee parents face with education in general and with illiteracy in particular are largely under-researched themes in studies about parent support. My ongoing research on immigrant and refugee communities has shown that teachers possess very limited knowledge about the refugee learners' home backgrounds (Daniels, 2017; 2018b). Teachers' lack of insight into the sociohistorical lives of refugee parents prevents them from making the connection between parent illiteracy and their children's challenges with literacy development. Instead, teachers continue to subscribe to the dominant narrative of refugee and migrant parents as being uninvolved in, and uncaring about, their children's education.

International research on teachers' views on immigrant parent involvement indicates similar findings, reporting as it does on how teachers misrepresent parents when they speak about them (Lareau, 2000; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Waterman, 2008; Li, 2010). These studies found that teachers were more likely to attribute the educational problems that students of minority groups experience to parents who are uninvolved and homes that lack cultural capital (Harris, 1985, cited in Lareau, 2000). Given these findings, a different reading of the involvement of illiterate parents in the education of their schoolchildren, and the beneficiaries of their exchanges, is required.

Situating the problem

Since South Africa became a constitutional democracy in 1994, many Somali refugee families have made this country their home, despite their lack of a common linguistic, cultural and ethnic history with South Africans. When the Somali civil war started in 1991, the country's education system collapsed, and, with that, Somali children's right to a basic formal education was undermined. Families from established communities were uprooted and the children of such families spent their childhood leading nomadic lives fleeing warlords, with most eventually seeking shelter in refugee camps. Three decades later, these displaced children are adults who are raising their own children in foreign countries such as South Africa. These parents, however, do not have the educational background or the formal school competencies that South African education requires in order to support their primary-school children's literacy development in the ways that schools value. International and national research shows that parents' illiteracy in their children's language of learning poses the biggest threat to the parents' role as educational collaborators (Singh et al., 2004; Martinez, 2011; Daniels, 2017; Slinger-Steenberg, 2018).

The refugee parent's literacy should be an important theme for educational researchers of the South African classroom to explore, given the country's growing refugee community and the challenge that multi-linguistic school populations pose to children's educational success. Research that explores the ways in which illiterate parents involve themselves in their children's schooling could inform educators about how best to support such initiatives educationally. It could also lead to a different type of collaboration with parents. In this article, I explore the challenges that illiterate parents face when they become involved in helping their children with their homework, and I discuss the benefits they derive from being involved in their children's education. The research question that guided the discussion is this: 'How do illiterate parents engage in educational processes, and what personal learning benefits do they derive from the experience?'

As there are relatively few studies that focus on refugee mothers' involvement in their children's education, and none in South Africa that explore refugee mothers' acts of adult learning and personal empowerment, my research aim is to amplify 'the roar which lies on the other side of silence' (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986:4). The feminist cultural theorist, Macedo (2015:83), asks us to ponder the 'disquieting narrative about the erasure of identity and silence' regarding women's educational experiences and contributions. This I sought to do by subjecting the women's educational contributions and investments to the public gaze in an effort to make visible their roles and to acknowledge them. I followed a humanist and equity-oriented research agenda, as it is my contention that refugee women's mobility differs from that of men, and, therefore, that their challenges are different too. Through narrative enquiry, I engaged with four refugee parents one-on-one and had the opportunity to probe aspects of their lives that informed my understanding of their educational trajectory (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 2014). The data formed part of a bigger research project¹ on parent support in an immigrant Somali community of refugees.

The four refugee mothers – Amirah, Malaika, Afifa and Shakira² – talked about their own histories with formal schooling and the social and historical influences that war had exerted on their educational development. I then explored the strategies they devised to participate in their children's schooling. Finally, I asked them to share the benefits that they had gained through participation. My presentation of their stories is an attempt to trouble the politics of misrepresentation and to challenge the parody of the refugee parent as being uninvolved in their children's education.

1 Acknowledgement: I wish to thank the National Research Foundation for their funding of my project through their Competitive Programme for Rated Researchers grant.

2 Pseudonyms were used for the participants in order to protect their identity.

Theoretical framework

Literacy is a socially and culturally situated practice that is rooted in cultural, historical and institutional contexts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). I draw on Gutiérrez's (2008) sociocritical literacy construct to historicise the literacy practices in the refugee home contexts of Amirah, Malaika, Afifa and Shakira. This allows me to reframe the zone of proximal development as a collaboratively constituted zone that facilitates the empowerment of both linguistically marginalised refugee parents and their Foundation Phase children. I consider literacy as 'more than a collection of decontextualized skills' (Alley, 2018) and share Gutiérrez and Larson's (2007) concerns about how horizontal forms of expertise that develop within and across the home practices are under-researched and not reported on. For her research in diverse ethnic and cultural contexts, Gutiérrez (2002) coins the term 'sociocritical literacy' in order to emphasise the complexities present in the transnational and hybrid world of the refugees' and displaced learners' home contexts. According to Marr (2017), itinerant methodologies can bring cross-spatial interconnectedness, also referred to as 'translocality', within critical range. Their use of such nomadic methodologies can, in turn, raise the consciousness of researchers about the energetic currents present in the transnational community (Marr, 2017).

My construct of the home as a pedagogical space builds on an existing body of research that views it as a particular kind of zone of proximal development³ (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Engeström, 1996). The perspective adopted here brings under scrutiny both the traditional roles ascribed to parents in the zone of proximal development and the beneficiary of learning. I perceive cognitive development in the home where both parent and child have limited literacy competencies to be collaborative and bidirectional. I find support from Auerbach (1995), who challenged the view of literacy learning being a one-way process from parent to child and argued instead that literacy interactions between parent and child often become a two-way system in immigrant families (Packard, 2001). However, it is an interactional space in which the illiterate parent still has to mediate the literacy development of her child, despite the limited range of tools at her disposal. I find it useful to engage with the parent-child collaboration as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which both parent and child engage in collective learning and both experience learning benefits. This situation then opens up a space for family literacy, which is an intergenerational approach to literacy acquisition. The term 'family literacy' refers mainly to programmes or a curriculum through which parents are taught ways in which to prepare their Foundation Phase children for education. I use the term to refer to informal literacy practices that children and parents perform together, such as reading and writing, to advance their literacy.

3 The zone of proximal development is best understood as the zone of the closest, most immediate psychological development of the children that includes a wide range of their emotional, cognitive and volitional psychological processes. Simply put, it is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what they cannot do without a teacher's assistance.

The analytical tools that I used to understand the participants' navigation of education as illiterate refugee women are informed by Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital and by Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory.

Bourdieu's concept of field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:97) refers to 'a network of objective historical relations between positions'. The 'field' explored in this article is the combined educational landscape that the parents traversed with their Foundation Phase children. The field is, however, a dynamic space in which there is constant vying for prime positioning and power. Moreover, the parent and the child have a relationship with the outcome of the action; the actions they take therefore facilitate a particular outcome. To explain the repeated patterns of such daily actions, Bourdieu (1998) introduced the term 'habitus', which refers to an individual's internalised ways of doing and being.

Bourdieu (1998:11) further describes a 'field' as a social space, that is, 'an invisible reality that cannot be shown but which organizes agents' practice and representations'. One's tacit understanding of the field brings one to understand social practices and how these practices are being facilitated. According to Fataar (2008), it is through studying the social spaces (fields) which people occupy that one develops an understanding of what people become when they inhabit these spaces, as well as how individuals use social spaces and what they produce out of such spaces. Importantly, it gives one insight into what people identify as the resources or the capital that they use to navigate their worlds successfully. 'Field' is useful in advancing insight into the resources that were available in the social spaces that the four mothers in this study navigated as children growing up in difficult circumstances, and the types of capital that they acquired in order to facilitate their children's basic education. By analysing the sociohistorical spaces they occupied, one can reveal how advantage and disadvantage played out in their lives, and how this influenced their decisions and their stance on education later in life.

For my research among vulnerable illiterate adults, I found the community cultural wealth (CCW) theory of Yosso (2005) to be a more suitable framework for analysing the women's narratives. This framework acknowledges the mutual engagement and influences between individuals and the communities they grew up in. Yosso's CCW theory both extends Bourdieu's perspective of cultural and social capital and provides a different reading of it (Daniels, 2018b). Bourdieu's theory centres on the middle class; therefore, the capital that working-class communities produce in their struggles 'to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression' (Yosso, 2005:77) are not explained. For Yosso (2005:77), the cultural wealth that exists in working-class communities is represented by 'an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts' that they possess and use to survive under often harsh circumstances. Yosso (2005) states that marginalised communities nurture cultural wealth through six forms of capital that she characterises as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. These forms of capital become dynamic interrelated practices that build on one another. Therefore, cultural and social capital are resources that are constantly being renegotiated, adjusted and produced as individuals move between real and virtual spaces on their life journeys.

Sociohistorical context of Somali refugee mobility

Globalisation has led to the increased movement of peoples and has made an extended range of mobilities possible. However, as pointed out by Cresswell (2010:17), various aspects of mobility make it ‘powerfully political’. Bauman’s (1998) earlier research into mobility suggested that it should be studied alongside social stratification and exclusionary practices because of society’s propensity to ‘other’ and to label certain members of society as ‘not belonging’ as a form of stratification that leads to religious, gendered and racialised hierarchies. A contemporary example of this is Donald Trump’s ruling at the beginning of his presidency that migrants from predominantly Middle Eastern countries and followers of Islam would temporarily be denied entry to his country because they are ‘inadmissible aliens’ and ‘would-be terrorists’ who are ‘detrimental to the interests of the United States’.⁴ I argue that it is such hierarchies that later inhibit the physical movements and status-related actions of profiled subgroups such as refugees.

Earlier accounts of mobility studies considered movement, integration and transport as forms of mobility. Sathar and Kazi (2000) (see, also, Besteman, 2016) point out that female mobility and honour are closely linked, because, in some patriarchal communities, women’s mobility carries the risk of dishonour as the traveller goes through public spaces. In this gendered theme, the distinction is made between socially acceptable mobility such as subsistence travelling – for example, for work purposes – and mobility for discretionary activities, which is less acceptable (Mumtaz & Salway, 2005; Adeel, Yeh & Zhang, 2014). The ‘new’ mobility paradigm departs from this framework and instead seeks to integrate the various forms of movement across disciplinary boundaries in an attempt to advance a more holistic understanding of mobility. I use Cresswell’s (2010:20) definition of mobility as ‘the entanglement of movement, representation and practice’ to understand the refugee parents’ trajectories from war-torn Somalia to South Africa.

Somali migration and displacement of the past quarter century is described by Marr (2017) as ‘a compulsory migration into stateless or emotional homelessness’. Siad Barre’s government was overthrown in 1991, causing total anarchy to erupt as warlords from the various clans fought one another for power. The devastating consequences of war together with drought, famine and violence forced the mass displacement of Somali society into refugee camps in Kenya, Ethiopia and Yemen. The majority of Somali families fled to the Lagdera District, where the Kenyan government, with the assistance of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), set up the Dadaab camps of Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera in 1991 and 1992 to respond to the crisis (UNHCR, 2018). In 2017, the UNHCR put the total population of Somali refugees in Kenya at 308 700, of which 244 000 were still living in the Dadaab camps. The UNHCR, in its global focus annual report (2018), estimated the number of people who were internally displaced in Somalia to be 2 648 000 million, of which 122 646 were returnees, 16 031 asylum-seekers and 16 230 refugees.

4 US Code §1182, cited in Executive Orders 13769 and 13780: ‘Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States’ (27 January and 6 March 2017).

The mobility patterns for refugees are different from those for migrants in that refugees are displaced people who have been forcefully uprooted and displaced (Bekkers, 2017). Their mobility is also more likely to be tied to dangerous events and traumatic experiences. There are many incidents that the four women recount about their flight to safer areas being traumatic experiences in which the lives of close family members were lost. The narratives of Amirah, Malaika, Afifa and Shakira delineated disrupted childhoods, displaced families, and memories of family members – all males – killed by rival clans. When Amirah's family fled their village, she was 11 years old. Amirah was part of a group of 13 family members who overnight became homeless nomads. She recalled how, for five years, their group led a nomadic lifestyle, fleeing from village to village and from country to country, defending themselves against warlords and hiding to escape death:

They were killing the kids ... they were raping the girls (pause) ... I can tell. We ran from village to village, from country to country. I was 11 and kept running until I was 16. They killed my father. They kill[ed] my uncles. (AM interview, 2016)

Malaika's experience is similar to Amirah's. She, too, was 11 years old when she arrived, on her own, at one of the Kenyan refugee camps. In the chaos that ensued when their village came under attack, Malaika was separated from her family. After spending one year without her family members in the Dadaab refugee camp on the Somali border, Malaika was fortunate to be reunited with her mother in another refugee camp. For both Malaika and Amirah, the trauma of war and displacement, death and loss is part of their childhood memories. The Dadaab refugee camps became their homes and their places of safety where they grew into adulthood. Malaika met and married her husband in the refugee camp.

Afifa and Shakira, the other two women whose stories I tell, were toddlers when the war started. Owing to the lawlessness in their country, even they as young adults eventually sought refuge in the refugee camps. Shakira was a 15-year-old widow when she arrived at the Dadaab refugee camp with her baby daughter after her husband had died at the hands of Somali warlords. She would spend eight years in the camp, where she met her second husband and remarried.

Starting over: Dreaming of a future

In my analysis of what their goals, hopes and dreams were of a future, a common narrative emerged for the four women. While in the refugee camps, they all dreamt of resettling and migrating to states where they could be safe, feel settled and live better lives. South Africa's camp-free policy was an attractive option for the young married couples, as it presented them with better physical-mobility choices and economic prospects than they had enjoyed in Kenya, and even in Europe. According to the women, South Africa's new democracy under Nelson Mandela's government from 1994 made many young Somali adults in the Dadaab camps turn their gaze to the south. South Africa is a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 1997) and has to grant access to work to all successful applicants with refugee status. Moreover, the country pledged that refugees' children would have access to basic formal education.

In 1997, Malaika, Amirah and their spouses, together with five other adults, left their Kenyan refugee camp and relocated to South Africa. They had to cross back into the country of their birth, from where they travelled south to Kismayo, a port city in Somalia. There they boarded a boat and travelled to Mozambique. Because they were illegal migrants in Mozambique, they remained in hiding until they could finalise their travel to South Africa. In Mozambique, illegal migrants make use of local agents who, for payment, are willing to transport them overland to the South African border. When the group arrived in South Africa in 1997, they applied for and were granted refugee status. The nine adults chose South Haven,⁵ a former Coloured township about 50 kilometres from Cape Town, as their home. Since 1997, when the initial nine adults settled in the community, the Somali community has grown to about 100 families.

Shakira arrived in South Africa a decade later and Afifa four years after her.

Table 1 provides biographical information about each participant.

Table 1: Demographic information on the participants

| Parent | Age | Arrival in South Africa | Marital status | Formal education | Children | Work |
|---------|-----|-------------------------|----------------|------------------|----------|---|
| Afifa | 33 | 2002 | M | None | 8 | Homemaker |
| Shakira | 34 | 2006 | M/2nd | None | 4 | Manages a fruit-and-vegetable shop |
| Amirah | 39 | 1997 | M | 4 years | 10 | Runs a business together with her husband |
| Malaika | 39 | 1997 | M | None | 8 | Runs a business from home |

The first waves of newly arrived Somali refugees were mostly single men who settled throughout South Africa in black communities and townships. This migration pattern changed in the next decade, when the Somali refugee families would chain-migrate to communities where an existing Islamic habitus was in place. Since the 2000s, the Western Cape, with its visible Muslim presence, seems to have been a preferred province for Somalis to settle in (Jinnah, 2010; Daniels, 2018b). South Haven, where the research population is settled, has an established Muslim community and its infrastructure includes five mosques, a community primary school and a high school, a habitus that is ideal for this staunchly religious refugee community.

⁵ This is a fictitious name for the town.

In my interviews, I explored their sense of belonging to, and membership of, the established community. Although their preference was to settle in communities where there is a visible Muslim presence, they were not eager to assimilate into the community. Instead, their decisions seem to be rooted in being in a Muslim community where an Islamic ethos is present and they have access to the community's scarce religious resources and infrastructure. Their actions suggest segmented assimilation and dissident acculturation to the South African Muslim community. For example, even though they were attending prayers in the community mosques and were sending their children to the only Muslim school in the community, they were resistant to, or hesitant about, integrating into the community. I interpret this resistance to assimilate as being part of an understanding of the transnational condition of being fearful of losing their cultural and national mode of being. In my conversations with the four women, I found them to be very proud of their heritage. The Somali identity is evident in their uniform style of dressing: long skirts and burka head coverings.⁶ They were very critical of the manner in which South African Muslims practise their religion and disapproving of the Western dress code of South African Muslim women.

Dreams and aspirations of literacy

In this section, I discuss the women's aspirations and the steps they took to realise such aspirations. They described the world that they are living in today as vastly different from the one they left behind in the Kenyan refugee camps. In the refugee camps, they had no opportunity to gain an education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and the Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 1960) affirm education as a human right. However, life in the refugee camps initially was about survival and about providing refuge to the thousands of displaced people who arrived daily at the camps. According to the participants, no formal basic education was made available to children in these camps. As a result, Shakira, Afifa and Amirah never went to school and Malaika did not continue her schooling beyond Grade 4.

For these adults, access to education for their children seemed to be the major driver for choosing South Africa as their home. Malaika, the only one who had experience of formal schooling, described South Africa as a free, safe country where refugee families can enjoy equal opportunities with South Africans. This 39-year-old mother has raised eight children in the 20 years that she has been living in South Africa. All her children had the opportunity to go to school, and her eldest son is now a university student who is studying towards a degree in psychology. This is also the case with the other participants, with all their school-age children being enrolled at school.

A theme that runs through their narratives is how these women accumulate aspirational capital and use it to encourage their children to accomplish academically. An example that Amirah provided of this is that she and her spouse continuously share their refugee experience with

6 Headgear worn by women to cover their hair and upper body.

their ten children. They constantly tell their children about the hardships they endured in the refugee camps and how they persevered and migrated to South Africa to start a new life. Amirah was unwavering in her resolve that her children would complete their schooling and have professions. What was interesting to me was the extent to which she had invested in each of her children's plans for the future. She could name each child's professional aspirations and invested in books on each profession that her children showed an interest in. She said:

Even now, until they finish matric, when they go to college, university ... we want to be ready. Whatever it takes, we will be ready. Whatever they dream, what they want to be – we will support them. (AM interview, 2016)

Malaika's narrative validates that of Amirah's. She, too, is ambitious for her children, and reminded me that she is emulating her mother, who taught her to read and to value education.

Access, mobility and learning a new language

In the conservative Somalia of the 1990s, girls traditionally did not receive a secular education, only a religious one. However, all the women grew up in families and communities where every child had equal access to formal basic education. Afifa, Malaika and Shakira recall both boys and girls from their communities going to school prior to 1991. However, their communities prioritised religious over secular education, and parents preferred their children to receive a religious education first, and then start their secular education. The annual visit by Amirah's aunt who was working in Italy led to a break with tradition for the girls in her family. Her aunt told of how her lack of a formal education had handicapped her navigation in a learning society, and of her social and economic challenges in advancing in society. She convinced her brother, Amirah's father, that formal basic education is an investment in a better future for his daughters. Amirah was seven years old when she enrolled in Grade 1 and was in Grade 5 when the war started. Malaika, who is the same age as Amirah, enrolled at a Madrassa (Islamic school) first. Therefore, when she graduated from the Madrassa at age 11, and was about to start with her secular education, the country was a war zone; all the schools had stopped functioning and the education system collapsed. However, what my findings show is that these women's childhood home contexts were pedagogical spaces where learning was encouraged.

They all recalled growing up in homes where various forms of cultural and social capital, such as books and newspapers, were present and informal education systems were in place. In Afifa and Malaika's homes, they were exposed daily to the customary reading, by adults, from the Quran. The older family members were all literate in Arabic, as they had completed their Madrassa education and practised a daily reading of the holy book. Afifa and Malaika's mothers had been to school and were literate in Somali. Malaika's prized possession is a bilingual Somali–English dictionary that she saved from her childhood home and brought with her to South Africa. Malaika, Afifa, Amirah and Shakira all had access to religious education, which continued even in the refugee camps. Therefore, despite their lack of a formal education, all of

them had accumulated various forms of cultural capital, mechanisms that guided their own decisions and actions concerning education in later years.

Their initial decisions were influenced, however, by the sociocultural context in which they initially found themselves as Somali refugees. They recalled how, when they first settled in South Haven, the patriarchal values that shaped their social practices and influenced their mobility as girls in Somalia were re-established. It was these values that became deterrents to their literacy development in South Africa. Their closed Somali community expected them to identify with the gender-defined role of homemaker and to abide by cultural norms that discouraged mixing with outsiders. By socialising only with women from their own ethnic group, in their own language, they had no incentive to learn the host country's languages. As Porter (2011:65) observed, women's immobility

relates not only to male concerns around the vulnerability of girls to sexual and other attacks and to their potential promiscuity, but also to gender divisions of labour, which typically place great emphasis on female labour contributions to household reproduction and, in locations where the transport gap is substantial, assign pedestrian transport of goods to females.

The men worked outside the community, which made mobility part of their daily experience. The men's work as informal traders in neighbouring communities created opportunities for them to mix and interact with the broader South African community and to develop literacy skills in the South African languages.

Even when the women were raising their pre-school children, they still did not experience their lack of English literacy skills as a barrier to communication because they seldom socialised outside of their ethnic group. It was only once their children started primary school that these mothers realised that their children lacked the foundational preparation for literacy. No foundational model for literacy was in place in their home environments; moreover, the practices of shared reading and reading aloud and the availability of print materials in English to promote positive attitudes to literacy were not in place. The lack of a shared language with the school placed them in situations where they were unable to communicate with their children's teachers, or even with their own children, about their schoolwork. The four mothers said that their inability to contribute to their children's development left them feeling incompetent, marginalised and alienated.

At the Foundation Phase level, teachers expect parents to be active participants with their children in homework activities. However, because the mothers were illiterate, they did not have the operational skills to execute the sanctioned school-related activities. Furthermore, they lacked the oral English literacy skills to function as facilitators of their children's home educational practices. Even so, the women displayed a strong commitment to their children's education despite the dispositional challenges that emanated from a lack of formal schooling. All of them said that they had started a journey towards becoming literate, starting with the English language.

When I interviewed the women in 2016, all of them were literate in English. This was, however, not the situation for Somali refugee women two decades earlier. Amirah was the only one who already knew a few English phrases when she arrived in South Africa. The other three participants said that they first heard English being spoken while watching television in the Kenyan refugee camps. This dilemma of being confronted with the challenge of mastering the English language forced the parents to become proactive in order to improve their own linguistic competencies in English. I next present the various strategies that they followed to facilitate literacy.

Television as teacher

Television in general and the soap operas in particular proved to be the best language teacher for the four women. In the mornings, when their children were at school, they would watch reruns of American and South African soap operas, practising the pronunciations and mimicking the actors' actions. Malaika and Afifa succeeded in building an extensive vocabulary and conversational competency through this practice. They say they started with learning the salutations, which they then tested on their Foundation Phase children when they arrived home from school. According to Bernstein (2000), educational attainment augments pedagogical time at home. However, the beneficiaries are usually the school-going children, not the parents. The women say that their children became their biggest mentors as they learnt alongside them. One of the creative ways in which Amirah practised alongside her children was through visual documents. She would assign them the role of newscaster or reporter on television and record them on video while they reported on what they had learnt during their school day. Each night, she gave a different child the opportunity to report, on camera, on what had happened to them during that particular day. Afterwards, she would play back the recordings for the whole family to critique. This is an example of the collaboration that took place between parent and Foundation Phase child. It underscores the intergenerational benefits of family literacy – in this case the parent and child practising their communicative skills together.

Role of literacy in homework supervision

Supervising their children's homework opened up an educational opportunity for the mothers to learn alongside their children. The narratives of the parents contained many examples of what Bourdieu (1998) describes as the social construction of the strategies that the parents adopt in order to help their children and advance their progress in school. What I found was that these literacy interactions between parent and child were seldom one-way processes; rather, they often became two-way processes in which parent and child were both benefactor and beneficiary. Existing family literacy research with immigrant families (Auerbach, 1995; Packard, 2001) validates this finding. These interactions between parent and child created opportunities for building the cultural capital that schools value, such as reading aloud, comprehension, and parents buying books and modelling educational values by doing homework and practising reading.

The school propagates early childhood literacy as the key to future success; it therefore expects all parents to help their children with their Foundation Phase reading exercises. But these

parents spoke about their educational limitations when assisting their school-going children with comprehension exercises, written work and educational projects. Nevertheless, they succeeded in creating dialogical spaces in which school-related activities were possible. Although, in the beginning, they did not have the required level of literacy, they would imitate the supervision processes of committed literate parents. And, although the four women now have different literacy competencies, which they acquired during their residency in South Africa, all of them said that, initially, they struggled to support their children's cognitive development because of their illiteracy in English. Despite Afifa and Shakira's non-existent reading and writing skills and their limited oral literacy skills in English, they still went through the motions of engaging their children in reading activities, asking questions about the reading, and praising them for how well they were doing. At that time, however, these two mothers could not verify whether their children were reading correctly.

A successful strategy was to collaborate with their Foundation Phase children in dialogical reading (Huebner & Meltzoff, 2005). They exploited the fact that most Foundation Phase books are picture storybooks which allow one to grasp the gist of a story. A common strategy they followed was to allow the child to direct and lead the conversation about the pictures in the storybook. The mother would follow the child's dialogue, constantly posing 'what' questions that she linked to the pictures and rephrasing the child's responses. In this way, the mothers could gain literacy skills alongside their Foundation Phase children. I considered Afifa's use of the cellphone as an educational tool highly strategic: when she received text messages which she could not read, she would include them as reading activities and ask her child to read them aloud to her. This is one example of the dialogical exchange having a mutually beneficial outcome for both parent and child: the parent could access her messages and her child could practise reading.

The literate Amirah and semi-literate Malaika faced fewer constraints than Afifa and Shakira. The former two mothers told of how much time they invested in understanding instructions in order to do primary-school homework. Malaika's constant consultation of her bilingual Somali-English dictionary to make sense of homework problems has paid dividends, in that she is now skilled enough to supervise her primary-school children's homework.

During homework time, these parents had mechanisms in place that benefitted the educational project. In Amirah's home, her school-going children gather at 17:30 in a room which has a table that seats six. While they do homework or reading, she sits close by, supervising them. During the week, she does not allow her children to watch television or to enjoy playtime, as they attend both secular and religious school daily. The mothers believed that, by becoming involved in their children's schoolwork and by praising their youngsters for engaging in educational work, they were encouraging them to persevere. It is through such actions that the strong message that education is important was conveyed to their children. Furthermore, these actions by the then functionally illiterate mothers challenged the perception that, when children hand in incomplete homework at school, provide incorrect answers to teachers' questions, or submit poorly done projects, their parents were not involved in their homework. The data that

this study collected highlight the interest level of these parents and the investment that they made, but they also bear witness to the constraints that illiteracy places on the effectiveness of parent–child engagement.

Older children as literacy resources

At the time of the study, Malaika and Amirah had been living in South Africa for more than 20 years. In the earlier years, when their eldest children started school, these mothers, like Shakira and Afifa, were not yet functionally literate. This forced them to look to others in the community and in their extended family circle who were literate in English for help. In the extended Somali families, there were a few older male siblings and uncles who, while living and working in Kenya, had become literate in English. Malaika and Amirah also enquired at the school about people who could assist them. So, for example, Amirah used to employ a retired teacher from the local community to supervise her children’s homework when neither she nor her husband had the skills or the knowledge to help them.

Now, however, Malaika and Amirah’s older children are in high school and they have since become rich resources that the parents use to advance the education of their younger primary-school siblings. My analysis of their narratives also indicates that there are constant exchanges of resources within and between the families. In the two decades which have passed, they have established support networks that such parents can access. An example of this is older high school learners offering their educational services to parents such as Shakira and Afifa in return for a small fee. Afifa also makes use of an after-school programme that provides extra tutoring in languages and mathematics, the learning areas that her children need help with. These examples reveal that there are parents who are proactive about addressing the literacy challenges they have. They explore ways of circumventing their limited capabilities by accessing support networks. At some stage, all of them had to locate valued resources in their own and the local community to assist them with educational support and help them successfully navigate their educational challenges. This is what Yosso’s (2005) community cultural theory categorises as social and navigational capital, and what Bourdieu (1998) refers to as social capital.

Education beyond schoolwork

Besides the pedagogical support, there were other forms of support that the parents provided which indirectly enhanced their children’s pedagogical development at school. I found Bourdieu’s (1998) ‘field’ a useful tool to use in my analysis of the resources that were accumulated in the social spaces of the families’ homes and the types of capital that they acquired to facilitate their children’s basic education. The mothers’ actions and investments in education were part of their daily engagement with their families. I argue, however, that they could not have been successful as champions of education if they had not also equipped themselves with literacy skills. What my analysis of the data shows is that the investment in education that these parents make in their children extends beyond schoolwork. For instance, one of the creative ways in which Amirah informally created a pedagogical space at home and

advanced a learning culture was by documenting their deeds visually. Instead of just asking her children to tell her about their school day, she devised a game that imitated television news reading and video-recorded the activity. Furthermore, she had a permanent arrangement with her primary-school children to accompany them to the local library on a Friday. What Amirah's intergenerational activities did was to build capacity and strengthen cognitive skills, acts that empower learners, both adults and children, to access and participate effectively in a learning society.

Discussion

Often, it is assumed that illiterate parents have no history of literacy and therefore are not as involved in their children's education as literate parents are, and that they do not value education. Furthermore, educators engage with school and home contexts as if they were organised in pedagogically similar ways. The data I collected on the refugee parents' involvement in their children's education shows such assumptions to be false. Amirah, Malaika, Afifa and Shakira invested heavily in their children's education once they had identified the barriers to their involvement. One such barrier was their immobility as Somali refugee women and the negative effect that had on their ability to access resources and services. As newly settled refugee women, their cultural practices isolated them by restricting their engagement with people from their own ethnic group. This practice proved to be detrimental to their acculturation to South African society and limited their accumulation of the cultural and social capital that they needed to support their children's early literacy development. The expectations of schools that parents of Foundation Phase learners collaborate with the teacher and step in as home literacy teacher created a major predicament for these illiterate parents. The parents identified their illiteracy in English as the barrier to their own children's successful navigation of formal education. They therefore started understanding the importance of organising their homes as pedagogical spaces if they were to affect their children's cognitive development and collaborate with their children's teachers. They also realised that the practices and representations of the home as social space, or field, as Bourdieu (1998) referred to it, had to change, or shift, if the homes were to become literacy-rich environments in which their school-going children's cognitive development could flourish. The findings show that these women made an extraordinary effort and devised creative ways to advance their children's development, which confirms that each of these women exercised agency.

Although the four mothers were not part of a formalised intergenerational literacy programme, they were cognisant of the importance of reading as far as early childhood literacy development is concerned. Even when they were not yet literate in English, they engaged their Foundation Phase children in activities such as having them read aloud and supervising their reading practice. By positioning themselves as co-learners with their children, the mothers had access to the planned and systematic instructional events that their children brought home as homework. What the data show is that an intergenerational literacy context was developing that allowed them to learn alongside their children. The mothers would simultaneously work on strengthening their own functional literacy skills in English by watching television soap operas and creating

opportunities to practise their English with their older children. All of these practices and activities became cultural capital that the parents and children were first accumulating and then spending to benefit the family literacy process. This, in turn, empowered parents with the confidence to engage in functional literacy practices such as visiting the school, meeting with teachers to discuss their children's progress, attending parent–teacher meetings and volunteering for after-school activities.

While working through the data, I reflected on how far the women had come from being illiterate refugee parents who had wanted better futures for their families. Their literate state seems to have benefitted the women in various ways. In the interviews, they came across as confident women and they spoke English fluently. In the ten years that Afifa and Shakira had been living in South Africa, and Malaika and Amirah's more than 20 years in the country, there have been major changes in how they navigate their worlds. What struck me was how freely they were moving around in the community. On the days of the interviews, two of the mothers first had appointments at the school before meeting with me. All of them walked to the school and the venue unaccompanied. Their mobility in the community seemed unrestricted, as the women use public transport to get to the town's business district and workplaces. Being literate seemed to have given the women increased mobility, as they could navigate their community unaided.

In addition to being the primary homemakers and caregivers in their families, three of the four women worked outside the home, as traders. Shakira owns and manages a fruit-and-vegetable shop, Amirah is in business with her husband, running a grocery-cum-cell phone shop, and Malaika has a home store where she serves as a distributor of traditional foods and pulses from East Africa. Their free movement between private and public spaces and their engagement with the broader community as traders differ radically from the context they described when they first arrived, having been confined to home and mixing only with women from their own ethnic group.

The women's past educational experiences influenced their present educational trajectory and that of the dreams and aspirations they have for their children's future. The overriding motivating factor for sending their children to school was to secure a better quality of life than the one they had left behind in the refugee camps. The social and historical contexts that had defined their early childhood experiences with education were also influential in defining their decisions in adult life. The mothers came from communities that had traditions of literacy and had grown up in homes where they were exposed to informal educational systems. Their parents and older family members were all literate in Arabic and Somali, as they had completed their Madrasa education. They were familiar with oral literacy traditions, such as reciting and reading aloud, and their memories of the presence of various forms of written artefact in their homes served as evidence of the value of literacy. It is their knowledge of the value of cultural and social capital that inspired these mothers to establish home environments in which education is valued and to engage in acts that encourage educational development. My finding that Amirah, Malaika, Afifa and Shakira all present with an embodied form of capital, as reflected in their attitudes to

education, is supported by my knowledge of their childhood social contexts. Their experiences of both informal and non-formal education positioned them favourably towards formal education and spurred them on to invest in their own and their children's education.

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