

Minoritised groups are not always comfortable engaging with schools through the traditional approaches used (Moll et al., 1992). Without the engagement and inclusion of all groups, mistrust and conflict is given the space to grow. We also know that being a reader and learning to read is the foundation for academic and future economic success as well as engagement in democratic society (Breadmore et al., 2019). This paper will outline a research project located in inner city Bristol, England that aimed to engage, often 'hard to reach' groups (Bonevski et al., 2014), with reading and school. The research design involved community researchers identifying members of the school and wider community who were considered to be 'influential', drawing from religious organisations, community and parent groups as well as community elders. This group of 'influencers' (Briggs et al., 2012) shared their experiences of learning and understanding of the barriers for families in engaging with reading and schools. 'Messages' were collaboratively designed and shared over six weeks through the 'influencers' channels of communication – informal WhatsApp groups, social media sites and word of mouth. During these six weeks, the school opened its library after school for families. Data was gathered to identify the number of families that visited the library (n=69), the books borrowed (n=144) and then analysed this to identify if any of the 'harder to reach' families had made use of the library. Twenty-six of these families were considered to be 'harder to reach'. Further data indicated that it was possible that at least eight of these families had engaged with the library as a result of the 'influencers'. This suggests the use of 'influencers' may present a promising area for further research.

“Drawing on community knowledge to engage diverse communities with their children's learning”

# A little about me

- Dr Jane Carter
- Background in Primary Education (teacher, deputy head teacher and Local Education Authority Consultant)
- Senior Lecturer at University of the West of England (focus Initial Teacher Education – English specialism)
- Research interests: early reading; community engagement; social justice – citizenship and citizenship education



# The research prompt and why it is important

- Minoritised groups are not always comfortable engaging with schools through the traditional approaches used (Moll et al., 1992).
- Without the engagement and inclusion of all groups, mistrust and conflict is given the space to grow.
- Being a reader and learning to read is the foundation for academic and future economic success **as well as engagement in democratic society** (Breadmore et al., 2019).
- Citizenship and citizenship education is built on basic literacy skills.
- There is, therefore a moral imperative to engage families that have been called ‘hard to reach’ (Bonevski et al., 2014),

# My research focused on, 'Hard to reach' communities

- Bonevski et al. (2014) identify a range of terms used by researchers when referring to groups or individuals that do not readily or easily engage with state institutions.
- These include: 'hard to reach', 'vulnerable', 'disadvantaged groups' and 'excluded groups'.
- In medical research, these groups are often called 'hidden groups' (Lambert and Wiebel, 1990)
- Gonzales-Duarte et al. (2019:1) "unequal power relationships that hinder basic rights" that translate into these multiple disadvantages and so further prevent the access to the means of future development and improvements

# ‘Hard to reach’ or a ‘need to be engaged differently’?

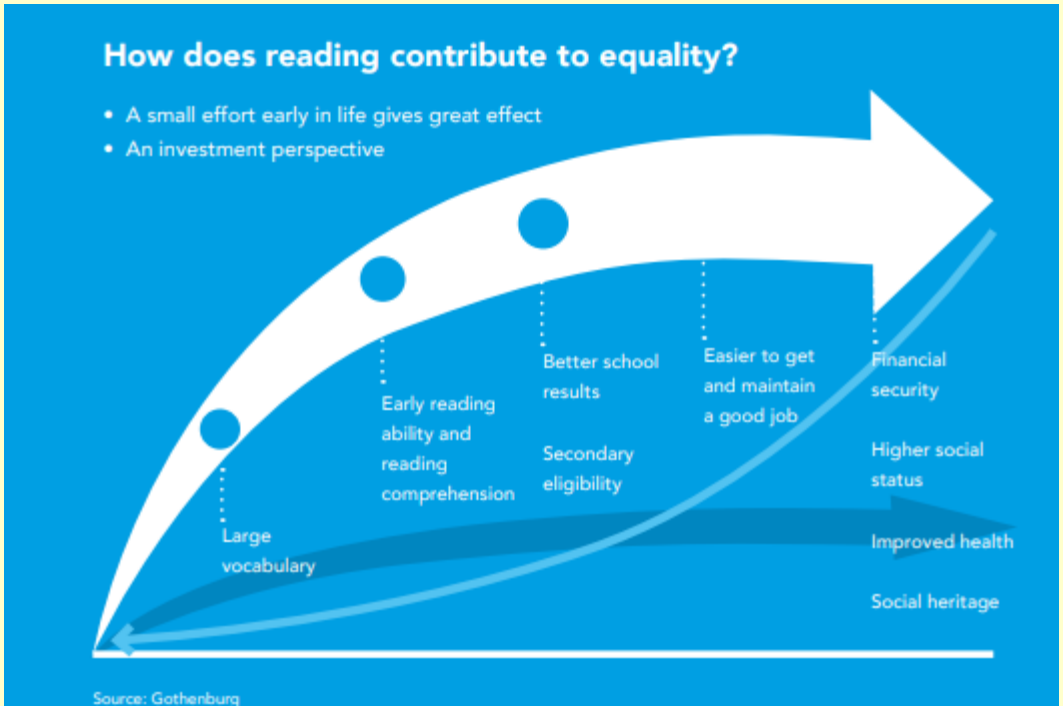
- Moll et al. (1992) demonstrated that literacy was culturally and socially constructed and what was often being identified by schools was not a literacy deficit but **merely a mis-match** between the literacies of the home and community and the literacy of school
- Hannon et al. (2020: 311) ‘harder to reach’ groups tend to have lower achievement levels in reading than their more advantaged peers, this **may be a result of a school’s inability to engage with these groups, to recognise and value “cultural strengths”** or perhaps to recognise that these groups **cannot always be engaged by the same means as the more advantaged family groups**

# I invite you to consider who these groups are in your context

- Who are your 'hard to reach' communities?
- Why do you consider them to be 'hard to reach'?
- Are they really 'hard to reach' or merely ignored and marginalised and need to be engaged differently?



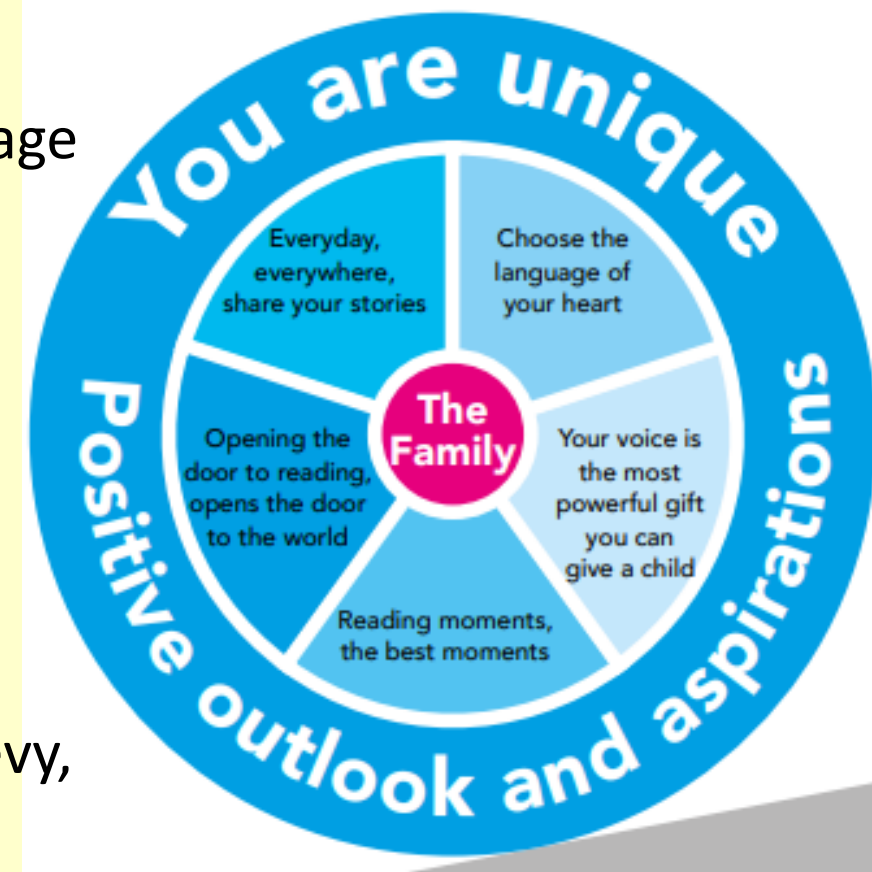
# The Foundation of my study was an Erasmus Plus Project with four other European cities titled 'Open the Door For Reading'





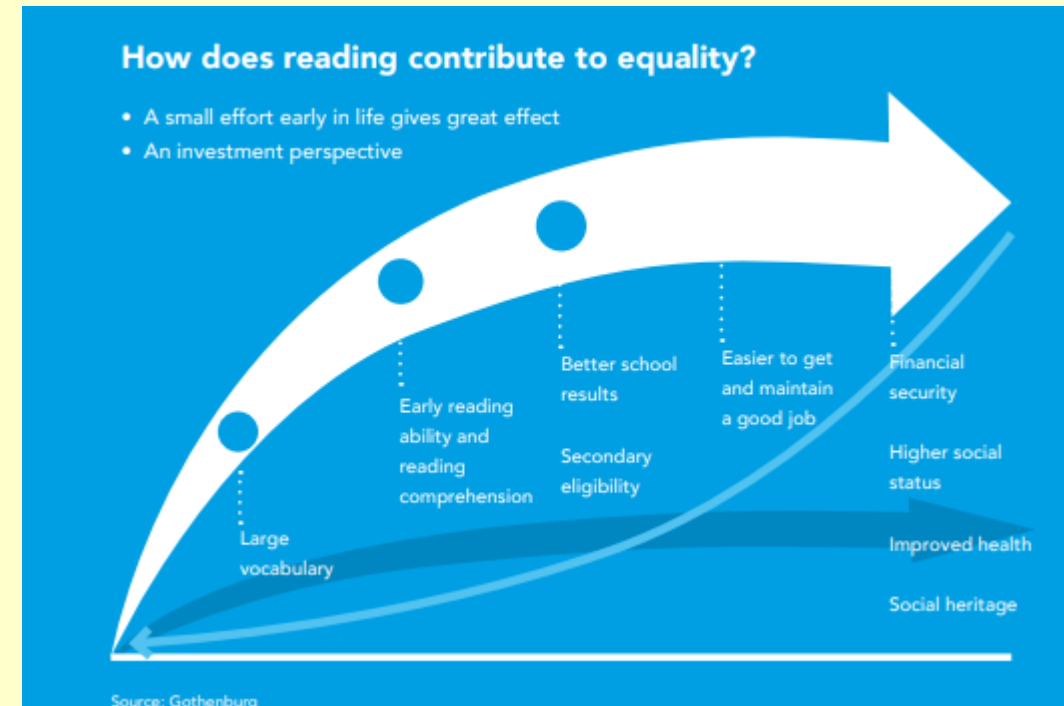
# The project produced a practitioners manual

- Aim of the 'Open the Door for reading' manual was to consider a family centred approach
- Utilising the social capital of the families themselves to engage others with shared reading
- Identifying the barriers
- Establishing of 'cloakroom libraries'
- Understanding and appreciating families literacy lives when that may not look like the 'literacy of school' (Preece and Levy, 2020) and so help frame book sharing advice



# My study – identifying the issue or ‘problem’

- Without community engagement, children will not be enabled to become active citizens
- In one school based setting, with a small library (or cloakroom library) a small group of families were identified as not engaging at all with the library or school reading practices.
- The families were largely from the school’s Somali community (95% of the pupils were from minoritized groups)



# The Somali community in Bristol

- Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir and Zhoa (2013) **different communities have different practices and so generalising about what works is not always beneficial or helpful**
- The Somali community is often **highly engaged with education**, has **high expectations for their children** but also often (Demie et al., 2007; Stokes et al., 2015).
- Abikar (2021) identified the multiple barriers to education faced by Somali families including **racism, trauma, lack of information about the English school systems, schools lack of knowledge about the Somali culture and the challenges** that come for parents who have a different language to the one used in school as well as socio-economic disadvantage.

- **Matthielsen (2017) cautioned against viewing these multiple barriers as a deficit to be countered and suggested that greater effort needed to be made by schools to recognise the benefits of dual language and of the cultural capital that comes with the Somali heritage.**

However

- **As a group considered to be ‘hard to reach’, it is possible the community, whilst having good networks these were not networks that would “.... introduce them to projects and services. In other words, participants friends and family were not using the services, and so nor were they.” (Lingwood, Levy, Billington and Rowland, 2020 p.186)**

# My study used the idea of ‘influencers’ as both a research tool and an approach to adapting traditional approaches to engagement of families

- The term ‘influencer’ is perhaps most strongly associated with the world of marketing of products and services: motivations, customer networks and word of mouth marketing.
- Briggs et al (2012) “Individuals who have significant contact with, and influence on, [the subject in question]. They may include, but are not limited to, role models, mentors, parents, and peers [as well as] other, more general cultural influences that impact beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.”
- Social influence theory identifies three aspects of social influence: compliance, identification, and internalization (Kelman, 2006).
- Ideas about peer mentoring could also be aligned with idea of social influence theory. In health studies around HIV and mental health for example, the peer mentor is used as one who has a lived understanding of a particular life experience and so is more likely to gain compliance, be identified with and enable the internalization of health and well-being messages

# Study process

- Identify those who were influential in the community and then find those community ‘influencers’
- When identified, the influencers were invited to share their literacy lives (often distinct from the ‘literacies’ of the school)
- Use their knowledge of the community to design messages to send out via the influencers
- Measure the impact on the influencers and their community reach on engagement with the library (opened after school twice a weeks) and the impact on the number of books target families were taking home to read with children

# Starting point was identifying those best placed to identify the influencers!

Fathia – parent at the school

Hibo - community organiser and founder of Talo

Both were trained as community researchers by Stepping Up - Horumar Women, a Bristol initiative



# The influencers

- Religious influencers
- In-school influencers
- Community influencers (community leaders)
- Respected community members (teachers and other 'professionals')
- Created two focus groups: one male and one female





# What did the influencers say about their literacy lives?

## Language

*Yusuuf: “If we look at the younger generation 90% can’t speak fluently in Somali and only speak English, and then 90% of the elder generation use [a mix of] English and Somali in their sentences. This is an issue.”*

*Degmo: “With us Somali parents, it’s when we don’t speak the English language that well that we start speaking English to our children and not speak Somali and that’s where the gaps start when they’re young – where you don’t have one language that you speak really well – this doesn’t help with reading.”*

# Language and identity

Sada: *“Language forms your identity, that’s part of who you are, so its important parents think about the language they are communicating with our children.”*

This complexity of identities was sometimes expressed as contradictions in identity. **Little (2017) characterises this as Somali young people pulling in the opposite direction to their parent.** However, the focus group participants shared this more as ‘difference’ rather than inter-family tension.

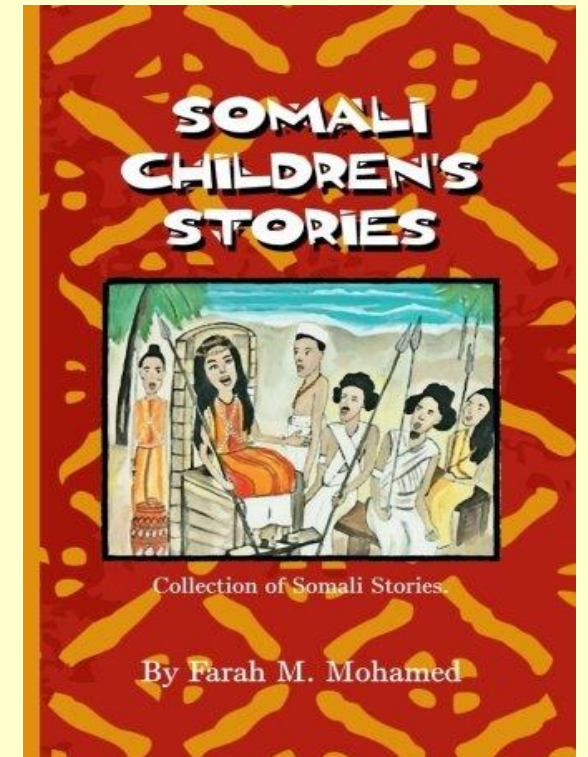
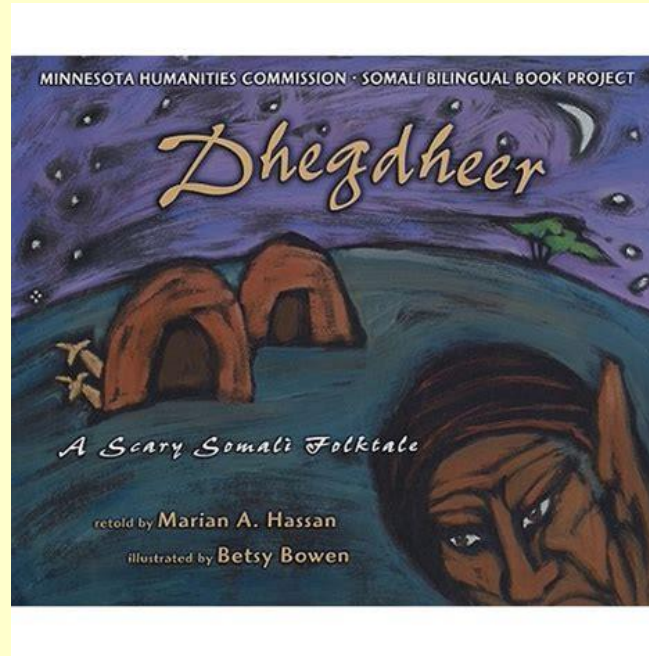
# Literacy identities

*Ceebla: “Songs and poems and traditional stories are really important, they form their identity, that’s part of who they are so it’s really important parents think about the language that they communicate this in.”*

*Hira: “Because our tradition as Africans is oral. I remember my grandmother telling us stories about, you know, with moral endings and things and so they stayed with me.”*

# Literacy identities

Degmo: *“My mum, she used to tell us stories, lots of stories, very scary stories really she used to tell us about Dhegdheer, which still gives me nightmares to this day and dad would tell us Dina and Daul stories.”*



## Difference but not deficit – differently engaged not 'hard to reach'

Suubban: *"You know when the teachers are saying to the parents you know this child needs to read for pleasure it's not something that they will get automatically because it is not something that they are used to."*

Barre: *"Parents are not actually in a position to read with their children, not because they don't want it, maybe because they haven't had the opportunity themselves."*

Magan: *"It is very easy to judge other people when you think they should know this or this parent has been in this country for X number of years here, they should know ...there may have had trauma in life and you are just struggling, you know every single day...you've got other proprieties. Let's try to understand."*

# Using the focus group influencer voices, messages were composed

- WhatsApp groups
- Social media
- Word of mouth
- School newsletter
- Mosque  
communications



# Examples of messages

During half term, tell your children some of the stories your parents told you when you were a child. Oral story telling is just as important as reading a book to your child. Perhaps you remember your parent or grandparent telling you the scary story of Dhegdheer! When you return to school remember that Sunny Primary is opening its Hub Library to families after school every Tuesday and Friday next term.

The first words of the Quran tell us to 'Read, read, read'.  
Help your child to fulfil  
this message by supporting their reading and choosing a  
book from the Sunny  
Primary Library.



Exploring and sharing your culture with your children is a great way to keep you and your children connected to their heritage but also help them grow in confidence. Can you remember the songs and rhymes you were taught when you were a child? Share them with your child and then perhaps see if you can find books in the Sunny Primary Hub Library that tell the stories of your childhood.

Have you noticed recently how much time we all spend on our phones? This week could you perhaps decide that there will be no phones on Tuesday after school? Or Friday after school? In this time you and your child could visit the Sunny Primary Hub Library 3.15 to 3.30 when it is open for families to look at books, talk about what is offered in the library and to borrow a book if you want.

# Action



The school  
cloakroom/hub  
library was opened  
after school each  
Tuesday and Friday.



- Messages were sent via the influencers before and during the days the library was open.
- Traditional school newsletter messages were also sent home

# Findings

- 69 children (328 children in the school) borrowed a total of 144 books alongside a parent, guardian or family member
- 43 were with parents that did not usually come to after-school activities with their child.
- 31 of the children were of Somali heritage (from 26 families)
- These families were followed-up by the school's community development co-ordinator through a quick telephone call.
- 14 parents responded to this providing information about how they heard about the library being open after school.



- In terms of the ‘influencer’ messages, using this additional data, it is possible therefore, **that eight of the ‘harder to reach’ families were ‘influenced’** to come along to the hub library.
- **A further twelve families** did not respond to the school’s community development co-ordinator’s calls and so **it is possible that more than eight families had been ‘influenced’**

# Conclusions and recommendations for practice

- Schools need to continue to **seek ways to identify and hear the voices of their community** in relation to the real and perceived barriers to reading and so access to the **full benefits of citizenship**
- Schools can benefit from **knowing and utilizing the wider community funds of knowledge** in relation to education and citizenship.
- **Use of the community ‘influencer’** appears to be **beneficial in engaging ‘harder to reach’ families**

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