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5. EDUCATION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the educational experiences of British-Somalis in Tower Hamlets and Camden. Somali settlers who have arrived in recent years in the United Kingdom have been less educated than other minorities, in part due to their nomadic background and the breakdown of the educational infrastructure in Somalia (Harris, 2004). Many young people missed out on their education in Somalia. However, it should be noted that data have not always been recorded by ethnicity, so trends are not readily available. The importance of education was raised in all of the interviews with stakeholders, and there were also two focus groups conducted with men aged 18–35 years in Camden and women under 35 years of age in Tower Hamlets which centred on education. Participants in other focus groups also discussed education and its links with employment and these are also incorporated into this chapter.

All respondents acknowledged the importance of education in terms of life chances, employment and integration. There were many examples of younger Somalis thriving in the educational system and achieving very high grades at GCSE, A-Level and going on to further education, and participants in both focus groups had successfully gone on to work in educational and professional settings. However, some participants had had negative experiences of education and concerns were raised by all respondents regarding the underachievement of Somali children in schools. This included experiences of being excluded and children not being fully supported by their parents and issues with the education system itself.

This chapter will first provide some demographic information regarding numbers of British-Somali children in school in Camden and Tower Hamlets and an overview of educational attainment and achievement levels. A summary of initiatives aimed to improve achievement will be outlined before the qualitative experiences of Somalis in education are presented and discussed.

5.2 Number of Somali Pupils in Schools

In the January 2013 Camden Schools Census, 8 per cent of primary school pupils were “Black African-Somali”. At secondary school level the figure was 7 percent.⁶⁰ As of the January 2013 Tower Hamlets School Census there were 1,630 Somali pupils enrolled at Tower Hamlets schools.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Freedom of Information via Camden Council. Camden Council, “Key Ethnic Minority Achievement Statistics and Information Report 2011–2012”.

⁶¹ Freedom of Information via Tower Hamlets Council. Tower Hamlets, “Key Ethnic Minority Achievement Statistics and Information Report 2011–2012”.

5.3 Educational Attainment and Achievement Levels

One key indicator of educational attainment is obtaining GCSEs at grades A*–C in five subjects including English and Maths. In England as a whole, 86.3 percent of girls and 79.8 percent of boys achieved this standard in 2011–2012.⁶² In Camden in 2011–2012, 63 percent of British-Somali girls achieved five or more A*–Cs in subjects including English and Maths. This figure is in line with all girls in Camden Secondary schools. The figure was 54 percent for British-Somali boys, which was slightly higher compared with results for boys in Camden as a whole⁶³ at 53 percent.

In Tower Hamlets in 2011–2012, 70 percent of British-Somali girls achieved five or more A*–Cs in subjects including English and Maths, while the figure was 49 percent for boys. For Tower Hamlets as a whole, the overall figure of achievement for British-Somali pupils was 58 percent, while for white British pupils the figure overall was 49 percent. In Tower Hamlets, Somali boys and white British boys performed the worst.⁶⁴ It appears that British-Somali girls are performing exceptionally well at school, while British-Somali boys' educational achievements are more in line with the overall average. It could be that perceptions among research participants of British-Somali boys' poor educational achievement are due in part to comparisons to the very high achievements of British-Somali girls.

Table 3. Pupils achieving five A*–C grades at GCSE including English and Maths, 2011–2012

	Girls	Boys
England (all pupils)	86.3%	79.8%
London borough of Camden (British-Somali pupils)	63%	54%
London borough of Tower Hamlets (British-Somali pupils)	70%	49%

Source: Statistics taken from Camden Council, "Key Ethnic Minority Achievement Statistics and Information Report 2011–2012"

⁶² See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219337/sfr04-2013.pdf (accessed 4 August 2014).

⁶³ Camden Council, "Key Ethnic Minority Achievement Statistics and Information Report 2011–2012", FOI, 2013.

⁶⁴ Tower Hamlets, "Key Ethnic Minority Achievement Statistics and Information Report 2011–2012", FOI, 2013.

5.4 Education of Girls vs. Boys

No national statistics are available on educational attainment by British-Somalis. The data for British-Somalis in the two local authorities covered in this report find that Somali girls are achieving well at school. Nevertheless, the issue of the value of education for girls was raised by a number of (female) focus group participants. For example, it was highlighted that some parents expected girls to marry relatively young and go on to have children. Such parents felt that it is not as necessary for girls to continue with their education beyond secondary school:

At the same time, as a girl of 16, 17, 18 or 19, they'd be happy for you to marry. They want you to aspire but not get carried away. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

When I studied hard my mum would say to me, "Don't overdo it, don't fry your brain. In the end you'll have children and nappies to deal with". (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

Other focus group participants explained that girls were encouraged to study and achieve educationally, but that this has to be balanced with gendered expectations:

My mum has never been against me studying or going to University, but I have to fulfil duties at home, because in her mind, one day I'm going to be somebody's wife, and I have to be able to do x, y and z, and I think that's where the difference lies. I don't think there has ever been a Somali girl who was told, you're not going to University, you're not studying, I don't think that's ever happened, but I do think there's a difference in what they expect from girls and what they expect from boys. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

Both of the women above did go on to higher education and there is recognition of the necessity and value of education for girls among the younger generations:

If you educate a girl, you educate the whole family. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

In addition, focus group participants and stakeholders also felt that British-Somali boys were penalised by the education system and were much more likely to be excluded from school than their white counterparts. The negative perceptions and labelling of young Somali boys is discussed further below.

5.5 Language Spoken at Home and at School

Although focus groups participants and stakeholders emphasised that many British-Somali parents are equipped with English language skills, there were experiences of parents being unable to speak English and engage with the school and education system. Often Somali was the language spoken at home and this was felt to disadvantage people in later life, as one focus group participant explained:

My mum wasn't speaking to me in English at home, I didn't know the past tense of that, even now I feel like sometimes when I'm at work I'll be, I don't know, I feel a bit more disadvantaged than the other people. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

English not being spoken at home was particularly problematic for parents attending meetings with teachers:

I just wanted to say about parents' evenings ... they didn't know the language, even my mum didn't know the language, and I was translating back what the teacher was saying. She would say, "She is a chatterbox", and I would say, "She's saying I'm good and I talk", trying to make it better. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

My parents, they don't really know the educational system, we got away with quite a lot; with parents' evenings we told them we were doing well when we weren't. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

Stakeholders and focus group participants felt that if parents were unable to understand what was being reported to them by their children's teachers, they could not properly address any problems or difficulties that might arise. This was ultimately felt to disadvantage Somali children, as they would not be receiving the joined-up support that they need from parents and teachers in order to thrive at school. However, it was felt that the younger generation of parents were much more able to support their children in education, as one focus group participant's comments illustrate:

The generation that are coming up now have parents that are very aware of the education system, rather than how it was maybe the generation previous to that, parents now that are bringing up their kids now they're a lot more in tune with the education system, how things work and trying to make their kids succeed. They do value education quite highly. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

5.6 The Qualitative Experiences of Somalis in Education

The underachievement of black students in U.K. schools has been well documented, although a specific focus on Somali heritage students has been lacking, in spite of a growing gap between their achievement and that of the national average.⁶⁵ As indicated above, there was a very strong sense in both focus groups that many British-Somalis in London were doing very well at school and going on to higher education and professional employment.

However, concern was expressed by all of the research participants that compared to other ethnic minorities and the general population, a significant number of British-

⁶⁵ F. Demie, K. Lewis, and C. McLean, "Raising the achievement of Somali pupils: Challenges and school responses". London: Lambeth Research and Statistics Unit, 2007.

Somali young people were not achieving satisfactorily due to a number of disadvantages relating to the education system: for example, joining school late due to arriving as a refugee and having to catch up with schooling; lack of cultural awareness; and being designated as having special educational needs (SEN) based purely on their Somali background. Further, at the Roundtable Discussion held with stakeholders, it was suggested that housing problems, for example overcrowding, could contribute to problems with Somali children's education, since there are limited spaces to study.

5.6.1 Beginning School Late

Some focus group participants described their experiences of beginning their education later than their peers. For some this was felt to be a disadvantage, since they could never "catch up". Some schools provided additional language support, while others designated children as SEN. However, several people who had started school late reported successfully passing exams and going on to higher education, although the motivation came from them rather than from the support of the education system or their parents:

I came here as a 16-year-old, and straight away they put me in sixth form, but I saw it as an opportunity quite frankly, coming from Somalia ... I was thinking "Everything is free, are you kidding me?", and yet there were people who were failing. For me it was a no brainer, I had to learn English, I had to go through the system, there wasn't anything specifically, they didn't give me extra support or anything like. (Camden, man 18–35)

5.6.2 Lack of Cultural and Ethnic Awareness

Other focus group participants discussed how schools did not make a distinction between different ethnicities, and instead included everyone under the banner "Muslim" when stipulating what was acceptable dress:

The experience that I had in terms of uniform was that Somalis fell through the gap. At the school that I went to there were two options ... a kilt and a blazer or a *salwar khammeez*. It was a cultural thing rather than religious and we got penalised for not being either or. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

There were also examples of teaching staff failing to distinguish between the needs of British-Somali children who had been born in the United Kingdom and those who had recently arrived from Somalia:

I remember at school that I was taken out of class to join other Somali girls to talk about our experiences of war. I've never been there. English is my first language. I felt that I missed out on core English language lessons because I was assumed to be a new arrival from a war-torn place. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

It is worth noting that focus group participants were often talking about their experiences of the education system in the past; in some cases this was almost 20 years ago, and this was acknowledged in their accounts. However, stakeholders emphasised the ongoing difficulties and disadvantage faced by British-Somali children in school in Tower Hamlets and Camden in terms of underachievement, negative labelling of British-Somali boys and lack of cultural awareness.

5.6.3 Lack of Parental Support

An issue that arose in most of the stakeholder interviews—and one which was central to focus group discussions—was the importance of parental support for children at school. Focus group participants talked about their own generation's ability to provide support for their children, but also acknowledged that it was lacking for them when they were at school and that not all Somali parents in Camden and Tower Hamlets were currently in a position to provide this for their children. A focus group participant explained that now he was a trained teacher, he understood from an educational perspective how important it is for parents to be able to support their children in order for them to thrive at school:

We're the first generation of Somalis [who understand the education system] ... our parents didn't know that much English, so we were left to our own devices at times. I went on to do teaching so I can see now from the other side as a teacher, how it feel when the parents are not supporting you. (Camden, man 18–35)

Many of the research participants felt that British-Somali parents struggled to support their children through school because of a lack of understanding of how the system works combined with their own lack of education. This could be understood in terms of not understanding their own role in their children's education:

Parents felt like, sending you to education that's it ... the schools are supposed to do the education, home is about discipline and that's it. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

Other participants suggested that parents' own experiences of hardship in Somalia affected them in terms of being able to fully support their children at school:

[Parents] can't support you. And also the reason that they put so much pressure on us, you have to realise they come from a country where everything was hard, just to get you know, just to get that livelihood for that day, just to eat, it's a different ball game compared to in the U.K. (Camden, woman 18–35)

Focus groups respondents were aware of the shortcomings of their own parents in this area, and also expressed concern for those parents who were currently unable to support their children in school. It was suggested that British-Somali parents wanted their children to do well at school, but they did not always have the means to help them. As one teacher commented:

Somali parents in general, when I see their dedication, they want their children to do well, because they never had the opportunity; if they had more people who could explain to them the system properly, what the child should know, properly, when they go to parents' evening. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

In the focus groups, there was clearly a predisposition among British-Somali parents for their children to do well in school, but they were not always able to fully support them. Understanding how the education system works and the importance of engaging with the school through parents' evenings were highlighted as areas of concern for British-Somalis in relation to schooling and education. In addition, and almost at the other end of the spectrum, British-Somali parents' lack of understanding of the education system was also apparent in terms of having unrealistically high expectations of their children's educational attainment:

With Somali parents it's like, say for example a white kid got an A and was one mark away from an A*, they would be praised, their parents would be happy, whereas if a Somali got an A and was one mark away from an A*, they would be like, "Why didn't you get an A*?", instead of "Well done you got that," they have that type of mentality. (Camden, man 18–35)

5.7 Main Areas of Concern for Somalis Regarding Schooling and Education

The main area of concern raised by research participants regarding the education of British-Somali children was underachievement at school. Lack of role models and inspiration, lack of family support, family breakdown, living in overcrowded or poor housing conditions and being on low incomes were all considered to contribute to an overall picture of disadvantage regarding educational performance. Concerns about the exclusion of Somali boys from schools were also raised. These concerns can be understood in terms of perceptions of discrimination and these will be discussed below.

5.8 Experiences of Discrimination in the Education System

5.8.1 Underachievement

A number of stakeholders identified underachievement of British-Somali children as a significant problem. Again, concern was expressed about the available levels of parental support for children in school, particularly in households with absent fathers and lone mothers. Again, the issue of parents not understanding the system was highlighted as being significant in terms of achievement at school. However, although stakeholders and focus group participants felt that parents' reluctance to engage with the educational system was a key factor in children's underachievement, there were also examples where it was felt children were being held back by the schools.

There was a strong feeling within both focus groups that the mainstream education system failed to encourage British-Somali children to achieve, with young people being encouraged to take NVQs and BTEC qualifications rather than A-Levels, regardless of

relevant A*–C grade qualifications at GCSE.⁶⁶ Comments from focus group participants suggest that ethnicity is significant in determining study options and future life chances:

If somebody is coming from an ethnic minority, and the class teacher thinks that maybe he might not be able to do well, he will be pushed into do a vocational course, which is equivalent to a GCSE, but if you've got GCSE in science or a BTEC in science, I think it's fairly obvious which one is higher, in terms of getting further into further education, in college and going from there.

I think if you're an ethnic minority generally, the expectation is already pre-set, and [the teachers] already think that you are not going to do well. (Camden, man 18–35)

The respondent also suggested that income and social class predetermined the expectations and educational trajectory of children in schools. In this sense, young British-Somalis in school could be understood to be experiencing a “double jeopardy” due to being both “Somali” and financially disadvantaged:

Sometimes it's not just the teacher predicting what level you should go into, sometimes they use this thing called “Fischer Family projections”,⁶⁷ so if he's from a poor family background, there's automatically a system to predict what this kid is likely to get, if he's family is middle class they would expect to be A*, A, if the kid is from a poor background this system pulls it off. (Camden, man 18–35)

There were a number of accounts of how when at school, young people from ethnic minorities were encouraged to take up jobs in particular sectors, for example catering or entertainment, while their white counterparts were given a greater range of options. The excerpt below illustrates this:

The school I was in they gave us a test, it was basically a careers test ... every person who was from ethnic minority background either got dancer, musician,

⁶⁶ The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) are both academic qualifications that are awarded in the United Kingdom. The main difference is that BTECs are awarded for vocational subjects, and GCSEs are awarded for a large number of other subjects. NVQs, or National Vocational Qualifications, are work-based awards achieved through assessment and training. They are based on national occupational standards that relate to competencies in job roles. There are five levels of NVQ ranging from Level 1, which focuses on basic work activities, to Level 5 for senior management.

⁶⁷ The Fischer Family Trust provides all local authorities in England and Wales with data which estimate what a child might achieve at key stages in education based on past performance and the average achievements of children judged by the Trust to have similar characteristics. The government has urged schools and local authorities to use the system, although it has come under criticism from teachers (and schools) for forcing a target-driven approach to educational outcomes at the expense of optimising educational attainment among pupils (*TES*, 12 December 2008).

chef, and none of us were interested in that ... so then we would look at the next white kid who was in our class and it was like, oh, I got options of engineering, doctor. (Camden, man 18–35)

The men in the Camden focus group felt that young people from poorer backgrounds and ethnic minorities were encouraged to take up lower-level qualifications by teaching staff and the education system because of the emphasis on schools' performance in league tables:⁶⁸

The reason that schools put kids into BTEC is because they can pass them and that improves their league tables, so then they can justify that. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

They'll say this kid is unlikely to pass GCSE, so he can do BTEC and get something equivalent to a C. And overall in this school, most of our children have done BTEC if they are worried that they're not going to get GCSEs. (Camden, man 18–35)

This was felt to be highly detrimental to the future life chances of young people:

That's because they don't really care about the children's futures, what they are focusing on is the success rate of the school. Students are statistics nowadays. (Camden, man 18–35)

Statistics is one thing, but what they are actually doing is undermining the kids, in a nutshell. (Camden, man 18–35)

5.8.2 Exclusion from Education/Stereotyping

Exclusion from school means that a pupil is not allowed in school for disciplinary reasons. There are two types of exclusion: fixed period exclusion, which means that a pupil is not allowed in school for a specified number of days because they have breached the school's behaviour policy; and permanent exclusion, which means that the head teacher has decided that a pupil should not continue at the school because of a serious breach of the school's behaviour policy, and allowing the pupil to remain in school would harm the education or welfare of the pupil or others in the school.⁶⁹

Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) are a type of alternative education provision (AP). They are run by local authorities and provide education for children who have been excluded

⁶⁸ Secondary schools in England have performance targets they are expected to meet. Schools are deemed to be below target if fewer than 40 percent of pupils pass GCSEs including Maths and English, with grades between an A* and a C.

⁶⁹ See http://www.ace-ed.org.uk/advice-about-education-for-parents/exclusion_from_school (accessed 4 August 2014).

from mainstream education.⁷⁰ There has been long-standing concern about the correlation between school exclusions and race.⁷¹ Pupils from some minority ethnic groups in England—and black boys in particular—are disproportionately represented within school exclusion figures.⁷² A number of stakeholders involved in supplementary education and community organisations also raised concerns about the numbers of British-Somali boys being excluded from mainstream education, commenting that they were “stereotyped” as boisterous and problematic.

It was felt that young boys who are excluded from secondary education are then marginalised, at increased risk of crime and gang involvement that further negatively impact on their life chances. As one focus group participant commented:

Another key concern is being excluded. I think we do a lot of work around kids being excluded from secondary school, and when you look at the comparisons between primary and secondary there is a big difference, where kids rarely get excluded in primary school, but as soon as they get into secondary school there's a very high level of exclusion that needs to be tackled and looked into in terms of why young people are being excluded from schools and is there any support for them. (Camden, man 18–35)

Concern about British-Somali boys being admitted to pupil referral was also raised:

Disproportionately Somali young men are admitted to pupil referral. The main reasons are that Somali boys are disruptive and don't listen. Instead of investigating why there are behavioural issues or pupils aren't engaged they are sidelined. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

In Camden in 2011–2012, two out of 18 pupils who faced permanent school exclusions were Somali pupils. In January 2013, two out of 70 young people in PRUs in Camden were “Black Somali”.⁷³ In Tower Hamlets, at the time of the January 2013 Census, there were two Somali pupils enrolled at the PRU.⁷⁴ The relatively small number of Somalis in the PRUs suggests that the concerns may be focused on temporary rather than permanent exclusions.

Research participants commented that the education system needs attention, as resources are not always used to best effect and measures to improve relationships between teachers and pupils are crucial. Part of the problem was seen to be the lack of

⁷⁰ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-education-for-pupils-outside-mainstream-school/supporting-pages/alternative-provision> (accessed 6 August 2014).

⁷¹ D. Weekes (ed.) *Did They Get it Right? A Re-Examination of School Exclusions and Race Equality*. London: Runnymede. 2010.

⁷² D. Abbott (2003).

⁷³ FOI via Camden Council.

⁷⁴ FOI via Tower Hamlets Council.

British-Somali teachers and teaching assistants, particularly where other ethnic minorities had appropriate representation.⁷⁵

In Tower Hamlets' Race Equality Scheme there is a specific reference to the need to recruit more Somali teaching staff: "We need to continue to improve the representation of BME teachers locally, particularly for some smaller minority groups such as the Somali community who are under-represented and where take up of the training and recruitment initiatives is low".⁷⁶ In 2009, Tower Hamlets had 14 teachers of Black-Somali ethnicity out of a total of 2,358 teachers.

⁷⁵ There are no Somali specific data available nationally; see Department for Education 2010 report "BME Teachers in England".

⁷⁶ Tower Hamlets Race Equality Scheme 2009–12, p. 21.

Table 4. Ethnicity of secondary school staff in Tower Hamlets (January 2009)

Asian—Bangladeshi	457
Asian—Chinese	26
Asian—Indian	72
Asian—Other	38
Asian—Pakistani	34
Asian—Vietnamese	6
Black—African—Other	110
Black—Caribbean	140
Black—Other	60
Black—Somali	14
Mixed—Other	19
Mixed—White and Asian	16
Mixed—White and Black African	2
Mixed—White and Black Caribbean	13
Other	30
White—English	955
White—Irish	60
White—Other	226
White—Scottish	35
White—U.K.	21
White—Welsh	23
Grand total	2,358

Source: Tower Hamlets Race Equality Scheme 2009–12, p. 14.

However, one of the research participants in the women's focus group felt that focusing too much on a person's ethnicity could also be a drawback as this can compound and perpetuate negative stereotyping:

I think there is too much emphasis on us being Somali. Maybe it's because we act so insular ... we should see ourselves as part of a wider society. That's what I'm going to encourage my daughters [to do]. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

This view was echoed in a stakeholder interview, when an example was given of an exchange between a teacher and a young girl on her first day at school. On first meeting the child the teacher asked her, “Are you Somali?” When the child said “no”, the teacher then asked “Are you English?” Again the child said “no” and replied, “I am a human being”. The teacher reported this to the girl’s mother at a parents’ evening, but in a manner that her mother found disconcerting. In spite of her cultural awareness training, the teacher did not think she had made a mistake by pigeon-holing this child on her first day at school (and did not ask her name); instead, she recounted this as an amusing anecdote.

5.9 Initiatives Taken by Schools in Response to the Needs of Somali Pupils

“Learning Mentors” is part of the national Excellence in Cities initiative (EiC)⁷⁷ that was established in 1999. It involves a series of measures for improving inner city education. EiCs embody the following principles:

- high expectations of every individual;
- diversity in provision;
- networks and working collaboratively;
- extending opportunity.⁷⁸

The Learning Mentor strand of EiC is designed to support schools in raising standards through helping students to raise attainment, increase attendance and reduce the incidence of exclusions. A number of schools nationwide have adopted the learning mentoring and assessed that it has had a positive impact on individuals.

Learning Mentors need to be qualified (usually to Level 2 in support in schools) and work in primary, secondary and further education, and act as role models to students and provide encouragement and support. Learning Mentors support, motivate and challenge pupils who are underachieving and mainly work with children who experience “barriers to learning”, including poor literacy/numeracy skills, underperformance against potential, poor attendance, disaffection, danger of exclusion,

⁷⁷ The other elements of EiC include City Learning Centres, Specialist Schools, Gifted and Talented, Beacon Schools, Learning Support Units and Education Action Zones, at <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/excellence/policies/mentors>.

⁷⁸ See <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/LEARNINGMENTOMIG1089.pdf> (accessed 6 August 2014).

difficult family circumstances and low self-esteem. The role of a Learning Mentor includes:⁷⁹

- identifying, in association with school staff, pupils who would benefit from mentoring;
- liaising with parents and carers to promote a mutually respectful relationship with a school;
- helping pupils who are underperforming in their subjects on a one-to-one basis outside the classroom;
- implementing strategies and supporting pupils in confidence-building activities;
- listening to and helping pupils resolve a range of issues that are creating barriers to learning;
- drawing up agreed action plans with pupils;
- monitoring attendance of pupils, and working closely with teachers and other professionals, such as social workers, educational psychologists, education welfare officers and Connexions personal advisers.

Examples of people engaging in initiatives in schools from the focus group interviews include positive experiences of mentoring:

I actually became an academic mentor by the time I was in Year 10 and Year 11 I had learned the language, the school would ask the pupils who knew their English education was good, to mentor little kids who were younger than them that didn't know the language. I had two pupils who had recently come from Somalia, they felt more confident to ask for help, they used to go extra early. I think it's important to have that in place, the kids who are older can help the kids who are younger, but as somebody who wanted to learn more. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

The benefits of after-school clubs were also highlighted. After-school clubs in the traditional sense are largely recreation based, providing activities such as sports, arts and crafts after the school day is finished. They bridge the gap between the end of the school day and when many parents finish work. Among the British-Somali community, as well as other ethnic minority groups, there has been a long-standing tradition to enrol children in after-school clubs for the purposes of supported learning. Subjects will often include core subjects, English and Maths. Additionally, lessons in mother tongue, Arabic language and Quran study are also sought after. These sessions often take place at voluntary sector organisations during evenings and weekends. It is

⁷⁹ See <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/LEARNINGMENTOMIG1089.pdf> (accessed 6 August 2014).

not uncommon for British-Somali parents to travel long distances for sessions, as a female focus group participant explains:

So by the end of it, I ended up doing really well, because I was doing it myself, and I had no support from home, my parents didn't know anything, my elder brothers were just about surviving themselves, and I ended up getting, like, 14 GCSEs and they were all A to Cs, because I put that extra effort in, every after-school club, on the docklands I used to go, every weekend Saturday and Sunday I was at tuition. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

In addition to school-based support, there are a number of organisations that operate to support the British-Somali community in Camden and Tower Hamlets.

In Camden, the Somali Youth Development Resource Centre (SYDRC) targets Somali and other young people between the ages of 11 and 21 years who live, work or study in the borough. The SYDRC provides crime prevention work; group work; outreach to schools and home visits; networking and referrals to specialist organisations; consultation and training; and partnership working with other organisations.

The Camden Cultural Centre also delivers services to the local community and supports mainstream services by being more accessible. It provides English, Maths and SEN education for primary and secondary school children. It is open to non-Somali children to foster integration with the wider local community. Camden's British-Somali Community Centre also provides a range of activities, including mother tongue and cultural awareness classes as well as Maths and Science homework support and sporting activities.

In Tower Hamlets, the Black Women's Health and Family Support (BWHAFS) runs supplementary school sessions, for example English, Maths and mother tongue lessons.

Tower Hamlets Council also offers language classes and mother tongue in 90 venues across the borough.

However, another person noted:

The quality of the tuition centres vary. Just because they're sending their children to tuition centres, they don't know what their kids could be taught, or what level they're supposed to be taught at, some of them are being given a disservice. And that's something we should think of. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

5.10 Where British-Somalis Turn for Advice, Information and Support about Educational Issues

As with housing, employment and health, British-Somalis are most likely to speak to members of their community or community groups regarding education. As one focus group participant commented:

In the Somali community everybody knows each other; everybody talks to each other, like they are your own family. They might not be your aunty but you call them aunty and cousins. (Camden, woman 18–35)

Significantly, a very high number of British-Somali children are engaged in private tuition⁸⁰ and supplementary education in both Camden and Tower Hamlets, and there are several community-based and other organisations which provide this. It is estimated that there are approximately between 3,000 and 5,000 supplementary schools in the United Kingdom.⁸¹ As one research participant commented:

I teach in a primary school down the road, my smartest children are the Somali ones, not because they learn at home, it's because I know every single Somali one ... I know goes to tuition and they get that extra support. And by the time they come to school they are higher than the other ones. (Tower Hamlets, woman 18–35)

5.11 Summary

The importance of education was emphasised by all of the people who participated in the research. As one stakeholder commented, “Education is the biggest issue. Kids aren’t supported in the education system and it’s the only way for them to get anywhere, it’s the only thing that can change people’s lives”.

Research participants expressed concerns about underachievement at school, particularly in terms of the way that British-Somali boys were treated by mainstream education, giving examples of boys being stigmatised as “bad”, or referred to special education units if teachers cannot cope with “boisterous behaviour”.

Further difficulties regarding education included parents’ lack of understanding of the education system and being unable to properly support their children, often since parents may not have been educated themselves. It was felt by stakeholders that parents should be better supported to be involved in their children’s education, and that this could mitigate future problems such as exclusion.

A child interpreting on behalf of parents was also highlighted as a problem. It should be noted that high numbers of Somali children now engage with supplementary education, which has improved achievement levels; however, underachievement remains a problem. It should be noted that the Ocean Somali Community Association (OSCA) has formed a Somali School Governors Forum. The Somali School Governors Forum allows members to support each other, share concerns, and discuss issues in relation to children’s attainment and school matters.

⁸⁰ Adfam, “Becoming visible: the Somali community and substance use in London”, 2009.

⁸¹ See <http://www.supplementaryeducation.org.uk/supplementary-education-the-nrc/> (accessed 6 August 2014)