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## **A struggle for equitable partnerships: Somali diaspora mothers' acts of positioning in the practice of home-school partnerships in Danish public schools**

**Noomi Christine Linde Matthiesen**

Department of Teachers Education, Aarhus, VIA University College, Aarhus,  
Denmark

### **Abstract**

*Drawing on positioning theory this study investigates how Somali diaspora mothers actively struggle to be recognized by teachers in Danish public schools as equitable partners in their children's education. The study takes into account the historically and politically constituted conditions for positioning work and argues that these mothers navigate skillfully in these conditions explicitly positioning themselves as both 'supportive assistants' and 'responsible parents'. However, the analysis shows that these mothers have narratives of unjust treatment of both themselves and their children in schools, but the struggle to be recognized as equitable partners inhibits their possibilities of taking up the position of 'advocate for their child'. They are thereby drawn into a position of 'passive complacency'. Additionally the article argues for a more encompassing understanding of positioning theory that takes into account the constituted conditions as well as embodied and material aspects of constitutive here-and-now negotiations.*

### **Introduction**

Taking into account the socially, politically and historically created conditions, this article investigates how Somali diaspora mothers actively struggle to be recognized by teachers in Danish public schools as equitable partners in their children's education. Research shows that ethnic minority parents and/or immigrant/refugee parents tend not to engage in

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home-school partnerships in the same way as ethnic majority parents do (e.g., Intxasuti, Etxeberria, & Joaristi, 2013). Much empirical work points out that these parents are perceived as not interested in their children's education (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Dahlstedt, 2009; Dennesen, Bakker & Gierveld, 2007; Blakely, 1983; Theodorou, 2008; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Guo, 2012). Additionally parents are perceived by teachers and principals as lacking sufficient skills to discipline and raise their children adequately (Lawson, 2007; Dahlstedt, 2009; Roy & Roxas, 2011). Others suggest that immigrant and refugee parents do not get involved in their children's education because they do not know how to do so (Dennesen, Bakker & Gierveld, 2007; Vera, et. al., 2012; Bitew & Ferguson, 2010; Ibrahim, Small & Grimley, 2009). This lack of familiarity with the western educational system is exemplified by Bitew and Ferguson (2010) who write that in Ethiopia parents traditionally only contacted schools when there were serious problems with their child, hence immigrant parents from Ethiopia in New Zealand tended not to contact the schools. Much research thus points out that immigrant/refugee parents seemingly lack certain skills and interest necessary to engage in their children's education.

An extensive body of research, however, has made the argument that home-school partnerships are school-centric in the sense that only those practices that the schools deem valuable are recognized as active engagement (Orosco, 2008; Thodorou, 2008; Carreón, Drake & Barton, 2005). Some research shows how particularly ethnic minority and immigrant/refugee parents engage in their children's development and education in a number of ways that go unrecognized by professionals (e.g. Lawson, 2003; Lopez, 2001; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006). Additionally, research has argued that this school-centric notion of home-school partnerships is based on western middle class norms that result in certain groups of persons being marginalized as their ways of engaging in their children's lives is not perceived as adequate (Dahlstedt, 2009; Dannesboe et. al. 2012; Lareau, 1987). It has been pointed out that many immigrant and refugee parents feel discriminated against in their home-school relations (Guo, 2012; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Jimenez-Catellanos & Gonzalez, 2012) experiencing that teachers judged them and held low expectations of their children and of them as parents (Shim, 2013; Rimirez, 2003). Additionally Shim (2013) and Carreón, Drake and Barton (2005) show that immigrant parents feel unable to influence teacher's decision-making and some parents do not express their opinions to teachers because they fear negative repercussions if they speak up.

However, despite this substantial inequality evident in the field of parental involvement of ethnic minorities, few researchers have examined how ethnic minority and immigrant/refugee parents cope with this dissatisfaction and how they go about actively struggling against marginalization and discrimination. Lareau and Horvat (1999) show how Afro-Americans are very aware of the history of racial discrimination and therefore challenge teachers on the basis of this awareness. Freeman (2010) shows how working class parents actively position themselves as responsible parents based on knowledge that they are not perceived as middle class parents and at the same time not wanting to be perceived as lower-class parent. No research, however, has examined the strategies used by immigrant and refugee parents in order to be recognized as responsible and equitable partners in their children's education.

Positioning theory provides a lens through which we can understand how persons navigate in their structural, societal and personal conditions and thereby negotiate their identity and their possibilities of participation. Based on a case study of home-school relationships

between Somali diaspora families and teachers in public schools in a Danish context, this article explores how these Somali diaspora mothers actively negotiated their positions in the parent-teacher conferences and in the interviews with the researcher. However, the article challenges the theoretical adequacy of positioning theory as a tool to make sense of interpersonal negotiations. Instead it is argued that it is necessary to draw on perspectives from social practice theory in order to comprehend the complexity of the conditions for negotiations. Furthermore, it is argued that persons not only actively negotiate their positions as well as being positioned by others, but are also *drawn* into positions. This point is initially argued theoretically and subsequently exemplified empirically.

The article takes its departure in a description of positioning theory arguing for the need to incorporate the concept of ‘participation’ in order to fully understand how persons go about negotiating their *being* in the world. Subsequently a description of the context is provided showing how immigrant/refugees are perceived in Danish society as well as which understandings of parent-teacher partnerships underlies the practice in a Danish context. Hereafter follows a description of the method and participants leading up to the findings of the study and a discussion hereof.

## Positioning theory

The notion of ‘position’ was introduced as a dynamic and immanent alternative for the static and overarching concept of ‘role’ found in social psychology (Davies & Harré, 1991). Goals, concerns, perspectives and purposes are not static but are constantly negotiated, and persons thus actively and dynamically position themselves and others in moment-to-moment interactions as certain ‘types’ of subjects in a concretely situated context (Burr, 2003). There are three key notions in positioning theory that are clearly described by Harré and Moghaddam (2003):

1. *Positions* are constituted by a cluster of rights and duties to perform certain acts, which may mean being excluded from performing other social acts. They are a part of a moral normative order in the sense that they involve ‘oughts’, i.e. if one participates from a certain position there are certain ways of doing things that one is expected to oblige in doing. Positions can be taken up, ascribed, imposed and negotiated. Furthermore, ‘positioning’ always occurs in relation to another and in a concrete context.
2. *Storyline* is the term used to describe certain norms and already established patterns of action that are loosely defined by normative conventions. The concept of ‘storylines’ situates interactions in historically and socially produced contexts where the meanings of what people say and do are already produced.
3. The term ‘*acts*’ is used to underscore the understanding that all social actions perform a specific act. Positioning theory draws on Austin’s (1961) distinction of illocutionary force where an utterance accomplishes a certain action, and the perlocutionary force where a specific purpose is achieved. For instance van Lagenhove and Harré (1999) describe how an illocutionary force can be ‘congratulating’ while the perlocutionary force is ‘pleasing the recipient’.

Although positioning theory argues that the theory focuses on “all the ways in which people actively produce social and psychological realities” (Davies & Harré, 1991, p. 45), the linguistic domain has been the primary focus of the theory (Harré et al., 2009). Lave (2011) argues that “[...] subjects, *objects*, lives and worlds are made in their relations.” (p. 152, my italics). It is therefore important to take into account how positioning is done through and by material objects. For instance, wearing a headscarf positions me as one type of person whilst wearing a baseball cap positions me as another type. This point will be further illustrated through the empirical analysis.

Additionally recent developments of positioning theory have had an increasing cognitive focus which weakens the strength of the concept as a tool for making sense of what people do in concrete situated historically and socially produced contexts. Harré et. al. (2009) write, “Positioning theory studies refer to cognitive processes that are instrumental in supporting the actions people undertake particularly by fixing for this moment and this situation what these actions mean” (p. 6). Although Harré et. al. (2009) explain that positioning theory is concerned with both “*implicit* and *explicit* patterns of reasoning” (p. 5, my italics), the cognitive focus on notions of *reasoning* implies a reflective act, i.e. not necessarily something that one ponders over, but none the less something that one could describe in rational terms if asked to do so. Bourdieu (1990), however, describes how the notion of ‘beliefs’ of normative socially acceptable ways of being (i.e. ‘storyline’ in positioning theory terms) is an *embodied* phenomenon in social practice, rather than a cognitive one and positioning theory can thereby be developed further by drawing on the concept of ‘practice’. Arguing that the social field can be understood as a ‘game’, Bourdieu writes that “one does not embark on the game by a conscious act, one is born into the game” (p. 67), and that being born into the game bestows a native membership, where one has a “feel of the game”. Entering into a specific social field as a non-member can be likened to learning a new language – speaking ones native language requires no reflexive energy, where as a new language requires much cognitive effort. The feel of the game entails a bodily sense of practical anticipation, where the ‘upcoming’ future, the next moment, contained here and now, is foreseeable, in a way that everything that takes place is experienced as reasonable and sensible. The world is thus not imposed on the person, who has to cognitively reflect on how to understand the world, but rather the person is entangled in the world, i.e. “It is an imminence in the world through which the world imposes its imminence, things to be done or said, which directly govern speech and action.” (p. 66).

Lave (2011) elaborates on this further, arguing that social life is not reducible to knowledge or cognitive reasoning but instead to collective *doing*. Being, i.e. social life, is thus a collective endeavor that is characterized by doing in a way that incorporates but is not exclusive to linguistic actions. Social practice is always historically and politically created and is (re)produced and changed through the concrete participation of persons in situated contexts (Dreier, 2008). This is in line with positioning theory’s concept of storyline, where certain norms and patterns of actions are already established (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003). Positions are thus not created out of context but are already available in specific situated practices (Dreier, 2008).

Positioning theory stresses that positions are negotiated in concrete practice. Likewise Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that participation in the world is always based on negotiations about how we can *be* in this concrete situated practice and how one is recognized as a certain kind of person. These negotiations are, however, not always based

on cognitive reasoning (explicit or not) but instead is a part of *being* in the world. Persons do not always take up positions or have positions imposed upon them, but are often *drawn* into the positions that are available in the context. Through this understanding of an embodied participation in the game, or world, the concept of positioning can be opened up and broadened so as to incorporate embodied ways of being that are pre-cognitive. As it will be shown in the empirical data, cognitive beliefs about moral normative rights and duties, are not always consistent with the ways in which positioning occurs in lived practices. ‘Positioning’ thus becomes a practical rather than a cognitive (or strictly linguistic) matter, where active positioning and interactions result in persons being *drawn* into certain positions that in turn create the conditions for active participation.

## **Historically/politically constituted conditions for positioning in the practice of home-school partnerships**

Denmark is a welfare state with a ‘knowledge-based economy’ where it is a central ambition in the educational system to be able to compete with other countries on ‘knowledge’. Since the introduction of the OECD PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) tests in 2000 it became apparent that, although Denmark had one of the world’s most expensive school systems, the pupils scored only average on the international rating (Anderson et al., 2001). Additionally, although it has always been apparent that immigrant and refugee children struggle in schools, PISA documented this tendency clearly. Furthermore it was worrying that in Denmark the students who are descendents of immigrants fared almost as badly in these international tests as students who themselves are immigrants (Mejding, 2004). There has thus been an increase in societal focus on educational outcome in Denmark, which is recognizable globally. One of the solutions turned to by policy makers and schools alike is ‘parental involvement’ (de Carvahlo, 2001).

The ambition of home-school relations in Denmark, as evident in the educational law since 1975<sup>1</sup>, is that parents and teachers are to ‘work together’ in joint collaboration ensuring the learning and development of the child (Dannesboe et al., 2012). The preamble of the educational law in 1975 thus states the following:

“The public school’s purpose is, *in cooperation with parents*, to ensure the opportunity for pupils to acquire knowledge, skills, work methods and manners of expression that will contribute to the individual’s overall development.” (Danish Educational Law, 1975, §1 p. 1, my translation, my italics).

This ambition and law determined demand is manifested in a number of practices: a minimum of one parent’s night per school year, where all parents in the class meet with the teacher(s); an online communication system, where homework, activities, trips etc. are notified; parent-teacher conference once per annum where parents and teacher(s) meet for a twenty minute consultation. The increased focus on educational outcome, however, has over the past forty years moved the focus of joint collaboration from ‘democratic participation’ to a school-centric notion of how parenting ought to be done. For instance,

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<sup>1</sup> Dannesboe et al. (2012) write 1974, as the law was passed in 1974 but was enforced in 1975. See [www.folkeskolen.dk](http://www.folkeskolen.dk).

in the school reform that was implemented in Danish public schools in August 2014 the role of parents is described in the following way:

Parents are a resource and must contribute to the schools work. Therefore it is specified in the educational law, that the school board's principles for collaboration between home and school also must include principles for parental responsibilities in the collaboration. (Agreement about professional improvement of the public school, 2013, p. 16).

Thereby the focus on parental responsibility is not defined as originating from responsible parents but rather as persons who adhere to duties and norms prescribed by experts (Knudsen & Andersen 2014). Knudsen (2012) has pointed out that the practice of home-school collaboration in Denmark is characterized by two contradictory discourses. On the one hand, parents are expected to support the teachers and aid them in their work. This discourse is termed the '*discourse of support*' by Knudsen (2012). Parents can thus, in this perspective, be seen as assistants to the experts, i.e. the teachers (Dannesboe et al. 2012; Dahlstedt 2009) and home-school collaboration becomes about answering the calls of the school, e.g. attending parent-teacher conferences, ensuring home-work is done, or baking a cake for the school bake-sale (Theodorou, 2007). Furthermore, research shows that schools are "relentless in their demands that parents display positive, supportive approaches to education" (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 38). In the Danish context this can for instance be seen in the objectives for the recently implemented school reform where objective number 3 (of 3) states:

Trust and wellbeing in the public school must be strengthened through, amongst other things, respect for professional knowledge and practice. (Agreement about professional improvement of the public school, 2013, p. 2)

It is thus important that parents show support and not criticism towards schools showing respect for school perspectives and professionalism (e.g. Palludan, 2012). The other discourse is termed the '*discourse of responsibility*' which concerns an expectation, that parents take responsibility for their child's education and independently work towards ensuring the academic success of the child (Knudsen, 2012).

However, as argued in the introduction, there are certain groups of parents who are considered neither willing nor capable of living up to this responsibility of independent engagement or supportive teacher assistant. Research has shown that policy makers and schools have negative orientations towards immigrant and refugee parents, perceiving them as passive and disinterested in their children's education (Dahlstedt, 2009). For instance, in 2010 the Danish government allocated 56 million kroner (approx. 10 million US dollars) to enhance the collaboration between public schools and ethnic minority parents, as this group is thought not to sufficiently live up to their responsibilities as parents (Dannesboe, et al., 2012). Several practices have over the past 15 years been introduced in order to teach parents how to engage in parenting in a way that adequately supports their child's education. The practice of *family schools* was started in 2003, where parents are taught how to parent 'correctly' (Knudsen, 2009). Additionally, in 2007 a game entitled "Health at play" was published, intended to teach parents to take responsibility for their children's diet (Knudsen & Andersen, 2014). Furthermore *whole-day schools* have been used in ethnic-minority dense areas ensuring that these children go to school for more hours spending less time at home. This allows the schools to compensate for parental lack of socialization skills and academic support (Holm, 2011).

Persons of Somali heritage are broadly considered the least ‘integrated’ group in Danish society thereby comprising a group that is generally not considered able to live up to their responsibility as parents (Fadel, Hervik & Vestergaard, 1999). A large group of Somali refugees arrived in Denmark in the mid to late 1990’s with a relatively large number of refugees still seeking asylum. There are approximately 20,000 persons of Somali heritage in Denmark (Denmark’s Statistics 2014a) which constitutes just 0.3% of the country’s population whereas in the city where the research was conducted the Somali Diaspora comprises 1.3%, thus constituting a more dense population in this particular city than in other parts of the country. Less than 30% of the Somali diaspora were employed at the end of 2013 (Denmark’s Statistics 2014b) and is thereby the refugee/immigrant group in Denmark with the lowest employment rate. Furthermore there has in recent years been a negative focus on the Somali diaspora in Denmark due to a series of incidents, where there has been significant media coverage. For instance, in 2010 there was an assassination attempt on the Danish cartoonist, Kurt Westergaard, who drew the Mohammed drawings of 2005, committed by a man of Somali heritage, as well as a recent incident of systematic social fraud amongst a large group of the Somali diaspora. A dominant societal understanding of the Somali diaspora is therefore that they do not wish to be integrated in society.

Additionally the 2012 PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) showed that pupils with ethnic minority backgrounds achieve significantly lower scores than ethnic majority pupils with the pupils with Somali heritage backgrounds achieving the lowest scores (Christensen, et al., 2012). The Somali diaspora thus constitutes a socially vulnerable and marginalized group in Danish society and persons of Somali heritage are thereby broadly considered neither *willing* nor *capable* of living up to the state and school defined requirements for parental responsibility.

## Method & Participants

The study followed four Somali diaspora families for 1 ½ years. Each family had a child in the third grade at the start of the project. The children went to two different schools, both located in an urban setting in a larger town in Denmark. The sound from parent-teacher conferences was recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim (a total of 9 parent-teacher conferences were recorded – 6 with a translator, 3 without). Participant observations were conducted by following the children across contexts, in class, after school programs, extracurricular activities and at home, where field notes were written. Parents and teachers were interviewed and subsequently transcribed. 5 formal interviews were held with Somali diaspora mothers (4 with a translator, 1 mother interviewed twice), 7 teachers were interviewed (2 were interviewed twice) and 2 school principals were interviewed. Several conversations were held during participant observations and field notes were written on these informal interviews held in the hallways, teacher’s rooms or with the parents at home. The interpreter used in the interviews was the parent-teacher liaison who was also the interpreter used at those parent-teacher conferences that required an interpreter. The interpreter was thus someone whom teachers and parents knew and seemed to trust.

The four families that participated in the project were all first generation refugees that moved to Denmark in the mid to late 1990’s. Three out of four of the families were divorced. This is common amongst the Somali diaspora in Denmark. Two of the fathers

did not participate in the lives of the family members. One father was married again and had young children with his second wife and found little time to participate in the daily routines of the family but did occasionally participate at parents meetings. The father in the family where mother and father were married, Muhammed, participated in parent-teacher conferences but did not wish to be interviewed and was never at home when I participated in home-life. The focus of this article is therefore on mothers. The schools characterized the home-school relationship with each of the families as ‘good’ and above ‘average’ when compared to other families in the Somali diaspora. The mothers also characterized their relationship with the school as ‘good’. Although this could be conceived of as a limitation, Flyvbjerg (2006) calls these critical cases and argues that when there are problematic dynamics in such cases it can be argued that these dynamics will most certainly be evident in the cases where the collaboration relationship is characterized as ‘bad’.

Details about the families are described in the table below:

| Name of parent (s) | Name of focus-child | Marital status                                       | Number of children | Employment  | Language skills   | Moved to Denmark |
|--------------------|---------------------|--|--------------------|---|---|------------------|
| Hadia <sup>2</sup> | Najma               | Divorced   | 5                  | Cleaning lady<br>Internship in daycare                            | Good – adequate for everyday communication                    | Adult            |
| Hanan              | Yousuf              | Divorced/<br>father sees children a few times a week | 3                  | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade subjects at an adult learning center (VUC) | Fluent with accent  | 14 years old     |
| Hooya              | Bilaal              | Divorced   | 4                  | On disability pension   | Useful sentences and phrases. Not able to hold a conversation | Adult            |
| Rahma & Muhammed   | Zaynab              | Married  | 6                  | Cleaning lady at a hotel/ fathers occupation is unknown           | Good – adequate for everyday communication                    | Adult            |

<sup>2</sup> All names of participants and places are pseudonyms in order to ensure participant anonymity.

The analysis drew on the concept of ‘positioning’. Firstly a thorough description of the historical, politically and socially produced context provided an analysis of the constituted conditions for positioning, i.e. which positions are available in the specific practice. The transcribed material from interviews and parent-teacher conferences as well as field notes from participant observations were coded focusing on how mothers discursively and through embodied participation positioned themselves as certain kinds of persons. The codes drew on an initial analysis of what ‘type of person’ the mothers were positioning themselves as. The codes were thereby developed through the empirical material. The initial analysis showed that there was a contradiction in the positioning work of these mothers, raising the further analytical question of how these positions interacted, creating possibilities and limitations for positioning work. The examples described in the following presentation of the analysis are chosen on the basis of their clarity and exemplary power.

## Findings

The analysis draws on the arguments of the above described historically, politically and socially produced context. As argued by Knudsen (2012) the discourse of ‘support’ and the discourse of ‘responsibility’ dominate the practice of home-school partnerships in the Danish educational context. At the same time, immigrant/refugee groups in general and the Somali diaspora in particular, are considered neither willing nor capable of engaging in their children’s education. The following analysis shows that the four Somali diaspora mothers actively produced themselves as both willing and capable of being involved in their children’s education by attempting to position themselves as ‘supportive assistant’ and as ‘responsible parent’. However, the analysis also shows that in the face of experienced unfairness and marginalization the position of dialogue was not available to them.

### Awareness of dominant societal positions

In interviews and informal conversations the participants in the project pervasively showed that they were aware of the dominant societal perspective of immigrants as persons that either are incapable of or do not want to engage in society in general or in their children’s education in particular. One example of this is seen in the following excerpt where a Somali diaspora mother, Hooya, and the researcher are driving together in the researcher’s car to another part of town where they are to meet with the translator, Ibrahim, with the purpose of conducting a formal interview:

We talk about how her children are doing. Hooya tells me about her oldest daughter who has a new baby. Hooya is upset that this means that the daughter struggles to get an education. She proudly tells me about her second daughter who does well in school and is in the process of deciding which university to apply for. Hooya changes the topic by stating, “You like immigrants, don’t you?” I laugh, and she goes on and explains that she thinks that there are many immigrants that are not good people but there are also many very good immigrants who want to do much for their children.

This excerpt shows how Hooya actively draws up a binary between “good immigrants” and “bad immigrants”. She thereby demonstrates awareness of the dominant societal

understanding of immigrants as “not good people” and creates an arena in which the position of “good immigrant” is possible by arguing that, despite this common perspective, there are many immigrants who are engaged in their children’s lives and their education in particular. By explaining that she thinks that it is a problem that her oldest daughter is not getting an education and by proudly discussing her second daughters educational path she positions herself as a person who values education, thereby positioning herself as a “good immigrant”. As we shall see, this form of positioning was common amongst the mothers.

### **Position of ‘supportive assistant’:**

At the end of a parent-teacher conference when Bilaal was in the third grade, his mother, Hooya, unsolicited, expresses her appreciation for the teacher’s efforts and says that she supports her son:

Hooya: I am here every single day to help him and support him linguistically and academically. I can sense that you do the same. You must tell me what I must do.

Hooya thus positions herself as a person who supports her child, as someone who is positive towards the school by recognizing the teacher’s efforts, but also as someone who needs to be guided in how to support her child, i.e. she positions the teachers as experts who have the knowledge about how her child achieves academic success. She thereby positions herself as someone who believes in the competencies of the professionals and is ‘on their side’ in a joint effort to ensure the education of her son.

In light of this positive stance the researcher asked in interviews whether the mothers wanted to change anything regarding their relationship with their children’s teachers. Most times the mothers answered that they were happy with the relationship as it was and stressed that they had a positive supportive attitude towards the school. One mother answered in the following way:

Rahma: If I was to say something, then the only thing is during the breaks, when the children are playing, there ought to be an adult present that keeps an eye on the children. But this isn’t a critique, just a suggestion.

Rahma thereby does venture a suggestion, thus positioning herself as someone who has opinions about her daughter’s education, but stresses that it is merely a “suggestion” and must not be understood as criticism. In this way she still positions herself as someone who is on the ‘side of the school’. Furthermore she shortly afterwards follows up with the following utterance:

Rahma: There is one thing that is very important, which is, that I am very happy with the teachers and with the school as a whole.

This exclamation underscores and emphasizes her position as someone who is positive towards the school, but also, although tentatively, as someone who has an opinion on how school could/should be done, i.e. she has opinions that are of value. These mothers are thus positioning themselves as *willing* to cooperate by taking up a position of ‘supportive assistant’.

### **Position of ‘responsible partner’:**

The Somali diaspora mothers positioned themselves in a broad array of ways as responsible partners that engaged in the education of their children as well as having valid independent opinions about their children's lives. One example is from a parent-teacher conference where the teacher, Steve, has explained to a mother, Hanan, that her son, Yousuf, has motivational problems. He proceeds by saying that there are things that Yousuf does well and says that Hanan should commend Yousuf when he does things well:

Steve: So I think that you should praise him for those things.

Hanan: Yes, I do praise him, so...

And later on in the conversation:

Steve: So it is about getting him started, uhm, getting him to work for things. Because it is a lot about [ ]

Hanan: [interrupts] He doesn't get much homework... I've noticed.

And later she follows up by saying:

Hanan: I don't do anything. I am just at home so I can help him [with homework].

Firstly Hanan positions herself as a person who actively engages in her child by saying that she praises her son when he does things well. When Steve continues to speak about the importance of getting Yousuf 'started' i.e. engaged in his work, Hanan interrupts and says that she has noticed that he doesn't get much homework. In this way she positions herself as a person that is engaged in her son's schooling by being aware of how much homework he has, and furthermore, as someone who has enough knowledge about schooling to determine whether the amount is an appropriate amount. She thereby positions herself as a person who is engaged, who is competent, but who is not provided with the necessary conditions to support her child, as he does not get homework where she can engage him and make him 'work for things'.

The mothers furthermore positioned themselves as active agents in their children's lives through material positioning. For example, Hooya lives with her family in a very sparsely furnished apartment. There is no furnishing or ornaments other than basic living room/dining room furniture except for a large whiteboard that hangs above the dining room table where the family does their homework. On the wall next to the white board hang several post-its with notices and appointments from the school. This choice in wall-furnishing positions Hooya as a mother who highly values education and engages actively in supporting her children's learning. Another example of a, perhaps more dynamic, material positioning is a situation where I am helping ten-year-old Zaynab do her homework at home in her apartment. Her mother, Rahma, sits on the couch breastfeeding Zaynab's 13 month old little sister whilst having a leisurely conversation with me. After breastfeeding the baby she picks up a book of nursery rhymes which she reads for the baby thereby actively positioning herself as a person who engages in activities that stimulates her child through a material object, namely a book.

Additionally these mothers position themselves as active persons in their children's lives through embodied participation. For instance, Najma and I walk home from Najma's after school program and go directly to a homework-support café in her housing area. We find her mother, Hadia, already at the café. After the researcher helped Najma with her homework, Hadia showed her around and introduced her (the researcher) to each of the

volunteers in the café. Although Hadia does not feel competent with regard to supporting Najma's homework activities, she successfully positions herself as actively engaged through her embodied participation in the particular context of homework support. Furthermore, through her introduction of the staff she shows that she spends much time in this supportive educational environment. These mothers thereby position themselves as *capable* of supporting their children and engaging in their education either by themselves or by employing strategies where they seek compensatory support.

### **Position of 'responsible supportive assistant':**

Often the mothers balanced between the two positions, i.e. responsible parent but also supportive assistant. For instance, when Bilaal started in the fourth grade he had new teachers, and Hooya says to them at the first parent-teacher conference:

Hooya: It is important for us to know which areas Bilaal struggles with, the areas where he needs to practice, and the areas where he has it under control. This is important for me, so that we can go home and talk about it and discuss what can be done better. And we need to increase our collaboration, you and I.

Here Hooya positions herself not only as a 'supportive assistant' but also as an assistant that is active and responsible and thereby worthy of partnership. A similar situation unfolds in a parent-teacher conference where Hadia tells the teachers that Najma has a mathematics tutor and subsequently asks if there is any specific areas where Najma needs extra work:

Hadia: She receives extra lessons, uhm, with a tutor.

Karen: okay.

Hadia: Not the school but from elsewhere. Is there any area where she struggles, where she needs help?

Through this interaction, Hadia positions herself as an engaged responsible mother that independently ensures sufficient academic support for her daughter but simultaneously as a person who seeks the expert knowledge that the teacher holds. She thus positions herself as positive toward the school with respect for the teacher's know-how and at the same time as a responsible parent who independently works actively toward ensuring the academic success of her daughter.

### **Position of resistance:**

The Somali diaspora mothers thus make an active effort to position themselves as positive towards the schools and as competent and active participants in their children's education. They thereby actively work towards being recognized as adequate collaboration partners. Parallel to this endeavor, nonetheless, these mothers told narratives of unfairness and inequitable treatment, although these narratives were always tentatively put forward. For instance, Hadia expresses that there are many narratives amongst immigrants that their children are not treated like "Danish" children:

Hadia: It is a feeling that most bilingual [immigrant] parents have, that their children are not treated like the others. And they all come home and tell about episodes where they have been treated unfairly. So in that way, there is a feeling of not being included in the community.

She stresses, however, that this is not the case with her daughter, Najma, whom the researcher followed. She told me a narrative of unjust treatment of her oldest son, but adamantly expressed that this was not an issue with the school in general but only with a particular teacher thereby successfully maintaining her position as positive and uncritical towards the school. But other narratives were told where it was clear that the position of equitable dialogue did not appear available to either these mothers or their children. Hooya, for instance, tells a story of how her son felt unfairly treated by his teacher, Anne, but did not feel that he could argue his case:

Hooya: One day, there was a conflict after the lesson and he became upset and was about to go home. He met his class teacher, Anne, and she started talking to him, trying to find out what had happened. But he didn't want to speak with her so he just walked past her and went home. She then phoned me and told me that she had just seen my son and that he didn't want to speak with her. I asked Bilaal, "how come you didn't talk to your teacher?" And he replied, "What use is it, mom? If I tell her what happened she would judge me anyway and say it was my fault so it is better if I just keep quiet and walk away."

Hooya explained that Bilaal and Anne had continually misunderstood each other and had previously had a strained relationship. Once again the narrative was in past tense, and when asked about their current relationship she assured the researcher that there were no present problems, underscoring the effort to painstakingly position oneself as positive.

This position of positivity toward the school has consequences for how the mothers guide and support their children. In the following excerpt Hadia explains that when the children come home and complain about an experience they have had in school it is the duty of the parents to be positive toward the school:

Hadia: If the children come home from school and tell us, "well the teacher told me off" or "I was sent out of the classroom, I was treated unfairly", then it is our job to not say to the children, "Okay, you are right, I will talk to the teacher". No, instead we say, "Are you sure, what you are telling me is correct? He told you off because you did this and this." So in that way you argue with the children, and explain to them that the teacher did not mean it negatively but in a positive way. [...]

Interviewer: So it is important to maintain a positive picture of the teacher?

Hadia: Exactly.

Through this narrative Hadia positions herself as a person who is not only positive towards the school on her own behalf but also actively engages in making sure her children are positive towards the school. Hooya expresses the same opinion and elaborates further:

Hooya: It is important, actually, that if the children feel that they are treated unfairly, if they feel that the teacher is always on their case, and if the children reach a point where they feel that enough is enough so they want to take up the fight, well then their future will be ruined.

Hooya hereby explains why this positioning as 'positive toward the school' is important, as she believes that a position of opposition or resistance will have immanent negative repercussions for the children. Hooya had previously experienced a situation where her son, Bilaal, had been continually language-tested by a speech therapist and at a parent-teacher conference she had requested the testing to stop because her son was upset every

time he was taken out of class to be tested. Although the teacher and the speech-therapist did not disagree with her at the time, the testing continued and Hooya remained silent. The interviewer therefore asked her why she didn't speak up when the teacher blatantly ignored her wish:

Hooya: Because I didn't want to take up the fight with them. I wanted to try to get out of this [the testing] in a way where they do not get angry at me and in a way where there are no misunderstandings between myself and them because I am afraid that it will create problems for Bilaal.

Interviewer: Bilaal?

Hooya: Yes, so I control my temper and say, how can I get us out of this situation so that my son doesn't get into trouble.

The position of equitable dialogue is thus not available to either parents or children. The attempt to position themselves as positive supportive teacher-assistants thus means that the mothers become paralyzed with regards to supporting their children in the face of racism and unjust treatment. A position of positivity, of compliance, thus seems necessary to them in order to ensure a good schooling for their children.

## Discussion

The description of the historically and politically created context showed that there are two dominant discourses in the Danish practice of home-school partnerships:

1. the discourse of support where parents assist the teachers who are considered experts
2. the discourse of responsibility where the parents must live up to certain understandings of independent engagement where they actively work towards ensuring their child's academic success (Knudsen, 2012).

The available positions in the practice of home-school partnerships are thus the position of 'supportive assistant' and the position of 'responsible parent'. However, the Somali diaspora mothers are a part of a larger group of immigrants and refugees which are, at a societal level, perceived of as neither willing nor capable of engaging responsibly in their children's education (Dannesboe et al., 2012). These mothers must thus navigate in these constituted conditions where they subjected to and constrained by the power of the dominant societal norms and understandings of 'good parent'.

Hermans (2006) describes the strategies deployed by immigrant parents from Morocco in Belgium and the Netherlands in the face of similar societal conditions. These immigrant parents instead use what is termed 'counter narratives' which relates to Villenas' (2001) concept of 'narratives of dignity'. Counter narratives or narratives of dignity are narratives intended to argue the value of certain practices, values and perspectives that are otherwise criticized in the larger society. Hermans (2006) shows how parents of Moroccan background in Belgium and the Netherlands employed narratives that criticized mainstream schooling and parenting practices while arguing for the value of their own thereby upholding their dignity in a society where they otherwise were perceived negatively. One would expect similar narratives from the Somali diaspora mothers in this study as they likewise are negatively positioned in society but instead their narratives were full of praise and non-critical attitudes towards the schools. The mothers in this study

seemed to be ‘playing the game’ in Bourdieu’s (1990) terms. They understood the need to be non-critical in order to show willingness and thereby be accepted as a ‘supportive assistant’. They also understood the need to position themselves as capable of being ‘responsible parents’. These particular mothers ‘played the game’ well, often succeeding in positioning themselves as both supportive assistants and responsible parents with valid opinions at the same time. However, they needed to be very explicit in their positioning endeavors as they were creating a space where they could be recognized as equitable partners which was something other than the positions that were imposed on them at a societal level. One would not expect to find these kinds of explicit positioning as described in the above findings amongst mothers with middle class ethnic Danish backgrounds. Perhaps teachers, for this reason, did not always recognize the explicit efforts made by the mothers.

Furthermore, the mothers are in a dilemma; on the one side both the mothers and their experience situations of racism, marginalization and unjust treatment whilst on the other hand they are struggling to be recognized as equitable partners. This struggle means that they first and foremost view it as important to show a positive non-critical supportive attitude towards the school. In their interactions in the parent-teacher conferences they actively positioned themselves as non-critical and positive thereby showing that they were *willing* to be assistants in partnership with teachers about their children’s education. Additionally these mothers attempt to position themselves as engaged responsible partners showing that they independently and actively participate in their children’s education both through embodied participation and through narratives and exclamations to both the researcher and in the parent-teacher conferences. They thus position themselves as persons who are *capable* of being partners, which must be seen in relation to the deficit societal positioning which claims that they do not have the competencies necessary to support their children. The Somali diaspora mothers in this study seem to become rigidly locked in their possibilities of positioning themselves as their conditions of societal prejudice position them as uninterested and incompetent, compelling them actively work for the position ‘supportive responsible assistants’. This struggle to be recognized as an equitable partner, however, shuts down their opportunity to position themselves as advocates for their children in the face of racism, marginalization and unfairness. Instead they seem to slide into, or perhaps are *drawn* into, a position of complacency, i.e. of non-critical supportive assistant who does as the expert says, as this position is not compatible with a position of opposition and resistance. The position of equitable dialogue partner thus does not seem to be available to them.

The empirical analysis has further shown that positioning theory is a useful tool in order to make sense of how these mothers interact in this practice and attempt to be recognized as equitable partners. However, it has also been shown that it is important to take into account which historically, politically and socially constituted positions are available in a certain context, which produce the possibilities and limitations for positioning work in here-and-now constitutive negotiations. Furthermore, positioning theory tends to focus on the linguistic realm, and although the analysis shows that much negotiation does occur linguistically the use of embodied positioning and material objects must also be taken into account. And a final theoretical point drawn from the analysis is, that although persons do actively and purposefully attempt to position themselves (and others) as certain ‘types of participants’, they are also *drawn* into positions that ‘playing the game’ inevitably hauls them into.

## Conclusion

The Somali diaspora mothers in this study actively navigate between on the one hand positioning themselves as partners that are willing and capable, i.e. they want to and can cooperate, and on the other hand wanting to advocate their child's position, i.e. make sure s/he isn't treated unfairly and is given a good education. They are attempting to be recognized as responsible parents who are engaged in their children's schooling. This negotiation is produced by the societal positioning of them as uninterested in and incapable of supporting their children's education, which makes their struggle to position themselves as their children's advocates difficult and they are thereby drawn into a position of passive complacency. It is therefore of importance that educators and policy makers become aware of the power of the dominant western norms, that create these struggles. Such an awareness may open up for opportunities for the voices of these mothers to be heard in a way that does not hold the risk of conflict and/or negative consequences for their children.

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#### **About the author**

**Noomi Christine Linde Matthiesen**, Ph.d. is currently an assistant professor at the Teacher Education Department, Aarhus, VIA University College. Her research centers on educational psychology, equitable education, marginalization, power dynamics, ethnicity and learning theory.

*Contact:* Teacher Education, Aarhus, VIA University College.

Email: [noomic@psy.au.dk](mailto:noomic@psy.au.dk)