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Educational Experiences of Indigenous, Refugee and Migrant Students - a study of drawings

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Voices of Somali Children in a Swedish School

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This paper is one of the Swedish parts of an international research about educational experiences of indigenous, refugee and immigrant students.

Somali student experiences and interpretations of the meaning of the concept of school will be elucidated in this paper. Their experiences and attitudes of school are made apparent with the aid of creative activity in the form of the production of drawings, combined with subsequent oral comments during a following interview.

All students in this investigation were of Somali origin, studying in a Muslim Free School located in the capital of Sweden, Stockholm. They, or their families are refugees from Somalia and many were born in Sweden.

The drawings were made and collected during ordinary school activities and all of

the students available participated voluntarily. Totally they were 16 with five girls and four boys in grade 5 and four girls and three boys in sixth grade.

The students were informed that this investigation was intended to understand what students of different origin thought about when they reflected on the concept of school. Participating class teachers during the introduction and the investigation noticed that all students, by their comments, found the purpose of the task very important. They took the task to draw a picture about their thoughts of school meant for them very seriously and put a lot of effort in making their drawings. Nearly half of them wrote down comments to their pictures. They worked all very concentrated from 15 minutes to nearly one hour with their drawings. Eleven of the students draw their pictures in light colours. Then they were interviewed individually. The interview was conducted with open questions about what had come into their minds when they thought about the concept of school. The interviews took between a few minutes to a quarter of an hour.

The aim of the analysis of the drawings and the subsequent interviews was to elucidate the meaning of the experiences and attitudes which the students gave form to by their pictures and oral expressions. Each drawing and the following interview was viewed as a unit. Qualitative similarities, differences, patterns and structures between the student's drawings and interviews were taken into consideration. From the analysis three main themes appeared as follows:

- ✦ **tasks**
- ✦ **the future**
- ✦ **relations**

Experiences and attitudes focusing on tasks

All drawings except two are more or less conventional pictures of school buildings and classroom lessons. Some of them were lifelike efforts to draw their school and own classroom.

Half of the students had written comments on their pictures which were in correspondence with the content to the following interviews.

One general feature in the text on the drawings and in the interviews is the student's positive attitude to do their best in school. "It is important to work hard and pass with great credits". Topics as Swedish, English and mathematics were written down on the pictures and also mentioned in the interviews as especially important to learn.



Figure 1.

"I think of maths, natural sciences and Swedish and if my friends will come to school and what I will be doing in school". Boy fifth grade.

The concept of school is connected with learning in the classroom. "Interesting lessons where you learn" could summarize this attitude. One student connects the concept of school with "... peace in the world".

Both in the drawings and in the interviews they showed a good trust in the competence and supportiveness of their teachers. "Do you understand, you children? OK, I come to you and help you" one student wrote on his picture, another "The teachers are best". For some of them, in the interview, school was the place of peace and quiet.



Figure 2.

"I learn step by step. You learn about something you did not know before i.e. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 in the class you learn the same thing. No one in the same class knows better than anyone else. If one student does not understand, the teacher helps". Girl, fifth grade.

At three pictures a clock was drawn but nothing in the interviews indicate that time played an important role in the student concepts of school.

Experiences and attitudes focusing on the future

Seven of the 16 students specially connect the concept of school with the future. "You have to learn if you will have a job in Sweden" and " ... to become somebody you have to learn Swedish".

Most of them express in the interviews a clear and great awareness of that school is the best opportunity to get a good job in the future as a teacher, a nurse, a lawyer, a pilot, a dentist or a doctor as three students mentioned. It is obviously that school studying for the Somalia students in the future will result in good occupations. In none of the interviews or in the drawings there is a glimpse of fear in the future to come for these 11 to 13 years old Somalia girls and boys.

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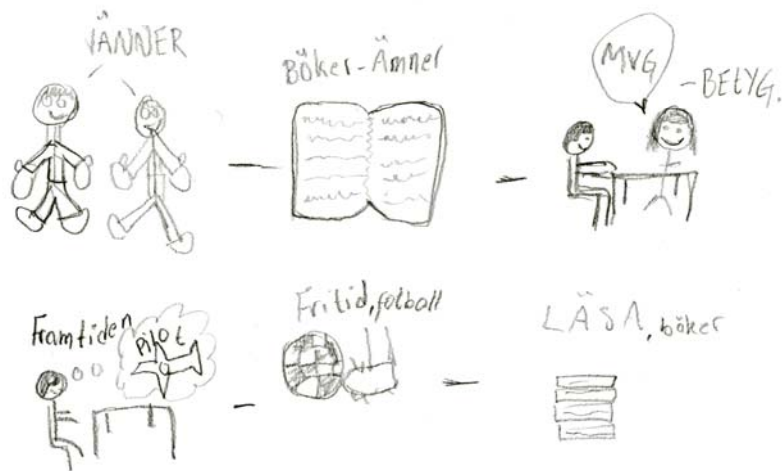


Figure 3.

(School), friends, books-subjects, grades, future, spare time, soccer, read, books. Boy sixth grade.

Experiences and attitudes focusing on relations

"To be with friends", "To have peers is good and none of mine peers in the classroom know better than the other, we are all the same", "All are friends and happy in our school" are student examples of the meaning of the concept of school. In one or another way most of the students both in their drawings and in the interviews involve relations with peers and teachers.

A few see the school as a good extension of relations outside of their often big families. There is also a connection between friends and learning, "I like to go to school, meet friends and learn".

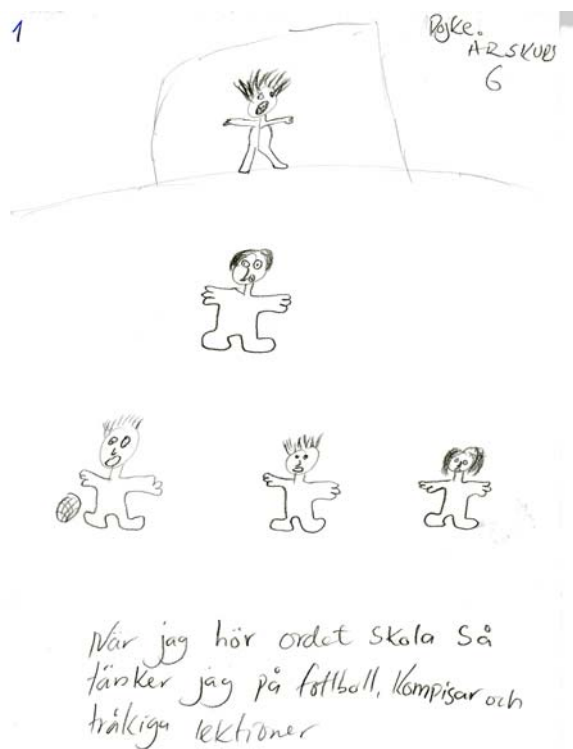


Figure 4.
"When I hear the word school I think about soccer, friends and boring lessons" Boy sixth grade.

Two of the students relate the concept to a full covering scenario of studies, friends, leisure time with social activities and a goal for the future.

Conclusions

The drawings and the interviews of the Somalia students show a very positive attitude towards the concept of school, which they regard as an important institution for education.

The school also means hard work under good learning conditions and will be the possibility high vocational aspirations will come true in the future.

The concept of school includes good relations to peers, not built on competition but on cooperation and friendship. The concept also involves interested and positive teachers which are regarded as resources.

There is no clear gender differences in the material although the boys more often use the opportunity to write comments on their drawings.

Even if there is a lot of racism in Sweden, especially towards Africans and Muslims, none of the students refer experiences of that kind in the drawings as well as in the interviews. No signs of protection against or resistance to assimilate into the Swedish society are to be found in the drawings and the interviews.

The attitude of school as a place of piece and quiet is totally opposite from studies of the school and class climate in "Swedish schools".

The material is a first attempt to investigate educational experiences of Somalia refugee students and will in the future be more analysed and connected to research and theories of "being one of the others".

