

Barriers to School-Home Cooperation: The Experiences of Somali Parents in Norwegian Primary Schools



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Abstract

This study examines Somali parents' experiences with school-home cooperation in Norwegian primary schools, highlighting systemic barriers to meaningful participation. Through focus group interviews, the research reveals how language challenges, cultural misunderstandings, and exclusion from decision-making structures hinder effective collaboration. Despite demonstrating a strong commitment to their children's education through teacher engagement, parents report feeling marginalized in school governance and distrustful of unilateral actions like child welfare referrals.

The findings underscore a critical gap between Norway's democratic ideals of school participation and the reality of tokenistic inclusion experienced by immigrant families. The study emphasizes the need for schools to move beyond superficial consultation toward genuine power-sharing, proposing concrete strategies including bilingual mediation, cultural competency training for staff, and formal roles for parents in governance. These measures would align educational practice with policy mandates while fostering equitable partnerships with diverse families.

Keywords: Somali immigrant parents, school-home cooperation, parental involvement, immigrant education, Norwegian schools.

1. Introduction

Norway's education system has undergone significant transformations in recent decades due to increasing demographic diversity. While this diversity enriches the educational landscape, it also presents challenges for fostering effective school-home cooperation. Research consistently demonstrates that strong collaboration between schools and parents enhances students' academic achievement, social development, and overall well-being (Drugli & Nordahl, 2016; Harris & Goodall, 2008). However, immigrant parents often face systemic barriers including language differences, cultural misunderstandings, and limited inclusion in decision-making processes that hinder meaningful engagement (Holter, 2016; Friberg & Bjørnset, 2019).

The Somali community represents one of Norway's largest non-European immigrant groups. Most Somali families arrived as refugees following the protracted civil war in their homeland, with residence typically granted on humanitarian grounds or through family reunification. Current statistics reveal a significant and growing Somali presence in Norway: as of 2024, there are approximately 27,665 Somali-born individuals and 15,964 Norwegian-born children with Somali parents, totaling 43,629 people of Somali background (SSB, 2024). This represents about 0.79% of Norway's total population. Of particular relevance to education, nearly half (47%) of Norwegian-born children with Somali parents were between 6 and 15 years old in 2021, equating to about 9,492 children of primary school age (SSB, 2021). When combined with immigrant children, the total number of Somali children in Norwegian primary schools is estimated between 15,000 and 20,000.

Despite facing socioeconomic challenges, including lower employment rates compared to the national average, the Norwegian-born children of Somali immigrants are demonstrating remarkable educational progress.

Statistics show 70% of Norwegian-born children with immigrant backgrounds are under 18, with growing numbers pursuing higher education - a trajectory that often surpasses their parents' educational attainment (SSB, 2024). This upward mobility reflects Somali families' strong educational aspirations, even as they navigate systemic barriers in their engagement with schools.

Norwegian schools bear a dual responsibility that extends beyond academic instruction to include fostering democratic participation, citizenship, and inclusion. These principles are enshrined in the Education Act, which explicitly mandates schools to collaborate with parents in supporting students' overall development (Ministry of Research and Education, 2003). Recent amendments to the Act, particularly Sections 10-3 and 10-8, emphasize transparency, shared responsibility, and local adaptation to ensure effective parental involvement (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024). This legislative framework positions schools as crucial arenas for democratic engagement, where all families - regardless of background - should feel empowered to contribute to their children's education and participate in school communities.

However, research suggests immigrant parents frequently experience exclusion from meaningful participation in school governance. Structural barriers including limited language proficiency, unfamiliarity with institutional norms, and cultural differences often prevent full engagement in decision-making processes (Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004; Strand & Granlund, 2014). For Somali parents specifically, these challenges are compounded by cultural mismatches in educational expectations, particularly regarding pedagogical approaches like "learning through play" that some view as insufficiently rigorous (Bouakaz, 2007; Vinje, 2016). International studies from Sweden, Denmark, and the UK reveal parallel experiences, where Somali parents report insufficient school

support, cultural clashes, and systemic barriers that limit their involvement (Bouakaz, 2007; Gitz-Johansen, 2004; Abdi, 2022).

This study examines Somali parents' experiences with school-home cooperation in Norwegian primary schools through a qualitative investigation of their reflections, challenges, and perceptions. We address two central questions: (1) To what extent do Somali parents perceive their voices as heard and valued in school-home cooperation? (2) What systemic barriers or enabling factors affect their ability to participate actively?

Our findings reveal that while Somali parents demonstrate strong commitment to their children's education through direct engagement with teachers, they experience systemic exclusion from decision-making processes and express significant dissatisfaction with pedagogical approaches they perceive as inadequate. These experiences create feelings of powerlessness and distrust that ultimately undermine the democratic ideals of school-home cooperation.

By centering Somali parents' perspectives, this study contributes to broader discussions about creating more equitable and inclusive school-home relationships in diverse educational settings. The insights generated have important implications for developing culturally responsive strategies that can bridge gaps between schools and immigrant families while fulfilling schools' democratic mission.

Methods

Given the study's focus on subjective experiences of parents, a qualitative approach was essential (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Among various qualitative methods, focus group interviews were selected due to their ability to facilitate dynamic and interactive discussions. In Somali culture, oral communication and collective dialogue are predominant, making focus groups particularly effective in capturing participants' authentic

reflections (Bouakaz, 2007). This method also allowed participants to engage with and reflect on the perspectives of others, enriching the data collected. Phenomenology complemented this interpretive lens by focusing on the lived experiences of Somali parents. Phenomenology seeks to identify shared meanings and commonalities in individual experiences to reveal the essence of specific phenomena (van Manen, 1990). This approach enabled the study to highlight patterns and themes in how Somali parents engage with schools, uncovering both systemic and cultural factors influencing school-home cooperation.

The study included seven Somali parents (four mothers and three fathers) with children in grades 5 to 7. These parents had lived in Norway for several years and had direct experience with the Norwegian school system. Recruitment was conducted with the assistance of the Somali Women's Association in Hordaland, ensuring participants met the study's criteria. Conducting interviews in Somali minimized language barriers, allowing participants to express themselves confidently in a culturally familiar environment.

The interviews were supported by both note-taking and audio recordings to ensure comprehensive data collection. Participants were fully informed about these methods and provided written consent. This dual approach enabled us to capture the participants' exact words while also noting contextual and non-verbal cues, ensuring a thorough and accurate interpretation of the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

A structured interview guide was developed to explore the participants' experiences comprehensively. Follow-up questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their responses, providing deeper insights into their perspectives.

All interviews were conducted in Somali by a bilingual researcher fluent in both Somali and Norwegian. Audio recordings were first transcribed verbatim in Somali and then translated into Norwegian by two independent translators to ensure accuracy. Any discrepancies between translations were carefully reviewed and reconciled through consensus discussions. This rigorous translation process preserved important linguistic nuances and cultural meanings while maintaining the integrity of participants' original statements. Following Geertz's (1973) concept of thick description, we contextualized these translated narratives within their broader social and cultural frameworks. This approach allowed us to capture the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences while remaining faithful to their original meanings.

The analysis proceeded with open coding, where key themes and concepts were identified and iteratively refined (Saldana, 2016). This process resulted in three main categories: *system understanding*, *powerlessness*, and *communication*. These categories provided a structured framework to analyze how Somali parents navigate systemic expectations, interact with power structures in schools, and communicate with educational institutions.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), now known as Sikt, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines and data protection regulations. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, their rights, and the confidentiality measures in place. Informed consent included permission for recording interviews and assurances of voluntary participation. Efforts were made to create a supportive environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences openly and honestly (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2. Somali Parents in Norwegian School-Home Research

School-home cooperation is essential for fostering students' academic success, motivation, and well-being (Bæck, 2018). In Norway, where education policy emphasizes inclusion and democratic participation, this collaboration is seen as a key mechanism for promoting civic engagement and social cohesion (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2021). Research highlights that effective cooperation between schools and parents enhances learning outcomes, strengthens social integration, and builds a supportive school environment (Epstein, 2011).

However, challenges persist, especially for migrant families, who often face systemic barriers such as language difficulties, limited familiarity with the education system, and differing cultural expectations around parental roles (Bendixsen, 2020; Handulle, 2021a). Somali parents navigate these complexities while maintaining high aspirations for their children's education. Yet, cultural differences in educational values and pedagogical practices can create misunderstandings and hinder meaningful engagement (Friberg & Bjørnseth, 2019).

There remains a limited body of research on school-home cooperation specifically involving Somali parents in Norway, which makes it challenging to fully understand their perspectives within this national context. However, both Norwegian and international studies provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities Somali parents encounter in their engagement with schools. These studies highlight recurring barriers, such as language difficulties, cultural differences, and limited knowledge of the local education system (Vinje, 2016; Bouakaz, 2007; Gitz-Johansen, 2004). They also reveal Somali parents' strong aspirations for their children's education and their willingness to engage when schools foster inclusive and supportive environments (Ahmed, 2013; Abdi, 2022).

Vinje (2016) offers a complementary perspective from Norway, finding that Somali parents often struggle with limited knowledge of the Norwegian school system. Language difficulties further compound these challenges, as parents may not fully understand the processes or expectations placed upon them. Nevertheless, Vinje highlights that Somali parents maintain high educational aspirations for their children and express a need for targeted support to effectively contribute to their children's learning.

From an international perspective, Bouakaz (2007) explores Somali parents' experiences in Sweden, revealing how language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and insufficient efforts from schools prevent Somali parents from actively participating in their children's education. Bouakaz advocates for measures such as trust-building and recognition of parents' unique cultural perspectives as strategies to enhance engagement.

Similarly, Gitz-Johansen (2004) investigates the experiences of Somali parents in Denmark, where differing expectations regarding parental roles and school responsibilities often lead to misunderstandings. The study shows how these cultural differences erode trust between schools and parents, ultimately complicating cooperation. Gitz-Johansen emphasizes the need for schools to bridge this cultural gap to foster stronger, more collaborative relationships.

The study *Initiating a Different Story* (2010) provides insights from South Africa, highlighting how Somali parents' lack of familiarity with the local education system can lead to misinterpretations of their engagement. Teachers may wrongly assume a lack of interest or effort on the parents' part, when, in reality, socio-cultural differences and systemic barriers hinder effective cooperation.

In the UK, Abdi (2022) explores the experiences of Somali mothers navigating Western-dominated school environments in London. The study finds that Somali mothers draw on their cultural identity, resilience, and traditions to address the challenges they face. Abdi further argues that Somali cultural ideals of leadership and parenting can offer alternative approaches to improving parental engagement in schools.

New studies further expand this understanding. Ahmed (2013) highlights the role of mother tongue teachers in Sweden as cultural mediators, bridging the gap between Somali parents and schools. Meanwhile, Daniels (2014), in a South African context, shows how socio-linguistic obstacles prevent Somali parents from contributing effectively to their children's education. In the United States, Muhumed (2018) underscores the role of racialization and cultural clashes as barriers to effective school-home cooperation. He calls for better recognition of Somali community values and parenting styles to improve collaboration.

The shared challenges faced by Somali parents in various educational contexts provide a foundation for understanding how systemic barriers and cultural dynamics impact school-home cooperation. Transitioning from these global perspectives, the focus now shifts to the critical role school-home cooperation plays in fostering child development, social capital, and democratic participation. By examining theoretical frameworks like Arnstein's Ladder of Participation and Nordahl's levels of interaction, we can better understand the degrees of parental engagement and their implications for inclusivity and shared decision-making in education.

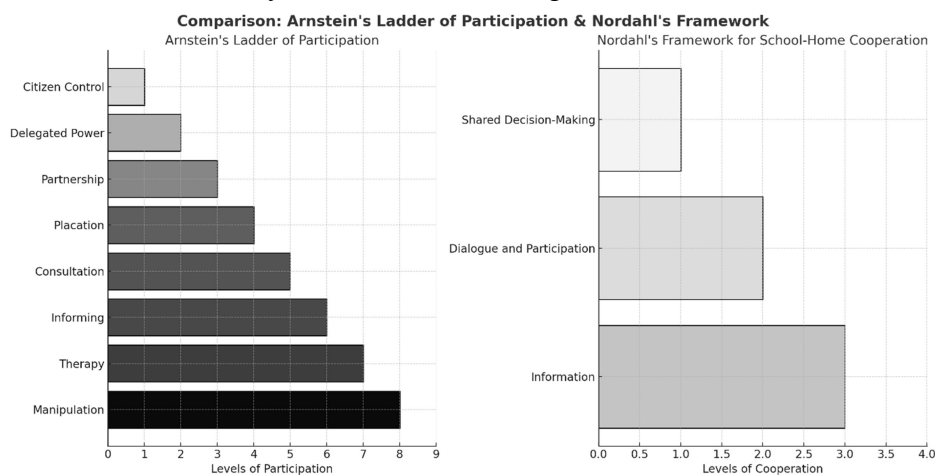
2.1 Democratic Foundations of School-Family Collaboration

School-home cooperation plays a crucial role in fostering democracy by encouraging participatory decision-making and shared responsibility

between schools and parents. When parents are actively engaged, they become stakeholders in the educational process, reflecting principles of inclusivity and collective engagement (Epstein, 2011). This partnership empowers parents to influence school policies and practices, enhancing accountability within the educational system (Lareau, 2011).

However, achieving democratic cooperation requires more than superficial involvement. Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation provides a conceptual framework to understand the varying levels of engagement between stakeholders. The ladder is divided into eight rungs, representing different degrees of citizen participation. These range from manipulation and therapy—non-participatory stages where stakeholders are simply informed or influenced—up to consultation and placation, which represent tokenism, where participants may be heard but lack decision-making power. At the top levels, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control, stakeholders actively participate in decision-making, sharing authority and responsibility.

Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation and Nordahl's Framework for School-Home Cooperation.



*Adapted and illustrated by Abdullahi Elmi Ibrahim & Ragnhild Ihle,
based on Arnstein (1969) and Nordahl (2007)*

In the context of school-home cooperation, Nordahl (2007) builds on this framework by outlining three levels of interaction: information, dialogue and participation, and shared decision-making. The first two levels often align with Arnstein's concept of tokenism. At the information level, schools provide parents with updates on their children's progress, but this interaction is largely one-directional. At the dialogue and participation level, parents are consulted and allowed to provide input, but their influence remains limited. True democratic participation occurs at the level of shared decision-making, where schools and parents collaborate as equal partners in shaping educational outcomes.

Despite its theoretical importance, shared decision-making is rarely achieved, particularly in multicultural contexts. For immigrant families, systemic barriers such as language challenges, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with institutional norms often hinder their ability to ascend Arnstein's ladder and engage in meaningful ways (Bæck, 2018; Harris & Goodall, 2008). These barriers leave many immigrant parents, including Somali families, stuck at the tokenistic levels of participation, where they are informed or consulted but lack genuine influence.

Furthermore, Bourdieu's (1977) theory of habitus and cultural capital sheds light on why some parents struggle to move beyond tokenistic participation. Parents with higher cultural capital—such as proficiency in the dominant language or familiarity with the education system—are better equipped to engage with schools. In contrast, parents with limited cultural capital may feel disempowered, excluded, or misunderstood.

To address these gaps, schools must create inclusive environments that actively foster trust and mutual respect. This includes providing clear pathways for parents to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes, offering multilingual resources, and implementing culturally sensitive training for staff. By doing so, schools can help all parents,

regardless of background, move toward the top rungs of Arnstein's ladder, ensuring that school-home cooperation aligns with the democratic ideals embedded in the Norwegian Education Act (Nordahl, 2007; Arnstein, 1969; Bourdieu, 1977).

2.2 School-Home Cooperation to Strengthen Students' Social and Cultural Capital

School-home cooperation is essential for fostering students' academic, social, and emotional development. Research highlights that active parental involvement contributes significantly to improved academic performance, enhanced social skills, and increased motivation (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Epstein, 2011). By working collaboratively, parents and schools create a supportive environment that addresses students' cognitive and emotional needs, promoting overall growth (Bæck, 2018).

Nordahl's (2007) framework outlines three primary forms of school-home cooperation: representative, direct, and contactless. Representative cooperation involves formal roles, such as participation in parent committees or school boards, where parents can influence broader school policies. Direct cooperation focuses on structured interactions, such as parent-teacher conferences, where discussions center on a child's progress. Contactless cooperation includes informal exchanges, such as emails or text messages, that provide situational updates. These forms highlight the diverse ways schools and parents can align their efforts to support children's development (Bø, 2011).

Effective collaboration, however, relies on addressing both internal and external factors influencing parental participation. Internal factors, such as parents' confidence, sense of purpose, and the emotional support they receive from schools, play a critical role in motivating engagement (Bø, 2011). Parents who feel their involvement is meaningful and valued are more likely to contribute actively.

External factors, including socioeconomic challenges, language barriers, and unstable living conditions, often hinder parental engagement. Lareau (2011) and Putnam (2000) emphasize that these external factors create structural inequalities, particularly for families from lower socioeconomic or immigrant backgrounds. For instance, parents working multiple jobs or lacking proficiency in dominant language may find it difficult to engage in parent-teacher meetings or navigate school communication effectively.

These collaborative efforts not only support students' immediate educational needs but also contribute to building their long-term social and cultural capital, essential for navigating complex educational and societal structures.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) theory of capital, cultural capital includes knowledge, language proficiency, educational attainment, and skills that are valued within the educational system. Social capital refers to the networks, relationships, and trust that provide individuals with access to resources and opportunities (Putnam, 2000). Schools and parents must collaborate to build and enhance these forms of capital for students, but disparities between parties often hinder cooperation.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides insight into how parents' cultural and social backgrounds shape their perceptions of their role in their child's education. Parents with high cultural capital often feel more comfortable engaging with schools and navigating institutional expectations, as their values and practices align more closely with the dominant norms of the educational system (Lareau, 2011).

In contrast, parents with limited cultural capital, often from immigrant or lower socioeconomic backgrounds, may struggle to engage effectively due to unfamiliarity with institutional norms and expectations (Bæck, 2018). For instance, these parents might view education as the school's

primary responsibility, while schools may assume that parents will actively support their child's academic and social development at home (Nordahl, 2007).

The disparity in cultural capital raises an important question: do parents fully understand their role in building their children's social and cultural capital? Research shows that schools often assume parents recognize the importance of their involvement, yet many parents lack the same cultural capital that schools expect (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Furthermore, immigrant parents may bring rich cultural traditions and values that are highly relevant to their children's broader social development, but these assets are not always acknowledged or integrated into the school's practices (Nieto, 2010). This misalignment in expectations can lead to fragmented cooperation and reduced effectiveness of school-home partnerships.

A shared understanding between schools and parents is crucial for effective cooperation. Without mutual recognition of each other's strengths and limitations, schools and parents may struggle to work toward common goals (Epstein, 2011). Schools must actively bridge these gaps by fostering inclusive environments where parents feel valued and supported. This requires recognizing and leveraging the unique cultural capital that parents bring, while also providing tailored guidance to help them navigate the school system. For example, bilingual resources, culturally sensitive training for educators, and parent workshops can empower families to better understand their role in their children's education and feel confident in contributing (Bø, 2011; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Addressing disparities in social capital is equally important. Families with limited networks or connections to the school community often feel isolated and excluded from decision-making processes (Putnam, 2000;

Lukk, 2009). Schools can strengthen social capital by fostering trust and creating opportunities for parents to build relationships within the school community. Initiatives such as parent mentorship programs, peer support groups, and culturally inclusive school events can help integrate families into broader networks, enabling more equitable participation (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Ultimately, school-home cooperation should be a partnership where both schools and parents align their goals and work together to build students' social and cultural capital. This requires schools to adopt a reflexive approach, critically examining their own assumptions about parental roles and recognizing the diversity of cultural and social capital that families bring (Lareau, 2011). Through open dialogue, trust-building, and mutual respect, schools and parents can establish a shared understanding of what cooperation entails and how it can best serve students' development (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

3. Navigating School-Home Partnerships: Insights from Interviewed Participants

This section presents the findings from the collected data, categorized into three main themes: *Communication*, *System Understanding*, and *Powerlessness*, with corresponding subthemes. These themes emerged from the analysis of interviews with Somali parents, shedding light on their experiences with school-home cooperation in Norwegian primary schools. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in fostering collaborative relationships between schools and parents. The summarized themes and insights are outlined in Table 1 below and are further elaborated upon in the sections that follow.

Table 1: Key Themes and Insights from the Data Analysis.

Category	Themes	Key Insights
Communication	Teacher-Centered Collaboration	Parents prioritize direct contact with teachers to resolve issues & support their child's progress.
	Mixed Experiences with Parent Meetings	Parent meetings are valued for updates but criticized as rigid, unresponsive, and dismissive of parental input.
System Understanding	Dissatisfaction with Educational Approach	Parents view learning through play as ineffective & irrelevant. Subjects like cooking, gym, and music are deemed meaningless.
	Criticism of Learning Outcomes	Parents feel classrooms lack rigorous instruction, with children sitting without meaningful learning.
	Limited Awareness of Formal Collaborative Bodies	Parents lack understanding of structures like FAU and have minimal participation in school governance.
Power-Powerlessness	Exclusion from Decision-Making	Parents feel their feedback is ignored, leaving them powerless in influencing school policies or practices.
	Low Levels of Trust	Experiences of distrust, including threats of child welfare services without dialogue, contribute to feelings of alienation.

3.1 Communication

The findings reveal that Somali parents place significant emphasis on maintaining strong, direct communication with teachers. Parents see this as their primary avenue for involvement in their children's education, often bypassing formal structures. One mother explained: *"I know that my responsibility as a parent is to follow up on my child's education and have close cooperation with the teacher"*.

Parents value the positive impact this teacher-centered collaboration has on their children. For instance, they believe that such communication fosters accountability in their children: *"When the student knows that parents and the school communicate, it can lead to the child taking more responsibility, for example with homework,"* said one mother.

When issues arise, parents take the initiative to reach out to teachers. A mother recounted: *"I discovered my child had not completed her homework. I contacted the teacher, and we agreed to work closely to ensure this doesn't happen again and to exchange information regularly"*.

However, parents reported that their engagement with the school typically stops at the teacher level, with little or no involvement with school leadership or systemic structures. While they attend parent meetings, parents often feel these meetings are one-sided, offering updates without genuine opportunities for dialogue. One father noted: *"The school tells us what they have done and their plans"*.

Despite their participation, parents expressed frustration with the rigid and unresponsive structure of parent meetings. Many felt their input was disregarded. A mother shared: *"We provided feedback about improving the meetings, but nothing changed. It would have been nice if our input made a difference"*.

This limited and often transactional communication reinforces parents' perception that their voices are not fully valued in the school community, as also reflected in Holter's (2016) findings on minority parents' experiences in Norwegian schools.

3.2 System Understanding

A significant theme in the data was Somali parents' dissatisfaction with the Norwegian educational approach, particularly its perceived lack of academic rigor and focus on "learning through play." Parents critiqued what they saw as an overemphasis on non-academic subjects. One mother described the approach as: *"Incomprehensible and irresponsible"*.

Subjects such as cooking, gym, and music were frequently labeled as irrelevant. A father remarked: *"There are several meaningless subjects in Norway, such as cooking and gym. Children need to learn, not waste time running around"*.

In addition to dissatisfaction with pedagogical methods, parents expressed limited understanding of the formal structures that enable parental participation in school governance. While parents are aware of the election of class representatives during parent meetings, most lack knowledge about their mandates. A father noted: *"I attend all parent meetings and often see that a class representative and deputy are chosen, but I do not know what this is about. No one has explained it to me"*.

Another mother supported this sentiment: *"When I participate in parent meetings, I hear about class representatives and deputies, but I don't know what they stand for or their mandates"*.

This lack of familiarity with systemic structures limits parents' ability to influence school policies, further exacerbating their feelings of exclusion and disconnection from the school system.

3.3 Power-Powerlessness

The theme of power and powerlessness emerged strongly in parents' accounts of their interactions with schools. Several parents felt that their feedback during parent meetings or other interactions was not taken seriously. One father observed: *"We have provided input but received no response or changes"*.

Parents expressed a sense of mistrust toward the school system, particularly regarding the school's use of child welfare services. One mother recounted: *"Despite having close contact with the teacher, the school reported concerns to child protection services without speaking to me first"*.

Such incidents were interpreted as a lack of empathy and recognition from the school, leaving parents feeling alienated and defensive. A mother shared her frustration after an incident involving her sick child: *"After a few days of illness, the school reported concerns to child welfare services, even though I had informed the teacher. When child welfare contacted me, they asked why the school had involved them since I had already communicated everything"*.

This lack of trust and perceived misuse of authority fosters a defensive stance among parents, reducing their willingness to engage further with the school.

Additionally, parents highlighted cultural misunderstandings as another barrier. Schools' assumptions about parental roles often conflicted with Somali parents' expectations. A father remarked: *"We have not asked to participate, and no one has invited us to influence what happens at school"*.

Such sentiments align with earlier findings by Holter (2016) and Friberg & Bjørnset (2019), which emphasize the challenges minority parents face

in navigating Norwegian school systems that do not actively encourage their participation.

These findings paint a nuanced picture of Somali parents' experiences with school-home cooperation. While parents demonstrate a strong commitment to their children's education through direct collaboration with teachers, systemic barriers—including limited understanding of formal structures, cultural misunderstandings, and feelings of powerlessness—hinder broader engagement. These findings will be analyzed further in the discussion section, drawing on theoretical frameworks and existing literature to explore how school-home cooperation can be reimaged to create more inclusive and participatory educational environments.

4. Discussion Section

This study highlights a key paradox in school-home cooperation among Somali-Norwegian families: although parents actively engage with teachers, they are systematically excluded from meaningful roles in school governance. Three themes emerge: (1) teacher relationships serve as both gateways and limits to involvement; (2) institutional practices reinforce power imbalances; and (3) cultural misunderstandings deepen mistrust. These findings reveal how procedural efforts often conceal deeper exclusion.

4.1 The Significant Relationship with the Teacher

The findings emphasize Somali parents' strong reliance on teacher-centered collaboration as the foundation of their school-home cooperation. This approach reflects their belief that direct communication with teachers is central to their children's academic success and personal development. Parents in the study consistently prioritized establishing

close relationships with teachers to address academic or behavioral issues. This dynamic aligns with Drugli and Nordahl's (2016) findings, which highlight how strong parental involvement can enhance children's motivation, academic performance, and attitudes toward school.

Moreover, the data suggests that teacher-parent collaboration fosters accountability in children. Parents perceived that regular communication between themselves, and teachers positively influenced their children's behavior and sense of responsibility. These findings resonate with Desforges' (2003) research, which emphasizes the role of parental engagement in shaping children's academic success and self-regulation.

However, the reliance on informal, teacher-centered collaboration presents significant limitations. Parents reported minimal interaction with school leadership or formal governance bodies like the Parents' Working Committee (FAU). Instead, they preferred addressing concerns directly with teachers, a preference often rooted in perceived barriers to navigating formal school structures. This mirrors Roland's (2013) findings that immigrant parents often favor direct teacher relationships due to challenges in understanding or accessing systemic processes.

This narrow focus on teacher-parent interactions limits parents' ability to influence broader school policies and practices, confining their role to addressing immediate concerns rather than participating as partners in systemic decision-making. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation provides a useful framework for understanding this dynamic, as parents' engagement predominantly remains at the tokenism level. While they are consulted or informed about school matters, they lack meaningful opportunities for co-determination, which undermines the democratic principles of school-home cooperation.

The findings also reveal a cultural gap in expectations regarding parental roles. While schools may assume that parents actively participate in broader governance structures, Somali parents in this study view their role as primarily focused on supporting their child's immediate needs through teacher interactions. This disconnect between parental expectations and institutional assumptions further limits systemic engagement and reinforces a cycle of informal, individualized cooperation.

In conclusion, while teacher-centered collaboration provides Somali parents with a practical and immediate avenue for supporting their children's education, its limitations highlight the need for schools to create pathways for broader, systemic engagement. By addressing these barriers and aligning institutional practices with parents' expectations, schools can foster more inclusive and participatory forms of school-home cooperation.

4.2 Barriers to Participation: Powerlessness and Systemic Challenges

The findings reveal a pervasive sense of powerlessness among Somali parents in their interactions with schools. Despite their willingness to engage, parents felt excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making processes. This lack of responsiveness to parental feedback undermines trust and discourages further engagement. Such experiences align with Holter's (2016) research, which highlights that immigrant parents often perceive schools as unresponsive to their concerns. Without mechanisms for genuine co-determination, parents feel their role is limited to providing information rather than having any real influence over school policies or practices.

These dynamics of exclusion are further compounded when analyzed through an intersectional lens. As families with refugee backgrounds navigate the school system in a non-native language, Somali parents face

multiple overlapping barriers: their advocacy is frequently misinterpreted as aggression rather than engagement.

Using Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation as a lens, Somali parents' engagement primarily remains at the tokenism level. While they are informed or occasionally consulted, they lack decision-making power, falling short of the democratic ideals of shared authority and co-determination. This tokenistic participation becomes particularly problematic when considering how language barriers, and refugee status intersect to create unique forms of marginalization within school systems (Abdi, 2022).

Cultural differences further amplify these challenges. Many Somali parents expressed difficulty understanding pedagogical practices, such as group-based learning, which they perceived as ineffective and inconsistent with their expectations of teacher-led instruction. This misalignment underscores a broader cultural gap, where differing educational norms and values hinder mutual understanding.

Furthermore, many parents were unaware of the roles and mandates of formal governance structures, such as the Parents' Working Committee (FAU), which are intended to facilitate parental input. This reflects systemic gaps in communicating opportunities for participation, particularly to minority parents, who may lack familiarity with these structures. The combination of limited institutional knowledge with systemic and linguistic barriers creates a perfect storm of exclusion that goes beyond simple cultural differences.

The exclusion of Somali parents from decision-making processes not only diminishes their ability to contribute meaningfully but also contradicts the democratic principles outlined in the Education Act (§10-3), which emphasizes inclusion, civic engagement, and active co-determination. By

failing to empower parents as equal partners, schools risk perpetuating systemic inequalities and undermining their responsibility to foster democratic engagement among all stakeholders. Addressing these barriers requires schools to adopt inclusive practices that bridge cultural differences and ensure that all parents, regardless of background, feel recognized and valued in their interactions with the educational system.

4.3 Barriers to Trust and Recognition

Trust and recognition emerged as significant barriers to effective school-home cooperation. While Somali parents reported positive interactions with individual teachers, their overall experiences with the broader school system often revealed a lack of empathy and understanding. Instances where schools acted unilaterally, such as involving child protection services without prior dialogue, reinforced feelings of mistrust and vulnerability among parents. Such dynamics illustrate how institutional practices can unintentionally create defensive relationships, discouraging active parental involvement.

Cultural differences further complicate these relationships. Somali parents expressed concerns about practices perceived as inconsistent with their cultural and religious values, including co-ed swimming lessons and sex education. These cultural disconnects contribute to parents' dissatisfaction with the school system and, in some cases, their decision to seek alternative educational options abroad for their children. This highlights the need for schools to engage more effectively with the cultural perspectives and priorities of diverse parent groups.

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital provides a valuable framework for understanding these challenges. Parents whose cultural values align closely with dominant educational norms tend to navigate the system more successfully, while those with differing values, such as Somali parents, face greater obstacles. This disparity underscores the need

for cultural sensitivity to foster trust and mutual recognition between schools and parents. When schools fail to acknowledge or address parents' concerns, it reinforces perceptions of exclusion and alienation, undermining collaborative efforts.

These challenges highlight the critical role of cultural inclusion in fostering effective school-home cooperation. Schools that successfully integrate diverse perspectives into their policies and practices create environments where parents are more likely to feel valued and included. Open dialogue and clear communication are particularly crucial in bridging cultural divides, as they allow for mutual understanding and recognition of differing expectations. Research by Holter (2016) underscores that trust and understanding form the foundation of meaningful relationships between schools and parents, suggesting that such relationships can enhance cooperation and mitigate barriers.

By actively bridging cultural gaps and fostering inclusive practices, schools can create environments that value the contributions of all parents, regardless of their cultural background. This approach not only strengthens trust but also aligns with the broader educational mandate to promote democratic engagement and social cohesion, ensuring that all families feel empowered to participate meaningfully in children's education.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a detailed analysis of Somali parents' experiences with school-home cooperation in Norwegian primary schools, focusing on their perspectives on inclusion, collaboration, and systemic barriers. The findings reveal a consistent tension between parents' deep commitment to supporting their children's education and the systemic structures that limit their opportunities for meaningful engagement. While parents prioritize close, teacher-centered collaboration to address their children's

immediate educational needs, this approach often comes at the expense of broader systemic participation.

The study highlights key barriers to effective collaboration. Parents reported feeling excluded from decision-making processes and systemic governance structures, such as the Parents' Working Committee (FAU). This exclusion reflects a larger failure to incorporate parents' voices into the school system's processes, which aim to foster participation, inclusion, and active citizenship. These systemic barriers undermine trust, leading parents to perceive the school as unresponsive to their concerns and disconnected from their cultural and educational expectations.

Cultural differences played a big role in how parents viewed teaching methods and their relationship with schools. Many felt that the education system lacked depth and relevance, making it harder for their children to succeed. They were also frustrated by cultural gaps in what was taught and how schools operated. These challenges made them feel disconnected and limited their ability to be actively involved in their children's education.

The findings also underscore the individualization of school-home cooperation. By focusing on teacher-parent relationships rather than systemic engagement, schools inadvertently narrow the scope of collaboration, restricting parents to reactive roles rather than active participants in shaping educational policies and practices. This dynamic contradicts the democratic mandate of Norwegian schools, which emphasizes inclusivity, shared responsibility, and the development of active citizenship.

In conclusion, while Somali parents demonstrate a strong commitment to their children's education, systemic barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and limited inclusion in governance processes hinder their full

participation. These findings compellingly demonstrate that Norwegian schools must transition from tokenistic gestures of inclusion to authentic shared decision-making with Somali parents. This shift is not merely preferable, it is essential for fulfilling the democratic mandate of Norway's education system and ensuring equitable participation for all families.

Future Research

This study provides valuable insights into Somali parents' experiences with school-home cooperation in Norwegian primary schools. To build on these findings, future research could explore several important areas.

Longitudinal studies could examine how school-home cooperation evolves over time, focusing on strategies to overcome structural and cultural barriers. Comparative research involving other immigrant groups may also reveal both shared and unique challenges, contributing to the development of more inclusive educational practices.

Since this study centers on parental perspectives, future research could incorporate students' voices to understand how parental involvement and school-home cooperation impact their experiences, engagement, and academic outcomes. Additionally, intervention-based studies could assess the effectiveness of tools such as interpreters, multilingual resources, and culturally tailored workshops in fostering trust and collaboration.

By addressing these areas, future research can provide deeper insights into creating equitable and inclusive partnerships between schools and diverse families.

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