

# Literacy practices in two Danish-Somali families: Between training, testing and “feeding the soul”

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*This article explores the literacy practices in two Danish-Somali families with young children. The data comes from focused ethnographic fieldwork in the families. The study is rooted in a sociocultural view of literacy, aiming at understanding how different ways of engaging with language and the written word express different beliefs and values about literacy. The study finds that school-oriented literacy training and literacy tests as well as religious practices play important roles in the everyday lives of the families. In some cases, the latter practices share similar properties with the former. The obvious and salient influence of school-like literacy practices shows that the families are not only very willing, but also very capable of fulfilling the roles of “co-creators” and “school-assistants” when it comes to their children’s learning and literacy development. This finding calls for a reconsideration of how teachers and other professionals perceive minority families and their literacy practices and experiences.*

*Keywords:* multilingual children, literacy education, religious literacy practices

## 1 Introduction: At-home literacy practices and minority language students

From early spring 2016 to the end of 2017, Somali everyday life was on display at a Danish museum. A group of local Danish-Somali women had organized, applied for and received funding for an exhibition at a prominent local museum. Visitors to the exhibition could undoubtedly recognize their own family life – regardless of cultural background – in that of the typical Danish-Somali family depicted in the exhibition. The presented family was shaped by the central welfare institutions of kindergarten, school and public leisure activities, and the only obvious spices setting the family apart from main stream Danish families were fancy window drapes (in use on special occasions) and ginger in the complimentary coffee. The first fieldwork activities in this study included visits to the (staged) everyday Danish-Somali life in the museum. Following these visits, I worked with two colleagues to carry out an ethnographic study of the at-home literacy practices of two Danish-Somali families.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I aimed to shed light on the literacy practices in a minority group who researchers, policy makers and

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practitioners still know very little about and whose children make up a growing minority group in local schools and institutions.

Minority students in Denmark are subject to numerous pedagogical and administrative initiatives with very different aims. Most of these initiatives arise from the same point: the minority students' perceived academic underperformance in the school system in general and their perceived struggles with language and literacy in their second language in particular. Researchers and policy makers perceive parental background as a core factor in students' academic success, and at-home interventions have shown to be successful in raising second language competencies (Andersen & Jakobsen, 2007). These initiatives are in line with a general tendency in welfare states and in schooling to regard parents and families as "co-constructors" (Thomsen, 2017) or even "teacher assistants" (Matthiesen, 2017, p. 498) with explicit responsibilities for supporting their children in areas such as literacy development. Even though successful at-home interventions make it evident that minority language parents possess considerable potential and can act as competent and able collaborators, programmes like these have also been criticized for positioning non-mainstream practices as less adequate or even deficient (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). No matter the stance regarding at-home interventions, they highlight the fact that very little is known about at-home language and literacy practices, especially those in the homes of minority families.

This knowledge gap is the point of departure for this study, aiming at shedding light on at-home literacy practices in Danish-Somali families. The data arise from ethnographic fieldwork focussing on everyday literacy practices in two families with young children living in the same Danish city. Anchored in a sociocultural view of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1990) this study investigates what kind of at-home literacy practices (Fast, 2007; Heath, 1982) the families engage in and value rather than how much or how well the children and their parents read. The ambition of this study is twofold. First, the study seeks to provide knowledge about an under-researched issue in literacy training, namely what actually takes place in the homes of families with young children, where literacy training supposedly plays a salient part in the family's literacy practices. Second, the study aims to shed light on literacy practices in minority families, which we know very little about.

### *1.1 Background: Literacy, schooling and the Somali diaspora*

App. 20.000 people of Somali origin live in Denmark. The Somali community is a rather new minority group in a Danish context, and their story resembles that of the Somali diaspora in the United States (Bigelow, 2010) and other western countries. Most members of the Somali community in Denmark are refugees or descendants of refugees who fled Somalia when the civil war erupted in the early 1990s. Very little is known about the Somali community in Denmark or their literacy practices. In her PhD-study, Matthiesen (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017) investigated home-school collaboration between teachers and Danish-Somali refugee parents. In a Nordic context, Fangen (2006) studied Norwegian-Somalis' experience and ideas about cultural adaption, and Dewilde (2016) studied newly arrived multilingual students' writing developments in Norwegian schools, including the translingual poetry of a young Somali student. Martha Bigelow (2008, 2010, 2011) has provided scholars and professionals with valuable insights

into questions related to language, race, religion and gender through multifaceted linguistic and educational research carried out among Somalis in Minnesota. Roy and Roxas (2011) investigated parent-school relations and perceptions among teachers and Somali refugee families in the United States, and Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar (1999) studied literacy and pedagogy in school and in a Somali community in Canada with a focus on newly arrived elementary students with Somali background.

The literacy rate in Somalia was low before the civil war and remains low compared to western societies; however, the 1972 decision to introduce the Roman alphabet and the following mass literacy campaign targeting rural areas resulted in a steep rise in the number of literate Somalis (Abdi, 1998, p. 333; Bigelow, 2010, p. 35). In colonial times, English, Italian and to a smaller extent Arabic were languages of instruction (Abdi, 1998). Due to the dominance of the Islamic religion, Somalia has a long tradition of faith literacy, taught in so-called "dugsis" (quranic schools) (Bigelow, 2010, pp. 38-39). In general, Islamic literacy and schooling play an important role in Somalia and for Somalis abroad (Abdi, 1998, p. 329; Bigelow, 2010; Moore, 2011, 2012). Despite a rising interest in quranic literacy, it remains an understudied literacy phenomenon (Moore, 2011). Moore (2012) argued that insight into what she called "Muslim children's other school" is important for teachers and other professionals working with children who participate in quranic literacy schooling, as both mainstream and quranic literacy education contributes to the children's experience with language and literacy learning. For many Somali refugees, quranic schooling may even represent a rare experience of stable, organized schooling, as quranic literacy was taught during the civil war in Somalia and maintained as a valued practice in the diaspora abroad (Abdi, 1998; Bigelow, 2010).

As stated above, little is known about literacy practices in Danish-Somali families. In studying home-school collaboration and Somali parents, Matthiesen (2017) found that teachers, influenced by deficit assumptions regarding the Danish-Somali parents and their abilities as parents of school children in Denmark, tended to explain Somali students' behaviour and academic outcomes as a result of their cultural background and upbringing. She found that the teachers in her study perceived the parents as deficient when it came both to educating and socializing and to providing academic support for their children's learning. Conversely, the Somali mothers in the study saw themselves as able parents and educators, but they struggled to position themselves as equal partners in the context of home-school cooperation when positioned as incapable and "wrong" (Matthiesen, 2017, p. 505). Roy and Roxas (2011) found a similar perception of Somali students and their parents in their study of the Somali Bantu diaspora in U.S. schools in Texas and Michigan. The teachers interviewed in the study perceived the Somali students as unmotivated for learning. In general, these teachers explained both the Somali students' behaviour and perceived lack of motivation for school with factors present in their homes rather than in classes and in schools (Roy & Roxas, 2011, p. 528). However, like Matthiesen, Roy and Roxas (2011) also identified counter-narratives in the Somali community. Contrary to the teachers' perceptions, the Somali parents expressed that they highly valued education and formal schooling and regularly told their children about future opportunities obtainable in the United States if they succeed in school (Roy & Roxas, 2011, pp. 534-535). Both studies revealed a lack of knowledge about Somali families among professionals in schools working with

Somali students, and both studies showed that this knowledge gap can be filled with broader societal deficit discourses and cultural essentialism.

The above-mentioned studies all took their point of departure in the relatively large and sudden influx of Somali refugees into western societies in the wake of the civil war. Even though the studies originated from different geographical and educational contexts, many findings coincide. In general, Somalis seem to be viewed as particularly difficult or problematic to integrate into western schools and societies (Fangen, 2006; Matthiesen, 2014), and Somali refugee parents risk being perceived as culturally unprepared for or not oriented towards literacy and schooling (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Matthiesen, 2017). At the same time, Somali youth and parents struggle to fit in, both in school and in society, and some choose to adapt a hybrid identity (Fangen, 2006) through rocky cultural and identification processes in which race, gender and religion also play important roles (Bigelow, 2010; Dewilde, 2016; Fangen, 2006).

## **2 Theoretical background: Literacy as practice**

Literacy researchers have investigated at-home literacy practices for several decades. Shirley Brice Heath's (1982) seminal work on literacy practices in American families inhabiting middle-class Maintown, white working-class Roadville and the predominantly black working-class Trackton showed how language and literacy practices vary along socioeconomic divides and how this variation creates very different conditions for different children when they become literacy students in school. Heath's (1982) work revealed that our perception of class and cultural background cannot be limited to statistics about parental education or income. Instead, class and cultural background also manifest as differences in language and literacy experiences and the values underpinning these practices. Heath's (1982) study made it evident that there is no "natural" way for parents to interact with their children around texts, rather different "ways of taking" and different ways of "making sense" from books and their content (p. 49).

In a Scandinavian context, Fast (2007) investigated the at-home and school literacy practices of seven young children learning to read and write. Fast found a rich and diverse literacy culture in the homes of the children, involving texts, images, movies, digital resources, religious literacy and popular culture. When the seven children started school and formal literacy training, they already possessed diverse and detailed experiences with literacy and literacy practices (Fast, 2007, p. 151). However, these experiences were not necessarily valued or even made relevant in formal literacy training in school. Formal literacy training valued a specific kind of text (i.e. paper) and specific practices (e.g. learning to read through learning about letters and sounds, otherwise known as phonics). This emphasis led one of the children in the study to characterize his literacy training in school as "learning about letters" (Fast, 2007, p. 169). Both Heath's (1982) and Fast's (2007) work on at-home literacy show that understanding literacy as situated practices highly influenced by the social context in which they make sense and are made sense of reveals how deeply imbedded they are in other social practices and the local social fabric. Book reading will often involve talking about the book with someone, such as a parent, and different families use and talk about books and texts in different ways. Thus, literacy practices – especially at-

home practices – cannot be understood and valued outside the contexts in which they take place and make sense to those involved.

Street's (1984, 2013) work on literacy in Iran promotes a view on literacy as essentially social and ideological. Street argued that nothing is natural or neutral about literacy practices; in fact, learning with words and texts is always deeply embedded in the sociocultural contexts in which it appears. Aligning with Heath and Street, Gee (1990) and Barton and Hamilton (1998) also promoted a view on literacy as essentially social and, as a consequence, situated. They found that people engage with literacy in different ways in different contexts because different ways of engaging with literacy meets the needs of different situations.

Street's (1984; 2013), Heath's (1982) and Fast's (2007) studies on literacy have showed the value and power of ethnography in literacy research. When aiming at understanding how "literacy is done" and practised in people's everyday lives, the methods applied need to be able to capture the social aspects of literacy. Hence, in an ethnographic study of the sociocultural aspects of literacy, literacy is not the only or necessarily the primary focus of the research interest, and the non-linguistic aspects of literacy often play a salient part. The same is true for this study: We seek to understand not how well the children and the parents in the Danish-Somali families read and write, but what kind of written texts they engage with, how they engage with them and for what purposes. We asked questions such as the following: What kind of texts are important in the everyday lives of the families in the study? What is important to know about these texts? To find answers to these questions, we embarked on what initially was a rather bumpy road to insights: ethnographic fieldwork in the everyday lives of the Danish-Somali families.

### **3 Methodology: Ethnographic fieldwork in the Danish-Somali community**

For a group of white, female academics in their mid-forties and older, establishing contact and developing mutual confidence with minority groups is not a straightforward task. In addition, our initial, unfruitful contacts with the local Somali community through official channels such as Facebook groups and emails followed a turbulent period where the community had been subject to significant negative attention from mainstream media; hence, our approach might have been met with some distrust. We finally established contact with the local Danish-Somali community during the above-mentioned museum exhibition on Somali life in Denmark. Later we also took part in a series of evening school lectures organized by a couple of the women behind the museum exhibition. The museum exhibition and the lectures paved our way into the Danish-Somali community, and during the winter months of 2017 we took part in both formal and informal meetings and get-togethers with a loosely organized group of 8–10 Somali mothers. In the end, this group of young mothers helped us recruit families relevant for our study, which meant families with young schoolchildren who were willing to let us into their homes and daily lives, and who were confident Danish speakers, as neither of us speak Somali. We carried out the fieldwork over a period of four months in early 2017. During this period, we joined in various activities such as when one mother travelled across town to pick her children up from school and stopped by the bank and the library on the way home. We visited the families on Saturday mornings when everyone was rested and ready to do

homework before lunch, and we took part in formal and informal meetings in the local Danish-Somali community. In short, we met with the mothers in and outside their homes and took part in a range of different activities that fill the everyday lives of families with young children.

### *3.1 Focused ethnography*

We have defined our method as focused ethnography or short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013) following Knoblauch's (2005) conceptualization of focused ethnography as a "peculiar type of ethnography" (Knoblauch, 2005, p. 2). Knoblauch's conceptualizing paper described focused ethnography as an emerging branch of ethnography, born out of a need for methods and ways to study particular and specific practices in contemporary society. Focused ethnography differs from so-called conventional ethnography in a number of ways. First, conventional ethnography tries to compensate for the fieldworkers' lack of familiarity (his or her "strangeness") with the field under investigation through long-term field immersions; conversely, fieldwork in focused ethnography is often shorter but carried out by fieldworkers who are familiar with the field and the practices under investigation. Conventional ethnography often aims at obtaining insider knowledge about the field under study, and the fieldworker gains this knowledge by taking a participatory role in the practices under study. In focused ethnography, the fieldworker has prior background knowledge about the field and the practices under study, and the role of the fieldworker remains that of the observer. In this study, the fieldworkers were teacher educators and educational researchers in the field of literacy; therefore, we expected to be able to identify and describe practices recognizable as literacy practices to us. However, the fact that we conducted the fieldwork in a community with which we had very little personal experience meant that we could be true to the fundamentally inductive nature of ethnography. Our data consist of observation notes including photographs from fieldwork in the Danish-Somali community with the two families and from school visits as well as interviews with mothers and with one teacher. Home visits were often short (1 hour), while school visits and cross-context visits could last several hours. We wrote fieldnotes in a notebook during field visits, but we elaborated upon them immediately after. We carried out both fieldwork (when possible) and data analysis as collaborative tasks with the purpose of strengthening the validity and the reliability of the data analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Our identities as white females with no familiarity with the local community or the Somali language were in many ways obstacles in the initial phases of the project, and they may have had an impact on the kind of data we have gathered. We were able to include only families where Danish was (one of) the language(s) spoken in the home, and this requirement almost certainly excluded families where the parents did not feel confident enough in Danish to invite a stranger into their homes. Being female turned out to be an advantage as it is much less problematic for a woman of Somali origin to invite an unknown female (rather than a male) into the home. In contrast, our academic background might have been an alienating factor for some potential participants. Even though parents are used to communicating with teachers and other care-takers of different professional backgrounds about their children, some families may have had bad past experiences from this kind of interaction and consequently be less willing to take part in a study where this is a core activity. The opposite could also be the

case; in fact, one of the mothers in our study allowed us into her home primarily because we were academics with a special interest in literacy. She stated that she hoped to learn something about how to read with her children from the fieldworkers' visit to her home.

The two families recruited for this study lived in council houses in different parts of the same Danish town. Their children went to different schools and day-care facilities. For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to the families as "Family 1" and "Family 2" throughout the paper. Family 1 consisted of two parents and six children aged one to 14 years, all of them in either school or day-care institutions. The father worked as a taxi driver and spent considerable time outside the home either working or socializing. The mother's everyday life was very much confined to her home and neighbourhood, and she spent her time transporting the youngest children from day-care and school. Both parents were Somali-born. The mother arrived in Denmark during her teens, and she stated that since she finished compulsory schooling, her life had consisted primarily of childcare. However, at the time of the data collection, she had partnered up with another Somali woman trying to rent a place with cooking facilities in their neighbourhood as they were planning on creating a catering and take-away business with traditional Somali food.

Family two consisted of mother, father and three children: two schoolboys aged seven and nine and a three-year-old girl. The mother was training to become a chef, and the father was teaching Arabic. The parents were Somali-born with a refugee background. Both parents had arrived in Denmark in their early teens and hence received formal education of various length in Denmark. Both families were plurilingual with Danish and Somali spoken in the homes. In Family 2, Arabic played a significant role as well, as the father was a language teacher who trained the children in written Arabic. Both families had strong ties to family members in other countries with grandparents and siblings living in in Sweden, England, Canada and Italy.

### 3.2 *The notion of "Danish-Somali"*

Roy and Roxas (2011) studied the Somali Bantus in the United States, hence taking into account that refugees from Somalia belong to different ethnic groups, but most scholars adapt the notion "diaspora" to Somali communities (Bigelow, 2010; Matthiesen, 2015, 2016, 2017; Moore, 2011) without addressing the question of naming further. Bigelow (2010, p. 3) is one exception. She pointed out that the notion "diaspora" is a construct and argued that "Somaliness" plays an important role for individuals and the community in her studies.

While the aim of this study is to investigate at-home literacy practices in Somali families, I do not seek to study or identify specific or typical "Somali literacy practices" that differ from typical or specific "Danish literacy practices". Therefore, I have chosen to apply the hybrid notion Danish-Somali in use among some of the women themselves. Even though we often found ourselves doing fieldwork in contexts where the fieldworker was the only non-Somali present, these contexts were characterized by other common traits. For example, most of the time they were women-only contexts, so participation was based on the participants' roles as mothers or women. On other occasions (e.g. a meeting with a Somali-speaking school counsellor and a group of Somali-speaking mothers), the common ground seemed to be the Somali language, as the topic of discussion

was newly introduced general demands regarding high school access for all mainstream students. Another reason for choosing to refer to those who identify as Somalis in Denmark as Danish-Somalis is that some of the women in the local community preferred and promoted this term themselves.

#### **4 Findings: Everyday literacy practices in the two families**

The two families included in this study engaged with texts in different ways and for different purposes. In both families, the children read at home, in the school and during their leisure time, while the parents read materials such as emails and letters from school. Children read alone at home because the school or the parents said they had to, children read alone because they enjoyed reading, older children read or talked about texts with younger children, and parents talked about texts with children or other parents. Parents and children engaged with books, and they read and talked about letters from schools or other authorities (e.g. the bank). Even though both families were multilingual, almost all the texts they engaged with were in Danish, the only significant exception being Arabic for religious purposes. The following section presents a closer account and analysis of the salient literacy practices we observed in the two families.

##### *4.1 Literacy is social*

Everyday life in the home of Family 1 was very social and cooperative: The older children helped the younger children get dressed and comb their hair, and toys (including a very popular laptop) were circulating while family members carried out their daily routines. In the event of conflict, the older children stepped in as mediators. Books were available and accessible like other toys and the family laptop. The home did not seem to have a designated place for books; often they were on tables or stacked next to the TV in the living room, and sometimes they had to be fetched from bags or drawers. The family had library books and books from a recent reading campaign supported by a chain of family restaurants.

Reading was often a social event: The older children read stories and picture books to their younger siblings. When reading a picture book, the younger child participated in the reading by pointing to the pictures or “reading” parts of the text. Sometimes the child-child interaction accompanying the reading resembled adult-child interaction or even teacher-student interaction applying an initiative response evaluation-like exchange. For example, the older child might point to a picture in a picture book and ask the younger sibling what he or she saw in the picture. The younger child would answer “coat-hanger” or “jump-suit”, and the older child would praise the younger sibling and move on to another picture and repeat the exchange. It was apparent that reading (in Danish) and talking (in Danish) about texts was a mundane and recurrent activity in the family. The youngest sister, who was four years old, knew the books and the stories by heart, making the I-R-E interaction somehow repetitive and ritual. However, she would also play the role of the older sibling and “read” to both her baby brother and the fieldworker, something she seemed to enjoy doing.

Similarly, the two schoolchildren in Family 2 read a lot. Their books lay scattered around the living room. The reading material available to the children in this family consisted of very different texts (in Danish), such as biographies about their football idols, Donald Duck pocket books, graphic novels and more



traditional children's literature borrowed from the school library. They read in the living room in the midst of family life, and they read while the TV was on or while their siblings and parents were talking or playing around them. Their younger sister often interrupted her brothers and asked them to read to her, but her request was often declined. Reading was a normal leisure activity that took place in the living room in the middle of mundane family life often simply because of the omnipresence of books.

#### *4.2 Literacy is training in Danish and Arabic*

However, not all literacy practices in the families were social and collaborative. A number of literacy practices stood out and seemed to demand solitary and quiet reading for the purpose of literacy training. This is evident in the data extract cited below.<sup>3</sup>

##### **Extract 1.** Fieldnotes, Family 2

The two boys have to train reading for 20 minutes every day as part of their homework, a task that the parents take very seriously. Earlier, the boys were allowed to read in their shared room, but the mother tells me that they [the parents] found that there was too much talking and laughing going on during the training sessions; hence, now the daily training has been moved to the kitchen area, allowing the parents to oversee that they are actually engaged in reading.

##### **Extract 2.** Fieldnotes, Family 1

The boy A [Family 1] wants to read with me. He has brought a book to the living room; he sits down next to me and starts reading out loud. The book is a children's book. The cover page features a colourful drawing of an open sailboat in the middle of what looks like stormy weather and high waves. Next to the boat, a blond long-haired man in a loose blue robe is walking on top of the waves. From the boat a group of men, all looking baffled, are watching the figure on the waves. The book is by Danish Author Kåre Bluitgen and is called *Jesus – the Savior from Nazareth*. The boy starts to read out loud; he reads fluently and fast. The book has drawings to support the written texts. I ask him how he chooses books he wants to read: What kind of books does he choose to read and why? He says that he has to read books that fit him and his reading development. He has to read books that are meant for ten-year-olds, not eight-year-olds (his age). He is not allowed to read books that are too easy, he says. He must borrow books that fit him, and he must read ten pages every day. In this way, he explains, at the end of the school year, he will have read thousands of pages.

The two school boys in Family 2 were active and engaged readers. They read a lot, and they enjoyed reading. As far as we can judge, they were also very competent readers, reading a range of different texts and genres. The youngest boy seemed to be a far faster and better reader than what is normally expected of children in Year 1. Despite his advanced level, literacy training was considered very important in this family. The boy in Family 1 also seemed to be reading above his age level; specifically, he had to read books appropriate for older readers, not eight-year-olds in Year 2, and the difficulty of the reading material (as opposed to content) seemed to be an important factor when he chose reading material.

The extracts above depict literacy events that focus on reading as a skill that can be trained and improved through reading a certain number of pages or minutes every day. The quantitative perspective is evident in both extracts with their emphasis on how many pages children read and how long they had to read,

while what they read and how they interacted with the texts seemed to be less important. Most concepts of literacy development include speed, automation and fluency in reading, something it makes sense to train, but it is not clear if the young readers were supposed to become faster and more efficient readers through this kind of training.

These literacy events also stood out when compared to the everyday literacy practices in the families. As reported above, reading in family two often took place in the living room, and both families viewed reading as an interactive practice. Normally readers were interrupted and would let themselves be interrupted by other activities going on around them. However, training was a different kind of literacy event; during training, reading had to be carried out in silence and as a solitary practice.

In Family 2, Arabic literacy practices played an important role in everyday literacy practices. The two boys were home-schooled in Arabic, the aim being to provide them with quranic literacy competences. The Arabic and quranic literacy practices in the home were in many ways similar to the school-initiated literacy training depicted above as illustrated by the following data extract:

**Extract 3.** Fieldnotes, Family 2

I notice a colourful folder on the coffee table in the living room. It has a bright green and golden front page and resembles the pictureless decorations of quranic or religious texts in the Islamic tradition. [...] The booklet contains pages with Arabic print. [...]. Most of the text is black, but some signs are red, some blue, some green and some are grey. [...]. It is one of his [the youngest boy] quran booklets. He is practising the texts in this booklets now, and the colours help him recite the text in the right way, he says. He shows me the first page in the book where the key to understanding the colours is written down by hand in Danish. The title of the page is "Tajwid", and it tells that blue means "qalqala", green means "in the nose", blue means "prolonged" and grey means "not to be read". [...] The boy finds more booklets in Arabic. He also has to do writing practice in Arabic. The folders with his written Arabic exercises are – contrary to the booklets with the printed text – very familiar. Each sign is exercised independently, two signs on each page. The page is divided into columns by hand with a blue pen, the sign is written with a blue pen on the top of the columns and then the boy using a pencil imitates the sign eight times for each column. On each page, an evaluative mark is added by pen, upon completion, I presume.

The two boys in Family two were explicit about the aim of their quranic literacy training. They stated they were not studying Arabic in order to learn the language and make use of it their everyday lives. One of the boys said "It is not to learn a language so you can talk to people. We cannot use it to talk in the streets. We just need to be able to read the quran. It is very important for us." The booklets had different annotations to support pronunciation and recitation, evidently an important skill for them to master. The boys' practice with the Arabic signs in their booklets resembled the way they practised writing in school. Both the boys possessed similar booklets given to them in school, where they practised Latin letters of the Danish alphabet in much the same way. The younger boy practised the Latin signs one by one, one on each page in his booklet. The older boy practised handwriting (i.e. words and phrases) in his booklet, as he was learning to master how to combine and connect single letters so they formed words and phrases that appeared alike in size and shape.

In Family 1, quranic literacy took on a very different form. Only the mother engaged in quranic literacy because, as she explained, "They [the children] are

not old enough to understand it." She had recently taken up reading the quran again after a long break. She had only nine years of school, hence no high school diploma or formal education apart from mandatory school, and was considering going back to school. She explained that she wanted to re-engage in religious education before she returned to school. It was important to her to feed the soul before feeding the mind, she said, making a clear distinction between the two.

Moore (2011) pointed out that quranic literacy in general conflicts with or even hinders secular notions of literacy. Specifically, learning to read and recite the quran emphasizes rote learning and hence a passive and reproductive learning style that is not valued in school literacy (see also Berglund, this issue). Nevertheless, the Arabic language teaching that took place in Family two's home carries similarities with the school-initiated training depicted in Extracts 1 and 2. First of all, there was an evident quantitative perspective in both practices. Both kinds of training involved an aspect of endurance and concentration as they required children to read a lot (i.e. of pages or booklets). Neither of the training events emphasized interacting with the content or with others about the content. Learning to write in Danish and in Arabic for religious reasons also had common perspectives. In general, it was considered important to master the signs and their architecture in any written language, and both the printed Arabic text in the quranic booklets and the handwriting that the older boy in Family two was practising focused explicitly on the appearance of the texts. Imitation played an important part as a guiding principle when learning about the signs, but aesthetic values connected to the writing also seemed important.

The quranic literacy practices that emerged from my analysis of literacy events in the two families did not stand out as conflicting with or hindering more secular or school-oriented literacy practices. On the contrary, the different literacy training events seemed to have the potential for supporting each other, as concentration and endurance were required for both. However, the boys in Family and the mother in Family 1 viewed quranic literacy in two very different lights. In Family 1, the mother viewed understanding and engaging with texts as a prerequisite for reading the quran, which was in turn a prerequisite for her own formal education. In Family 2, the children learned to read and write Arabic in order to be able to read the quran because "it is very important to us". Their justifications seem to be in line with the general assumption that access to quranic Arabic gives Muslims, regardless of their linguistic background, access to a wider religious community (Dewilde, this issue; Moore, 2011, 2012). The different perceptions of quranic literacy and literacy practices in general that emerged from this study suggest that the young readers and their mothers were able to distinguish between these practices and hence apply different approaches to texts and reading when wanting or required to do so. As a consequence, Arabic and quranic literacy can be understood as one in a range of literacy practices in their everyday lives adding to their experience and expertise in engaging with texts for different purposes.

#### *4.3 Dealing with tests and reading test reports*

In both families, books did not seem to be treated any different than other toys. They were accessible to the children and did not seem to have a special place in which they were stored and preserved. Only library books received special care, but even these books were sometimes lost and hard to find for both children and parents. However, Family 1 treated one collection of texts very differently. These

texts included the children's literacy and math test reports from the mandatory national testing carried out in Danish and math every second year as well as a small collection of the oldest children's written assignments with teacher feedback. The family preserved these texts in separate plastic pockets kept in a plastic folder that the mother stored in a cupboard. On our first visit to the family, the mother took out the folder because she wished to discuss the results with the fieldworker whom she knew to be interested in literacy. The literacy tests are standardized digital tests that divide literacy into three subskills tested independently in a multiple-choice format. Hence, they test decoding, language comprehension (i.e. vocabulary, idioms and syntax) and text comprehension (i.e. cohesion and genre) separately (Pøhler, 2011). As a lay person, the mother had a quite detailed understanding of these three subskills, and she offered an explanation for why her children's scores were generally higher in decoding compared to the other subskills. She used the written assignments and the teacher feedback to compare the standardized test results and the qualitative feedback on her children's literacy skills. She also compared the literacy and the math tests, and she hypothesized that her children's difficulties in math could be explained by their difficulties with the math-specific vocabulary they encounter when tested in math. Her assertion was supported when looking at their results in language comprehension in the literacy tests.

For minority language families, tests are important, as the children are subject to tests that majority language children do not experience. For example, in the town where this fieldwork was carried out, minority language children who live in school districts with many minority language families have to pass a Danish language test before starting school. If they do not pass the test, the children cannot attend the local school; instead, they are bussed to a school outside their own neighbourhood with a lower share of minority language children. In the case of Family 1, the oldest daughter did not pass the test when she started school seven years ago; consequently, she was bussed to a school a few kilometres away. This was – as reported in in the data extract below, a shock for the mother:

**Extract 4.** Fieldnotes, Family 1

The mother joins us in the living room, and we talk about the oldest girl's school. She did not pass the Danish language test at the age of six; hence, she was included in the city's bussing programme [see explanation below] and sent to a school outside their own neighbourhood. The mother says she was shocked to learn that her daughter did not pass the language test. "Are we bad parents? Our children were born here, but yet their Danish is not good enough." After second grade, the girl passed the test, but they decided to let her stay in the school further away from home. They later sent two of the younger children to that school too. All the younger children passed their language test at the age of six, and the oldest girl passed the language test faster than the other "bussed" girl in her class.

Following the failed language test, the mother decided on a language shift in the family and made Danish the medium of communication in the home. Even though all her younger children later passed the language test, the choice to shift language in the home was a cause for concern for the mother. She and her husband were second language speakers of Danish, and she was worried they might not be proficient enough to support their children's language development in Danish. She feared that the parents' limitations might cause the children difficulties when they encountered a more technical vocabulary in school, such as when they had to read subject-specific texts in math and science.

The data reported above show that the mother in Family 1 was an attentive and very capable reader of tests and teacher feedback. She had elaborate understanding of the test report and of concepts like decoding and comprehension and the connection between language and learning in a literacy context. It is also remarkable that she treated and preserved reading tests – rather than books – with great care. This practice resembles a “mainstream parent’s” relation with children’s books in Heath’s (1982, p. 55) study. The reason for this behaviour could be that she interpreted her children’s tests as tests not merely of language and literacy, but also of her and her husband’s parental abilities in Denmark (see Extract 4). However, as a minority language parent, she felt as if she were trapped in a catch-22 situation: She could speak Somali to her children and maybe provide them with a more native-like and richer vocabulary, something that would support their reading comprehension, or she could choose to speak Danish to them, in order for them to do well in the language test.

## 5 Conclusions and implications

The literacy practices in the Danish-Somali families in this study appear heavily influenced by the diverse and many-sided literacy demands of contemporary Danish society. Therefore, school-like or school-oriented literacy practices were very salient in the families. As a result, most of the literacy practices in the Danish-Somali families depicted above will – like the everyday lives on museum display – be highly recognizable to most parents with young children, no matter their background. Danish was the dominant language for these families, and we never saw literacy practices evolving around texts in the families’ mother tongue Somali. This language shift and its consequences were of some concern to the mother in Family 1. Literacy training played an important role in both families. In one family, language and literacy testing were important tasks, and a failed language test had resulted in a family language shift. This evidence shows that literacy practices and discourses about language and literacy from the surrounding society directly affect language and literacy practices in minority families, in some cases with far-reaching consequences and not only as a direct result of specific at-home interventions. The obvious and salient influence of school-like literacy practices shows that the families are not only very willing, but also very capable of fulfilling their roles as “co-creators” and “school assistants” when it comes to their children’s learning and literacy development.

More resources might be available for cooperation and co-creation; for example, quranic literacy was practised and accommodated in different ways in the two different families to meet different needs. In Family 1, the mother considered quranic literacy “food for the soul” and something children must grow into, but in Family 2, quranic literacy was part of everyday literacy training practices and in many ways did not differ significantly from the practices installed in the family by the school. We did not ask neither the children nor the mothers if they saw the Arabic literacy training and school-oriented literacy as mutually dependent or even enriching, but evidence from the literature on faith literacy has showed that the two literacy practices are considered difficult to combine (Berglund, this issue; Moore, 2012). The data reported in this study gives cause to reconsider this assumption. Religious literacy practices are part of the children’s literacy experiences and could potentially be made relevant in school. Specifically, the

aesthetic perspectives on both handwriting and recitation in quranic literacy can support and put into perspective handwriting and read-aloud activities in more traditional literacy training. Dewilde's study (this issue) of second language writers in Norwegian also shows how young writers of Muslim background draw on their experience with Islamic texts when writing. For those young people, their Islamic heritage literacy seems to lend them an individual, artistic voice in their second language, enriching and contributing to their personal and linguistic development.

During our fieldwork in the Danish-Somali community, we attended a number of self-organized events where the Danish-Somali mothers came together to discuss school- or society-related topics. These self-organized events showed that there is great potential for an equal and empowering home-school collaboration with the Danish-Somali community. While members of this community might not use the official channels or forums, they are highly capable of accessing, understanding and making relevant and important information flow. If teachers and schools are able to interact with and tap into these ad-hoc and cross-school-district organizations, they can potentially develop into strong collaboration forums.

Reconsidering why teachers and other professionals perceive minority families in certain – often deficient – ways can help these professionals reflect upon and question their concepts of language and literacy in a multilingual society. Street's (1984, 2013) and Heath's (1982) critical and sociocultural views of linguistic and literacy practices offer theoretical lenses through which literacy practices in multilingual and multicultural societies can be reconsidered. Heath's and Street's work show how literacy practices differ because people's needs and values differ, and this theoretical stance can help teachers and other professionals understand and question how different views of literacy affect how we consider and value different literacy practices, including the predominantly autonomous view of literacy (Street, 2013) as a separate skill that can be trained and measured. However, more importantly, we might be able to shed new light on not only the Danish-Somali families but also all minority families and their different and diverse literacy practices and resources. In this way, minority families might have a greater chance of being perceived as people who possess literacy experiences that are relevant and valuable for themselves, for their children who are learning to read and write in Danish schools and for our overall understanding of literacy as a diverse, but valuable, social practice in society.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Colleagues Ida Gyde Hansen's and Inger Maibom's contributions to the fieldwork and data analyses have been of central importance to this study.

<sup>2</sup> In this article I focus on findings from our study of the at-home literacy practices in the families. Christensen (in press) reports (in Danish) also on findings from fieldwork in the school.

<sup>3</sup> Data extract are translated from Danish to English and slightly revised to enhance readability.

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