

## **Somali Student Developmental Skills, Supports, and Aspirations, given Number of Somali Students in a District**

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April 2020

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the  
American Educational Research Association.

Citation:

Chávez, C., Rodriguez, M.C., Palma, J. & Smith, M. (2020, April). *Somali student development skills, supports, and aspirations, given number of Somali students in a district* [Paper presentation]. American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting.  
<https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/194886>

# **Somali Student Developmental Skills, Supports, and Aspirations, given Number of Somali Students in a District**

## **Background**

Somalia, known as “God’s Land,” is located on the Horn of Africa. After independence in 1960, the Somali government’s goal was to unite the many Somali clans into one country. Following decades of traumatic events, unstable governments, regional wars, drought, and a recent civil war (Roble, 2008), the first wave of Somali families fled as political refugees. A second wave escaped to refugee camps across the region due to civil war violence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016).

Many refugees and asylees relocated to the United States. The Somali population in the United States was 145,185 in 2015 (nearly doubled from 2005), and in Minnesota was 56,676 (nearly tripled since 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Minnesota is home to the largest Somali community in the United States.

The positive influence of the Somali community is apparent in many ways in Minnesota. In 2016, Ilhan Omar was elected to the MN House of Representatives, the first Somali-American legislator in the United States (Xaykaothao, 2016). The Somali community has opened hundreds of businesses across MN (Roble, 2008), charter schools (Boarini, 2012), non-profit organizations (e.g., Ka Joog), mosques and other religious, cultural, and educational centers (see Salatomatic, 2017).

The Minnesota Department of Education (2016a) reports 21,287 students who speak Somali at home. Somali youth report aspirations to pursue higher education, despite challenges. MN Somali youth report being treated unfairly, criminalized, and feeling the effects of Islamophobia following the 9/11 terrorist attack (Bigalow, 2010). Unfortunately, there have been widely publicized events such as the attack at a St. Cloud mall, where a young Somali man injured 10 people before being killed by an off-duty police officer that feed negative stereotypes of Somali men (Hauslohner & Harwell, 2016). In addition, national reports on ISIS recruitment of Minnesota Somali men have contributed to negative impressions of Somali youth (see Ibrahim, 2016, reflections from a MN Somali reporter).

## **Perspectives**

Because of local and national news regarding Somali youth in Minnesota, and a general negative climate regarding immigrants in the US, Somali youth receive continuous messages regarding their at-risk status. This is in strong opposition to the work of educators and youth development specialists, who focus on the positive aspects of youth, including an asset orientation to promote optimal outcomes. We take a positive youth development (PYD) perspective, stemming from positive psychology and community-based youth development.

Minnesota, through partnership with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2017) and the American Institutes for Research (AIR, 2017) has developed a set of social and emotional learning competencies for K-12 schools (MDE, 2018). By supporting the social and emotional learning of all youth, we hope to help all students secure success in school, college, and careers. The development of social emotional learning skills has been associated with positive academic outcomes. Complex associations between personal,

academic, and social conditions are influenced by social structures in the ecology of youth development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These social structures include self, family, schools, and communities. When students are supported in multiple relationships, contexts, and environments, their development is positively influenced. Rather than a focus on what is wrong with youth, PYD is an asset-oriented perspective (Masten, 2014; Roehlkepartain, 2015). A number of key principles from the frameworks of PYD are common and drive our work to examine developmental skills and supports of Somali youth, including: (a) youth have inherent capacity and are key actors in their own positive development; (b) positive development is enabled through multiple relationships, contexts, and environments; (c) all youth benefit from positive opportunities; and (d) community is a critical delivery system (Benson et al., 2006). Under the theoretical perspectives of PYD, we propose two following questions:

1. What is the level of developmental skills and supports for Somali students and how do they compare with their non-Somali peers?
2. Are developmental skills and supports associated with school performance or educational aspirations of Somali youth?

### **Methods & Data Source**

The data come from the 2016 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS), designed by the Departments of Education, Health, Human Services, and Public Safety, and administered anonymously and triennially to 5th, 8th, 9th, and 11th grade public school students. The survey purpose is to monitor important trends in students' habits, experiences, and beliefs about positive and risky behaviors (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016b). The MSS Interagency Team provided the researchers full access to the survey database for secondary data analyses, as part of a larger program of research investigating the ecologies of positive youth development, with review by their institutional review board.

### **Participants**

In total, 168,733 Minnesota students in grades 5, 8, 9, and 11 responded to the 2016 MSS. Among them are 3619 students who identify as Somali (2.1%), 5.1% American Indian, 3.5% Asian (not Hmong), 2.8% Hmong, 5.2% Black (not Somali), 3.4% multi-racial, 9.4% Latino (including those of any other race who identified as Latino), and 67.2% White; including 49.5% female students.

### **Measures**

Based on models of developmental skills and supports from the Developmental Asset Profile (Search Institute, 2013), several measures were constructed and psychometrically evaluated based on MSS items. The measures of skills include Commitment to Learning (CtL), Positive Identity (PI), Social Competence (SC); measures of supports include Empowerment (Emp), Family/Community Support (FCS), and Teacher/School Support (TSS).

Validity evidence for these measures come from two sources that include content-related evidence (Benson et al. 2006 and Search Institute (2013), and internal structure or construct-related evidence (MSS Technical Report, Rodriguez 2017). To provide construct-related evidence, each measure was evaluated via confirmatory factor analyses [CFA] done in Mplus v7

(Muthen & Muthen, 2012) and differential item functioning analyses by race & ethnicity, assigned sex at birth, and grade done in Winstep v 3.92 (Linacre, 2016). We used common guidelines for assessing model fit of these measures, which include adequate fit indices where Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA) is below .10, comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) are greater than .90 (Brown, 2015; Kline, 2011), and standardized factor loadings are .40 or higher (Brown, 2015).

These measures were scored using the partial credit Rasch model in Winsteps 3.92 (Linacre, 2016). Given the ordinal nature of the response scales of each item, the partial credit Rasch model allows each item to have its own structure to place persons and items onto the same scale.

A single factor CFA was fit to the data for three support measures (FCS, TSS, and Emp). The model fit indices for these measures of developmental support were estimated. Five items were used for FCS, RMSEA is .13, CFI is .98, TLI is .95; six items were used for TSS, RMSEA is .13, CFI is .98, TLI is .95; and six items were used for Emp, RMSEA is .227, CFI is .91, and TLI is .854. These fit indices indicate overall adequate fit for the measures and support the use of these items as indicators of developmental support at the group level, which is the intended use of the measures.

Similarly, a single factor CFA was fit to the data for the three development skills measures (CtL, SC, and PI). Model fit indices were estimated for the three developmental skills. Six items were used for CtL, RMSEA is .108, CFI is .945, TLI is .909; eight items were used for SC, RMSEA is .126, CFI is .941, TLI is .917; six items were used for PI, RSMEA is .167, CFI is .956, TLI is .926.

The scale for each measure was centered at 10, which corresponds to the neutral position or the middle of the response scale on the items. Scores above 10 are positive, where students report that the characteristic is more like them than not, and scores below 10 are negative or where students report that the characteristic is less like them.

## **Analysis**

Scores are compared to the neutral point on each measure (score of 10) across Somali and non-Somali students. To explain variation in school grades and post-high school aspirations (e.g., plans to go to college), multilevel regressions (HLM 7.01; Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2013) were completed to account for variation due to district enrollment of Somali students. School districts were identified as having low Somali-enrollment (less than 350 Somali students in the district) or high Somali-enrollment (more than 350 Somali students). About 57% of Somali students who participated in the MSS are in 13 school districts with 350 Somali students or more. The remaining 43% are in 165 school districts with fewer than 350 Somali students. All variables were group-mean centered at level-1, so means were added back to the intercept model at level-2. Models were built sequentially, including student demographics first, then adding developmental skills and supports, and finally the Somali student district enrollment indicator (DEnroll: 1=low Somali enrollment, 0=high Somali enrollment).

## Results

### Somali Student Characteristics

In total, 3619 student participants identified as Somali. Overall, 51% were male, 75% received free/reduced-price lunch, and 12% received special education services. As for post-high school plans, 79% planned to go to two-year or four-year college. Although we were not able to explore associations with family composition, we note that 90% of Somali youth reported to live with at least one biological parent; 56% reported to live with both biological parents; 42% lived without their biological father. About 64% of the Somali students in the sample attended schools in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

### Levels of Developmental Skills & Supports

MN Somali youth reported very high levels of developmental skills and supports (see Table 1). The mean score of each measure was above 10 (the neutral point) for Somali and non-Somali students. Somali students reported exceptionally high levels of CtL ( $M = 12.7$ , 1.7  $SD$ s above 10), PI ( $M = 11.7$ , 0.9  $SD$  above 10), SC ( $M = 11.7$ , 1.0  $SD$  above 10), Emp ( $M = 12.8$ , 1.5  $SD$ s above 10), FCS ( $M = 12.7$ , 1.4  $SD$ s above 10), and TSS ( $M = 12.3$ , 1.0  $SD$  above 10). Somali youth reported high levels of developmental skills and supports compared to all other racial/ethnic communities except for TSS for Asian students (see Table 2). Somali students also reported slightly lower school grades.

**Table 1**  
*Developmental Skills and Supports for Somali and Non-Somali Students*

<i>Measure</i>	Non-Somali students ( $n = 151212$ )		Somali students ( $n = 3322$ )		<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Commitment to Learning	12.23	1.55	12.70	1.79	0.30
Positive Identity	11.19	1.85	11.73	2.19	0.29
Social Competence	11.39	1.63	11.65	2.04	0.16
Empowerment	12.51	1.91	12.84	2.09	0.17
Family/Community Support	12.39	1.87	12.66	2.13	0.14
Teacher/School Support	12.07	2.31	12.28	2.67	0.09
Grades	3.19	0.92	2.99	0.96	-0.22

*Note:*  $d$  = standardized mean difference between Somali and non-Somali students. All differences significant at  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**

*Developmental Skills and Supports by Race/Ethnicity in Standardized Mean Difference (d) from State Averages*

	CtL	PI	SC	Emp	FCS	TSS	Grades
Am Indian	-0.23	-0.19	-0.27	-0.28	-0.26	-0.21	-0.40
Asian	0.21	-0.07	0.00	-0.07	-0.15	0.11	0.25
Black	-0.02	0.07	-0.12	-0.10	-0.09	-0.14	-0.37
White	0.02	0.04	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.04	0.12
Multiple	-0.12	-0.13	-0.12	-0.15	-0.18	-0.22	-0.07
Latino	-0.11	-0.13	-0.21	-0.19	-0.19	-0.09	-0.43
<b>Somali</b>	<b>0.30</b>	<b>0.30</b>	<b>0.17</b>	<b>0.18</b>	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>-0.19</b>
Hmong	0.08	-0.21	-0.22	-0.34	-0.45	-0.01	-0.10

### Exploring Educational Aspirations

Somali secondary school students reported high educational aspirations (as did most students in MN), where 8% planned to go to a two-year college and 72% planned to go to a four-year college. Only 2% reported that they do not plan to graduate from high school (compared to less than 1% of all other students). See Table 3 for other post-high school plans.

To explain variation in college-level aspirations for Somali students, a logistic multilevel regression was estimated, examining the role of developmental skills and supports. The major significant factors are briefly described here (see Table 4). At the student level, we found:

- CtL had a positive association with college-plans for students in smaller schools with fewer Somali students.
- TSS had a negative association with college-plans for students in smaller schools with fewer Somali students.
- The average level of CtL and average school grades for Somali students in a school district had positive associations with the proportion of Somali students in the district having college-plans.
- There were no gender differences for Somali student college-plans.

**Table 3***Post-High School Plans of Somali Secondary School Students*

Plans:	N	%
I don't plan to graduate from high school	47	2.0
Get my GED	62	2.6
Go to a two-year community or technical college	196	8.4
Go to a four-year college or university	1698	72.3
Get a license or certificate in a career field	82	3.5
Attend an apprenticeship program	4	0.2
Join the military	54	2.3
Work at a job	107	4.6
Other	97	4.1
Total	2347	100.0

**Table 4**  
*Multilevel Logistic Regression Results for College-Plans*

Fixed Effect	Coefficient	<i>p</i> -value	Odds ratio
For INTRCPT1, $\beta_0$			
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{00}$	1.30	<.001	3.68
DEnroll, $\gamma_{01}$	-0.21	.334	0.81
CTL_MEAN, $\gamma_{02}$	0.54	.014	1.71
PI_MEAN, $\gamma_{03}$	0.05	.815	1.05
SC_MEAN, $\gamma_{04}$	-0.21	.435	0.81
EM_MEAN, $\gamma_{05}$	0.28	.178	1.32
FCS_MEAN, $\gamma_{06}$	0.20	.288	1.22
TSS_MEAN, $\gamma_{07}$	-0.27	.053	0.76
GRADES_M, $\gamma_{08}$	0.55	.038	1.74
SEX, $\gamma_{09}$	0.69	.269	2.00
For Y1 slope, $\beta_1$			
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{10}$	0.75	<.001	2.12
DEnroll, $\gamma_{11}$	-0.29	.334	0.75
For CTL slope, $\beta_2$			
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{20}$	0.02	.784	1.02
DEnroll, $\gamma_{21}$	0.35	.002	1.42
For PI slope, $\beta_3$			
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{30}$	0.14	.138	1.15
DEnroll, $\gamma_{31}$	-0.11	.454	0.90
For SC slope, $\beta_4$			
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{40}$	0.09	.424	1.09
DEnroll, $\gamma_{41}$	-0.13	.395	0.88
For EM slope, $\beta_5$			
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{50}$	0.00	.993	1.00
DEnroll, $\gamma_{51}$	0.07	.572	1.07
For FCS slope, $\beta_6$			
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{60}$	-0.07	.258	0.93
DEnroll, $\gamma_{61}$	0.15	.189	1.16
For TSS slope, $\beta_7$			
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{70}$	0.02	.699	1.02
DEnroll, $\gamma_{71}$	-0.16	.045	0.85
For GRADES slope, $\beta_8$			
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{80}$	0.11	.253	1.11
DEnroll, $\gamma_{81}$	0.23	.116	1.26

*Note.* DEnroll is district enrollment indicator: 1=low Somali enrollment, 0=high Somali enrollment.



## Explaining Variation in School Grades

Students reported the school grades they typically receive. About 30% Somali students received mostly As, 43% mostly Bs, 18% mostly Cs, and 7% mostly Ds or lower. Letter grades were converted to a 4.0 numeric scale. Somali students reported slightly lower school grades ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ) than non-Somali students ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ). Females reported slightly higher grades (0.3  $SD$ s higher) than male students, but this difference was the same among Somali and non-Somali students.

To explain variation in school grades for Somali students, a multilevel regression was estimated, examining the role of developmental skills and supports. The effects of PI and SC were found to vary significantly between school districts, although neither were significant on average at the student level (indicating that perhaps in some districts these were significant factors). The significant factors are briefly described here (and Table 5):

- Female students reported slightly higher grades than males, except for the districts with the highest Somali student enrollment (over 1000), where there was no gender difference.
- Students with higher CtL reported higher school grades.
- Districts with higher levels of CtL and SC among Somali students also had Somali students with higher school grades on average.
- There was no main effect on school grades for districts with fewer Somali students.

**Table 5**  
*Multilevel Regression Results for School Grades*

Fixed effect	Coefficient	Standard error	<i>t</i> -ratio	Approx. <i>d.f.</i>	<i>p</i> -value
For INTRCPT1, $\beta_0$					
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{00}$	2.84	0.04	70.741	138	<.001
DEnroll, $\gamma_{01}$	-0.03	0.13	-0.243	138	.808
CTL_MEAN, $\gamma_{02}$	0.14	0.06	2.47	138	.015
PI_MEAN, $\gamma_{03}$	-0.05	0.08	-0.684	138	.495
SC_MEAN, $\gamma_{04}$	0.19	0.08	2.412	138	.017
EM_MEAN, $\gamma_{05}$	0.02	0.07	0.276	138	.783
FCS_MEAN, $\gamma_{06}$	-0.05	0.06	-0.842	138	.401
TSS_MEAN, $\gamma_{07}$	0.01	0.04	0.174	138	.862
SEX, $\gamma_{08}$	-0.05	0.21	-0.231	138	.818
For Y1 slope, $\beta_1$					
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{10}$	0.24	0.04	5.453	1781	<.001
DEnroll, $\gamma_{11}$	-0.26	0.10	-2.544	1781	.011
For CTL slope, $\beta_2$					
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{20}$	0.12	0.02	7.79	1781	<.001
DEnroll, $\gamma_{21}$	-0.02	0.03	-0.481	1781	.631
For PI slope, $\beta_3$					
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{30}$	0.01	0.02	0.583	145	.561
DEnroll, $\gamma_{31}$	-0.02	0.07	-0.303	145	.762
For SC slope, $\beta_4$					
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{40}$	0.00	0.02	0.176	145	.861
DEnroll, $\gamma_{41}$	0.04	0.07	0.502	145	.617
For EM slope, $\beta_5$					
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{50}$	0.02	0.02	0.971	1781	.332
DEnroll, $\gamma_{51}$	0.05	0.04	1.275	1781	.203
For FCS slope, $\beta_6$					
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{60}$	0.01	0.01	0.427	1781	.669
DEnroll, $\gamma_{61}$	-0.01	0.03	-0.35	1781	.726
For TSS slope, $\beta_7$					
INTRCPT2, $\gamma_{70}$	0.00	0.01	0.365	1781	.715
DEnroll, $\gamma_{71}$	0.03	0.02	1.198	1781	.231

*Note.* DEnroll is district enrollment indicator: 1=low Somali enrollment, 0=high Somali enrollment.

## Discussion

As we continue to learn about the experiences and aspirations of Somali youth in Minnesota and across the country, it is critical to give presence to their voice. This includes recognizing the positive characteristics and outcomes as well as the challenges. The volumes of research and practice in the positive psychology and positive youth development arenas consistently illustrate the developmental power in taking a positive or asset-oriented approach.

We see important indicators of developmental skills and supports that are strongly associated with educational outcomes and aspirations in a large sample of Somali youth. Not only are the developmental skills very high among Somali youth but supports are present and acknowledged among these youth. These are important levers to secure the success of these youth. The role of developmental relationships is particularly relevant and notable, which is currently recognized as the necessary roots for youth success (Li & Julian, 2012; Roehlkepartain et al., 2017), in addition to malleable factors in school and after-school programming.

The implications for practice and policy are becoming clear. Although we have only partial evidence, primarily in CtL, the promotion and development of social and emotional skills play an important role in supporting Somali youth achievement. Somali students identify strongly with doing well in school and find value in learning, which may have an impact on their educational outcomes. It is important to continue to foster this commitment to learning and support Somali students in a variety of ways.

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