

Sheeko Xariir / A Story to Connect Us

Somali-American Storytelling in the Classroom

by Ruth Smith with Qorsho Hassan



In the beginning of every Somali storytelling experience is a beckoning . . .

66 *Sheekoy sheeko / Story, story*
Sheeko xariir / A story to connect us **99**
Waa baa waaxa jiri jiray / One day there was ...

Macallin Qorsho / Teacher Qorsho

Qorsho is an educator in the Somali community, in addition to being a co-researcher and co-author of this article. She has embraced the expertise drawn from Somali storytelling practices by encouraging her students to share stories, inviting members of the community into her classroom to share their stories, and to tell her own.

Qorsho and her sister were born in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her mother had come to the United States on a student visa. From Louisiana, her small family moved to Canada before settling in Atlanta, Georgia, during her elementary years. They later moved to Columbus, Ohio, where she is now a 3rd-grade teacher at a charter school in Columbus whose student population is primarily Somali.¹

¹ Adapted from Hassan and Smith 2017, 73-75.

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I think my experiences growing up have made me very much appreciate the hard work that my mother put into our upbringing. I was raised in an area where the people who lived there were very affluent, and I had the opportunity to go to Hilliard City Schools. Thinking about that in my adult years has really given me the opportunity to realize that I probably wouldn't be right here if I didn't go to those schools. I think about the privilege that I've had going to suburban schools and how that's led me to The Ohio State University. Basically pursuing education because I truly believe that no matter where you live you should get the best education and resources, and enforcing that as a reality.



Qorsho Hassan.

Photo by Asia Nuur. Used with permission from the artist. Previously published by Trillium Press.

I think that your twenties are for making mistakes and figuring out who you are. I have a better understanding of my family, that component has always been there. Education's coming around full circle being a teacher, but I still struggle with not the identity portion of who I am, but where I see myself.

I think that people assume that everyone has the same rights to education, but the truth of the matter is that's not the case. My family, particularly my mother and my uncle, fought really hard for that success to be attainable for my sister and me. They made sure that we were involved in many activities and I remember my mom, when we first moved to Hilliard, she knew that we would be anomalies, because we were one of the first Somali families. She made sure that while we were being integrated into the school, into the suburban life coming from inner-city schools, that we also retained our culture. Granted, I still went through a phase where I questioned my identity, but I never got to the point where I either didn't see myself as Somali or didn't see myself as American.

My mom made sure that there was a balance, and whether that was at home instilling the cultural values through food and language or whatever, but also making sure that we got the religious component like going to *dugsi* [religious school], and then being very involved in the American life as well. Watching TV and playing outside and doing all of these things that were quintessentially American, so it was a good balance and she made sure of that.

A lot of the times I think about what I want to do in ten years or twenty years. I don't see myself being complacent. I don't see myself staying necessarily here in Columbus or even in America. I don't know where in the world I might end up, but I just know that I'm not going to stay in one place or even field. I don't see myself being a teacher for very long. That always shocks people when I say that. I really want to write children's books, bilingual children's books that are very much necessary and needed in the community. I see myself doing a lot of outreach work for young women who live in Somalia, either some sort of youth program or even facilitating an all-girl Somali school. Something along those lines, but I see everything as short term and that's part of the religious component, that I know I'm going to die. At some point I need to make sure that all my goals are met, and that's why I don't want to be fixated on one for a very long time.

I didn't have any mentors, but I can definitely say that Mrs. Fulmer, my 4th-grade teacher in Atlanta, she showed me such compassion and as I teach I realize that I embody a lot of her methods. She was both compassionate and kind yet strict. One of the things that Mrs. Fulmer used to do was brain breaks and they weren't called that back then, but basically she let us move and gravitate and go where we needed to. I remember thinking for my ADHD brain and my ADD brain, because I have both, how powerful it was for her to let us move around and be kids. Oftentimes kids aren't allowed to do that today, they have to sit stationary for so many hours. Now, I call my students my friends. Granted they know there are boundaries, but they joke and they play and they are kids around me, and that's really important.

I would like to say that my role in the community first of all as a young Somali female is that I'm not afraid to be heard or seen in whatever capacity that is. I think when people see me they say, "Macallin Qorsho," which means Teacher Qorsho. They basically appreciate and are respecting my role as a teacher, but I think that I educate beyond that role, or educate beyond my capacity.

Hopefully I'm seen as someone who is trying to shed light on the positive work of young Somalis, but also bring light to the changes that need to happen and the challenges that we need to overcome. There's a balance and I think that's really important, that we have a balanced perspective. It's not one-sided, we're just not saying the Somali community is roses, because no community is. We do have our thorns but we need to be actively removing them, in whatever, whichever way we can. I feel like I do that in my own way, every day.²

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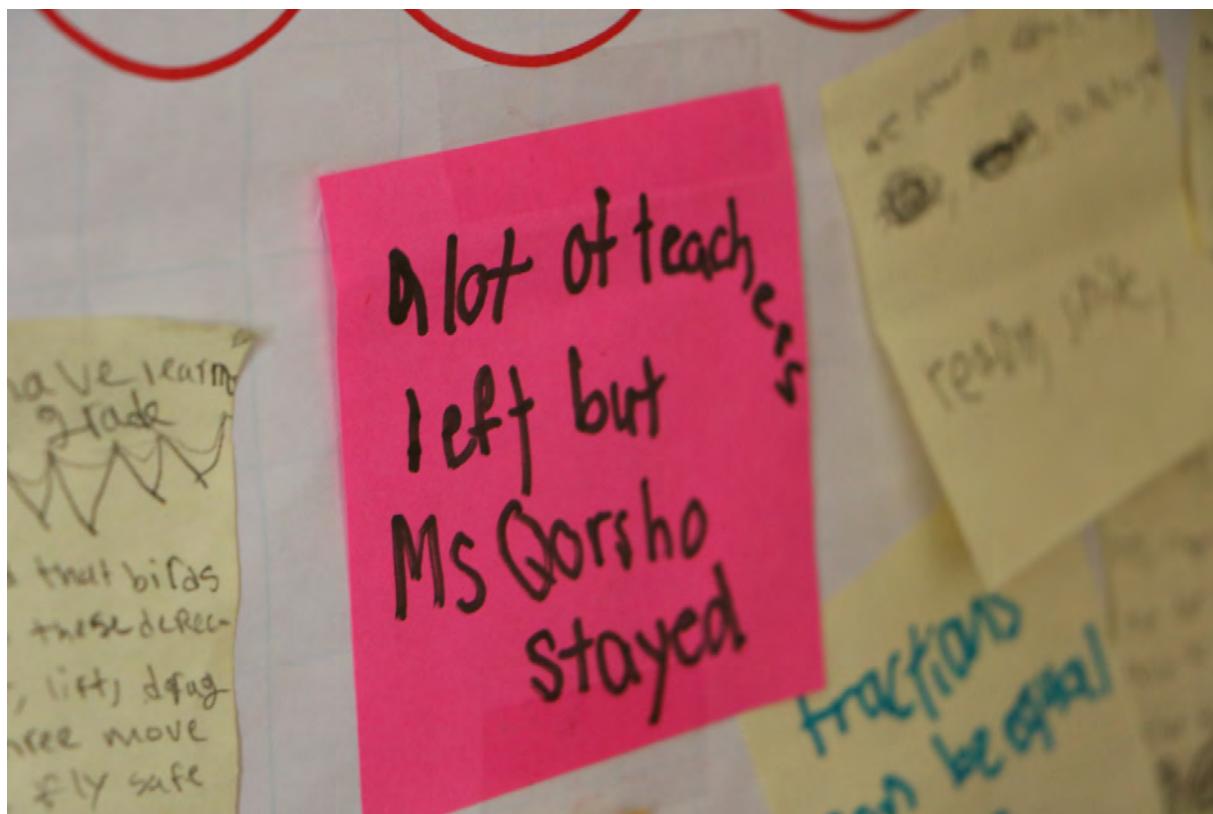
Mashruuca / An Initiative Started through a Partnership

In 2016, the photonarrative initiative *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between* documented the stories of Somali-Americans in Columbus, Ohio. *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah*, which means a *Community In-Between*,³ derives its title from the Somali *maahmaah*/proverb: *dhex iyo dhexaad/betwixt and between*. Through the stories of our participants, we identified overarching experiences of navigating multiple identities, the importance of education and giving back to the community, and the unique challenges and assets of community building in diaspora. One of the major themes among 1.5- and second-generation Somali-Americans was the importance of

² Hassan quoted in Hassan and Smith 2017, 73-75.

³ The Dublin Arts Council is presenting *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between* in collaboration with guest preparators Ruth Smith and Qorsho Hassan. Additional support is provided by state tax dollars allocated by the Ohio Legislature to the Ohio Arts Council (OAC). The OAC is a state agency that funds and supports high-quality arts experiences to strengthen Ohio communities culturally, educationally, and economically.

mentorship and how stories helped facilitate mentoring. This finding led to further investigation on how mentorship through storytelling can bring new ways of learning and knowing into educational environments. After a brief introduction to the project and its results, we present Qorsho's story as a Somali-American educator and the ways in which she uses storytelling in her classroom to cultivate a culture of mentorship. We conclude by offering strategies for educators working with newcomer and second-generation students.



"A lot of teachers left, but Miss Qorsho stayed." Qorsho's students wrote reflections on what they learned and felt during a thinking activity on their last day of 3rd grade.

Photo by Ruth Smith. Previously published by Trillium Press.

Qorsho and I met while I was volunteering at an afterschool program in the Global Mall, one of two Somali malls in Columbus. Columbus is home to the second largest Somali population in the U.S., approximately 55,000 in number.⁴ Many Somalis reside in the Northeast area of Columbus where dozens of shops in strip malls include Somali halal markets, home health cares, day cares, and clothing stores. Qorsho was interning at the Somali Cultural and Research Institute, which at the time was across the hall from the afterschool program, translating Somali folk tales for a

⁴ "Counting the Franklin County Population." Estimates range from 15,000 to 60,000. Although 5,935 Somalis have been officially resettled as refugees ("Impact... Report" 2016, 23), the majority arrived through secondary and chain migrations. These migration patterns make counting the Somali population difficult, as no official records of movement are kept.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a qualitative research process in which community participants are actively engaged in determining and carrying out the processes of inquiry, analysis, and presentation. PAR forefronts relationships, education and the goal of transformation and social change.

Additional PAR Resources

- Hunter, Lisa, Elke Emerald, and Gregory Martin, eds. 2013. *Participatory Activist Research in the Globalized World: Social Change through the Cultural Professions*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Kindon, Sarah, Rachel Pain, and Mike Kesby, eds. 2007. *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*. London: Routledge.
- McIntyre, Alice. 2008. *Participatory Action Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- McTaggart, Robin. 1997. *Participatory Action Research: International Contexts and Consequences*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Reason, Peter and Hilary Bradbury, eds. 2001. *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, 363-371. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

second-generation Somali-Americans,⁷ I immediately agreed. I approached a colleague at the Dublin Arts Council about a seedling idea for a photonarrative exhibit, and since then the Dublin Arts Council has generously supported the development and presentation of *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between*.

Narratives concerning the Somali community are often told by outsiders in both academia and popular culture (Ismail 2015, n p.). To address this disparity, Qorsho and I work intentionally as partners across cultural and religious lines, employ participatory forms of research, and use participants' words and community artists' work. Since that first conversation in 2015, we have interviewed 15 Somali-Americans between the ages of 18 and 40. In addition, we offered a photography scholarship to two female Somali student community artists, who received a camera, participated in a workshop with artist Riya Jama at the Dublin Arts Council, and had the

bilingual children's book project.⁵ In the years that followed, we worked together on a narrative participatory photography project exploring Somali women's experiences⁶ and met regularly for coffee. At one such meeting, I reflected on my observations of the young Somali-Americans I met through my work who were actively building community. Although Somalis have been living in Columbus for over 25 years, the community is still seen as being in the process of integration (DachenBach 2015, n.p.; Roble and Rutledge 2008; Chambers 2017). This conversation turned to issues of immigrant and refugee identities and the labels and feelings associated with them. We felt that little had been shared about the emerging generation of Somali-Americans, their experiences, and their contributions.

As a participatory action researcher who values collaboration, education toward social justice, and a belief that research should lead to action, when Qorsho suggested we look more at this issue of community building among 1.5- and

⁵This project was not published but was meant to be used by the Columbus community and local educators. The Minnesota Humanities Center has published four Somali folk tales, available at <http://www.mnnesotahumanities.org/somalibooks>.

⁶ See "A Participatory Photography Project," 2014.

⁷ We define 1.5-generation Somali-Americans as Somalis who were born elsewhere but have spent the majority of their lives in the U.S. and second generation Somali-Americans as those who were born in the U.S.

opportunity to take portraits of the participants. The portraits, narratives, and artifacts collected from participants have been curated into an exhibit at the Dublin Arts Council on view August 8 through November 3, 2017. In addition, our research has been shared in book form with Trillium Press (Hassan and Smith 2017), via social media following the style of Humans of New York,⁸ and through programming developed with the Dublin Arts Council and the Ohio History Connection. Our partnership is contributing to knowledge about Somali experience in diaspora, and we maintain a strong commitment to outreach and networking both within and outside the Somali community of Columbus. This manifests in the development of posters featuring the stories of our participants distributed to nonprofits and schools serving Somali youth and community forums on topics raised during our interviews such as representation in law enforcement, political involvement, and resettlement. We also advocate for opportunities such as the photography scholarship empowering two student Somali-American artists.



Qorsho and author with guests at the exhibit opening.

Courtesy of Dublin Arts Council.

Our **photonarrative exhibit** features the stories and portraits of 15 participants. The process of creating this work draws from the PAR method, narrative participatory photography, which engages community members in collaborative photography and storytelling. Its explicit political and educational aim emphasizes collaborative artmaking and storytelling; relationship, community, and research; curation as a form of analysis; and the consideration of multiple audiences and modes of presentation.

Additional Resources

Smith, 2015, 2014 a&b.

Wang, Carolyn. 1999. Photovoice: A Participatory Action Research Strategy Applied to Women's Health. *Journal of Women's Health*. 8.2: 185-192.

Wang, Carolyn and Michelle. A. Burris. 1997. Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*. 24.3: 369-373.

⁸ Follow *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between* on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ururdhexdhexaadah or on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/ururdhexdhexaad>.

Soomaalida Columbus / Somalis in Columbus

Since the years leading up to the Somali civil war (1991-present), millions of Somalis have been displaced around the world. In Columbus, newcomers have been met with mixed receptions. They continue to be welcomed and supported by governmental and nongovernmental organizations offering vital services. Several arts-based and educational initiatives have emerged to raise awareness and provide cultural education.⁹ Yet many agree that the city was unprepared for the large influx of secondary migrants. Fueled by the current political climate, anti-Somali ideologies based on cultural racism, nativism, and Islamophobia persist (Waters 2012, 79), and Somalis in Columbus are caught in the crosshairs of racial tensions, Islamophobia, and an increasingly volatile debate about immigration and refugee resettlement policies.

The Somali community in Columbus has a significant economic and social impact (“Impact... Report” 2016). There are an estimated 600 Somali-owned businesses (“Community Highlights” 2005) and eight Somali mosques. Roughly 2,000 Somalis are enrolled in higher education (“Community Highlights” 2005), several charter and private schools cater to Somali students, and numerous nonprofits run by and employing Somalis provide services such as tutoring, dropout prevention, parent advocacy, case management, and more. There is a strong connectedness among Somalis in diaspora as seen in the sharing of resources and a spirit of entrepreneurship.

Despite their successes, separation between communities, economic disparities,¹⁰ and lack of political representation continues. Somali residential neighborhoods and business opportunities are often developed in areas with overall economic depression, low-performing schools, and high crime rates. The ability to stay within an ethnic enclave, limited human capital,¹¹ financial obligations to family in diaspora and in Somalia, and racial identification present barriers to integration into American society (Abdi 2011, Ali 2009, Waters 2012). For these reasons, some say that although Somalis have achieved much in Columbus, they are still “preparing to fully participate in American society” (Roble and Rutledge 2008, 18).¹² Participation, an alternative to assimilation, entails choosing which aspects of U.S. culture to adopt and those from which to refrain. Benchmarks of participation, including political representation; educational opportunities; involvement with local law enforcement; and the building of schools, community spaces, and businesses, are only the beginning of a strong community.

⁹ For example, The Ohio State University K-12 Somali Teacher Workshop (Moore and Joseph 2011), Dumarka Soomaaliyed Voices Unveiled (“A Participatory Photography Project” 2014; Smith 2014a&b, 2015), The Somali Documentary Project (Roble and Rutledge 2008), Tariq Tarey’s visual ethnography including a collection of photographs from the show “Forlorn in Ohio” permanently housed at the Columbus Museum of Art and the film *Nasro’s Journey*, shown on WOSU public television in 2012 (Tarey 2016), and Mohamud Dirios’ Somali Cultural and Research Institute (“Somali Cultural and Research Institute” 2015).

¹⁰ The average median household income is roughly \$10,000 less for a refugee family than the county average (“Community Highlights” 2005, 23).

¹¹ Human capital includes personal assets such as education, knowledge, habits, social and personality attributes, and competencies that yield economic value. Social capital, on the other hand, is the individual and collective benefits derived from relationships, networks, and connections between people.

¹² DachenBach (2015) and Chambers (2017) also assess the Somali community as still in the process of integration. Chambers attributes the reasons for this to the unique cultural and political systems seen in minimal philanthropic support, fragmentation among community leadership, nonunionized low-wage labor, and a lack of representation in local politics and law enforcement.

Waa baa waaxa jiri jiray / One day there was....: Identity, Networks, and Mentorship

Through participants' oral histories, photographs, and collection of artifacts, we found that individuals play unique, although often overlapping, roles of mentor, leader, and connector in their efforts to build a strong community. Their stories illustrated the heterogeneity and flexibility of *Somalinimo*/Somali identity within the American context, which has shifted in meaning from an all-encompassing ethnic, racial, and religious identity to maintaining a connectedness across national borders and generational boundaries through shared values, religious practice, and language (Hassan and Smith 2017). Their stories also brought to light the ways that Somalis

growing up in diaspora navigate multiple identities and consciousness (Somali, Black, Muslim, gender, immigrant/refugee, diasporan) and locate their multicultural knowledge, critical and creative energies, and the ways they are creators of their own destinies as individuals and as a community within the many interconnected dynamics of Somali-American life. These stories depict individuals succeeding in response to (rather than despite) challenges and traumas. And while these identities are fluid, we are careful to avoid falling into cosmopolitan, or global, nomadism, which denies a critical contemplation of social, political, and economic disparities (Demos 2013, 1–20). The individuals in this project are aware of the effects of these intersections and well versed in navigating them. They work to improve fluency among themselves and others through participation in a variety of groups aimed to serve, mentor, lead, and connect.

Secondly, we confirmed the importance of internal and external networks. Roble and Rutledge (2008) emphasize the importance of a fluid exchange between other cultural communities. Moreover, in Columbus this entails building reciprocal relationships with host community organizations as we have done within this project through our partnership with the Dublin Arts Council, alliances with other immigrant and cultural communities, and strong interfaith networks. An important element of these relationships is developing an understanding of the diaspora networks. For example, Somali Political Action Group (SPAG) connects with other Somali political groups, especially in Minneapolis, as well as local politicians.

Thirdly, we found that diversification of careers is particularly important, as there is an expectation that youth pursue careers in health care for example. However, to build a strong community, there is need for a range of pursuits: law enforcement, social work, education, arts and culture, business, social services, and more. The first step is letting youth know the options available, from volunteering to creative careers. Because of their positionality and connection to both Somalis and



Guests at the exhibit opening.

Courtesy of Dublin Arts Council.

Americans, Somali-Americans are able to bridge generational and cultural gaps in these fields that have, up to this point, inhibited many from either using their services or pursuing careers in them.

Finally, we discovered a strong proclivity toward mentorship. One aspect of giving back, a value rooted in both Somali culture and Islamic practice, is recognizing the connectedness of individuals and the community. If an individual succeeds, so does the community, but if the community fails, so does the individual. Eight of the 10 participants who specifically addressed whether they had a professional mentor or role model answered no. All but one of these respondents are in careers outside health care. For many, as first-generation college students, there were further challenges ranging from not understanding the institutional bureaucracy to navigating financial aid, all the while not having someone who has been through the process to answer questions. Moreover, our two community artists both responded that Riya Jama's mentorship was one of the most valuable aspects of the scholarship and workshop. Finally, all participants, including the community artists, spoke of ways they wanted to provide mentorship opportunities to those younger than they are. Thus, several participants indicated the necessity for bringing youth into their workplace, talking with them about possibilities, and developing intercultural exchanges.

Lataliyaal / Mentors

Our interviews indicate that much of this mentoring is done through storytelling. Storytelling is culturally important for Somalis (Afrax 2010). Stories document the vibrancy of lived experiences and perspectives; impart a moral or lesson; invoke thoughts, feelings, and inspiration; and transcend time and space.¹³ The Somali oral tradition acknowledges the virtues of memory, which “presupposes two things: the existence of a pool of memorizers and, secondly, a constant repetition of the ‘word’ for its survival” (Ahmed 2002, 1). In Somali oral culture, young people are taught about their heritage and history through different storytelling mediums, allowing each generation to preserve its wisdom and that of preceding generations selectively for posterity (Ahmed 2002, 1). Even in diaspora, when Somalis come together, they share experiences, encode them through the telling of stories, and increase the number of stories in the cultural repertoire. Agency is cultivated through storytelling in which narrators take ownership of their stories, and, although the telling is autonomous, together stories create a bank of knowledge, tradition, and group memory.

The individuals in *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between* share experiences of growing up, and in doing so pass along and contribute to group memory within the diaspora (particularly important because diaspora spans multiple generations, unique from other immigrant experiences). These stories assist in the preservation of culture as well as affirm individuals' cultural identity as they navigate their own intersectionality within community. In the remainder of this article, we continue Qorsho's story as documented in *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between*, and examine how mentorship through storytelling among second-generation Somali-Americans brings new ways of learning and knowing into learning environments.

Waxbarid / Educate: Integrating Storytelling into the Classroom

Qorsho sees her commitment to community involvement really beginning around 9/11 when she started teaching people about what it was like to be both Muslim and American. From that point on, she used whatever resources and power she had to make a difference. First as a volunteer with

¹³ Ahmed (2002) examines the stylistic devices used in the memorization, telling, and craft of poems, stories, and songs.

the Somali Bantu community, then as an AmeriCorps volunteer with at-risk kindergarteners and a Fulbright teacher in Malaysia, and now as a teacher in Columbus.¹⁴ As she reflects upon her classroom, Qorsho shares that her mom calls her *miro dhaliso*, which basically means the sower of seeds:

That's just the perfect way to describe what I do. I cultivate [the students] but they have the power and the means to grow. That's my focus right now, is sowing those seeds and building bright young leaders who are inquisitive, who don't just take information, they question it. Who are both proud of their ancestors but also proud to be an American, which is something that I need to stress often because a lot of them feel very comfortable being Somali, but have questions about being American. It's also just refreshing to have that dialogue with them, because I know that they don't feel safe in certain spaces to have those conversations. (Hassan, personal interview 2016)

She attributes part of her success to her identity as a Somali-American. But, her integration of storytelling—sharing her story with her students, listening to theirs, and bringing the stories of others in the diaspora into the classroom—helps connect students to their past, their present, and their future. Due, in part, to this realization Qorsho also insists that her students “really need to see people who are like them teaching them and understanding them, and understanding the nuances of being a Somali-American because there are a lot of things that they don't really see eye to eye with their parents, but then they see eye to eye with me. I can sense how comfortable and how relieved they are to have me as their teacher versus a non-Somali teacher, but then I also realize how much of an impact they have on me” (Hassan, personal interview 2016). Stories have the power to affirm and promote characteristics of personal identity, including the students’ identity as immigrants, refugees, or children of such, as well as their identity as Muslims and Somalis. Too often the stories that are heard and then retold are crafted by outsiders to their experience. The significance of Qorsho’s work to bring these stories into her classroom and create a space for a culturally centered telling of stories about experiences of both challenges and successes is vitally important.

While stories can reinforce master narratives and structural inequalities that often go “unmarked” in mainstream discourse, we also recognize the opportunities that stories create for self-representation and agency through participatory research practices. Telling stories together and creating a space for participants to speak for themselves cultivates a counternarrative to the stories crafted by outsiders. One way this counternarrative is re-presented is in the creation and distribution of inspirational posters featuring the portraits of each participant in *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between*, a key attribute derived from the values and experiences of the participants, and a quote expanding on that attribute. These attributes include words such as passion, advocate, network, justice, understanding, tolerance, guidance, independence, educate, integrity, advocate, community, humility, self-awareness, knowledge, and respect. Each has been explained and defined through the stories that individuals share. The attributes, the quotations, and the portraits that accompany them on the posters collectively redefine success among Somali-Americans. For example, Qorsho’s attribute is *waxbarid* / educate and her mother’s story, her own

¹⁴ Adapted from Hassan and Smith 2017, 73-75.

experiences growing up in American schools, and her position now as a teacher are interwoven into her narrative as well as her teaching practice.

Another way Qorsho has promoted storytelling in her classroom is by cultivating an environment of mentorship. Qorsho frequently invites successful Somali-Americans into her 3rd-grade class to talk about their careers, their education, and issues relevant to them. These guest speakers share stories of challenges and success to develop a career consciousness, cultivate a new representation of success, and demonstrate Somalis in a variety of careers. These stories create a databank of possibilities for Somali students and become interwoven into their own stories.

An additional crucial element of Qorsho's story is her presence. At the end of the 2015-16 school year, Qorsho assigned her students to write how they felt and what they learned that year on Post-it notes. Posted in the middle of the board of notes, which I saw over the following summer in her home office, one student wrote, "Many teachers left, but Miss Qorsho stayed." Miss Qorsho stayed. Putting in the time, showing up, and making a commitment to a community of students cannot be overlooked. Without a listener, stories cannot be shared. Without a teller, the pool would have nothing to pass on. Without a curator, some stories may be overlooked and a sense of the collective may be missed.

This is the challenge that *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between* has sought to address—documenting the stories of 1.5- and second-generation Somali-Americans; exploring the ways that these individuals are contributing to their communities and find themselves in between cultures, communities, and identities; and finally identifying the interconnections between individual experiences. The stories share experiences navigating these waters, contribute to group memory, and connect stories of individuals within the diaspora. This group memory generates a bank of stories to be retold, critically assessed, and internalized, creating deep roots and imparting valuable lessons to youth following them. These individuals are creatively and critically addressing disparities between the Somali community and greater Columbus, the lack of role models for Somali youth, and a myriad of other issues related to community building in the diaspora. Their stories create space for a story about belonging.



Qorsho with her students. Photo by Ruth Smith.

In a recent article posted on The Somali Literacy Project¹⁵ (a great resource for educators working with, and parents of, Somali students), Qorsho shared some reflections on teaching Somali students (“Reflections...” 2016). Much of the article revolved around culturally responsive teaching and having positive perspectives of parents and families brought over the “threshold of the school door” (Deafenbaugh 2015, 76). We elaborate upon these reflections in the context of storytelling in a classroom.

First, learn more about the culture of your students. The more you show interest in your students’ background, the more they’ll open up to you. Asking simple questions like, “What kind of activities do you do for Eid?” will allow your students to share their experiences with you. These questions prompt children to share their own stories, creating as we did in *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between* a modicum for belonging. This also provides an opportunity to create group memory within the diaspora, an important element in Somali oral tradition.

Second, incorporate the culture in the classroom whenever possible. You can use Somali folk tales for literacy lessons, place bilingual dictionaries in the classroom library, and display Somali translated number and color charts, all of which can easily be found online. Learning a few Somali words helps too, one reason we write as much as possible in *Urur Dhex-Dhexaad Ah: Community In-Between* in both Somali and English.

Third, create a space for appreciation of different cultures in the classroom. Offer opportunities for students to share their culture and their parents’ narratives in the classroom. This allows non-Somali students to share similarities and understand differences. Moreover, within a common experience, individual stories are nuanced. As we analyzed the individual stories within broader themes in the exhibit, we were careful to preserve unique experiences while maintaining an interconnectedness among our 15 narratives.

Finally, engaging parents can be challenging, especially if there is a language barrier. While many newcomer parents are able to understand spoken English, they may have difficulty expressing their thoughts and concerns. Be patient and understanding of their situation and give them time to respond and conceptualize their ideas. This goes for students as well. Providing a space for students to think, conceptualize their ideas, and respond will promote a more truthful and open environment. Time and again in the stories of our participants, education was highly valued, but often there was little knowledge of how to navigate the education system.

Understanding the role of storytelling in Somali culture and the diaspora can transform teaching practice and relationships in the classroom. While these suggestions are specific to Somali students, the underlying value of students’ cultures and the encouragement of storytelling in the classroom apply across the board. The telling and listening of stories is important and imparts valuable lessons for the classroom and all our diverse cultural lives.

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¹⁵ Find it at <https://thesomaliliteracyproject.com>.

community in Columbus, she is co-founder of Muslim Neighbors www.muslimneighbors.com and the Interfaith Leaders of Greater Lafayette.

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