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**BARRIERS TO SOCIAL INCLUSION THAT AFFECT  
SOMALI YOUTH IN TORONTO - 2005**

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**The Major Research Paper is submitted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree  
in  
Immigration and Settlement Studies**

**Ryerson University  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada**

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## **BARRIERS TO SOCIAL INCLUSION THAT AFFECT SOMALI YOUTH IN TORONTO – 2005**

A major research paper presented to Ryerson University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Immigration and Settlement Studies

By Allison D. Lawrence

### **ABSTRACT**

To identify barriers to social inclusion faced by Somali youth living in Toronto, focus group discussions were held with 21 Somali youth, parents of Somali youth, and community service providers. Qualitative analysis of the data revealed that participants shared (1) dealing with racism and discrimination, (2) awareness of the depressed economic status of their community, and (3) relying on their own community for services and support. The results showed that social exclusion was experienced in education, during the process of seeking employment and in accessing recreation services. The extent to which such social inclusion was experienced was gauged using the Laidlaw Foundation framework, which includes the dimensions of: valued recognition, human development, involvement and engagement, proximity and material well-being. Using such measures, lived experiences were meaningfully categorized for analysis. Participants exhibited love and respect for the culture and values they share and expressed readiness to educate and inform others about the traditions that shape their lives.

**Keywords :** Somali youth; social inclusion; education; employment; recreation

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**The strength of Canadian municipalities cannot be measured strictly in terms of overall trends in income and economic growth. Quality of life is also a function of active social networks and public spaces and services that support the inclusion of all residents in city life (Federation of Canadian Municipalities 2004).**

## INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will outline the aims and objectives of the research, how the topic was chosen, and the literature that was used to guide it.

The object of this research is to identify barriers to social inclusion that face Somali youth in Toronto. Social inclusion is defined by the Scottish Executive as: “reducing inequalities between the least advantaged groups and communities and the rest of society by closing the opportunity gap and ensuring that support reaches those who need it most (2005).”

Researchers at the Laidlaw Foundation describe social inclusion as a “concrete aspect of the real lives of children and adults”, and lists valued recognition, human development, involvement and engagement, proximity, and material well being, as its five cornerstones (2002). Valued recognition refers to recognition and respect of children and adults through programs and policies that recognize differences. Human development refers to the nurturing of existing talents and skills. Involvement and engagement refers to having the right and the support to be involved in making decisions that affect oneself, family, and community. Proximity refers to the reduction of social distances between people by having them share physical and social space, and providing opportunities for interaction across ethnic, cultural, and economic boundaries. Material well-being refers to people having adequate income and secure housing, so that they are able to fully participate in the life of their community (Laidlaw Foundation 2002). Laidlaw Foundation goes further by stating: “Social inclusion reflects a proactive, human development approach to social well being that calls for more than the removal of barriers or risks (2002).” In the last few years, social researchers have been examining the lived experiences of immigrant populations in Canada (Saloojee 2003, Omidvar and Richmond 2003, Papillon 2002, Ooka and Wellman 2003). One recurring theme has been that of ‘social inclusion’. According to Omidvar and Richmond, the term ‘social inclusion’ means the “realization of full and equal participation in the economic,

social, cultural and political dimensions of society (2003).” Omidvar and Richmond explain social inclusion as a concept of “belonging, acceptance and recognition (2003).” According to Saloojee, the antithesis of social inclusion, ‘social exclusion’, occurs due to the process of discrimination, and results in the “re-victimization and marginalization of the excluded (Saloojee 2003).”

Walker and Walker define social exclusion as:

... a comprehensive formulation which refers to the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in a society. Social exclusion may therefore be seen as the denial (non-realization) of the civil, political and social rights of citizenship (1997).

Several Canadian studies have looked at risk factors that affect social inclusion for immigrant and refugee populations (Saloojee 2003, Omidvar & Richmond 2003, Canada’s Cities 2002). Pendakur & Pendakur (2004), Lochhead (2003), and Kelly (1995) identified risk factors to include unemployment, homelessness, and lack of access to health care services. Previous researchers have looked at access to employment via credentials and Canadian experience, access to housing, access to health care and access to participation in the political field. However, the present study will add to this body of work by focusing on the perspective of Somali youth in particular, in relation to education, employment, and recreation services.

Discrimination and racism have been described in the literature as practices that demonstrate social exclusion by their very nature (Saloojee 2003). Saloojee proposes that racial discrimination and racism are “continually reproduced and used to deny people access to the valued goods and services in society (2003).” Respondents in my study pertinently cover this topic in all three categories of the investigation, education, employment and recreation.

Supporting documentation is available from the Ontario Human Rights Commission, (OHRC) which states,

As a systemic barrier, discrimination is a practice that restricts or inhibits members of groups who are protected from discrimination under the Human Rights Code, from being employed or advanced (OHRC).

Freiler talks about social exclusion as a familiar notion to,

Those who (i) are denied access to the valued goods and services in society because of their race, gender, religion, disability, etc.; (ii) lack adequate resources to be effective, contributing members of society; and (iii) are not recognized as full and equal participants in society. (2001,13).

Though many studies on Somali populations deal with adaptation, the present project focuses on the sense of belonging and connectedness with society.

Adolescents need to be socially connected in order to be empowered citizens, as social connections outside of school activities are viable means for community involvement and pride (Poirier 2005).

This is the rationale that provides the foundation for the present investigation.

The present project simultaneously teases out information about Somali youths' sense of belonging and connectedness with society, while it collects data about their values and beliefs. It not only enquires about experiences in secondary level education, but also about experiences in seeking employment and experiences in accessing recreation services.

Reitsma gathered "anecdotal information from a variety of sources" about the needs of Somali youth (2001). That study provided insight into experiences and perceptions Somali youth managed while living in Toronto (2001). Reitsma's study addressed Somali youths' experiences with education, employment, racism and discrimination. Many youth participants in that study made reference to feeling as though they were being targeted and were victims of discrimination and racism. Results of my study also gave insights into these areas. Though Reitsma's study

was about assessing the general needs of Somalis in Toronto, the present study engaged Somali youth in Toronto with regards to their opinions, perspectives, and experiences.

In this project, youths' experiences in secondary education were explored, because schools have a formative influence on their attitudes and behaviour (Toronto District School Board, 2004). The decision to investigate secondary education experience was reinforced by a review of the work of some European researchers. In the particular case of children of immigrants and refugees, "left-out-ness" is the term used to describe immigrant youth who, though off to a positive start in the early years, begin exhibiting delinquent behaviours in their mid to late teens (Kofoed 2005). According to Anderson, those who end up engaging in petty crime had common feelings of being outsiders or being left out (Anderson 2000).

"Outsider-ness" is another term found in the literature that is used to describe feelings of exclusion as experienced by immigrant youth (Ålund 2001). Kofoed observed that "conditions of immigrants and their children are not adequately addressed by reference to [these] general social indicators (Kofoed 2005)." Kofoed proceeded to investigate just how children of immigrants experience social exclusion (2005). Like Kofoed, this researcher's focus is on the children of immigrants and refugees – Somali youth in particular.

The debate on Canada's Multiculturalism Policy persists while ethno specific groups continue to express frustration and sometimes anger, due to barriers to full participation in Canadian society. In this context, Somali youth in Toronto have taken a keen interest in their future and their experiences of barriers to full participation in their community (Research and Data Group 2003). As the present study investigated what barriers confront Somali youth as they seek employment, it shed light on the extent of their participation in society. Full participation refers to a two-way process of integration - in other words mutual accommodation by immigrants and the host society (Papillion, 2002).

Recreation activities were explored because research has shown that adolescents need to be socially connected in order to be empowered citizens, and that social connections outside of school activities are viable means for community involvement and pride (Laidlaw Foundation 2003). Researchers at Laidlaw Foundation went on to explain, “Our experience has taught us that engaged and involved young people produce strong and active future citizens (Laidlaw 2003).” Research undertaken by the Laidlaw Foundation indicates that youth recreation is a public good; consequently, it was reasonable for the present study to investigate Somali youth’s experiences with accessing recreation services. In the statement of purpose for the *Youth Recreation Initiative*, Laidlaw Foundation declared,

Youth recreation is important to young people's development. Society needs to invest in the development of healthy, moral, socially connected and empowered citizens. Vital to this mix is the availability of quality out-of-school activities for youth to engage in, and an opportunity for youth to be directly involved in creating and implementing those activities (2003).

It went on to define recreation as including “physical and artistic experience; activities freely chosen by participants; opportunity to progressive skill development and fun (Laidlaw 2003).” As described in the literature, these elements beg inquiry through personal accounts. Hence the rationale for collecting data that pertain to the recreation component.

Researchers have criticized the adequacy of recreation programs, lack of youth involvement in their governance (Laidlaw 2003), and the lack of recreation models for immigrant youth (OCASI 2003). However, gaps still exist when the Somali youth are included as consumers of recreation services. Addressing the needs/requirements of Somali youth whose social patterns are heavily defined by Islamic culture, including specific religious and gender practices, it is apparent that the current circumstances do not allow for their full participation in recreation services. Most of these studies do not factor in the Somalis’ distinct cultural patterns

which include gendered socialization, the hijab<sup>1</sup>, and engagement in prayer practices several times throughout the day. The present study profiles the ways in which Somali youth respond to a system that often falls short in incorporating their cultural and religious values, including the gender aspects of their culture. Living lives that are defined by Islam, Somali girls are required to be virgins at marriage and are not entitled to have experience or knowledge of sexuality before marriage (Niemelä 2005). According to Niemelä, as rites of passage into adulthood, traditionally Somali girls get to wear hijab, take responsibility for household work and get circumcised. Somali girls ultimately make “creative use of Islam”, carving out a hybridized culture where adolescent girls and boys might spend time together “dating” but only in public – no sexual relations before marriage is still strictly observed (Niemelä 2005).

Thus the present study is focused on Somali youths’ experiences with education, employment and recreation services, with sensitivity to their religion and gender practices. It was hoped that this examination would provide insights into the gaps in services for Somali youth as seen by Somalis in the identified areas and that it would lead to greater awareness and deeper understanding of Somali youths’ lived reality in their neighbourhood communities. The ultimate purpose of this study is to contribute to mechanisms of change that will improve the quality of life for Somali youth in Toronto, availing them in achieving equitable access to education, employment and recreation services, in order that they are recognized as active citizens making and/or influencing decisions that affect not only the Somali community, but the broader community as well.

It is hoped that information from this study will bring to the surface target areas for moving towards social inclusion of Somali youth. Such substantiation has the potential of making possible positive modifications to policies and procedures in educational institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> Hijab: A scarf many Muslim women wear to cover their hair

employers' hiring practices, and the manner in which recreation programs are designed and delivered.

## **HISTORY OF SOMALIS**

It is impossible to discuss Somali youth in Toronto without a discussion of Somali history. In the early part of 1960, when the map of Africa was re-drawn, the new borders permanently separated families, cut off herding routes, and denied access to essentials such as water and grasslands. In 1969 General Said Barrie began a 21-year rule of power in Somalia. Though there was a great deal of hope for a return to peaceful living, political corruption surfaced, and tribal rivalries dominated the government's attention (Somalia).

Colonization forced many changes, and Somalis needed to rapidly adjust. Portuguese and Omani colonizers destroyed trade cities. Ethiopian, Italian, French, and British colonizers deliberately encouraged clan rivalries in the hopes of gaining their own control of Somalis (Castel & Kuranta 2004). Giving certain political authorities to various tribes of Somalis caused deep wounds amongst the peoples (CIC 1998). Attempts to regain lands in Ethiopia saw the involvement of Soviet and Cuban troops and the destruction of the Somali army (CIC 1998). It is during this turbulent time that the first mass migration of refugees emerged from Somalia. Many fled to Europe, Canada, the United States of America, Australia and New Zealand. Most Somalis arrived in Canada between 1989 and 2001 (Reitsma 2001).

Somalis first arrived in Canada as refugees in the 1970's. In the late 1980's, the Somali community began to grow rapidly as civil war ravaged their country (Abdullahi 2001). Until as recently as 2001, Somalia was one of the top ten countries in numbers of refugees coming to Canada (Diversity Watch). In 2001, there were 50,000 to 70,000 Somalis living in Canada

(Abdullahi 2001). At that time Somalis were the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest group of refugee claimants in Canada. By June 1991, 22,500 Somalis lived in Toronto.

The uniqueness of Somalia and its people rests in its homogeneity of religion, culture, and language (though Arabic, Italian and English are spoken in different areas of Somalia, everyone speaks the official language, Somali). Since the 1800's, the French, the British, the Italians and neighbouring Kenya, have colonized different parts of Somalia at the same time. Since that time, political violence and civil unrest have clouded life in Somalia. In 1991, as militias fought against each other, and hunger, rape, and death became more widespread, people began to flee to neighbouring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen, and Burundi. Large refugee camps were their homes, until major resettlement programs moved families to Europe and North America.

With the belief that they are all blood relations, Somalis tend to feel and exhibit a free and natural connectedness with each other. Conversion to Islam occurred between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, as Somalis spread out into what is now known as eastern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. Somalis strongly adhere to Islam and belong to the Sunni sect. As a result, they typically observe strict separation of the sexes, and women are expected to cover their bodies, including their hair, when in public.

For Somalis the family is the ultimate source of security and identity. Upon meeting, Somalis ask each other "What is your lineage?" unlike North Americans who ask, "Where do you live or where are you from?" (Industry Canada). Somali families typically consist of seven to eight children. Over 90% of Somali women are circumcised. Though much has been written about female genital cutting (FGC), those families that practice it consider unclean and unmarriageable a girl who is uncut (Refugee Women). Against the law in Canada, FGC is not believed by some to be a true religious tradition of the Muslim people, as the Koran says nothing

in support of it and there is no written history of literature to indicate that the custom was practiced in the time of Mohammed (Refugee Women). According to some publications, FGC is practiced mainly because of myths about female genitalia, but in Canada, it is a child protection issue and social workers are mandated to intervene (Affi).

Though devout Muslims pray five times a day to Allah, Somalis recognize that this practice is not always accommodated in the Canadian lifestyle. Holidays like Ramadan and Eid are important vehicles for socialization and celebration. The sacrifice of a goat or lamb is a typical practice in Somali culture. In North America, Somali families have been known to make arrangements with local farmers to have the animal killed in the manner defined by their religion. Because Somalis do not typically celebrate birthdays, they often do not know their exact date of birth. They observe and celebrate the anniversary of family members' deaths.

Many families have lived through trauma, experienced the loss of loved ones, loss of property and wealth and spent prolonged periods in refugee camps. Somali refugee families arrived in Canada with single mothers as heads of the families. An unusual family structure in Somali culture, this situation existed because husbands were lost in wars or remained in refugee camps (Affi). Coupled with little or no experience in single handedly managing the family, women struggle to learn a new language, fit into a new culture, and practice a new way of life while providing security and guidance to their children (Affi).

One of the reasons for choosing this topic is because Somalis' entry to Canada was as a result of displacement due to war. This researcher is interested in following how the children of these refugee families, now adolescents and young men and women, survive after fifteen years in Canada. The main catalyst for this project, though, is the finding by investigators that Somalis "are one of the largest and most marginalized immigrant and refugee groups in Toronto (Hulchanski, Murdie, Dion, and MacDonald 2004)." The few studies that look at Somalis deal

with newcomer needs and issues (Reitsma 2001, Affi 2005, Castel & Kuranta 2004). The present work deals with issues related to integration and full participation.

## **SOMALI YOUTH**

Youth programs that specifically address the settlement and adaptation needs of Somalis are often established in the cities where they live. The International Rescue Committee (IRC), in the United States of America, provides relief, rehabilitation, protection, post-conflict development, resettlement services, and advocacy for those uprooted or affected by violent conflict and oppression. In cities like Minnesota, Nashville, Washington, and New York, to name a few, Programming for Somali youth in particular is focused on assisting youth in making the transition to life in North America (Castel and Kuranta 2004). Organizations like Midaynta and SOYAT in Toronto provide settlement services for Somali youth in Toronto while in Ottawa, there is the Somali Centre for Youth (Research & Data Group).

With a strong desire to tell of the “settlement experiences of the Somali community, through their perspective” and to share “material that previously existed only within the community itself”, Somali youth living in Metro Toronto created an information web page on Industry Canada’s website. This informative source displays the history, experiences, and talents of Somalis in Canada. Promotional literature indicate that Somali youth living in Metro Toronto want to inform the public about the historical background of Somalis, the differences between nomadic cultures and life in Canada in terms of issues related to housing, jobs, education, the role of women in Islamic culture, and the experiences of becoming accustomed to Western life and values (Industry Canada). This effort points toward Somalis taking responsibility for their future here in Toronto. The effort indicates recognition of the ideological differences between their birth society, one defined by Islam where religion and gender determine behaviour, and a

Western society where Christianity is secularized (Niemelä 2005). Canada's Multiculturalism Policy of inclusion and "[helping] people overcome barriers related to race, ethnicity and cultural or religious background (Canadian Heritage)," leads many to assume that the host society and its institutions would develop a wider awareness and deeper understanding of Somalis and their lifestyle.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section discusses the purpose of the study and its relevance, the approach taken and justifications for so doing. It describes the data that was collected, the method of data collection, and some of the difficulties encountered during the research process. Elements of the literature review that strengthened the use of the tools chosen are also discussed.

### **Purpose**

The study's aim was to uncover the feelings, experiences, and opinions of Somali youth, parents of Somali youth, and workers at non-profit organizations that serve a significant number of Somali clients. Through a series of questions about experiences with the secondary school system, in seeking employment and in accessing recreation services, this researcher learned whether or not Somali youth experienced full and equal participation in the society in which they live. Respondents shed light on how they experience belonging, the level of acceptance they perceive, and the recognition they sense in society. Their narratives give insights into the five cornerstones of social inclusion described by CERIS researchers as: the equitability of programs, policies, and practices that characterize access to services, skills nurturing and development, opportunities for interaction across ethnic, cultural and economic lines, and the economic security with which they live (Saloojee 2003 and Freiler 2001).

According to Hancock, a qualitative approach is best suited to research that: seeks the opinions, feelings and experiences of participants; relies on perceptions and experiences of participants; may test or challenge an existing theory (1998).

This project takes a qualitative approach to the research. As the data sought aimed for levels of meaning and understanding that go deeper than mere numbers, the qualitative approach was deemed best suited to the type of information the research aimed to gather (Hancock 2002).

The research sets out to discover what life is like for Somali youth in Toronto as they negotiate secondary education, the job market and recreation services and activities. It sought to accomplish this through personal descriptions of interactions with secondary school staff, employers and recreation facilities' frontline staff. As youth participants told of challenges to access, they followed with solutions or suggestions for improvement. These were considered relevant as they presented a context that was meaningful to all participants, within which barriers to social inclusion were reflected upon. In addition to the youth participants, whose personal experiences were shared, parents and service providers perform a supportive and guiding role assisting and advising youth.

This study was conducted between mid-July and mid-August of 2005, immediately following approval of the proposal by Ryerson University Ethics Committee. The study solicited personal accounts and observations of Somali youth's activities in secondary education, obtaining employment and accessing recreation. Three lines of investigation define the study. The first is the personal and individual experiences of 12 Somali youth between the ages of 17 and 21, experiences in the three named categories of community life. The second is the perceptions of 3 parents of Somali youth who witness daily obstacles youth face as they negotiate secondary education, the job market, and recreation services. The third line of investigation is the

interpretations and professional opinions of 5 community workers at non-profit agencies who support, guide, and counsel Somali youth.

### **Accessing the Population**

Access to the Somali population in Toronto was gained through two entry points. One was the Somali Youth Association of Toronto, SOYAT. SOYAT is “a non-profit youth-based community organization serving the Somali youth in Metropolitan Toronto (SOYAT website).” The other inroad was by way of a community contact in the Somali community who once worked as a Somali School Settlement Worker with the Toronto District School Board. She is an avid community developer and advocate.

The first contact availed this researcher of youth participants through the Community Kitchen Program. The Community Kitchen Program is a youth focused program offered through SOYAT, designed to help Somali youth improve their cooking skills, while giving them a safe and relaxed environment in which to air fears and concerns. Boys and girls meet separately on two different days, at the Rexdale Community Health Centre. SOYAT’s Executive Director briefed the coordinator of each Community Kitchen Program, about the purpose of the study and the general method being used, and then introduced the coordinator to this researcher. When this researcher met with the each coordinator in turn, there was anticipation and willingness to participate. Community Kitchen participants, who became focus group participants, modeled this mood and genuinely participated, wanting to ensure that all went well. All enthusiastically contributed to the discussions. Due to a sudden violent death in the community, the meeting with the girls had to be postponed one week.

The first youth focus group session was conducted with five boys. The second was made up of seven girls. Both sessions took place during the regularly scheduled Community Kitchen

Program time, so participants did not need to make an extra trip for the session, and they did not miss the substantial meal that is usually a product of each Community Kitchen workshop.

The second lead connected this researcher with the Executive Director of an emerging Somali Community Services Organization. Upon his request, the focus group questions were put to him in a short meeting, before he decided that Dejinta Beesha Somali Multi-Service Centre would be the best access to community workers who serve Somalis upon such short notice. Dejinta Beesha Somali Multi-Service Centre is an agency that provides settlement and integration services for the Somali Community in Toronto (Agency Flyer). Six agency staff, all women, participated in the focus group session. They were joined by two parents of Somali youth. These parents also worked as community service providers at other mainstream organizations, but they were designated to work with Somali clients. This group of eight formed the third group. The meeting took place at the offices of Dejinta Beesha, who provided participants with a snack.

### **Focus Groups**

A focus group is a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research (Powell et al. 1996: 499)

A focus group is a group of interacting individuals having some common interest or characteristics, brought together by a moderator, who uses the group and its interaction as a way to gain information about a specific or focused issue (Marczak & Sewell 2005).

Both these definitions describe and strengthen the reasons why focus groups were used in this study. Participants shared the same culture, language and religion. Though some were born in Kenya, they all self identified as Somalis. This study explored personal experience and personal opinion. These sources were used to glean data regarding the phenomenon of social inclusion through education, employment and recreation.

Kitzinger (1994) commends the benefits of organized discussion while Goss & Leinbach (1996) describe the social aspect of the focus group. Both studies are premised on the good information that comes from sharing ideas sparking recollections. Further, Kunz, Milan and Schetagne (2000) emphasize the richness of the data that can be gained by the use of focus groups. The subtleties of body language, tone of voice, and over all demeanours of participants, provide a more complete and encompassing set of data for the researcher. These aspects of data collection contributed to making focus groups the appropriate tool for this project. The opportunity to observe the group dynamics of participants as they discussed familiar topics provided a practical and living context in which to interpret the findings.

### **Questions**

Participants were asked to complete a “Personal & Family Information” form (See Appendix I). It was explained to participants before the start of each focus group session that the study was seeking personal opinions and observations, and not right answers. The main demographic data are summarized later (See Appendix II).

The focus group sessions were tape recorded, except the session with the service providers, because two participants did not consent to this method. In this situation, the researcher wrote notes during the discussion. An attempt was made to capture exact quotes, but where this was not possible, general descriptive words were noted and later expanded upon. Immediately following the session, the notes were looked over, and details and clarifications inserted.

Focus group sessions were guided by open-ended questions based on three specific topics – education, employment, and recreation (See Appendix III). To generate the data gathered, questions opened with the phrases “What has been your experience...” “In your view...” and “In

your experience...” These types of questions tended to draw out opinions and individual perceptions and participants were made to feel in control of the data that was being gathered.

Open-ended questions were posed, allowing participants the opportunity to answer, explain and clarify as they responded. Care was taken to ensure that each question dealt with a single separate aspect under investigation, so that it generated responses pertaining to one topic at a time. The youth were asked three questions, and the group with service providers and parents was asked four questions (See Appendix III). The questions were presented to the groups in a consistent manner. Their content had a natural flow and a logical sequence – school, employment, and recreation. The recreation and employment questions could have been interchanged in the sequence but the decision to ask about recreation last was based on the idea to end the discussion on a lighter topic. The questions were asked with the understanding that anyone may choose whether or not to answer. Sometimes other questions were asked to clarify a point or to encourage a response, but all stayed strictly on the topics presented. The discussion sometimes returned to a question that was asked earlier as individuals recalled relevant instances.

### **Focus Group Sessions**

At times, the group discussion materialized as being a bit difficult to control as participants became agitated, excited, and passionate and would engage in cross talk and deliberations that took the discussion off track. In these circumstances, the researcher would draw on multiple group facilitation skills and steer the conversation back to the topic at hand without arousing in participants feelings of being “cut off.”

In many instances it was impossible to separate individual experience from that of the group, in keeping with the focus group method. However, as the nature of groups is to engage in discussion, the research benefited from the informing and confirming of data on the spot (Bernard

1994). A huge benefit to using focus groups in this study was the immediacy of the data. This feature made focus groups an efficient mode for data collection.

Even though a questionnaire might have been appropriate to collect data, it was not possible due to the extremely limited opportunity to collect a considerable amount of information--- a benefit of using the focus groups. A questionnaire could not ensure that all participants had the same understanding of the questions being asked. Not only was this an important feature of this study, but in the focus group setting, a great deal of information was gathered as participants interacted in a genuine manner to a natural situation.

Individual interviews were not used due to the time constraints, and also because they tend to be limited by only revealing individual attitudes, beliefs and feelings. This study aimed to get at the group experience. Interactions amongst group members provided clarification of ideas as well as it revealed the attitudes, beliefs and feelings of the group.

The qualitative approach using focus groups proved appropriate for this study because it yielded data that is descriptive, subjective, and natural. With an interview guide, the focus group discussions followed a systematic pattern. Each discussion session lasted approximately 75 minutes, capturing multiple views and attitudes in a short period of time.

## **FINDINGS**

This section will discuss the findings of the research. Participants' responses to the three main topics of discussion, education, employment and recreation, are categorized.

Twenty individuals, 15 female and 5 male, participated in three focus group sessions. All participants, two under the age of 18, declared that they were adherents to the Muslim religion. All were Fluent in English and Somali, and seven fluent in at least one other language.

Participants were either permanent residents or citizens of Canada. Eighteen were single and never been married. Three participants were university or college graduates, 8 were enrolled in college or university at the time, and nine were enrolled in high school. Of the twenty participants, ten were employed, either full time or part time, seven were unemployed, and three were engaged in volunteer work from time to time (See Appendix 1D).

Of the 10 employed participants, seven women worked at summer student placement positions at non-profit organizations. They were knowledgeable about their jobs, their culture, and their history. Participants exhibited respect for this researcher's endeavor, and throughout the discussions patiently clarified inquiries and expanded upon examples.

The research found that Somali youth in Toronto experience barriers to social inclusion in Canadian society, as they pursue secondary education, seek employment, and access recreation services. This means that inclusion indicators are absent from the aforementioned three areas of their lives. Following the lead of researchers at Laidlaw Foundation, inclusion indicators fall into five significant categories that are said to define social inclusion. The categories are (1) valued recognition and respect through programs and policies that recognize the uniqueness of culture, (2) opportunities to nurture existing skills and talents and to develop new ones, (3) having and being able to exercise the right to be involved in the decision making process about things that directly impact their lives, (4) having the opportunity to share social and physical space with opportunities for interaction across ethnic and economic boundaries, and (5) having the income and security to be able to fully participate in community life (Saloojee 2003).

Analysis of the data collected revealed three themes that continued to repeat across the groups as the questions were discussed – racism and discrimination, lack of resources, and all things Somali.

## **Racism and Discrimination**

All participants narrated experiences of racism and discrimination because of skin colour, religion, their clothing (the females) and the fact that males and females do not undertake co-ed leisure activities. These experiences occurred in school, while trying to gain employment and in trying to access recreation services.

The girls freely shared their observations and opinions of their secondary school experiences and the discriminatory environment in which they had to learn.

*Our teachers... the principal is racist first of all. She just thought that all the Somali people were evil (Girl- College Student, Employed).*

*Hijab and skin colour were reasons for discrimination and racism (Girl- Grade 12 Unemployed).*

*I went to that same school. And when I was there it was completely different. They were very racist and ... truthfully, they were. I was the only Black youth who was part of the administrative system in the school – in the office. And one day I overheard a counselor talking to two students telling them don't take science and chemistry and biology because gym is free that time and they could also take arts during that time and it upset me. And by the time I got up to go and talk to them, it got me more upset when I saw it was my sister and her friend that she was talking to (Girl- University Graduate Employed).*

These descriptions express feelings that arose due to the experience of racial discrimination. These youngsters clearly recognized that they were not favoured and therefore not included. The following comment by a female university student bears this out:

*When it comes to Somali youth, I think that they ignored [us] – well, Somali youth went under the Black kids (Girl – Summer Employee).*

It is as if they had resigned themselves to tolerate practices of obvious exclusion and the resulting emotional response, something over which they had no control, while in school. Here are some other recollections:

*My school was kind of negligent in serving their needs, some of the Somali kids (Girl-University student- Employed).*

*They didn't even acknowledge the Black kids (Girl-College Student-Employed).*

*Black kids were considered kind of troublemakers or something like that. (Girl-University Student-Employed).*

Unlike the girls, the boys did not give lengthy stories, but quietly one boy stated how things worked at his school.

*When it comes to extra curricular activities, it is not a big problem but things like sports, some sports are favored more than others like during gym times, you'd have one sport that's played longer like hockey instead of basketball. Basketball would be cut short (Boy-Grade 12, Unemployed).*

The others nodded their heads in agreement and recognition as he spoke.

The lack of programs and policies that recognize and respect differences was expressed in the experience of one of the young women. She said,

*When I came in grade 6 I knew many languages, but I was put in ESL, then they used to send me to French class. So was I supposed to learn French or English? But then there were no classes for any of the languages that I spoke, Somali, Italian, Arabic, Swahili. I was mad. I used to get into a lot of trouble (Girl –College Student-Summer Employee).*

A parent acknowledging that she had the same experience with her child, shared,

*None of the teachers could relate to us: the hijab, language –the culture – they could not relate (Parent).*

This comment encouraged service providers to explain,

*If your child is behind, the parent cannot help because the parent has language barriers and has a different expectation of school.*

*Parents tried to get the sympathy from teachers, but were told that there were many to teach and they could not do any thing special just for one student. But when you looked at the class, there'd be 12 Somali students in there (Parent and Family Counselor).*

Parents recalled that teachers gave no incentives to Somali students and that the boys in particular were easily discouraged. They said that the boys were often described as hyperactive and in need of medication. The parents said that they too became discouraged when they saw the effect that the school environment was having on their sons. This description duplicated some of the sentiments shared in the girls' session. One of the university graduates said that the boys were often asked not to stand together in groups in the school's hallways. They were also constantly asked to refrain from speaking Somali while at school. Other girls also spoke about the experiences of the boys in particular, in their schools. Very aware of their isolating situation, one girl took the time to explain something that might be interpreted as a calculated approach by school staff, to ensuring failure of Somalis.

*They [the boys] get held back so that when its time to graduate, like [only] one or two [graduate] ... and the rest are off somewhere else...you know what I mean... Like they track you off so... like they do it on purpose, like the teachers, for the boys, they make classes like drama, gym, art... they make it so nice, they give the weakest teachers those classes to teach so that students would actually want to go to the class, but really they're just sending you off to the wrong class because.... If you take those classes... they are the clicks [cliques]... the university clicks [cliques] and then there's the other clicks [cliques], so, they say, while your friends are taking this course, "Are you sure you want to head off with the Indians"? (Girl-University student who initiated the topic)*

Participants felt that people who are not Somalis do not understand their values and traditions. They felt that others did not care to learn about them. In more than one instance this was expressed:

*White people are scared of the boys (Girl- College student-summer employee).*

*When I was in school, teachers said that they were tormenting others by just standing around in groups (Women-University student-part time Service Provider).*

*If only they got to know us (Parent-Family Counsellor).*

*Some employers, the reason they don't want to hire you is because they don't know about you so, so when people don't know things, they tend to be afraid (Woman-College Student- Community Worker).*

The boys met their program coordinator's summary comments with respectful silence when he said,

*...I try to tell them [the boys in the Community Kitchen Program] that we have higher hurdles. We are Black and on top of that we are Somali men and there is a certain stigma attached to being Somali. It has a lot of stigmas. The hurdles are high, and you can't just say that it is not fair, because the White kids get it so much easier. They will get it so much easier, it's true its..... I'm not trying to be like the victimized Black man or whatever. I don't want to talk about it from that point of view, but it is true As I've found in my life ...*

Though it starts off being very personal, his commentary, expands to include the wider community of Somalis:

*I wanna work harder because I understand there's people that are gonna try and hold me down and I have to make a conscious effort to break stereotypes. I have to make a conscious effort not to fall into what people expect me to fall into. I try to tell people that, but it's not something that's easily done because it takes a lot more work and when you see a lot of people having fun and you gotta make that decision that I'll skip fun for today with that I can do something, not only for myself, but I can also represent my community.*

Experiences in seeking employment are also coloured with experiences of racism. One young woman who was completing a summer position described her experience:

*You'd get a job like, when you email them your resume they'd like it with all of the experience you have, they'd tell you, we really need you. When you come in for the interview, they tell you the position filled. Like retail, retail.... I hate that.*

A service provider, who is a university student and who was working at a summer placement, attempted to clarify the depth of the problem when she said, "It's hard to get a job when your résumé has the name Mohammed". Her peer, a second year college student engaged

in summer employment said, “Yeah, so we don’t have that many problems because we are not covered”, as she singled out the girls who were not dressed in hijab.

Narratives from the boys corroborated the sentiments discussed in the girls’ group. The boys believed that they were discriminated against because they are Muslim – something, they say, that is easily recognized by their names. They felt that employers have a negative impression of Muslims, so they suffer because of this. The boys spoke of giving out résumés and speaking with managers of businesses that advertised that they were hiring. However, these boys are yet to receive job offers.

The parent who works as a family counselor emotionally spoke of her son’s experience. She said that security guards confronted her son when he went to the Mall looking for a job. She felt that the “racist behaviour” would be no more if people actually knew Somalis.

Both girls and boys spoke of difficulties accessing recreation programs and services. They explained culturally inappropriate programming, kept them out of their local community centres. The girls said that they could not find any ‘all girls’ programs such as swimming or lifeguard training. They described traveling 90 minutes each way to enjoy free 2-hour all girls’ swims on Sundays, even though there is a pool at a recreation center closer to home. A female university graduate and full time employee, described a particular situation:

*One day swimming was cancelled, and they gave us the basketball court instead.....because the life guards didn’t show up. Because we traveled all the way from Etobicoke we demanded something. It happened to us a few times...The life guards don’t even care about us... that’s the worst of all.*

When asked by this researcher whether or not there are any Somali lifeguards, she very solemnly explained:

*The thing about that is we are all wearing Hijab, right. So we need somewhere where there’ll only be girls being taught to be lifeguards. Everywhere where I’ve tried it’s all boys and girls mixed. The*

*community we are working with now, they are doing it for free... but the youth, it is all mixed... so we can't do it.*

This absence of similar programs in their area, as well as the inability to even access leadership training, was interpreted as a total disregard for their religious values and discrimination against persons who adhere to the Muslim faith.

### **Lack of Resources**

Freiler refers to “lack of adequate resources to be effective”, as one of the factors that contributes to social exclusion, a factor that is highlighted by the way the youth respondents interpret their marginalized existence (2001).

It was evident that not only the adults, but also the youth, were keenly aware of the lack of financial resources within their community, and its impact on their daily lives. When one of the boys said that his school offered sports like golf and tennis for gym, and that there were several sports scholarships, as this researcher excitedly asked for more information, his peers quickly clarified, “He goes to a rich school”. The school the former boy attended was out of the area in which he lived. These youngsters readily linked low economic status with the many challenges that shape their world. As they seemed to try to make sense of their experiences, two of the boys said that their school is “poor”, and that is the reason why one sport is favoured over the other, whereas at a more affluent school, such favouritism would not be necessary.

The youngest boy brought up the topic of basketball programs in the community being regularly cancelled, and without notice. As the others agreed, between them, they spoke sadly about better and brighter facilities at community centers they visited in neighbourhoods that were more affluent. It was their opinion that their community would never be able to have centers that are “clean”, “spacious”, “calm”, “with places to chill and play pool”. One of the boys who goes to a “poor” school said,

*Like I've been to a community center like at Vaughan and it was a big community center, like where they had pool tables and televisions.*

Before he could complete the idea he was in the midst of conveying, another boy from a “poor” school finished it saying,

*That's a nice neighbourhood – a nice community center. Yeah. Like it was so big and there are hardly any teenagers there and its for them so – why build it there if no one is going to use it?*

When asked to describe the community centre in their neighbourhood, the former speaker said, “dull”. As all eyes lowered to the floor, they repeated in unison, “dull”.

The girls and women, who took the long trips to go swimming, said that the fees their local pool set were beyond their means. A girl who wore hijab said, “At the community center it is expensive”. She then proceeded to outline the fee structure that included a monthly membership fee and a designated swim time that could not be guaranteed to be an ‘all girls’ swim. This young woman went on to explain that the recreation department therefore has no reason to designate any ‘all girls’ swim time at that pool, because there was no demand for it. The fees did the job of keeping Muslims away from that pool.

The others made it clear that they preferred to make an excursion out of the long trip from Etobicoke to Regent Park. Sunday swim trips were enjoyed more than for swimming; the journey was also an event.

A service provider who works at a Somali community service agency attempted to give details about the source of additional pressures on families. Mostly single mothers often feel obligated to financially assist relatives in Somalia. The resulting strain consequently depletes their already limited resources. This topic, he explained, is often a source of contention between mothers and their teenagers living with them in Toronto.

## **All things Somali**

Participants spoke lovingly about the Somali Youth Association of Toronto, SOYAT, whom they used for all job search needs. Staffed by Somalis, SOYAT is held in the minds of Somali youth as a source of pride. They expressed trust in the guidance received from SOYAT with such comments as “SOYAT is the only Somali youth organization”, “[We need] more organizations like SOYAT...They are very helpful” and “If I need to get my résumé done, I go to SOYAT”. The boys and the girls said that they approached SOYAT for all job search needs such as job postings, résumé preparation and interview preparation. Though the YMCA was also used, this was mainly for technological resources – computer, printer, phone, fax.

Students who attended schools with very dense Somali populations spoke of SOYAT bringing support programs and motivational speakers to their school. They described being very involved in school activities and school clubs, and the fact the Somali students were involved in every aspect of the school. One girl very excitedly explained that at her school,

*All Somalis went there, so Somalis were the majority of the school, so all of the attention was there already. We had SOYAT, who used to come down to Kipling [High School], to have a girls' thing and a guys' thing. We used to have fashion shows too. Somalis were a part of everything we did in the school. There were many workshops put on by SOYAT.*

A college sophomore agreed that the same situation existed at the high school that she and another girl in the group attended. She said,

*Well we went to Scarlet and the majority were also Somali. And SOYAT used to come and do the same thing*

She described that from working in the office during the lunch hour to heading up committees, to giving the valedictory speech at graduation, Somali students were included. The gym was the designated prayer area, and students felt comfortable to access it. In schools where Somalis were not in the majority, youth talked about having trouble in getting out of classes to attend prayer

sessions in very small areas. Teachers would keep them in class beyond prayer times and ask them to go later.

Youth who were employed for the summer said that they gained the opportunity through a government-funded program that paid their salaries. Tropicana Community Services and Horn of Africa Community Services, two non-profit agencies that target African and Caribbean youth, managed the program. Those who worked in recreation programs, worked with Somalis.

Service providers who participated in this research worked primarily with Somali clients. They gave some insights into what they saw as the causes for many of the difficulties Somalis faced. One seasoned community family counselor said that the subject of education is a complex problem that included parents, culture and the schools. He said that parents were not of much help to the children in school because they had language difficulties, their minds were still very much on the situation back home in Somalia, and they expected the school to take care of everything their children needed. This opinion was shared by the youth who said that parents struggled with English and did not understand their dilemmas when they complained about their negative experiences at school. All service providers and parents concurred that Somali parents and Canadian teachers have very different expectations of each other, and this made for a rough journey for Somali youth through secondary school.

The coordinator of the boys' Community Kitchen Program had this to say about the position of Somalis in Toronto in 2005:

*I think as a community, Somalis haven't been here that long. A lot of us are trying to understand the way the system works now. Everyone is coming into the knowledge now. We are coming into the action now. We are not just going to sit here and let people dictate what we can and can't do.*

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative study suggest that Somali youth in Toronto experience barriers to social inclusion as they engage in secondary education, seek employment, and access recreation services. These barriers include, but are not limited to, racism and discrimination, lack of resources, and 'all things Somali', which resembles the phenomena, ethnic residential segregation (Li 1998) and institutional completeness (Breton 1964).

Ethnic residential segregation is the tendency of people of the same ethnic group to reside in the same geographic area. Researchers have attempted to explain the reasons for this, and in his article, Peter Li quotes Driedger and Church (1974) who he said "suggested that a higher degree of ethnic residential segregation is related to a strong maintenance of institutional completeness, and it represents an opposite to assimilation (Li 1998)." Institutional completeness, refers to "the strength of ethnic communities derived from the diversity and range of services available in the community" (Breton 1964).

The findings in the present research strongly illustrate that participants are comfortable to speak of their feelings and their experiences about highly personal experiences such as racism, discrimination and family income status, without harboring or displaying negative attitudes. Instead, there was an overwhelming sense of understanding about past and current situations.

Having mastered one of Canada's official languages, Somali youth are more confident than are their parents, about the society in which they live. Canada is their home, and they speak from the perspective of being entitled to a Canadian lifestyle. The parents and service providers expressed that they felt that Somali youth needed to spend more time at the Somali community centers to take advantage of specific programs. The programs, they said were designed to help the young people access jobs. Examples of these were training in the operation of cash registers, workplace communication skills and workplace leadership skills. The younger service providers,

who were university and college students, as well as the recent university graduates, employed at community services organizations for the summer, disagreed with this view. They felt that Somali youth were sufficiently ready to join the job market. They said that Canadian born/White youth were trained on the job and they too would be trained on the job. They felt that all that was really needed was the chance to show employers that Somali youth are fast learners and good employees. This replicates a statement that was made in the girls' group by a high school graduate who said, "I have so much community experience, all I need is a chance". The summer students also explained that volunteering at the Somali community centres do not necessarily pay off with jobs in mainstream businesses.

What was obvious to this researcher was that Somalis who are young adults did not see themselves as newcomers in need of settlement assistance in the form of orientation to a new culture. In that case, some Somali community centres are probably delivering inappropriate services for Somali youth. The fact still remains that SOYAT has the winning formula. Their staff are youthful and remain connected to their client group through on-going needs assessment and various programs and partnerships with similar agencies such as Tropicana and Horn of Africa (Personal Communication, July 2005).

To this researcher, the trend of Somalis taking care of Somalis, if not checked can be a contributing factor to the marginalization and further exclusion of Somali youth from full participation in the broader society. The service providers felt this effect, and they voiced feelings of being discriminated against. This researcher detected that participants sensed this effect of Somalis being 'set apart' as a community onto itself may have already made an impact by keeping them away from being involved in the wider society. Though research on ethnic residential segregation and institutional completeness has spoken of its benefits, it is this author's opinion that more thorough investigation needs to be conducted in visible minority communities.

Where poverty, racism, and existing marginalization in several areas are factors that define the community, useful studies would factor these elements into the research. 'All things Somali' may be the most powerful barrier to social inclusion that Somali youth face

The frustration expressed by service providers, with individuals who normalize their marginalized status reflected feelings of impatience with the general state of Somalis in Toronto. Service providers explained that after arriving in Canada as refugees over ten years ago, Somali families were assisted financially by the government. Unfortunately, many have become so used to their circumstances, that they do not seek improvement. It is the future of the next generation that some service providers worry about.

This research project achieved its aim by investigating the social experiences of Somali youth in 2005 Toronto. The cornerstones of social inclusion (Saloojee 2003 and Laidlaw 2003) can serve as measures of social inclusion, and can be applied to Somali youth.

If valued recognition is a cornerstone of social inclusion, the evidence from the focus groups demonstrated that this factor is very unfamiliar in the daily experiences of Somali youth in Toronto. These youth told of being made to feel as though nothing they brought to their school community was of value. Their families learned upon arrival to Canada that there was no room in the education system to accommodate their existing ability to speak three, four or five African languages. On the contrary students were made to learn two more languages before they were able to make any progress within the school system. Until then, they were treated like outsiders, even told that they may need to be medicated, implying that they were broken and needed to be 'fixed'. The girls were all keenly aware of the negativity associated with wearing the Hijab. A piece of clothing that is valued in Somali culture is a symbol for exclusion from employment. These factors contributed to oppressive effects and supported social exclusion, elements of racism and discrimination.

Inherent or learned skills continued to be devalued when the youth were repeatedly denied employment. They felt that they were not being allowed to demonstrate what they could do. The youth mentioned that they had the skills to be employed just like any other young Canadian, yet they were repeatedly turned down for jobs. The boys spoke of working on résumés, handing them out, making concerted efforts to seek out employment. Yet, they felt that their Muslim names kept them out of the job market. The lack of opportunities to develop existing skills, and to learn new ones, was frequently repeated. Thus, as a cornerstone of social inclusion, human development was not readily available to Somali youth. The impression they were left with is that the systems that govern employment practices perceived that Somali youth have little or no potential, and need not be targeted for enrichment. This could have debilitating effects on individuals if believed to be true. The parents and service providers spoke of feelings of discouragement when they witnessed the lowered spirits of the boys in the community. In contrast the youth participants in this study were anxious to do more and to experience more, as they expectantly looked-forward to that opportunity to earn decent wages and/or learn meaningful skills.

These youth were so far removed from any decision-making processes in their community that they had little knowledge of how things worked. The boys spoke of basketball programs being cancelled without warning, but they did not know how decisions were made to cancel the programs. Involvement and engagement formed a small part of their lives, for those who had the opportunity in their high school. This was possible in schools that had large Somali populations. As kids growing up, parental involvement in schools was limited due to lack of proficiency in English. The generation of youth who will be parenting their own children soon, may set new standards for community engagement. They do not face the same language difficulties as their

parents, and they are learning, through experience, the pressure points and the gaps in education and recreation services.

As a cornerstone of social inclusion, proximity continues to be a challenge for Somali youth. Attending post secondary institutions would offer more chances for interacting across ethnic and economic boundaries. However, Saloojee's proposition that various populations share neighbourhoods, parks, libraries, and other public places, is yet to be seen with Somalis. To get to really know a culture, one has to be close to it, very close, and as far as focus group participants see it, they are served by Somali staffed agencies, housed in situations that are almost impossible to get out of and employment is not readily accessible. Existing recreation programs are still based on one cultural design, even within the neighbourhoods of the Somali youth. The gender factor is still a complication for recreation programmers. It is known that Somali girls do not share recreation activities with the boys, yet 'all girls' programs continue to be absent from local recreation programming. The ethnic residential segregation spoken of earlier is part and parcel of the lack of shared public spaces. Municipal infrastructures work to keep Somalis in particular geographic spaces

Of course, everything is tied into material well-being. Absence of this cornerstone of social inclusion persists in holding Somali youth in the communities in which they live. Without the resources to fully participate, recreation fees are too expensive, relocation to safer neighbourhoods is not an option, and 'poor' schools are the norm.

The five cornerstones of social inclusion offer social planners a blue print for growing inclusive communities. Reaching far beyond removing the barriers to social inclusion, these factors would allow education to truly serve the whole person, building self-esteem and nurturing positive attitudes towards that system. The cornerstones would ensure that summer employment is a priority for those youth who want it, that building skills and potential through education for

the community is established, and that recreation programs respond to the communities that they serve.

## **EVALUATION OF RESEARCH PROCESSES**

The narratives of participants were considered valid and credible. Gruba and Lincoln prefer to use the words “credibility”, “transferability”, “dependability”, and “conformity”, as opposed to the words “reliability” and “validity” when assessing qualitative research methods (1985). They argue that the latter are better used to assess quantitative methods of research. In the present study, which engaged focus groups, credibility was reasoned to be the most useful and logical assessment tool.

The literature warns that using focus groups to gather data leaves a degree of uncertainty about the accuracy of the information gathered. In the present study, as participants’ comments and experiences were shared in a social setting, they were compared amongst contributors who confirmed and corroborated as conversations progressed. Thus, validity was checked as the research progressed. As feelings and experiences were duplicated within and across groups, there was the feeling that the same story had been told many times, and the time is right for action. By the end of each discussion, participants were on the verge of strategizing on what they should do next in order for them to be recognized and respected in employment and recreation services.

As this researcher transcribed group discussions from the tape recordings, there was an increased awareness of the biases with which this project was approached. In order to gain the data being sought, this researcher was heard to pose several leading questions that encouraged participants to give responses already set in this researcher’s mind. This tendency was identified after the first group was interviewed, hence when the second session was held, though still

present, there was a lot more room for participants to say exactly what they were thinking, without the researcher's "flavour" added to it.

In the end, it was recognized that the design of the focus group discussions was very helpful for data collection. Engaging a contact person to connect with existing groups and brief them on the project before hand, paved the way for an easy entry into the each group's confidence. Holding the meetings at a location that was familiar to group members, Rexdale Community Health Centre and offices of Dejinta Beesha, removed many of the anxieties held by participants.

The topics used for gathering the data were familiar topics and the questions were easy for participants to follow and to respond to. Though open-ended, there were few questions (3). This allowed for wide ranging discussions on feelings, ideas and beliefs. Participants were able to inform the researcher about themselves as a group with statements that began with "Somali people like to..." and "Somali people usually ...". With such few questions, the process allowed for unanticipated questions without going too far off topic. The questions that were posed to the youth were piloted with two youth. This helped to make those questions more user friendly. The questions asked of service providers and parents targeted their opinions and observations, giving them the opportunity to speak without restraints associated with 'right' and 'wrong'.

The profile of the researcher may have had an impact on the rapport that evolved in each focus group. Non-Islamic, I immigrated to Canada from Trinidad and Tobago over 23 years ago. This shared racial and immigrant status might have made it easier for many highly personal issues to be discussed. Being female, I am sure that this accounted for much of the male participants' politeness and careful responses. Some encouragement was needed for them to relax as we engaged in dialogue. Female participants were spirited and relaxed and did not need any encouragement to speak freely.

The method used presented the researcher with limited control of the numbers of participants in the groups despite making the request for a certain number of participants. Group behaviour coupled with youth populations is quite unpredictable, so one had to be flexible and prepared for anything. Though designed to engage a session with parents only, and separate sessions with boys and girls between the ages of 13 to 15, this did not occur. There was a narrow window of time within which group sessions could take place, and when this was paired with summer vacations, there was not much more that could be done than to combine participants across demographic sets. To engage 13 and 15 year olds would have meant obtaining parental permission, and due to lack of proficiency in English, in ability to secure a translator and the need to engage in a significant amount of coaxing, the number of focus group sessions was reduced.

Most of these problems could have been avoided by more advanced planning, which would have entailed preparing the potential population group for the discussion sessions. Engaging the services of a translator, someone from within the Somali community, would have made the session for parents more accessible and ultimately more inviting. If the project were to be run again, this researcher would engage the assistance of a facilitator from the Somali community. This would serve to share the workload in gathering and transcribing data as well as corroboration of notes would allow for more holistic data collection.

Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity could not be assured because most of the participants socialize together and are therefore very familiar with each other. However, when this was explained to them, they acknowledged that this was an obvious situation, and were relaxed and happy to get on with the discussion

Data collection and analysis were limited by time constraints. In order to facilitate manageability of the project, a relatively small amount of data was collected. Descriptive text is used relating the results and it is presented in the format of the themes that emerged from the

focus group discussions. As a process, this researcher believes that the data collected are valid and reliable. The process was straightforward and is easily duplicated.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The objective of this study was to tease information out of the narratives of the youth themselves, from those who perform a parenting role in the lives of Somali youth, and those who serve Somalis at community service agencies. The information sought was about barriers to social inclusion facing Somali youth in Toronto. This type of evidence dealt with notions of full participation in Canadian society. The tools to perform this exercise needed to reach beneath the surface of statistical reports and feel good policies, as they allowed personal perspectives to be shared.

Four years after Reitsma's needs assessment, many of the same issues appear in the present study (2001). The findings in this study are validated by those found in Reitsma's. This type of replication ultimately validates the opinions and perceptions held by Somali youth that they are ignored, neglected, and not favoured by the system.

Though the study did not set out to make recommendations, it strongly suggests that policies and practices in education, hiring practices, and accessibility to recreation services are vigorously reviewed using social inclusion indicators. Efforts to recruit teachers of Somali background, for instance, would pave the way for proximity and involvement. Present day Somali students should be encouraged to prepare for teaching careers. Upon graduation, their placement need not be in schools with high Somali populations, but all over the city and beyond.

Employers need to be accountable for discriminatory hiring practices. A system of reporting application and employment statistics will make intolerance of racial discrimination the

norm rather than the exception. Certainly this is more easily accomplished in the area of recreation services.

It is acknowledged that the small size of the groups used in this investigation makes it difficult to formulate conclusive recommendations. That is why there is a great deal of room for further research on the topic of social inclusion. Research that follows should embark on the specifics of operationalizing concepts of social inclusion. The willingness of SOYAT, other contacts in the Somali community, and research participants, to contribute to this study, resonated with this researcher. The feeling is that something good needs to come out of the findings of studies such as this. The population under consideration is bright, knowledgeable and enthusiastic. If that keenness were capitalized upon planners might be looking at some very creative and innovative results.

Sustainable employment programs are tangible outcomes of this type of research. To implement accessible and appropriate recreation programs would take some focused attention by aware staff. The planning resources already exist within the Somali community, who, if teamed with mainstream planners and policy makers, could produce something that is enjoyed by a wider population.

This study is one step. It has confirmed and proven the existence of barriers to social inclusion that affect Somali youth in Toronto. In the end, this study calls for development of pragmatic strategies to reduce if not eliminate racism and discrimination against Somali youth, ease economic disadvantage within Somali populated neighbourhoods, and provide opportunities for more intercultural relations between Somalis and the other cultures that make up the population in Toronto. Through education, employment, and recreation, the strongest impact will be felt by Somali youth as barriers to social inclusion are dissolved.

The following quote from a quality of life report published last year is a step in the direction in which this researcher would like to see future resources channelled:

Quality of Life in these communities remains fragile. This fact must be incorporated into public policy thinking. Concerted policy action by all orders of governments is urgently needed to establish sustainable foundations for Quality of Life in these municipalities and in our country (Federation of Canadian Municipalities 2004).

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PERSONAL & FAMILY INFORMATION

“Identification of Barriers to Social Inclusion that Affect Somali Youth in Toronto in 2005”

*INSTRUCTIONS: Please complete the following questions as completely as you can. You are free to choose not to answer some questions. The researcher is available to clarify any questions.*

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Sex: ☐ Male ☐ Female
3. In which part of the city do you live? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Do you live in: ☐ a rental house ☐ own house/condominium  
☐ a rental apartment/part of a house
5. Religious Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Marital Status: ☐ Single (never married) ☐ Engaged ☐ Common-Law  
☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Remarried
7. Your personal immigration and settlement history:
  - a) Arrival Status: ☐ Refugee (Year:\_\_\_\_\_) ☐ Landed Immigrant (Year:\_\_\_\_\_)
   
☐ Born in Canada Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) Present status: ☐ Refugee ☐ Landed Immigrant  
☐ Canadian Citizen (Year:\_\_\_\_\_)
   
 c) First language learned: \_\_\_\_\_
  - d) Language Skills (Fluency): ☐ Somali ☐ English ☐ French ☐ Italian  
☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - e) Highest Level of Education (e.g. Grade, Degree): \_\_\_\_\_
  - f) Current Education Status: ☐ Not engaged in education

- ☐ Enrolled in High School (Grade: \_\_\_\_\_)
- ☐ Enrolled in College/University Full-Time
- ☐ Enrolled in College/University Part-Time

g) Employment Status: ☐ Employed Full Time    ☐ Employed Part Time  
☐ Unemployed    ☐ Not Working for Pay

h) Professional/Work Title: \_\_\_\_\_

**8. Family Structure (i.e. who are your family members):**

- a) Living Parents:    ☐ Mother    ☐ Father
- b) Are Parents:    ☐ Married    ☐ Common-Law    ☐ Separated  
☐ Divorced    ☐ Remarried    ☐ Widowed (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- c) Number of Male Children in Family: \_\_\_\_\_
- d) Number of Female Children in Family: \_\_\_\_\_

**9. Household Structure (i.e. who do you live with): CHECK ALL THAT APPLY**

- a) Do you live with:    ☐ Both Parents    ☐ Mother    ☐ Father  
☐ Other Adult Relative (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Spouse/Common-Law Partner
- b) Do you live with:    ☐ Siblings    ☐ No Siblings  
Number and Sex of Siblings: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Father's immigration and settlement history:**

- a) Arrival Status: ☐ Refugee (Year: \_\_\_\_\_)    ☐ Landed Immigrant (Year: \_\_\_\_\_)  
Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_
- b) Present status: ☐ Refugee    ☐ Landed Immigrant  
☐ Canadian Citizen (Year: \_\_\_\_\_)
- c) Language Skills (Fluency): ☐ Somali    ☐ English    ☐ French    ☐ Italian  
☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- d) Highest Level of Education (Grade, Degree): \_\_\_\_\_
- e) Current Education Status: ☐ Not engaged in education

- ☐ Enrolled in High School (Grade:\_\_\_\_\_)  
☐ Enrolled in College/University Full-Time  
☐ Enrolled in College/University Part-Time

f) Employment Status: ☐ Employed Full Time    ☐ Employed Part Time  
☐ Unemployed    ☐ Not Working for Pay/Retired

g) Professional/Work Title in Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

h) Professional/Work Title in Canada: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Mother's immigration and settlement history:

a) Arrival Status: ☐ Refugee (Year: \_\_\_\_\_) ☐ Landed Immigrant (Year: \_\_\_\_\_)

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

b) Present status: ☐ Refugee    ☐ Landed Immigrant

☐ Canadian Citizen (Year: \_\_\_\_\_)

c) Language Skills: ☐ Somali    ☐ English    ☐ French    ☐ Italian    ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

d) Highest Level of Education (e.g. Grade, Degree): \_\_\_\_\_

e) Current Education Status: ☐ Not engaged in education  
☐ Enrolled in High School (Grade: \_\_\_\_\_)  
☐ Enrolled in College/University Full-Time  
☐ Enrolled in College/University Part-Time

f) Employment Status: ☐ Employed Full Time    ☐ Employed Part Time  
☐ Unemployed    ☐ Not Working for Pay/Retired

g) Professional/Work Title in Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

h) Professional/Work Title in Canada: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you!

**Table 1 Demographics**

Item	Numbers
Total Number of Participants	20
<b><u>Religious Affiliation</u></b>	
Muslim	20
<b>Gender</b>	
Females	15
Males	5
<b>Age</b>	
Under 18	2
18 years and over	18
<b>Immigration Status</b>	
Permanent Residents / Citizens	20
<b>Marital</b>	
Single/Never married	18
Engaged	1
Married	1
<b><u>Language</u></b>	
Fluent in English	20
Fluent in at least on language other than English or Somali	7
<b><u>Education</u></b>	
University or college graduates	3
Enrolled in university of college	8
Enrolled in high school	9
<b><u>Employment</u></b>	
Currently Employed (FT / PT)	10
Unemployed	7
Not working for pay	3

### **“Identification of Barriers to Social Inclusion that Affect Somali Youth in Toronto in 2005”**

#### **FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

##### **For youth:**

1. Do you think that your school is serving you well?
  - a. If you answered “no”, what can be done to help you?
2. What is it like for you when you look for a job?
  - a. What do you think can be done to help you?
3. What is your experience with recreation services?
  - a. What do you think can be done to make them better?

##### **For parents:**

1. Do you think that the school is serving your child well?
2. What is it like for your child as he/she looks for a job?
  - a. What can be done to help him/her?
3. What was your child’s experience with recreation services?

##### **For service provider workers:**

1. In what way does your organization target Somali youth for services?
2. Do you think that Somali youth make the best use of your services?
3. In your view, what are the kinds of issues that face Somali youth in the areas of education, employment and recreation?
4. What do you think can be done to help Somali youth in the areas of education, employment and recreation?

①

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