

FAILING TO MAKE THE GRADE: SOMALI-CANADIAN STUDENTS AND THEIR ENCOUNTERS WITH
THE CANADIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

By

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Subeyda Mohamed

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Education System

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Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the discriminatory practices and racism in the education system contribute to the low achievement and high dropout rate of Somali-Canadian youth. Through qualitative research, semi-structured interviews with nine participants--this study explores the educational experiences of Somali students in the Toronto District School Board (the TDSB). This study found Somali students experience systemic discrimination in local TDSB schools--unfair grading practices, ethnic grading, differential treatment, deliberate streaming, stereotyping, profiling, the unequal application of discipline policies, disproportionate rates of suspensions and lack of religious accommodation. This study also found that systemic discrimination contributes to low achievement of Somali students, their disengagement from learning process, early school departure, and the criminalization of Somali boys. This study employs Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education as its main theoretical framework, through this lens the researcher links the schooling problems of Somali students to systemic discrimination based on their race and/or ethnicity.

Key Words:

Somali-Canadian, Education, TDSB, Discrimination, Low-Achievement, Racism

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Introduction

Immigrants and refugees who leave their country of origin to migrate to Canada often do so in search of a better life, security, peace and hope (Ighodaro, 1997, p. 67). “Canada [is] perceived [by many] as a place [they can] fulfill dreams, pursue aspirations and realize expectations” (Ighodaro, 1997, p. 67). Many Somali parents who fled the civil war in Somalia with their children and settled in Canada did so with their children’s future in mind (Abdi, 2012, p. 20). These Somali parents had dreams of higher education and consequently economic mobility for their children (Abdi, 2012, p. 20). These aspirations for many have not come to fruition instead these parents have had to deal with their children (the 1.5/ 2nd generation) dropping out of high school in disproportionate numbers and becoming involved in anti-social behaviour (Abdi, 2012, p. 20; Wingrove & Mackrael, 2012). This study looks into what is behind this lack of academic success and the drop-out phenomenon, an issue of major and growing concern for the Somali-Canadian community (Abdi, 2012, p. 20). More specifically, this study explores how discriminatory practices and racism in the education system contribute to the low achievement and high dropout rate of Somali-Canadian youth.

The education system is arguably the primary means through which we acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to ensure our full participation and integration into Canadian society (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 200). According to Henry and Tator, a significant body of research (innumerable studies, reports and surveys) demonstrate, “the ways in which racial bias and discrimination are woven into educational policies, programs, and practices and are reflected in the attitudes and norms of teachers, principles, and administrators.” (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 200). Henry and Tator (2006) also demonstrate the complex and far-reaching impact of racism on the life chances of racial minority students such as Somalis (p. 200). This study will contribute to this existing literature on institutional racism in education; it will also provide insights into the specific actions needed to ameliorate the educational and integration barriers faced by second generation

Somali-Canadians. This research in addition will help build intercultural understanding by contributing to existing literature on the post-immigration experiences of the Somali community.

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review will be divided into four separate sections. The first section will detail my theoretical and analytical framework--Critical Race Theory (CRT) or more specifically CRT in education. The second section will help situate the reader by providing some important background information on the Somali Canadian community, the ethno-cultural group that will be the focus of this study. This section will outline the early migration and settlement experiences of the Somali-Canadian community particularly how the aforementioned experiences have transformed the community in terms of beliefs, practices and values. The third section will provide an overview of existing scholarly literature on Somali students and their early experiences with the Metro-Toronto school system. Here, the study will examine the academic and non-academic challenges faced by Somali students when the community first enrolled in Toronto's public school system in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The fourth section will provide an overview of Somali students' present-day academic struggles within the Toronto District School Board (hereafter referred to as the TDSB). This section will present data from several TDSB reports analyzing the performance of all TDSB students at the secondary level to highlight the severity of the academic problems facing Somali students. The last section will focus on the themes that characterize the existing literature on the educational experiences of Somali students--experiences of overt racism, stereotyping, differential treatment and religious discrimination.

There have been only four research studies conducted on the educational experiences of Somali students in Toronto since the community first settled in the city in the late 1980s (Abdi, 2012, p. 54). This paucity of research is surprising given the severity of this group's

schooling problems and the size of the community in Toronto (Abdi, 2012, p. 54). As discussed below, these four studies on Somali students and their experiences in Toronto's public schools--Ighodaro (1997), Collet (2007), Mahamed (2010) and Abdi (2012) vary in focus. It is of note that only Abdi's (2012) thesis examines the factors contributing to the high dropout rate of Somali students in the TDSB.

This thesis project will explore how the discriminatory practices and racism in the education system contribute to the low achievement and high dropout rate of Somali-Canadian youth. This study will focus on the educational experiences of members of the 1.5, those who immigrated as children, and 2nd generation, students of Somali descent born in Canada or who arrived in Canada before their fifth or sixth birthdays and have been socialized entirely within a Canadian, diasporic context (Berns McGown, 2013, p. 4). Participants of Somali descent, members of the 1.5 and 2nd generation who graduated or "dropped out" of local TDSB schools within the last five years, are interviewed about their educational experiences in this board.

As previously mentioned this study will in the researcher's opinion contribute to the existing literature on the educational experiences of Somali students. It will also help provide insight into the specific actions needed to ameliorate the educational and integration barriers faced by 1.5 and 2nd generation Somali-Canadians.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework I have chosen to use for this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT) more specifically CRT in education. I chose this approach because it offers researchers "a radical lens through which to make sense of, deconstruct and challenge racial inequality in society" (Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 1). CRT is committed to speaking truth to power--it is based on the understanding that race and racism are the product of social thought and power relations (Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 1; (Yosso, 2006, p. 73)). "CRT theorists endeavour to expose the ways in which

racial inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal and unremarkable” (Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 1). A brief summation of CRT’s origins and development is crucial to understanding its ambitions as an intellectual and political movement (Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 2; Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 10)). CRT came out of the 1970s ‘leftist legal movement Critical Legal Studies (CLS) which sought to “deconstruct traditional liberal approaches to legal ideology and discourse [with the aim of] better conceptualizing how structural (class) inequalities were perpetuated and maintained in US society” (Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 2; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 10).

Many scholars of colour initially supported CLS (such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Cheryl Harris and Patricia Williams) because they felt alienated from existing legal discourse (Aylward, 1999, p. 27; Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 2). These scholars ultimately came to view Critical Legal Studies negatively as well because it failed to suitably engage with racism and reductively positioned racism as analogous to class-based discrimination (Aylward, 1999, p. 30; Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 2; Yosso, 2006, p. 72). As stated CRT developed in response to the shortcomings of Critical Legal Studies, since its inception CRT has undergone many revisions and refinements in relation to new developments in scholarship, and legal and policy discourse (Aylward, 1999, p. 27; Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 2). CRT in education is one of these developments, this theoretical and analytical framework challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, 2006, p. 74).

CRT in education has five principle tenets, the first of which is that racism is deeply entrenched in the social order and public institutions (Guy, 2009, p. 30, Yosso, 2006, p. 73; Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 2). CRT accordingly attempts to disentangle interwoven strands of racialized subordination based on gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent and sexuality (Yosso, 2006, p. 73; Guy, 2009, p. 30). Secondly, CRT challenges white privilege and rejects claims of objectivity, neutrality, color-blindness, meritocracy and equal opportunity made by

educational institutions (Yosso, 2006, p. 73; Guy, 2009, p. 31; James, 2012, p. 469). It “challenges notions of ‘neutral’ research [and] ‘objective’ researchers and exposes deficit-informed research that silences, ignores and distorts epistemologies of People of Color” (Yosso, 2006, p. 73). CRT scholars assert that these traditional claims are camouflages for the self-interests of dominant groups in society and instead demonstrate the perpetuation of oppressive conditions specifically for the reasons of race and perceived difference (Guy, 2009, p. 31; Yosso, 2006, pp. 73,74). Third, CRT is committed to the elimination of racial, gender, and class injustice as well as the empowerment of People of Color and other subordinated groups through critical research (Yosso, 2006, p. 74; Guy, 2009, p. 31).

One of the greatest strengths of CRT is also one of its tenets; it validates the experiential knowledge of people of colour (Yosso, 2006, p. 74, Guy, 2009, p. 31; Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 3). Yosso states, “CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of People of Color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination” (Yosso, 2006, p. 74). CRT draws on the lived experiences of people of colour through exploratory research methodologies such as storytelling/counter-storytelling, narratives, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, and chronicles (Guy, 2009, p. 31; Yosso, 2006, p. 74). These research methodologies enable people of colour to ‘speak back’ about racism and can be a means of psychological and spiritual empowerment for these communities (Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 3). CRT also incorporates a transdisciplinary perspective; critical theorists utilize knowledge from multiple disciplines, such as law, psychology, sociology and social work, to better understand race and racism (Guy, 2009, p. 32; Rollock & Gillborn, 2014). This framework will allow me draw on the lived experiences of Somali students--their insights into the operation of racism in the education system and their understanding of being racially minoritised“(Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 3).

Background: The early migration and settlement experiences of the Somali-Canadian community

According to the existing literature, prior to the late 1980s there was really no Somali “community” to speak of in Canada (Hopkins, 2006, pg. 365; Danso, 2002, pg. 4; Berns-McGown, 1999, p. 1). The first wave of Somalis arrived in Canada around the late 1980s first fleeing clan-based persecution; and later, after the ousting of Siad Barre in January 1991 the outbreak of civil war (Berns-McGown, 1999, pp. 13,14). In the subsequent years, the community has grown rapidly with most refugees settling in the Toronto or Ottawa area. Berns-McGown states that between 40,000 and 50,000 people settled in Toronto and another 20,000 in Ottawa by the mid-1990s (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 6). The number of Somalis living in Toronto present-day is unclear. Berns-McGown arguably the most significant scholar and researcher on the Somali-Canadian Diaspora provides these figures and states the number of Somalis in Toronto and Ottawa is today about double the aforementioned numbers (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 6). According to the 2011 National Household Survey, however, only 44,995 people in Canada reported having Somali ancestry (Canada, 2014). Estimates provided by Somali community organizations, similar to Berns-McGown put the number of Somalis in Toronto around 90,000-100,000 (Hopkins, 2006, p. 366). Since the census significantly underreports community populations this figure may be closer to reality (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 26).

Canada’s Somali community much, “like the generation of post-Second World War Jews who arrived in Canada traumatized by the war and the Holocaust [...] arrived as refugees in the grip of a collective trauma” (Berns -McGown, 2013, p. 17). These early arrivals consisted of people who had seen and suffered through the unimaginable--war, displacement, loss of homes, property and, loved ones, rape, torture, murder and imprisonment--many had post-traumatic stress syndrome (Berns -McGown, 2013, p. 6; Berns -McGown, 1999, p. 14; Ighodaro, 1997, p. 101; Scott, 2001, p. 25).

Somalis were disadvantageded in comparison to the Jewish refugees in question in that they had to go it alone (Berns -McGown, 2013, p. 17). As Berns-McGown (2013) and Mohamed (2009) note Somali refugees who came here in the late 1980s/early 1990s had no previously established diasporic community to guide them and help them retrain for the labour market, to find housing, to teach them English or to help them cope with the racism in the wider society or their trauma.

Israelite et al. (1999), Mohamed (2001) and Kusow (2006) all note that the clan-family system, traced through patrilineal descent, is the basis of Somali social structure and integral to one's social identity in Somalia. Social identity in Somalia is tied to clan differentiation rather than race and religion. This system divides the society into so-called nobles and non-nobles (Israelite, Herman, Ahmed Alim, Mohamed Abdullahi, & Khan, 1999, p. 5; Mohamed H. A., 2001, p. 7; Berns -McGown, 1999, p. 21; Kusow, 2006, p. 541). Berns-McGown (2007) and Hopkins (2006) both found that Somalis initially preferred to live in close proximity to other members of their sub-clans or, at least, clan-family members with whom they were on good terms. Those of Somali descent who settled in Etobicoke and west Toronto are mainly of the Darood and Hawiye clans (Berns-McGown, 1999, p. 23; Hopkins, 2006, p. 366). Whereas, those Somalis who settled in the north of the city around York and North York, and the east in Scarborough are mainly of the Isaaq clan (Berns-McGown, 1999, p. 23, Hopkins, 2006, p. 366). I would add Somalis settled along clan lines in various areas throughout Toronto because of Somalia's history of inter-clan strife and persecution (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 7; Berns-McGown, 1999, p. 20)

In terms of gender roles and expectations, in Somalia women traditionally are regarded as subordinate to men and their primary role and duty in life is to care for their husbands, children and extended families (Israelite, Herman, Ahmed Alim, Mohamed Abdullahi, & Khan, 1999, p. 5; Ingiriis & Hoehne, 2013, p. 319; Mohamed H. S., 1999, p. 53). The civil war in Somalia engendered a transformation of gender roles in diasporic communities, "women's roles have been revolutionized by the absence of men or by their failure to attend to the daily survival of their families" (Mohamed,

1999, p. 54). Today, there are many single-mother households in the diaspora because many Somali women lost their husbands when the Somali-state collapsed (Israelite, Herman, Ahmed Alim, Mohamed Abdullahi, & Khan, 1999, p. 5; Berns-McGown, 1999, p. 18;). They were killed in the resulting fighting or stayed behind when their families fled the country (Israelite, Herman, Ahmed Alim, Mohamed Abdullahi, & Khan, 1999, p. 5). Others were reunited with their husbands but the stress of displacement and violence, “tore these families apart over the course of the move and in their early years in their adoptive homes” (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 7).

Somali women often found themselves, “[alone], keeping their families together, finding housing and income, finding education for their children [and] dealing with the complex legalities of their precarious position in Canada” (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 7). Many Somali refugees who migrated to Canada did so at time that coincided with dramatic changes in social policy that were particularly burdensome for single-mothers (Israelite, Herman, Ahmed Alim, Mohamed Abdullahi, & Khan, 1999, p. 4). These changes instituted by the Ontario Conservative government of the time (around 1995 and on) included a 21% reduction in social assistance payments, elimination of rent controls and institution of co-payment for prescription drugs (Israelite, Herman, Ahmed Alim, Mohamed Abdullahi, & Khan, 1999, p. 4).

Opoku-Dapaah (1995) profiled the Somali-Canadian community in Toronto in the early 1990s, his study surveyed 385 Somali men and women, he found that his participants were for the most part underemployed. Opoku-Dapaah (1995) notes over 50 percent of his participants had completed high school or college before immigrating to Canada. Despite this, these individuals for various reasons--a lingering recession, language barriers and a lack of recognized experience--when they were working were employed in marginal jobs in the assembly/packing industries or commercial/retail businesses (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995, p. 14). In addition, Opoku-Dapaah’s (1995) study found that only 29 percent of those surveyed were actually employed at the time.

Today, there are still very high levels of poverty and deprivation within the Somali

community in Toronto (Danso, 2002, p. 6). Danso (2002) corroborates Opoku-Dapaah's (1995) claim that in Canada there is lack of recognition given to the professional qualifications, credentials, and training of visible minority immigrants. Participants in Danso (2002)'s study, who were interviewed in 2001, disclosed an average gross income of only \$1,350 per month. The Canadian Arab Institute in a series analyzing the 2011 census data released by Statistics Canada found that the Somali community averaged an annual income of as little as \$24,182 a year (Dajani, 2014). In part because of Canada's ongoing failure to recognize migrants' foreign credentials, many highly educated Somalis were forced, particularly in the early years (critical to their children's education), to move into public housing (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 18). Israelite, et al (1999) and Jibril (2011) corroborate that families are forced to live in public housing ¹(and by extension marginalized neighbourhoods) because of the high rents and limited options they are faced with in the local housing market.

"Living in a marginalized neighbourhood carries real risks for children, and boys, in particular. Those risks have translated into major problems--abilities unrealized; the criminalization of boys, which would not have happened had their parents managed to find jobs and housing in other neighbourhoods [and] the creation of outsider-status cycles--that have prompted media portrayals of Somalis as outsiders who have not integrated easily into the Canadian body politic" (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 18).

Overview: Somali students and their early experiences with the Metro-Toronto school system

The term "cultural adjustment" is first used in the literature reviewed in relation to the problems Black Caribbean students were facing in the school system in Canada (James & Brathwaite, 1996, pg. 15; James, 2012, p. 472). In the 1970s, Canada experienced a large influx of Black immigrants from the Caribbean; their children subsequently experienced intense difficulties in school (James & Brathwaite, 1996, pg. 15). School authorities at this time in response to this issue

¹ The researcher does not intend to stigmatize public housing or its residents with this statement. This statement is meant to stress Somalis continue to dwell in public housing because many lack the financial means to rent in the local housing market.

labelled the poor performance of Black students in the system a result of their adjustment problems (difficulties adjusting to a new society) (James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 15; James, 2012, p. 472).

Other explanations given for their performance tended to focus on pathological reasons for example, many of these Black students were said to have psychological problems (James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 15). Others were described as slower learners or learning disabled, hyperactive, having attention deficit syndrome and assigned to special education (James & Brathwaite, 1996, pp. 15,16).

“Looking through a CRT lens means critiquing deficit theorizing and data that may be limited by its omission of the voices of People of Color” (Yosso, 2006, p. 75). These explanations that satisfied educators ignored the similar schooling experiences of Canadian-born Black youth who were doing poorly in school despite having parents who supported their educational goals --in favour of a deficit perspective (James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 16). Yosso states that, “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in [...] schools is deficit thinking” (Yosso, 2006, p. 75). Deficit-informed-research often ‘sees’ deprivation in Communities of Color and deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for their poor academic performance (Yosso, 2006; p. 75; García & Guerra, 2004, p. 151). Low educational attainment is often attributed to the following: “(a) students [entering] school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills [necessary]; and (b) parents neither [valuing] nor [supporting] their child’s education” (Yosso, 2006, p. 75; García & Guerra, 2004).

These assumptions about Communities of Colour often lead schools to employ the banking method of education (Yosso, 2006; Freire & Ramos, 2009, p. 164)). Yosso states, “as a result, schooling efforts usually aim to fill up supposedly passive students with forms of cultural knowledge deemed valuable by the dominant society” (Yosso, 2006, p. 75). Educators place emphasis on cultural differences and fail to acknowledge race and racism as factors and the role of school educators and curriculum in students’ achievement in school because they assume schools

work and that students, parents and Community of Colour need to change to conform to this already effective and equitable system (Yosso, 2006, p. 75). Thus, forms of exclusion and institutional racism become hidden, normalized, and unquestioned in schools procedures.

Ighodaro's thesis project (1997) focuses on the experiences of Somali students in the Metro-Toronto school system; more specifically he investigates the impact of cultural adjustment and discrimination on the aspirations of young Somalis. His study was the first study to examine the educational experiences of Somali students in Toronto and as such is a significant source. He notes at one point in his study that the precise source of the educational problems experienced by Somalis is unclear (Ighodaro, 1997, p. 40). Somali students (in the mid 1990s) seemed to face a range of problems in the school system including cultural insensitivity on the part of the system, language barriers, issues to do with "cultural adjustment" to the school environment, and a lack of understanding from teachers and administrators (Ighodaro, 1997, p. 3). Despite this, Ighodaro at times takes on a deficit approach to the community's schooling problems attributing the poor performance of Somali students to their culture and religion. He, for example, states that some Somali students felt reluctant to communicate with their teacher due to religious constraint, a claim not further explained (Ighodaro, 1997, p. 46). In another part of his work, he argues that much of the early socialization of immigrant and refugee women from "the Third World" puts them at a disadvantage when communicating with others (Ighodaro, 1997, p. 73). In regards to this assertion, he references gender-linked values namely passivity and submissiveness widely upheld in these communities (Ighodaro, 1997, p. 73).

Ighodaro also notes that Somali students did not access guidance and counselling services available to them at their schools because of cultural reasons. "Somali students I have interviewed have a very wrong notion and attitude about guidance and counselling. They think that students who consult guidance counsellors are not normal [...]" (Ighodaro, 1997, p. 72). According to Ighodaro, many of these students were consequently unaware of the full scope of services provided

by guidance counsellors such as information services, referral services, career services, and follow-up (Ighodaro, 1997, p. 72). Ighodaro's framing of this issue is highly problematic as it ignores the large structural barriers (like being a refugee) that can limit the community's agency and affect how the community is perceived. It also does not consider the fact that Somalis experienced persecution in their homeland; many had a loved one jailed, tortured or murdered by government authorities; and because of this, they may distrust or fear of anyone resembling a public official (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 6; Berns-McGown, 1999, p. 14). Ighodaro (1997) states that this cohort faced discrimination, racism and prejudice in the Metro-Toronto school system, one participant he interviewed shared encountering both racist peers and teachers. Outside of this and a follow-up comment that in spite of these experiences this particular student performed very well in all her courses, Ighodaro does not discuss the impact of discrimination, racism or prejudice (terms the author does not define) on academic performance.

Ighodaro (1997) Alladin (1996) Scott (2001), Abdi (2012) all note many Somali students were inadequately prepared for schooling in Canada. Some of the Somali students who enrolled in Toronto's public school system shortly after the community's arrival in the late 1980s had gaps in their schooling "due to interruptions caused by [the] bitter civil war in northern Somalia in 1988 and in the south in 1991" (Abdi, 2012, p. 16). These events displaced families consequently forcing children out of school (Abdi, 2012, p. 16). It is of note that all public schools in Somalia were closed in 1991 following the breakdown of civil society halting the education of all students (Abdi, 2012, p. 16). "The war, coupled with a famine, [also] led to a large exodus of refugees to neighbouring African countries. Many of these [Somali refugees] spent years in refugee camps before [being able to migrate] to Canada and other countries" (Scott, 2001, p. 19). Abdi also states that "some Somali students did not participate in formal schooling at all [prior to enrolling in Toronto area public schools] as they were either too young to attend school before the civil war erupted or [they] lived in rural areas where there were no schools" (Abdi, 2012, p. 16).

Alladin (1996) corroborates this and he notes that in 1990, when Kipling Collegiate Institute received an influx of Somali students, these students were assigned age-appropriate placements, meaning they were assigned to a grade level considered age-appropriate (Abdi, 2012, pp. 16,17). Alladin (1996) states that age-appropriate placements exacerbated academic struggles for these students because such placements did not take into consideration these students' level of education i.e. gaps in their education or their lack of formal schooling. "Simple tasks [for example] such as note-taking, time management, and adjusting to classroom 'etiquette' were identified as factors that posed challenges for Somali students by their educators" (Abdi, 2012, p. 17; Ighodaro, 1997, p. 46)).

Today's Somali students are predominately Canadian born and most in Toronto started their schooling with the TDSB and as such their academic problems are not related to their foreignness to the Canadian school system (Abdi, 2012, p. 19).

Overview: Somali students and their present-day Academic struggles within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)

On November 21, 2012, the TDSB passed a motion directing staff to establish a Task Force on the Success of Students of Somali Descent (ETT, 2014, pg. 95). This Task Force was established to "address the persistent achievement and opportunity gaps experienced by students of Somali descent" (ETT, 2014, pg. 95). According to the Toronto Star, the board established this Task Force at the urging of the Somali community after a series of violent incidents in 2012 (Daubs, 2013). The Toronto Star does not go on to discuss these violent incidents in more detail. "Since 2005, [however] dozens of young men from [Toronto's] Somali community have been killed, most of them casualties along a cocaine-dusted corridor between the housing projects of Toronto and the oil patch in Alberta²" (Wingrove & Mackrael, 2012).

² This quote refers to murders of young Somali males who were alleged to be involved in drug trafficking.

The disproportionate number of young male Somalis dropping out of school, becoming involved with gangs and drugs and being incarcerated has been a major concern for the community for some time (Abdi, 2012, pg. 20). This issue was the theme of a community meeting held by a Somali community organization in 2005 and again a conference organized at York University by the York University Somali Students Association (YUSSA) in February 2012 (Abdi, 2012; Borders, 2005). “Many other informal and formal but undocumented meetings and discussions about the issue occur frequently in spaces where Somalis gather such as the various Mosques around the city” (Abdi, 2012, pg. 20). Despite this, the Task Force was not universally accepted by Somali parents, as some parents believe that more supports for Somali students will stigmatize their children and others of Somali descent (Alphonso, 2014).

The Task Force on the Success of Students of Somali Descent Report, though divisive, provides valuable insight into this group’s current academic performance and demographics. The Task Force found that as of 2012, there were approximately 5616 self identified Somali-speaking students attending schools in the TDSB (ETT, 2014, p. 97). According to the report, the majority of these Somali students (83%) were born in Canada making them 2nd generation Canadians, with the remaining 7% born in Somalia and 4% in Kenya (ETT, 2014, p. 97). In 2006, the TDSB reported that only 2% of their Somali-speaking students were enrolled in English as a Second Language classes (Abdi, 2012; Brown & Sinay, 2008, p. 5). It can be inferred from this data, the fact only 2% of Somali-speaking students need ESL classes means for those not born in Canada--speaking and understanding English is not an issue.

Recent data collected by the TDSB and featured in the Task Force’s report found that, “students of Somali descent are experiencing a significant, persistent achievement gap when compared to TDSB students overall” (ETT, 2014, p. 97). The 2006 TDSB Grade 9 Cohort Study

These young men from Toronto’s Somali community moved West more specifically to Fort McMurray in search of work. After reportedly struggling with unemployment and chronic underemployment these young men are alleged to have entered the drug trade leading to their premature death.

compared outcomes for Somali-speaking students with those of same-aged TDSB peers, its findings provided the following sobering picture (ETT, 2014, p. 97). The five year study (2006-2011) found that 25% of the Somali students dropped out of high school--the TDSB defines a drop out as anyone who has left the TDSB without a record of transferring or without graduating (Abdi, 2012, p. 1; ETT, 2014, p. 97). In addition, the report stated that 74% of the Somali cohort, compared to 49% of TDSB students overall, had experienced one or more of the following: placement into special education, suspension and/or below provincial standard achievement on Grade 6 EQAO results (ETT, 2014, pp. 97,98). Though the data indicates both male and female Somali-speaking students are at "higher risk" of falling into one or more of the previously mentioned categories in comparison to their same-aged TDSB peers (ETT, 2014, p. 98). Somali-speaking male students are more acutely at a "high risk" of dropping out; the dropout rate is 33% among Somali-speaking male students, whereas it is 17% among females (ETT, 2014, p. 98). "Somali males are also more likely than Somali females to be suspended, achieve below standard on grade 6 EQAO, and be identified as Special Education students" (ETT, 2014, p. 98).

CRT theorists have argued "that the prevailing racist discourse within society operates in such a way that the designation of students as "at risk" is merely an indication that they need [additional] educational supports, guidance, and mentorship" (James, 2012, pg. 470). The good intent behind assigning this designation has "become so normalized it obfuscates the 'inconspicuous and covert approach to issues of inequity that ambiguously suggest racial preconceptions' of [B]lack and other racialized students" (James, 2012; Sefa Dei, 2008). Though insightful, these statistics fail to distinguish whether there are differences in the educational outcomes of members of the 1.5 and 2nd generation. They fail to note whether Somali students who grew up in social housing projects and those who lived in middle-class neighbourhoods growing up had similar rates of suspension and/or placement into special education. Given the fact that Somalis tend to live in concentrated areas whether Somali students in

the west and east of Toronto³ had similar performance on Grade 6 EQAO. Though a comprehensive study of the educational experiences of Somali students (at the elementary and high school level) is well outside the scope of this research, this study will endeavor to fill some of these gaps. The questions posed to participants in this study will provide insight into not only their personal experiences--“Tell me about your experience in high school? “What was it like being a Somali student?” The responses to the questions will also provide insight into their country of birth, childhood, socio-economic status (what sort of neighbourhoods they grew up in), if they grew up in the west or east of Toronto and if this made an impact on their educational outcomes. This information will provide educators, family, and service providers’ clearer insight into the kind of educational supports Somali students need.

As previously noted, CRT challenges claims that educational institutions make regarding objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity (Yosso, 2006, p. 73; James, 2012, p. 469). Though it is often denied and rarely acknowledged by education officials, race plays a significant role in the poor academic outcomes of Black students such as Somalis (Farah, 2011, p. 6). James & Brathwaite (1996), Dei (1997), Galabuzi (2014), Fonseca (2010), Abdi (2012), Farah (2011) and Bhattacharjee (2003) all illustrate that racism informs the attitudes and practices of teachers and administrators, the misapplication of discipline policies, the streaming of minority students (especially Blacks) into non-academic programs and contributes to the low attainment and high dropout rate of Black youth. “Left unaddressed, systemic racism and discrimination [...] inevitably [contribute] to students’ disengagement from the schooling process [and] have a significant impact on their education” (James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 19).

Abdi (2012) states that in the 2006-2007 school year, 59% of Somali students did not apply to post-secondary education and of those who did, only 21% confirmed acceptance into university

³ As previously mentioned when Somalis settled in Toronto they did so along clan lines. Darood and Hawiye clan-family members tended to settle in the west of Toronto in Etobicoke while many Isaaq clan family members settled in the east in Scarborough.

and 6% college. Abdi (2012) notes that there could be various reasons for low postsecondary attendance, one such reason being some of the Somali students who graduated did not graduate with marks high enough to gain post-secondary acceptance. TDSB research findings corroborate Abdi's supposition, Somali students in high school perform poorly in mandatory courses; take the majority of their Grade 9 courses outside of the academic program of study; have low credit accumulation; high rates of failure in the Grade 10 Ontario Literacy Test; and high absenteeism--conditions that are linked to low postsecondary attendance (Abdi, 2012, p. 3). While Somali students meet many of the disqualifications stipulated, the abovementioned fails to take into account the role school policies, school curriculum and other factors play in low post-secondary attendance. The fact of the matter is that students do not just happen to take the majority of their Grade 9 courses outside of the academic program of study. Farah (2011) and Abdi's (2012) research found that Somali students are negatively streamed into low-level academics by educators.

TDSB findings show that the overwhelming majority of Somali students in high school perform at a level two (60-69%) or below and those meeting or exceeding the provincial standard (a level 3 i.e. 70-79%) are a minority (Abdi, 2012, p. 6). In 2006, the percentage of Grade 9 Somali students meeting or exceeding the provincial standard in Mathematics was 18% meaning 82% were not; in Science it was 24% with 76% not meeting the provincial standard; in Geography it was 30% versus 70% who did not; and in English only 30% met or exceeded the expectations of the province (Abdi, 2012, p. 5; Brown & Sinay, 2008, pp. 37-39). While Ministry of Education guidelines stipulate that "students in Grades 9 and 10 will make the choice between academic and applied courses" the full quote notes this choice is to be made based on their strengths, interests and needs (Abdi, 2012, p. 108). This qualification (the latter) indicates academic strengths are to be a factor in what program they can and cannot take, it is possible that a poor academic record for some of these students might have played a role in guidance counsellors' efforts to assign them to courses in the

applied program (Abdi, 2012, p. 108).

Themes that characterize the existing literature on the educational experiences of Somali students

“CRT is one vehicle through which the experiences of marginalized people are conveyed and their voices restored...only through the authentic voices of people of colour [voices of those who are commonly silenced by and within the dominant discourse] [can] researchers begin to understand educational experiences within these communities (Guy, 2009, pp. 31,32).”

Because research design utilizing a CRT framework does so with the intent of centering the experiences of people of color (Guy, 2009), it is important to incorporate into this study what young participants of Somali descent have already shared regarding their educational experiences. The themes that characterized semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with young participants of Somali descent regarding their educational experiences are the following: experiences of overt racism, stereotyping, differential treatment and religious discrimination (Abdi, 2012; Berns-McGown, 2013; Collet, 2007; Farah, 2011). Given the dearth of research on the educational experiences of Somali students in Toronto, as previously noted there have been only four research studies conducted on the educational experiences of Somali students since the community first settled in Toronto in the late eighties (Abdi, 2012, p. 54). Farah’s (2011) study on how young people of Somali-Djiboutian origin are able to articulate and negotiate their identities while going through the schooling process is incorporated in this section. Although Farah’s participants attended Ottawa area high schools their experiences are nevertheless highly valuable, they indicate Somali students’ educational experiences in Ottawa schools parallel those of Somali students in the TDSB.

Participants interviewed by Farah during the course his research,

“...identified issues of racism and stereotyping, racial profiling and the criminalization of [Somali males] within Ottawa public schools, the unequal application of zero tolerance policies resulting in systematic suspensions and expulsions, low teacher expectations and ethnic grading”[...]. (Farah, 2011, pg. 133)

As the major issues in regards to Somali student disengagement from schooling and educational

outcomes.

Farah (2011) notes, despite policies that explicitly denounce and discourage racism within public schools in Ottawa, Somali students in their interviews shared their teachers' openly articulated discriminatory language in class directed toward Somali students (Farah, 2011, pp. 136,138). Such incidents included teachers linking members of their racial group to AIDS and relating Black students with criminality (Farah, 2011, pp. 75,136). Similar to Farrah's (2011) findings, many of the young Somali Canadians that Berns-McGown interviewed also shared their experiences with racist teachers at school (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 14). These participants, member of the Somali community in Toronto and as such presumably former TDSB students, shared that their teachers often assumed that they would not be able to cope with university or succeed as professionals due their ethnicity (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 11). According to Berns-McGown, every participant who shared such an experience with her expressed feeling hurt and scarred by it and it having a powerful impact on his or her sense of self and possibility (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 14).

Farah shares what a teacher candidate who did her practicum teaching in one of Toronto's inner city public schools was told by a fellow teacher: "not to waste too much time on the Jamaican kids because they'd never amount to anything and most would likely end up in jail anyways...as for Somali students, she was told, it was likely 'inbreeding' that accounted for their total lack of intelligence" (Farah, 2011, p. 158). The teacher candidate had hoped that these views were limited to this particular teacher. In due time she came to realize however that there was a pervasive climate within the school in question that had branded these children "losers" (Farah, 2011, p. 158). The teacher candidate noted that students conform to educator's expectations, if nothing is expected of them as with Somali students and they are treated as dumb and lazy, then that is how they will act. (Farah, 2011, p. 159)

Galabuzi (2014) corroborates this teacher candidate's supposition; he similarly asserts that

students are likely to perform in a manner consistent with the stereotype attached to their identity. Steele (1997) states that society has deeply embedded stereotypes that connect race to academic ability, this belief (that intelligence and other behavioural attitudes are heritable) has existed since the foundations of Western society (Peters, 1995, p. 463). In literature as far back as Plato's *The Republic*, this view has been perpetuated--the breeding of the guardians in the republic for example reflects the conviction that their good qualities are heritable (Peters, 1995, p. 463). More recently, Herrnstein and Murray (1996) have controversially argued that on average blacks have IQs 15 points lower than Whites and that government efforts to reduce inequality would be fruitless because of blacks' lower cognitive abilities (The JBHE Foundation, 2005). Rushton (1997) similarly asserted that "African ancestry ensures a deficiency of 'intelligence, law-abidingness, sexual restraint, and social organizational skills' (p. 236), and that these are all genetically fixed" (Brace, 1996, p. 177). These works have been debunked and labelled as attempts to provide a "scientific" justification for racial denigration and bigotry (Brace, 1996, p. 177). Despite this, the predominant stereotypes remain which consider East Asian and South Asian students to be gifted, inherently smart and as having a good work ethic (Galabuzi, 2014, p. 195). Conversely, they suggest that Black students do not do well in school (Galabuzi, 2014, p. 195). Children become aware of these stereotypes early on in their schooling career and these assumptions over time come to affect both teacher's expectations of students and these students' expectations of themselves (Galabuzi, 2014, p. 195).

Abdi (2012) notes that participants she interviewed shared with her how school officials seem to unjustly enforce discipline policies.

"The participants of this research shared that they were unfairly suspended for trivial things, on partly the basis of their ethnicity, until they were eventually expelled or they left as a result of multiple suspensions that resulted [in] frequent unsuccessful school transfers within the TDSB [...]" (Abdi, 2012, p. 89).

Dei (1997) and Brownstein (2010) both note in their works that the misapplication of discipline policies "push" students out of school. The youth participants in Abdi's research agree, they did not

consider themselves TDSB “dropouts” even though they did not receive their high school diploma and though they fit the TDSB’s definition of drop out (Abdi, 2012, p. 86). These participants expressed that their final exit from their local school was far from voluntary and that they felt that they were forced out of school despite their own wish to continue their education (Abdi, 2012, p. 87).

Fonseca corroborates that students are often meted out severe punishments for non-serious infractions and minor misdemeanours (Fonseca, 2010, p. 95). While tough measures would be appropriate for serious offences in the case of the former, non-serious infractions and minor misdemeanours, such measures are problematic and have far-reaching consequences (Fonseca, 2010, pp. 95,96). A report commissioned by the Ontario Human Rights Commission on the Ontario Safe School Act notes that there is good evidence to suggest that suspending or expelling a student increases the risk he or she will become anti-social or escalate in his or her anti-social behaviour (Bhattacharjee, 2003, p. 58). The report states that the most tangible loss, however, for a student who is suspended or expelled is education (Bhattacharjee, 2003, p. 54). A student not receiving academic programming regresses academically and the cumulative effects of exclusion derail them from achieving their educational goals (Bhattacharjee, 2003, p. 54). Fonseca similarly asserts that “...punishments such as school exclusion often [cause] youth to be further alienated and disengaged from school, pushing them even more into a vicious cycle of failure and despair” (Fonseca, 2010, p. 96).

Abdi (2012) states that frequent suspensions have a serious impact on the education of Somali students; as a result of being unfairly targeted for suspension, these students are demoralized and may be consequently unable to catch up with their missed school work. In both Farah (2011) and Abdi’s (2012) research participants interviewed on this subject reported that Somali students at their school were punished more harshly than their white peers for similar types of behaviour and expressed feeling unfairly targeted. The fact that Black students bear the brunt of

unfair disciplinary policies is extensively discussed in the literature (Abdi, 2012; Brownstein, 2010; Farah, 2011; Fonseca, 2010; Galabuzi, 2014). Galabuzi states that Black students are suspended at a rate twice higher than any other group in the TDSB and at a rate three times higher than their white peers--the most populous group in the system (Galabuzi, 2014, p. 197).

Galabuzi notes that, “disproportionate rates of suspension [...] represent a differential administration of discipline policies” (Galabuzi, 2014, p. 197). Fonseca states that, “the behaviours and actions of racialized students are often held suspect” (Fonseca, 2010, p. 98). Participants in Farah’s research said that when conflict occurred at school, they were automatically viewed as the aggressor or guilty party (Farah, 2011, p. 178). Dei et al (1997), in their ethnographic study of Black youth and schooling corroborate such experiences, “[Black] students... complained about the social stereotyping of [Black] males as ‘violent’, as ‘troublemakers’ and even as ‘criminals’” (Dei, 1997, p. 149). As previously stated, some participants in Abdi’s research expressed that TDSB officials used school discipline policies to facilitate their exit from the public school system, while other interview participants shared that they stopped attending their last school out of fear of being ‘kicked out’ by school administrators (Abdi, 2012, pp. 87,91). There is no published TDSB data to show how many Somali students are expelled each year and there is also no data available as to why they are expelled (Abdi, 2012, p. 89). Further research is needed to substantiate whether such experiences are systemic or isolated incidents. I expect that the open-ended questions I intend to ask my participants will allow them to express their personal experiences and perspectives on this salient issue.

When discussing the various issues that made their studies at the TDSB difficult and led to their early school departure, Abdi’s participants also shared that they were refused access or discouraged from pursuing courses that lead to their desired path (university) (Abdi, 2012, p. 108). One of Farah’s participants (Anbaro) went so far as to say guidance counsellors at her Ottawa area high school deliberately misled students and streamed them into lower ability programs without

fully disclosing the impact such courses would have on their future career aspirations (Farah, 2011, p. 220).

The participant (Anbaro) shared that many of her peers were led to believe that they could take easier general levels courses in the 9th and 10th grade and later on advance into academic courses in grade 11 without repeating courses--when in actuality, students needed to have taken advanced courses at the grade 9 and 10 level to automatically advance to grade 11 academic courses (Farah, 2011, p. 223). Farah (2011) notes that for many of these Somali students, grade 11 was the first point of realization that university was no longer an option for them. This was not because they were academically incapable of such studies but because they were never given a real opportunity to achieve those dreams (Farah, 2011, p. 223). Farah (2011) states that the deliberate misguidance and/or the withholding of relevant course information from Black youths is an example of differential (negative) treatment on the basis of race and that it has become a common educational practice in many public schools despite claims of equality. The participants in my study will be asked about their experiences in this regard to ascertain whether their experiences with guidance counsellors mirror those of Somali students in Farah (2011) and Abdi's (2012) research.

Dei (1997), James and Brathwaite (1996); Curtis, et al. (1992); and Oakes (2005) all note that public schools stream students of colour from low income households into lower ability programs that lead to their failure such as the applied program in order to keep existing race and class inequities in place. Curtis et al (1992) found that public schools in Ontario start the streaming of these students into lower ability programs as early as elementary school by placing such students in Special Education and continue with this process at the high school level by keeping these students in programs such as the applied program. Students who exhibit behaviours in line with their cultural group and not the cultural values and norms of the dominant culture are apt to be deemed abnormal and labelled deficient or disabled (Mahamed, 2010, p. 17). As Mahamad (2010) notes "students behaviours... should not be categorized as "abnormal" if they are consistent

with their own cultural group.” This is not the case at present, when gauging deviance or abnormality, the characteristics and behaviours of the dominant group (white middle class students) are considered the norm (Mahamed, 2010, p. 18).

“Students who [come] from cultures that are not in line with[...]Eurocentric cultural values might be viewed as abnormal in Toronto’s schools and[...]this type of thinking might lead to placement of students like the Somali students into[...]classes for students with ‘behavioural’ problems” (Abdi, 2012, p. 112).

TDSB research indicates that students who are placed in behavioural programs have minimal chance of graduating from high school (Abdi, 2012, p. 112). Studies conducted by the TDSB also corroborate that placement into lower ability programs such as applied courses affect educational outcomes--“[for example] 44% of students taking ‘Applied’ courses failed to graduate from high school while 84% of those in the Academic program...graduated” (Abdi, 2012, p. 106).

Collet (2007) draws attention to the fact that schools vary in regards to religious accommodation. While the majority of participants in his study stated that their school was accommodating to their needs, the type of religious accommodation they received and their satisfaction with it differed among participants (Collet, 2007, pp. 142,143). Some participants shared that they were provided with a space on site to pray their daily prayers and a larger space for Friday sessions as well as special lunchtime arrangements during Ramadan (Collet, 2007, p. 143). While some schools attended by other participants only made accommodation for one or two of these religious needs (Collet, 2007, p. 143). Collet (2007), Berns-McGowan (2013) and Farah (2011) all note their participants allege they experienced religious discrimination in school. One of Collet’s participants (Alaso) shared that she felt one of her teachers impeded her ability to make use of onsite prayer space and made her uncomfortable to pray at school (Collet, 2007, p. 143).

A male Somali participant (a former Ottawa area public high school student) interviewed by Farah stated that “his principal told him not wear his religious head covering, which is a sign of humility and obedience under Allah” (Farah, 2011, p. 145). The participant in question found this discriminatory because other religious symbols and attire, “[like] the Christian practice of wearing

crucifix necklaces...[the] Jewish practice of wearing...Yarmulka head coverings and [the] wearing [of] turbans [were] allowed” (Farah, 2011, p. 145). It is also alleged that an Ottawa area high school denied students the right to perform daily prayers and as consequence they had to abandon this obligatory act of worship (Farah, 2011, p. 144). Further research is needed to establish a definite link between lack of religious accommodation and early school departure. What the perspectives of participants interviewed on this subject already indicate is that religious discrimination alienates Somali students from the learning process.

Methodology

The data presented in the following sections of this paper derives from semi-structured interviews conducted with members of Toronto’s Somali community, more specifically young Somali Canadians who attended Toronto area public high schools. Drawing on these interviews, this study will explore the role that discriminatory practices and racism in the education system play in the low achievement and high dropout rate of Somali-Canadian youth. The following section describes why the researcher chose to conduct interviews with this population and the method of sampling, accessing the population (recruiting participants), data collection and analysis. It also includes a brief discussion on ethics.

Interviews

“A semi-structured interview is a flexible interview in which the interviewer does not follow a formalized list of questions. Instead, a list of general topics is created, called an interview guide” (Wali, 2014, p. 18). As noted by Jensen et al (1991) a semi-structured interview allows for a more fluid two-way conversation between the interviewer and the participant. As Jody Miller and Barry Glassner (2004) note “[the] strength of qualitative interviewing is the opportunity it provides to collect and rigorously examine narrative accounts of social worlds” (p. 137).”

This exploratory research methodology works well with my theoretical framework, the primary objective of CRT as scholar-activist movement has been to give “voice” to the lived experiences and histories of the oppressed (Guy, 2009; Aylward, 1999; Rollock & Gillborn, 2014; Yosso, 2006). According to Guy (2009), “Use of authentic voices – voices of those who are commonly silenced by and within the dominant discourse, is [not only] an essential tool for deconstructing how positivist research is traditionally conducted” (p. 31). Furthermore, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), who are cited in Guy, add that “[it is] only through the authentic voices of people of color [such as young Somali-Canadians] that researchers can begin to understand educational experiences within these communities” (Guy, 2009, p. 32).

Sampling

There were a total of nine participants recruited for this study. This number of participants was deemed suitable given the time constraints the researcher was under to conduct this research project. The participants interviewed for this project were all high school graduates having graduated from local TDSB schools within the last five years (i.e. 2011-2015). Participants were all 2nd generation Canadian meaning they were all born in Canada, and they ranged in age from 17 to 23. Six of the participants were male and three of the participants interviewed were female. Eight of the participants interviewed grew up in the West end of Toronto and attended West end high schools. The remaining participant interviewed grew up in the East end of Toronto and attended an East end high school.

Eight of the nine interviews conducted were one-on-one, and one of the interviews was conducted with two male participants who asked to be interviewed together. The researcher consented to this request because one of the male participants for cultural and religious reasons was opposed to being alone with a female interviewer who was not related to him by blood or marriage. Participants came from a range of backgrounds: some were outwardly observant in terms

of their faith, others were not, most were raised in two-parent households, though a few were raised by single parents or in astronaut families⁴, some participants grew up middle-class while others were from working class families, they currently lived in social housing or had parents who had to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. The nine participants interviewed attended in total five different TDSB high schools. All nine participants interviewed are currently enrolled in either university or college and are pursuing a post-secondary degree.

Accessing the Population

I recruited my participants through a snowball sampling technique and utilizing my personal network. I initially intended to recruit participants through Somali community organizations but faced significant challenges using this approach. I e-mailed the recruitment email in the appendix of my MRP to seven Somali community organizations inviting these organizations to participate in this study. I received only two replies to my initial email in a timely manner, the two Somali community organizations that responded tentatively agreed to help facilitate my research. I emailed my contacts at these organizations recruitment items, my interview script and consent form with my contact information to distribute to people they think are eligible and might be interested in participating. I explained to my initial contact those who wish to participate or find out more about the study should contact me directly instead of having this mutual acquaintance provide me their contact information.

When I did not receive a reply from the other organizations, I e-mailed them again (two and half weeks after my initial email). At this point I also reached out to my personal contacts in the Somali community and asked for the personal phone numbers of the executive directors and senior staff members of these five organizations. I was told that two of the organizations in question

⁴ This term refers to families whose children live and study in western countries while one or both parents work overseas to support the family.

had recently folded and was given the contact information for the staff of the remaining organizations.

I contacted the staff of these organizations by phone after receiving their phone numbers. The executive directors of two of these organizations did not contact me back despite the fact I left each voicemails explaining my study. The executive director of another organization I contacted promised to help facilitate my research going so far as assign a member of his staff to help recruit participants for this study. Unfortunately, I experienced difficulties working with this staff member, this individual failed to schedule interviews as promised. This individual also ignored phone calls on mutually agreed upon times and dates and a follow-up attempt to contact them. Around this time one of the organizations that had agreed to facilitate my research became unresponsive to my emails and phone calls and the other pulled out unexpectedly. At this point given the time constraints I was under I changed approach and began recruiting participants through my personal network.

I am aware of the need to be self-reflective; I am a young Somali-Canadian woman with connections to the Somali community in Toronto. This influenced how I recruited participants and my interactions with them--because of my background I was able to access participants through my personal contacts. I recruited a total of five participants through my personal network. The rapport I had previously established with some of these participants made it easier for them share their insights and personal struggles with me. Positive rapport and our shared ethno-cultural background also made these participants willing to recruit their friends to be part of this study. I was able to recruit four additional participants using snowball research methods.

One of the limitations of this research project is its relatively small sample size. A much larger size would be needed to recognize and capture more accurately the challenges facing Somali students in the TDSB. Somali youth do not like to be labelled as 'dropouts' since leaving school before graduation inspires shame and is considered a personal failure by the community at large.

Though I made repeated efforts to do so, the secrecy and great stigma attached to this issue made it impossible for me to recruit high school dropouts to participate in this study. I would consider this lack of diversity in experiences to be a limitation of my study.

Somalia is a country that is highly patriarchal and conservative in religious and cultural mores and such cultural traits are also present in the Somali-Canadian diasporic community. Despite my cultural competency, my background in education and credentials I felt that male Somali-community leaders I interacted with did not take me or my research seriously. I believe that this was due to my gender and perhaps also due to the cultural perception academia is not an appropriate career path or “place” for a young Somali woman. I also found my gender to be a limitation in interactions with young Somali male participants. As previously noted, two participants asked to be interviewed together because one was opposed to being alone with a female interviewer not related to him by blood or marriage. This discomfort with being alone with me, a female researcher, was also apparent in several other interviews with male participants. Despite efforts to establish rapport with these participants during the course of the interview, this manifested as an issue.

Data Collection and Analysis

All the participants who agreed to be part of this research project were asked to sign consent forms. Consent forms were either given in person to the participant or emailed to participants prior to the interview and signed. The consent form outlined the purpose of this study, benefits of participating in this research, the risks associated with participating, the confidentiality agreement, and their rights as a participant. Participants were also asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire prior to the start of the interview. A copy of this questionnaire can be found in the appendix of the MRP. The purpose of this questionnaire was to provide the researcher

with basic data that might not emerge naturally during the interview process --data on gender, age, age at arrival, immigration status and grade last attended.

The interviews were recorded for analysis and all the data gathered was transcribed verbatim. I did not correct grammar or the use of slang. Transcribing participants' responses verbatim prior to writing down any of my own interpretations was done to help me avoid misrepresentation.

A Grounded Theory approach was used in terms of analyzing and organizing data. "...In a [Grounded] Theory approach, data analysis is a search for common patterns (similarities), uncommon patterns (dissimilarities) and satellites (unique information) to provide an overall description and explanation of what is being studied" (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006, p. 220, 221). Patterns were identified by color coding similar responses, the most re-occurring comments were organized into the aforementioned themes and the titles of said themes were used as the headings for each section of my MRP. A list of the open-ended questions that I asked my participants can be found in the appendix of the paper.

Ethics

Participation in this research project was voluntary. Participants were informed at the start of the interview they could choose not to answer a particular question or withdraw from participating at anytime. If for whatever reason they chose to withdraw from this study that they could also choose to withdraw their data from the study. In this case, their audio files would be deleted and their consent forms, transcripts and demographic questionnaires would be shredded.

The researcher foresaw that some individuals might be hesitant or fearful to participate because they may think as young Somali Canadians they may be further marginalized or stigmatized through participation. To maintain these participants' anonymity and alleviate such concerns their real names were not used in place each participant was assigned a pseudonym

which will be used when presenting their individual responses. Only the researcher and her MRP supervisor Dr. Cheryl Teelucksingh had access to data provided during the interviews. These measures were clearly stated in the consent form.

The only other risk associated with participating in this study was for the participants to potentially feel upset or distressed when they recounted painful memories. Before the interview, participants were given a list of Somali community organizations that provide counselling services. Participants were verbally informed that these organizations have trained counsellors they can approach to help them deal with any distress.

Interview Findings

The following section will discuss the findings of this research. Eight interviews were conducted. Seven of these interviews were semi-structured one-on-one interviews and the remaining interview featured two participants being interviewed together. As previously noted these participants had asked to be interviewed together for religious reasons, a request the researcher accommodated. Though they ranged in religious practice, all of the participants self-identified as Muslim. All of the participants interviewed, including those who were not practicing Muslims during high school, shared that they and fellow Muslims students were owed religious accommodation as a matter of principal. As previously noted a Grounded Theory approach was used to analyze and organize the findings into the following themes.

Theme 1: Poor guidance, withholding information regarding course selection and deliberate streaming

All of the participants interviewed entered high school with dreams of attending university

or college. All but two of the participants (Ayan and Nasra) were in academic ⁵stream classes from the start of grade nine i.e. their high school career. The former participant, Ayan, shared that she suffered in grade nine and was put in all essential classes at the start of high school because of her poor academic performance in grade eight. Ayan attributes her poor academic performance--the fact that she failed grade eight along with many of her classmates that year--to her teacher who she claims regularly slept in class and did not care about his students and their academic abilities. Ayan's claim that her grades in grade eight were not indicative of her true academic abilities seems to be corroborated by her later academic achievements. Despite starting off in all essential classes, Ayan worked her way up to applied and eventually academic classes prior to being accepted into and attending university. Nasra, another participant, at the start of high school was in mostly academic classes except for applied Math, English and Geography. She ended up switching these classes to academic the first week of grade nine.

Again and again, all the participants interviewed shared that getting a good education and doing well in school was and has always been important to them and their families. Khadra, a twenty-year old female participant who is currently in university shared the following in regards to her drive to succeed and attain a post-secondary education:

"All day, all day my parents talk about school, school, school, studying. Cause [sic] my parents didn't go to college or university and right now I am [...] the first one in higher education in my family. But I get where they are coming from [...] my dad's like a taxi driver--he doesn't want me to do the same thing. My mum works three jobs, so I see them struggling and I want to do better for myself."

Despite their drive to succeed, Khadra and other participants shared repeatedly that their guidance counsellors did not think they were capable of university studies or succeeding generally because of their race and/or ethnicity:

"They think--that we [Somalis] don't take our education seriously...and they didn't think it's possible for us--to get a [university] degree if we wanted to." (Khadra)

⁵ The academic stream of study prepares students for university; the applied stream of study prepares students for College and the Locally Develop (Essential) stream prepares students for the workforce after high school.

""Oh, he's Black he's probably not going to succeed." Like it's like they--brush you off...they're just like, "oh he's Black, he's likely not going to go [to] university."" (Gulaid)

"Some of them were disrespectful to be honest. Yeah. Cause [sic] they--think we [as Somalis] are dumb." (Moe)

Participants also shared that guidance counsellors were not supportive of their efforts to challenge themselves and would try to deliberately stream them into lower-ability classes.

Ayan shared the following in regards to her experience transferring from applied to academic.

"They--definitely make it seem harder than it is, cause [sic] now I look back and I'm like, "it wasn't that hard." They make it seem like there's so many barriers. You know? When those barriers actually don't exist."

Khadra shared that despite getting a ninety in her previous academic math class; her guidance counsellor did not think it was appropriate for her to take calculus.

"He would ask, "Why do you need that?" "You don't need to go [sic] to calculus." He tried to steer me towards--having a spare. No class--at all." (Khadra)

Another participant (Moe) went so far as to state that guidance counsellors at his school lied about the availability of certain classes--and told him and others (fellow Somali students) that the classes they wanted to enrol in were not available when they were.

"[They said the classes] weren't available and they were cause [sic] we [did] our research. They try to steer you towards the easier courses [instead]--like arts or whatever...that don't go forward to university."

The following participants--Kamal, Nasra, Khadra, and Ayan, all shared that guidance counsellors at their school either did not disclose to Somali students the consequences of taking applied courses at the grade nine and ten levels could have on their future aspirations or deliberately misled them.

"They [guidance counsellors] would always try to say that applied and academic are the same thing and they are not...they would say it's the same class. Next term [those who followed that advice] had to go [to] summer school cause [sic] they needed a university course but--the guidance counsellor told them to take applied. So it ruined everything--and they were set back." (Khadra)

“They don't know whether they need to be in applied or academic, you know? Nobody really sits down with you I feel like. Until grade twelve to have that talk... [Somali students] had to take another semester--[...] had to take summer school--[they] maybe wanted to go to university but ended [up] having to go to college. *Yeah*, there's definitely a few people I've seen go through that.” (Ayan)

Nasra commented that she and several of her high school friends had to pay for private school classes to attain the credits they needed for the university program they wished to pursue.

“They [guidance counsellors] didn't give me any information about like university or college up until like--grade twelve. Which [by then] your graduating so it's like too late to take the classes [you need]. So I actually even went outside of my school and did private school classes. I did Chemistry and Bio outside of school. I couldn't [get those credits at school]--I didn't take them in grade nine and ten.”

Theme 2: The stereotyping and profiling of Somalis and unfair disciplinary measures

Participants who attended high schools with a large Somali population noted that their schools were often perceived to have a poor reputation because their school was majority Somali. These participants all commented that Somali students were viewed as a monolithic group; rather than being recognizing for their individual differences and needs. Nasra shared that her school administrators would always speak about Somali students as a group--“these Somali kids.” Participants shared they felt their school administrators and teachers perceived Somali students particularly Somali boys in a negative light. As the following quotes reveal,

“They [...] thought we were people that were just dropping out of school, not going to any classes, selling drugs, doing drugs and all that. They thought we were trouble makers just generally.” (Amir)

“Somali guys are just--they have no respect at that school. They are all treated as if they are drug dealers and--bad kids.” (Khadra)

Participants interviewed repeatedly commented that their school's disciplinary policies were unfair, particularly for Somali students. They complained that Somali students were always assumed to be involved in wrongdoing. For example, the majority of participants shared how when

an incident occurred at their school such as a fight, suspension (school exclusion between two days and a week) or less frequently expulsion, would be the punishment school administrators would tend to mete out against Somali students. White students at their school participants note would not be suspended for similar incidents (fist fights); they would instead be given detentions, mediation, a slap on the wrist or an in-school suspension.

Nasra and Gulaid both noted that many Somali students with whom they started high school with did not graduate with their cohort. Both these participants commented that expulsion was one of the means through which these students were eliminated from the school environment.

“I think the ones that survived from grade nine and like lasted up until grade twelve were the good ones...Yeah, there were a lot of people [Somali students]...like if I used my knowledge and commonsense I know they didn't finish. But I can't say that for certain...people do get expelled but people [also] I don't know...They eliminate themselves [through their actions].” (Gulaid)

“They would expel --expulsions, they would throw expulsions like crazy...It actually [got] to the point they [school administrators] had no students anymore. And we still don't, we really have...a small group of people. But they would expel a lot for small things...I had a cousin actually he went to the [same] school for a year and he got into a fight with one of the--kids that went to [our] school and he got *expelled*. They both did... That was his first incident; it was the first week of school.” (Nasra)

Participants, Abdi and Ali, shared the following in terms of how school administrators treated Somali students at their school(s).

“Like if anything bad was to pop off in the school--the Somali students would be the first to [...] be interrogated...they go class by class, call us down to the office [to] see what we know about what happened. If we didn't know then they [school administrators] would like try to like put us in a different room. It was like a police interrogation...they want to pin a Somali student so bad that they'll just do [it] --just pin somebody. And then they give a suspension even though they didn't do nothing.” (Abdi)

“She [the vice principal] tried to suspend eight boys for no reason. Eight Somali--and a couple Black... [They] were just coming back from lunch and like something happened...They said a group of [name of participant's high school] boys like made a mess...outside of school property--they tried to say it was us and it wasn't us.” (Ali)

Ali, Abdi, Kamal and Khadra also noted that surveillance of Somali students, particularly boys, was common at their respective high schools:

“Let's say there is a Somali guy standing outside of the school they [school administrators]

[would] think he is a drug dealer. They would have teachers watch kids--look at them to see what they're doing--they would ask thirty-five different questions. But if a cadaan [meaning white in af Somali]--like a white guy was sitting outside they don't care. And the majority of the white guys are outside but they don't care at all. (Khadra)"

Kamal similarly notes that the bad behaviour of one or two Somali students had negative repercussions for all in the eyes of school administrators.

"One person's actions did *really* put a stigma on --all... [They]...see a group of Somalis walking down the hallway or whatnot. They really do --you know what I mean? Eye them."

Theme 3: Unfair grading practices, ethnic grading, lower expectations, and differential treatment on the part of teachers

Participants interviewed shared that their teachers had unfair grading practices (practiced ethnic grading)--ethnic grading is used here to explain the process whereby teachers assign grades based on one's race and/or ethnicity rather than on the quality and content of the paper" (Farah, 2011, p. 246). Nasra shared the following experience she had in high school with ethnic grading. This incident relates to a presentation she and two other Somali Muslim girls did on the subject of White Privilege for her white English teacher.

"Like I went *beyond* for this project...We even went out to like the streets and started talking to people--did interviews...There was no reason for us to get lower than a ninety... So we got our mark back and we got a seventy. Like a seventy-two or something like that... So we went and we talked to her after school. [Participant laughs slightly] Fully this what she said to us [...], "well you got work ten times harder than like Christopher--," which is another student that got a ninety...*Christopher was White*. He was the only White kid in the class... So she compared us to him and we're like, "That's not fair." Christopher did like [a] *terrible job*...and he still got a good mark...And she was like, "no, well you gotta [sic] do ten times better than Christopher just cause [sic] you know *who you are*.""

Abdi explained how he and other Somali students experienced ethnic grading—the following is an incident that he witnessed firsthand:

"Yeah, it was a parent-teacher interview and one of my friends.... He came to the interview we're [in] line we're just waiting you know? And he's with his dad and they're talking to the teacher and she's telling [his dad] something totally different. Then when she told him that day...He's like this, "you told me this during the day and now you're going to flip it --switch it on me." And for some reason all the assignments that he handed her weren't there you know? They were missing or like she probably switched up the marks or something for his midterm mark to go down. And he basically said, "it's not only me you"--I remember him saying "it's not only me you do this to-- you do it to all of us [Somalis] in the same class." And he mentioned my name. And he was kinda [sic] right cause [sic] the majority of our midterm marks were like that."

Moe and Amir also mentioned that certain teachers at their high school assigned lower marks to Somali students (marks lower than what they deserved) and that Somali students had to get these teachers again and again to correct their marks.

Nasra, Abdi, Khadra, Amir, Gulaid and Moe all commented certain teachers at their school tended to make judgements about their academic abilities during the first week of school (without having taught them prior to said class) and/or had lower expectations for them. Participants, Nasra, Khadra, Moe and Amir, went so far as to outright claim some teachers they had were racist⁶ and/or prejudiced towards them and other Somali students.

“The teachers, they were kinda [sic] racist. They don't like us [Somalis] at all.” (Amir)

“My French teacher... Not trying to say she is racist but she acts racist... I was the only Black Somali person in French class taking it all four years--in high school. And she's like --she didn't think that-- I would be good in French. But again, I got a ninety-six in that class.” (Khadra)

In regards to teachers' lower expectations, some participants claimed that teachers intimidated and discouraged Somali students from continuing on in their academic classes. Abdi, one of these participants, stated that his grade eleven academic-level Math teacher would repeatedly urge Somali students to switch out of her class and intimidated them with the prospect of failure. In addition, Nasra shared that teachers at her high school discouraged Somali students (again with the prospect of failure) from continuing on in all the major academic classes--English, Math, Science, and Business.

“I had a science teacher... This was in grade-- I had him from grade ten to [sic] up... And every single time he would be like, [Nasra] “You should be in [the] humanities like this is not for you. You should switch out the class, you should switch out the class, you should switch out... I never switch[ed] out [the] class but you would see other [Somali] students that would kinda [sic] feel discouraged [after similar treatment] and switch out of the class.” (Nasra)

⁶ The quotes attributed to Amir and Khadra seem to point to racist ideologies held by the teachers—the participants did not expand on these claims.

Participants interviewed also disclosed that they experienced differential treatment in the classroom. More specifically, that teachers favoured their white peers, provided them with additional help, made allowances for them when they skipped tests or handed in assignments late and treated them as individuals not a monolithic group.

“They were treated nicer, more lenient by teachers...In general like--say if I skipped a test I would have a bigger consequence than a white--European person [who] skipped a test. They would get a chance [to redo it].” (Moe)

“I remember my Political Science teacher he loved the white girls. Like he really did, like you can see it in his face and how he would treat them. He would listen to them more, he would give them...extra help, he would allow them to have longer deadlines...extensions for work...So I found, that with him, it was like I definitely felt sometimes I felt uncomfortable in that classroom. Because of the way he treated the white girls and the way he treated the rest of us... It was like whatever, we were kinda [sic] whatever and then those were *his* students. His prized students.” (Ayan)

Theme 4: Issues with Religious Accommodation

Some of the participants interviewed shared that their high school did provide Muslims students with onsite prayer space and religious accommodation on Eid and they felt that this accommodation was satisfactory. Two participants, Moe and Ayan, noted that they were not practicing during high school. Ayan disclosed she could not comment on religious accommodation in her school as she was unsure about policies and practices in place during her time in high school, and Moe shared he knew onsite prayer was available at his high school though most of his Muslim peers were non-practising throughout high school.

Nearly all the participants, except Khadra and Nasra, noted that Ramadan ⁷did not take place during the school year while they were in high school; it fell during the Summer those particular years. Khadra, Gulaid, and Nasra all commented that certain policies and practices in place in regarding religious accommodation at their respective schools were problematic. Khadra,

⁷ Muslims use the lunar calendar for religious practices. The month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is the time when Muslims are required to fast.

not only shared an encounter with a teacher who refused to provide her with religious accommodation on Eid, she also described other practices at her school concerning prayers she felt were off-putting and lacked tact.

...“We had to fight for it [prayers], then we could do it. They would think --we're using the prayer to skip class... They would time people. Like they would wait outside... Like you --your not Muslim you don't know when-- how long we need to pray for. Like it's to the point where people did not want to pray because it's like what's the point? The prayer was a hassle for them so I think they stopped [prayers altogether] after that... When I was in night school --Maghrib like was during night school...[it got] to the point if you left class during Maghrib time ⁸to go pray they would kick you out of night school entirely.”

Gulaid shared that he felt there was prejudice against Muslims at his high school and that he and other Muslims were treated unfairly as it pertained to prayers:

“The school wouldn't-- kinda [sic] didn't accommodate for prayers... Usually the --second prayer Duhr [is] between lunch and third period. So if you're going to go eat your lunch, pray, it's usually --it cuts into third period. And when you get to third period... You have to be marked late. The teachers are always strict about that, they don't --even if you tell them, "Oh I was praying." "No, go get a late slip." So it was a trade off --if you want to pray you're going to be late. If you want to be on time, then you can't pray.”

Gulaid also shared the following regarding lack of adequate prayer space at his high school and how it pertained to the aforementioned:

“You would have to go to the cafeteria... [it was] not really offered... you had to wait until everyone was done their lunch...[to] pray. Cause [sic] you have to pray in congregation so --like the gap between third period-- the gap between when lunch ends and third period --[wait until then] to pray... That's the issue [why students were always late], yeah.”

Nasra shared that her high school never had a prayer room during most of her time there despite the fact most of the student population at said school was Muslim. Muslim students at her high school were not provided any accommodation in relation to prayers until her last two years of high school, when her high school got a new principal who happened to be Muslim. She noted that while initially students were let out of class to pray in the hallway, the actions of few students ultimately led to prayers outside of the classroom being discontinued:

⁸ The Maghrib prayer is prayed just after sunset—it is the fourth of the five daily prayers performed by Muslims.

“There would be that one person that ruined it for everybody that leaves for salat prayer⁹during class. Cause [sic] [it] would be like during third or fourth period. And they would leave during class... cause trouble or walk around the hallways and they completely cut it off. They were like, "no students can leave for prayer if you're going to pray it has to be in the classroom where the teacher [can see students]--"

Abdi commented his school provided on-site prayer space and were accommodating in terms of letting Muslim students take however long they needed to pray. Abdi shared he felt fortunate seeing that none of the other schools that he was familiar with provided religious accommodation.

Analysis

The racially biased attitudes and practices of teachers and administrators

Ethnic grading and lower expectations

Participants interviewed for this study repeatedly commented that their white teachers employed unfair grading and evaluation practices. Teachers, the majority of participants noted, assumed they were academically and/or intellectually inferior and incapable of succeeding in an academic class because of their race and/or ethnicity. It is noteworthy that these teachers made these assumptions about their academic abilities despite never having taught these students prior the class in question, and despite the fact that some students had exceptional academic records. These findings are line with Ontario studies conducted by George Martell which “illustrate... cultural bias [on the part] of teachers based on racial, cultural and socioeconomic differences result in these students being viewed as incapable or incompetent” (cited in Mahamed, 2010, p 16). Bairu Sium, a Toronto area teacher of more than forty years, personal experience Black students are underestimated; they are not intellectually stimulated in class; and they are streamed away from

⁹ Salat refers to the ritual prayer performed by practicing Muslims. Muslims are religiously obligated to perform prayers five times daily at prescribed times.

the academic program (Shanoff, 2005). Farah's (2011) study also revealed that teachers had a tendency to assign a mental grade to Black students on the first day of class, not expect much of them and practice ethnic grading. According to Farah:

"Premature evaluation and negative attitude towards Somali-Djiboutian students' academic abilities are rooted in racism and negative stereotyping, which in turn results in low teacher expectation. The belief that Somali-Djiboutian students are academically inferior is later transformed into action through ethnic grading, which of course produces a student with academically inferior grades thereby continuing to propagate the view held by some, that Black students are academically and intellectually inferior"(Farah, 2011, p. 248).

Allen (2005) and Tomlinson (2005) both note that teachers' grading practices are unreliable, inconsistent, and are often based on non-achievement factors. The aforementioned is especially true in classes (i.e. subjects) where subjective interpretation allows teachers the use of their personal values, views, style and differences in expressing ideas to lower minority students' marks (Farah, 2011, p. 249). Henry and Tator (2011) note that there exists a complex relationship between educator's expectations and their students' academic performance. As found in this study, racially biased attitudes and stereotypical opinions teachers hold of particular groups translate into differential classroom treatment and lower expectations.

Ethnic grading has a profound impact on those who experience it, Farah (2011) notes it erodes a student's confidence and lowers his or her self-esteem. While white, middle class students have parents with the cultural knowledge, language skills and social capital to advocate on their children's behalf, participants interviewed expressed that many of their Somali friends were unwilling to involve their parents when they had an issue at school, or had parents who lacked the aforementioned (the cultural knowledge, language skills and social capital) to advocate for them. According to Farah (2011), without this kind of support from parents, the tendency is to succumb to the messages of low ethnic grading, leading students to eventually become de-motivated and disengaged from the educational process. Institutional racism in school has an impact on individuals' own behaviour and perceived potential—as exemplified by this excerpt from Nasra.

“If teachers think I'm going to fail, well I'm going to fail anyways so what's the point of even trying? So that's what a lot of people would do [stop trying]. And --if you're going to get a bad mark compared to Christopher [a white student]... [Participant laughs slightly] then what was the point of even doing that project?”

The application of discipline policies

Participants of this study reported that school administrators at their respective schools viewed Somali students, particularly Somali boys, in a negative light. More specifically, they expressed that Somalis students were viewed as “troublemakers”, “bad kids”, “drug dealers”, and in the case of one school, as “drop-outs.” Participants shared that Somali students were always assumed to be involved in wrongdoing, implicated even when they were not and complained about the profiling of Somali students. Participants believed that these negative perceptions, this stereotyping and profiling of Somali students resulted in harsher disciplinary measures against them (i.e. suspensions for minor infractions, suspension for first offences, expulsions and police involvement). Interview findings from this study revealed that white students at these schools would be given detentions, mediation, a slap on the wrist, or an in-school suspension for the same offences (fighting for instance) that would result in Somali students being punished with suspension (school exclusion between two days and a week) and/or expulsion. Suspension and expulsion were often the first recourse school administrators turned to when dealing with these students.

This study's findings also corroborate those of Abdi (2012), Farah (2011), Lee et al. (2011) and Galabuzi (2014). Abdi (2012) similarly found that school administrators targeted Somali students as the perpetrators of wrongdoing when an incident happened at school or even outside of school. Farah's (2011) findings also assert that Blacks are generally viewed as the aggressor or guilty party and receive more frequent suspensions or expulsions than their white peers. Farah (2011) found that white students would be assigned punishment inside the school—for example, after school duties-- as opposed to being suspended. Galabuzi (2014) notes that the behaviour of Black youth. Especially of Black males, on school premises is routinely labelled hyper-aggressive,

scary, and/or gang-like by (white) school administrators and teachers.

According to Galabuzi (2014),

“the construction of the fearsome Black youth has [become] a basis for close policing and teacher distancing, creating an inhospitable climate for learning...triggering disengagement, Behavioural designation and Special Education assignment” (pg. 219).

Lee et al. (2011) likewise found in their research that “suspensions are consistently associated with negative academic outcomes for individual students, including greater risk of dropping out.”

Bill 212 (the Education Amendment Act) took effect in February of 2008 in Ontario replacing the controversial Safe School Act, which had been in effect since 2001 (Fonseca, 2010, p. 93). The Safe School Act was introduced by the Progressive Conservative Government in 2001. This Act was grounded in a zero tolerance approach with regards to dealing with behavioural, discipline and safety problems in Ontario schools (Fonseca, 2010, p. 92). Initially, zero tolerance policies focused on truly dangerous and criminal behaviours, but over time, broadened to incorporate an array of minor misbehaviours and began to treat criminal acts and minor misdemeanours as equally offensive (Fonseca, 2010, p. 90). The Act ultimately came under widespread criticism for its punitive and discriminatory impact on racialized students and students with disabilities (Fonseca, 2010, p. 93). Bill 212 required school boards to ensure that in implementing their discipline policies, they are sensitive to diversity, culture and special needs and reflect a progressive approach to discipline (Fonseca, 2010, p. 92). Progressive Discipline is described as

“a whole school approach that utilizes a continuum of interventions, supports, and consequences to address inappropriate student behaviour and to build upon strategies that promote positive behaviours” (Fonseca, 2010, p. 92).

Bill 212 stipulates that school boards are required to consider mitigating and other factors before students are suspended or expelled (Fonseca, 2010, p. 93). While Bill 212 outlines clear guidelines for school administrators with regards to suspensions and expulsions, it provides no accountability procedures to monitor compliance with the law (Fonseca, 2010, p. 95). Because of

this glaring omission, there is nothing to hold school administrators answerable for violations of Bill 212, enabling them to disregard the provisions of the law (Fonseca, 2010, p. 95). Fonseca notes that school administrators are able to act as they wish because students and parents at the receiving end of disciplinary measures “do not understand the process, the rights they have or the school code and the law” (Fonseca, 2010, p. 95).

The streaming of Somali students into non-academic programs

All of the participants interviewed noted that a good education is and has always been important to them and their families. All of the participants interviewed also shared that they entered high school with dreams of attending university or college and they worked hard towards this goal. Some participants described their guidance counsellors in high school as supportive and characterized their encounters with them as positive. Unfortunately, however, the experiences of these participants were the exception. The majority of participants again and again reported that their guidance counsellors did not think they were capable of university studies or succeeding in an academic program of study because of their race and/or ethnicity. Participants interviewed disclosed that their guidance counsellors: did not support their efforts to challenge themselves; would try to deliberately stream them into lower-ability classes; provided poor guidance (did not tell students that they needed to have taken advanced courses at the grades 9 and 10 level in order to automatically advance to the grade 11 academic courses); and in the case of one participant (Moe and as he recounts several of his Somali peers), school officials lied about the availability of classes. These findings are line with those of Abdi (2012) and Farah (2012), who both found in their respective works that Somali students are refused access or discouraged from pursuing courses that led to their desired path (post-secondary education). Galabuzi notes:

“...[though] modes of streaming have evolved with time and taken on different (often disguised) forms...they have always been directed at the same outcome--securing

educational advantages for youth from the dominant group (male, middle class, white and straight) by separating subordinate groups from the mainstream experience of education and it's benefits" (Galabuzi, 2014, p. 188).

Dei (1997) and Solomon (1992) also confirm that streaming has historically denied youth from subordinate groups educational opportunities, served to undermine their self-esteem; contributed to their disengagement from the learning process; and perpetuated stereotypes about their abilities, leading to lower expectations and poor educational outcomes for them. As Farah (2011) notes, the actions of guidance counsellors, such as the previously mentioned contravene the educational rights of these students, and indicate that guidance counsellors fail to meet their responsibilities as outlined by the ministry's guideline:

"Guidance counsellors play a central role in the assessment and placement of students, and in helping them to enhance their self-esteem and relationships with others. They assist students in developing high expectations for themselves and appropriate educational plans, and provide support with life-skills training, pre-employment skills development, career orientation, exploration, and planning" (cited in Farah, 2011, p. 226).

Lack of religious accommodation i.e. religious discrimination

Some of the participants interviewed reported that their high school did provide Muslims students with onsite prayer space and religious accommodation during Eid¹⁰. The level of satisfaction with this accommodation differed among participants. While a few participants were highly satisfied with the religious accommodation they received, others shared they had to fight for prayers at their school and even then, they were not satisfied with the religious accommodation they were offered (Gulaid, Khadra and Nasra). These participants felt some practices at their respective schools concerning prayers were religiously insensitive and off-putting. Gulaid went so far as to state he felt there was prejudice against Muslims at his high school. As mentioned in the literature review, Collet (2011) similarly found during the course of his research, that schools and

¹⁰ Eid is an Arabic word meaning feast, festival, holiday. Eid in the context of Islam is a religious holiday. There are two Eids celebrated each year, Eid Al-Fitr and Eid-al-Adha.

teachers vary in regards to religious accommodation.

In terms of religiously insensitive and off-putting practices these participants referred to the fact that school officials would stand outside their designated room and monitor the amount of time that students took for their prayers. They explained that teachers marked them late despite knowing they were at Duhr prayer (this practice forced some students to skip this prayer). Nasra and Khadra shared that school administrators at their high schools halted prayers entirely at one point or another due to the misbehaviour of few students who chose to “goof off” instead of worship. The performance of the five daily prayers (also referred to as salat) is one of the five religious obligations that make up what are known as ‘Pillars of the Faith’ (Clarke, 2000, p. 3). “Prayers are performed at specific times and must be observed during these times” (Abdi, 2012, p. 127). Denial of prayers would mean students were denied their right to practice their religion under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Farah, 2011, p. 144).

This study’s findings are consistent with Farah (2011) and Abdi’s (2012) findings on religious accommodation. Participants in their studies reported that their administration did not trust them to pray without supervision and school officials made it difficult for them to observe their prayers and Muslim holidays. Collet (2007) states that scholarship indicates that the presence of Islam in Somalia can be traced back to 622 AD, from the first century after the *hijra* (what is regarded as the beginning of the Muslim era). Collet (2007) notes that Islam is a very significant component of the Somali cultural identity. When asked to list primary characteristics of Somali national identity, participants are apt to name Islam as one such characteristic. There is a virtual inseparability between culture and religion—participants interviewed for Collet’s (2007) study. These participants stated that their religion is the basis for what is culturally appropriate and acceptable (Collet, 2007, p. 140).

Berns-McGown similarly notes that Somali-Canadian youth she interviewed on the topic of religion, “consistently described [Islam] as important [to them], whether or not they practised it in

any sustained way” (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 8). Collet’s participants, even those who were not practicing Muslims during high school, felt like the participants in this study that they were owed religious accommodation as a matter of principle and individual freedom (Collet, 2007, pp. 141, 142). One of the participants featured in his Collet’s research (Arale) viewed religious accommodation as an extension of general tolerance and respect for religious pluralism (Collet, 2007, p. 142). Another participant (Awarale) went so far as to make a more direct and personal connection between school policies and her identity (Collet, 2007, p. 142). Awarale stated that if public schools did not provide religious accommodation, she could not see herself as a student in them (Collet, 2007, p. 142). These religiously insensitive policies and practices in place at these respective schools and denial of prayers are not surprising. As Arat-Koc notes

“Since the 1990s in Canada...more specifically since 11 September 2001, we have been in a period of retreat from multiculturalism and a politics of inclusion. During this period racism has not only intensified, but also, and more important, been legitimated through public discourse and mainstream institutions” (Arat-Koc, 2006, p. 216).

Research Findings and Critical Race Theory in Education

CRT in education challenges claims educational institutions make regarding objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity--”[CRT instead] [demonstrates] the perpetuation of oppressive conditions specifically for the reasons of race and perceived difference (Guy, 2009, p.31).” A CRT in education framework guided this research, and led to the findings that procedures and practices in the TDSB presented as neutral and colour-blind are actually racially biased; that they perpetuate deficit thinking and reproduce educational inequities for Somali students. As I mentioned in my literature review, one of the most prevalent (and unchallenged) forms of contemporary racism in schools is deficit thinking which “takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for [their] poor academic performance” (Yosso, 2006, p. 75). This study found educators in TDSB schools take this position (a deficit view) in regards to this community and its academic issues. CRT scholars argue that

“racism serves to reinforce and advance White Supremacy, helping to maintain a status quo that while disproportionate or inequitable to racial minorities allows Whites to retain their positions of power” (Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 4).

Through deficit thinking and a focus on the lack of promise among subordinate youth such as Somalis, the education system secures educational advantages for the dominant group (white, middle class students). Assumptions regarding deficit and lack of promise allow the system to privilege the latter by concentrating scarce system resources, curriculum and instructional attention on their education (Galabuzi, 2014, p. 188).

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to explore how the discriminatory practices and racism in the education system contribute to the low achievement and high dropout rate of Somali-Canadian youth. To this end, the perspectives of nine Somali-Canadian youth who graduated from local TDSB schools within the last five years were solicited through in-depth interviews. CRT in education as the theoretical framework of this study was used to examine and critically challenge the notion that education is “colour-blind.”

Three years after Abdi’s (2012) and four years after Farah’s (2011) research, many of the same issues noted by them are present in this study. The findings of this study show Somali students in the TDSB experience systemic discrimination--unfair grading practices, ethnic grading, differential treatment, deliberate streaming, stereotyping, profiling, the unequal application of discipline policies, and disproportionate rates of suspensions and lack of accommodation i.e. religious discrimination. Participants interviewed compellingly articulate how these practices contribute to low achievement of Somali students, their disengagement and alienation from the learning process, the elimination of their peers from the school environment as well as the criminalization of Somali boys.

The low achievement and high dropout rate of Somali-Canadian youth is not just a Somali problem. “Failing to complete high school jeopardizes the economic prospects of immigrant youth

and imposes a social cost on Canadian society that it can ill afford” (Anisef et al. as cited in Abdi, 2012, p. 22). According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, high school dropouts can expect to earn \$100,000 less in income over the course of their life and cost Canadian taxpayers \$4000 in social assistance payments per individual per year (Abdi, 2012, p. 22).

There are other serious implications of the negative experiences of Somali-Canadian youth in the education system. According to existing research, Somali-Canadian youth also have higher crime rates. It is noteworthy that high school dropouts account for only 15% of the Canadian population, but comprise 80% of federal inmates and enjoy overall a poorer quality of life (Abdi, 2012, p. 23). A significant number of young male Somalis who have dropped out of high school have subsequently become involved in gangs and drugs leading to their imprisonment or premature death (Abdi, 2012, p. 20). The Canadian educational system must be held accountable for its failure to adequately educate Somali youth and its failure to meet its mandate to provide inclusive, equitable, and democratic education (Abdi, 2012, p. 23). As Farah states,

“...to preserve the existing educational arrangement is to support the subtleness and pervasiveness of racism within [...] public schools. It also sends a clear message that the educational experiences described by the participants are frivolous and lack credibility. Accepting the status quo is to render silent those who are disempowered by the impact of racism” (Farah, 2011, p. 282).

Appendix A



Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Please note that there is no right or wrong response. I am interested in receiving a range of ideas. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with a question, you can always opt not to answer the question or you can stop the interview at any time. I am going to record our conversation; I hope that you are okay with this.

1. Tell me about your experience in high school?
2. What was it like being a Somali student?
3. How were you perceived by guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators?
4. (Follow up question) How were other Somali students at your school perceived by guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators?
5. How were you treated by guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators?
6. (Follow up question) How were other Somali students treated by guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators?
7. In what ways do you think Somali students were treated differently in comparison to White Students?
Probes:
 - a) In comparison to other Black students?
 - b) In terms of disciplinary policy.
 - c) In terms of placement into lower ability classes (i.e. applied classes).
 - d) In terms of accommodation (i.e. alternative seating, adaptive devices, extra time, oral tests).
8. In the time you were at school did you see any improvements in regards to how guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators treated Somali students?

9. (Follow up question) Why do you think that happened?
10. How do you racially identify?
11. (Follow up question) Was your high school experience similar to that of Black students and other racial minorities at your school?
12. This is the end of my questions. Thank you for participating. Are there any other comments or ideas that you would like to add?

Appendix B

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If any question makes you uncomfortable, you can skip that question. You may stop participating at any time during this process. I am going to ask you to fill out this short questionnaire. The purpose of this questionnaire is to provide me with basic data that might not emerge naturally during the interview; I hope that you are okay with this.

Demographic Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions by marking one line or filling the blank space.

1. Ethnicity : _____
2. Gender: M_____ F_____ T_____
3. Age: _____
4. Age at Arrival: _____
5. Country of Birth: _____
6. Immigration Status: _____
7. How far did you go in school?
 - 1) Less than 10th Grade _____
 - 2) Completed 10th Grade _____
 - 3) High School Diploma Or Equivalent _____

This is the end of my questionnaire. Thank you for participating.

Appendix C



Ryerson University Consent Agreement

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this consent form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

[Failing To Make the Grade: Somali-Canadian Students and their Encounters with the Canadian Education System]

INVESTIGATORS: This research study is being conducted by Subeyda Mohamed an Immigration and Settlement Studies Masters Candidate under the supervision of Dr. Cheryl Teelucksingh at Ryerson University.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Subeyda Mohamed at the following email address: subeyda.mohamed@ryerson.ca or leave a message on the voicemail of Dr. Cheryl Teelucksingh at this number 416-979-5000 ext 6213.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The purpose of this study is to explore how the discriminatory practices and racism in the education system contribute to the low achievement and high dropout rate of Somali-Canadian youth.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO OR WHAT PARTICIPATION MEANS:

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- You will be asked to sign a consent form.
- You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire with the following kind of questions: Ethnicity, Gender, Age, Age at arrival, Immigration Status, Grade Last attended.
- With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. You can request the recording to be terminated at any time during the interview.
- You will be interviewed for an hour at a mutually agreed upon location other than your home.
- Participants must be either 1.5 or 2nd generation Somali Canadian. Meaning you must have been born here or arrived in Canada before your fifth or sixth birthday to participate in this study.

- **If you do not fit the above-mentioned criteria you are not eligible to participate.**
- Participants of Somali descent, members of the 1.5/2nd generation, who have graduated or “dropped out” of local TDSB schools within the last five years, will be interviewed about their educational experiences in this board.
- **Questions will be along the lines of:**
 - Tell me about your experience in high school?
 - What was it like being a Somali student?
 - How were you perceived by guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators?
 - How were other Somali students at your school perceived by guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators?
 - How were you treated by guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators?
 - How do you think Somali students were treated by guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators?
 - In the time you were at school did you see any improvements in regards to how guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators treated Somali students?
- If you wish to have a final copy of the findings sent to you such a request can be accommodated.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS:

I cannot guarantee that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study. At the same time, your participation will contribute to:

- The existing literature on the educational experiences of Somali students.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS TO YOU AS A PARTICIPANT:

The only risks associated with participating in this study are participants potentially feeling upset or distressed when recounting painful memories.

Before the interview, you will be given a list of Somali community organizations that provide counselling services. These organizations have trained counsellors you can approach to help you deal with any distress.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

To maintain the anonymity of participants your real names will not be used; instead a pseudonym [a fake name] will be assigned to each participant and will be used when presenting your responses. All information that can identify you that you share during the interview will remain completely confidential. Information that could identify you will not be presented in the researcher’s MRP or any publications resulting from this study. Information from all participants will be combined for analysis and reporting, so no individual’s information will be shared in a way that can identify you.

Only the researcher Subeyda Mohamed and her MRP supervisor Dr. Cheryl Teelucksingh will have access to data provided during the interviews. The interview materials will be stored electronically on a secure network at Ryerson University, and hard copy material will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet at Ryerson University [the office of Dr. Cheryl Teelucksingh]. Two years after the data analysis is complete, the data will be destroyed. If you as a participant wish to review the transcripts of your interview, you can request to do so and your request will be accommodated in a timely manner.

Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law--there is a requirement to report to the proper authorities any indication of self-harm or potential harm to others that may be revealed during the course of the interview.

COSTS TO PARTICIPATION:

There are no costs associated with participation to you the participant other than travel to the mutually agreed upon interview location. The researcher will not be able to reimburse you for that expense.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If any question makes you uncomfortable, you can skip that question. You may stop participating at any time during this process. If you choose to stop participating, you may also choose to not have your data included in the study. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University, the researcher Subeyda Mohamed or her MRP supervisor Dr Cheryl Teelucksingh.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY: If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact. Subeyda Mohamed the researcher [the Immigration and Settlement Studies Masters Candidate] conducting this research at the following email address: subeyda.mohamed@ryerson.ca or voicemail at the office of Dr. Cheryl Teelucksingh at this number 416-979-5000 ext 6213.

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study please contact:

Research Ethics Board
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
416-979-5042
rebchair@ryerson.ca

Research Participant Signatures

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study “Failing To Make the Grade: Somali-Canadian Students and their Encounters with the Canadian Education System” as described herein. Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, and you agree to participate in this study. You have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant (please print)

Participant Signature

Email address

Your signature below indicates that you acknowledge and agree to be audio recorded.

Participant Signature

- ☐ I would like to receive a copy of the final findings
- ☐ I would like to review my interview transcript

Appendix D

Title of email Introductory Email:

Failing To Make the Grade: Somali-Canadian Students and their Encounters with the Canadian Education System: An Invitation to Participate in Research

Body of email:

Good morning!

My name is Subeyda Mohamed and I am Masters of Arts - Immigration and Settlement Studies Candidate at Ryerson University. I am writing to inform you about a research study that I am currently conducting to fulfill my requirements for graduation. This study has been approved by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. I am reaching out to Somali community organizations and settlement agencies to recruit potential participants. I am hoping you will help facilitate my research by circulating word of this project among your network.

My project is titled 'Failing To Make the Grade: Somali-Canadian Students and their Encounters with the Canadian Education System.' The purpose of this study is to explore how the discriminatory practices and racism in the education system contribute to the low achievement and high dropout rate of Somali-Canadian youth.

As part of this study, I am seeking to interview participants who are either 1.5 or 2nd generation Somali Canadian. Meaning they must have been born here or arrived in Canada before their fifth or sixth birthday to participate in this study. Those who do not fit the above-mentioned criteria are not eligible to participate. Participants of Somali descent, members of the 1.5/2nd generation, who have graduated or "dropped out" of local TDSB schools within the last five years, will be interviewed about their educational experiences in this board. The goal of the interviews is to allow participants to express their personal experiences and to uncover what they think are the main factors contributing to the high dropout rate and low achievement of Somali Students.

If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

With best wishes,

Subeyda Mohamed

In follow up email (if they reply that they are interested), that is where I send the Information and Consent form (in Dropbox folder: Study Materials- Interview Script and Interview consent form).

Appendix E



PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN Education

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study of *the educational experiences of Somali-Canadian students*.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the discriminatory practices and racism in the education system contribute to the low achievement and high dropout rate of Somali-Canadian youth. Participants must be either 1.5 or 2nd generation Somali Canadian. Meaning you must have been born here or arrived in Canada before your fifth or sixth birthday to participate in this study. **If you do not fit the above-mentioned criteria you are not eligible to participate.** You will be asked to sign a consent form. You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire with the following kind of questions: Ethnicity, Gender, Age, Age at arrival, Immigration Status, Grade Last attended. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. You can request the recording to be terminated at any time during the interview. You will be interviewed for an hour at a mutually agreed upon location other than your home. Participants of Somali descent, members of the 1.5/2nd generation, who have graduated or “dropped out” of local TDSB schools **within the last five years**, will be interviewed about their educational experiences in this board.

Your participation would involve (1) interview session, this interview will be approximately (1 hour long).

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,
please contact:

Subeyda Mohamed, the Immigration and Settlement Studies Masters Candidate conducting this research at

416-979-5000 ext 6213 (leave a voicemail at the office of Dr. Cheryl Teelucksing) or
Email: subeyda.mohamed@ryerson.ca

This study has been reviewed by, and approved by the Research Ethics Board, Ryerson University.

[illegible]

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