THERE IS NO CHOICE:

EXAMINING SOMALI PARENTS’ EXPERIENCE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

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for the degree of Masters of Arts in the
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We now have a student population that is culturally, linguistically and economically diverse. This, in turn, has resulted in school board initiatives in response to this diversity, primarily; it appears, in ways that harden social class and racial divisions in the society (Roberston & Kushner, 2006). One clear example of this is the over-representation in Special Education of poor, immigrant students of colour, whose culture and language differs from that of English-speaking Canada. This thesis focuses on the experience of Somali parents whose children have been placed in Special Education or where an attempt has been made to place them. The purpose of this study is to examine if high or low cultural capital among Somali parents’ influences the placement of their children in Special Education. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews, I look at the experience of 8 Somali parents. Thematic analysis of the data is used to understand the findings.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the supervision of Dr. David Livingstone during this work. I thank Dr. Janet Maher who served on my thesis committee and provided continuous support throughout this process. I would like to acknowledge the invaluable help of Dr. David Chanfield and Dr. George Martell for their ongoing support, advice and guidance.

Finally, I am forever indebted to my parents Khadra Hussein and Osman Duale for their patience and encouragement when it was most required.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

Introduction

My research interest stems from my community upbringing and the problems and circumstances that the Somali community faces. I come from a lower-socio-economic community in one of Toronto’s North West community housing complexes situated in Jamestown. It is a community that faces barriers greater than normal in terms of poverty, hunger, inadequate housing, and a school system undercut by racial and social class bias.

Perhaps the greatest impact of volunteering in this community came from watching so many students (like me) who come from a war-torn, immigrant background ending up in a special needs class or bottom streamed where the curriculum was simplified and the school’s expectations were much lower. Many of the families were concerned that the schooling experience in this community did not satisfy their hopes and aspirations.

My involvement opened my eyes to the extent of the problems facing children in Toronto’s poor inner city schools. I eventually came to supervise programs that gave jobs to over 100 youths in Jamestown (ages 15-24), who had not yet found work of any kind. In dealing with these issues and interacting with the youth on a daily basis, I began to take part actively as a counsellor for the kids in the community, particularly on issues underlying their problems in school. The youth spoke on behalf of themselves and others who had been placed in the Applied or Essential stream while wanting to be in the Academic stream. Students in the higher level streams—the academic or university bound stream will typically be directed to university or competitive community college programs as post-secondary destinations; whereas, students in the lower levels streams—“Essential” (locally developed) and “Applied” — will be directed to limited community college programs, unskilled, poorly paid jobs, unemployment and underemployments (Martell, 2005). These young people wanted to know how this situation came about and this led to a formal community meeting with both the children and parents present. Many of the parents of the children who had approached me expressed their concern over their children’s placement in Special Education and the categorization of a learning disability.
With this difference in mind, I began to question the role of education, particularly Special Education and the lower streams, as it affects the lives of these students—most of whom are poor, black and immigrant. I started to do some preliminary research on the overall educational system and how it denies many low-income children (who are increasingly black and immigrant) authentic hope for the future and what kind of policy changes would help. I have been especially interested in examining the bottom-streaming of working-class immigrant children of color in the Toronto District School Board -- how these children are defined as intellectually inferior, offered a substandard curriculum, and then sent on to low--paying, low-skilled jobs (or no jobs at all).

**Statement of the Problem**

In this thesis, disparities in Special Education placement will be examined in terms of parent’s cultural capital and their capacity to navigate the system during the process of assessment, referral and placement of their child in Special Education. It will then focus on the degree to which the cultural capital of Somali Parents influences the decision to place their children in Special Education.

In this study, cultural capital is defined as the “proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices—for example, linguistic styles, aesthetic preferences, styles of interaction” (Kilbridge, 2000, p. 8). This study recognizes further that, in the context of immigrant parents’ efforts to navigate the school system, our understanding of cultural capital has to include the interaction of several factors which includes the “general length of time in Canada, command of the English upon arrival, and age on arrival; family background, including social status, the number of generations in Canada and whether the family is a voluntary or involuntary minority here, and school context” (Kilbridge, 2000, p. 11). Given this complexity, more research than this thesis can attempt is needed to contextualize its findings. Furthermore, there are major implications dictating how the educational system might better serve the needs of linguistically different students and their parents from low-income communities of color and these also need to be examined. Further research in this area may have far-reaching implications for the referral, assessment and programming thrust for ethnic minority students.
A Brief Overview of the Somali Experience in Toronto

This section provides an overview of the Somali community in Toronto. It discusses their migration experience in Toronto in the early 1990’s including the challenges and issues that confronted them when they entered Ontario public schools.

A wave of Somali refugees entered Canada during the period of 1989-1995 (Scott, 2001), as a result of “internal political turmoil, military conflicts, and ongoing drought in the countries of the Horn of Africa” (Ali, 1990, p. 15). Many Somali children entered the Canadian school system, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area. The Toronto Board of Education had limited knowledge of these refugee students and their needs and circumstances.

Somalis are racially, religiously, ethnically and linguistically homogeneous. Inasmuch as humans tend to focus on their differences to establish a sense of group identity, the Somali people differentiate themselves according to their clans. Britain and Italy colonized this East African country in the 19th century. The British ruled north Somalia and Italy ruled the southern part of Somalia. As a result, Somalis from the south speak Italian as a second language, while the Somalis in the north speak English as their second language. The two colonies united and got their independence on July 1, 1960. The population of Somalia was approximately 7 million before a civil war that left hundreds of thousands dead and caused many others (nearly one million) to flee to neighbouring countries (Mensing, 2001).

The Somali people are one people, with one language which is Somali (first written in a Latin script in 1973), and they have one religion, Islam. The Somali community is a relatively new community in Canada. According to the 411 Initiative for Change, “the size of the Somali community is estimated at between 120,000 to 150,000, with 70% of this population being women and children” (411: Somalia, 2007). Their socio-cultural practices and religious affiliations are outside of the mainstream Canadian values. This has created many challenges for the Somali community trying to connect to their host country’s culture.

The community is unevenly distributed across Toronto. Most Somalis live in the north Etobicoke and Downtown (Regent Park) areas, but they are scattered throughout the city, with some concentrations in the former cities of North York and York.
Most Somali women are single parents with limited education backgrounds and have difficulty finding jobs and integrating. Large segments of the new arrivals are from rural areas and life in a big city such as Toronto presents many challenges, linguistically and culturally. In addition, immigration restrictions have impeded a smooth path toward integration and resettlement. Initially, significant portions of the population did not speak English. But now, as many youths are speaking English, some parents are concerned that these members of the younger generation are losing their culture and religion.

Currently, many Somalis remain convention refugees and landed immigrants because of immigration rules that significantly delay attainment of citizenship. The Department of Immigration created rules that lengthened the waiting period of citizenship because the vast majority came as refugees with no identification papers. The presentation for the 7th International Congress of Somali Studies held at York University in 1999 confirms that:

“This situation caused problems for the many Somalis who sought refuge in Canada, where identity documents are normally required for refugees seeking to become landed immigrants (i.e., permanent residents). Because so many Somali refugees could not produce documents deemed satisfactory by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Canadian government adopted an amendment to the Immigration Act that created a new category of refugees without identity documents: the Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class (UCRCC)” (Israelite, Herman, Alim, Mohamed & Khan, 1999, p. 6).

Many Somalis were not able to access education or jobs as immigration officials cause delays in the process of accepting and receiving the papers necessary to apply for jobs or schools. The exposure to the new Western culture and the numerous cultural, communication, religious and racial barriers resulted in the community experiencing significant mental health, educational, and adjustment problems (Israelite, Herman, Alim, Mohamed & Khan, 1999).

Today, similar problems face Somali students as result of their cultural, economic and migration experiences and they remain over-represented in the Special Education bottom streams of the system (Scott, 2001). The multi-faceted challenges faced by the Somali community were unfortunately not met with appropriate services by the Toronto District School Board (Scott, 2001). The Toronto District School Board Grade 9 cohort study looking at Fall 2000 students found that the highest dropout rates (according to student
language) were Portuguese, Spanish and Somali-speaking students in the cohort and the student indicators of being at-risk are:

- Students born in the “English speaking Caribbean, Central and South America, Mexico and Eastern Africa”
- Students speaking Portuguese, Spanish, and Somali (Brown, 2005)

Furthermore, Somalis experiences with the school system were further affected by language and cultural barriers. The findings in the study found several cases where language barriers affected Somali parents’ understanding of school board documents and their interaction with the school concerning school decisions. One case in the study found that a “Somali child was ‘sent home from school with a note explaining why he was suspended; the mother was not able to read the note and sent the child back to the school the following day. This mishap continued for three or more occasions until the intervention of settlement workers from the Board of Education and from SIWA [Somali Immigrant Women’s Association] who acted as translators” (Scott, 2001, p. 32). This is not an unusual experience. Consent forms and/or school documents are written in English, and very often no translators or interpreters are provided for parents during their interaction with the school system.

There is an additional problem. Since most Somalis come to Canada as refugees, many Somali families experience the unfortunate predicament of family separation, with some living in Canada, some back home and some in different countries. The study of Somalis’ immigrant experience finds that, “all children living overseas were aged 12 or more years. Further Undocumented Convention Refugees must wait a minimum of three years before they can apply to become permanent residents. Once this is completed, sponsorship applications for family members can take up to another two years to be processed. Thus, by the time the Eritrean and Somali families are reunited, the children may no longer be children” (Scott, 2001, p. 35). This is important to note, since assessment in Canadian schools usually takes into account the child age and not prior schooling when making decisions regarding a students’ exceptionality. However, in the case of Somalis who come to Canadian classrooms much older with limited or no schooling, it is suggested that age appropriate assessment should be reviewed with respect to its validity.
Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1, *Introduction and Purpose of the Study*, outlines the problems that face Somali students in Special Education and gives an overview of the Somali experience in Toronto.

Chapter 2, *Knowing the Character of the Education System*, provides a review of the relevant literature as it pertains to the following: a) Referral of Students into Special Education based on Community Experience; b) Reasons for Low Income Ethnic Minority Students Referral into Special Education

Chapter 3, *Board Policy on Special Education*, provides a specific policy context for the study of special education in Ontario and Toronto.

Chapter 4, *Methodology and Data*, outlines the research protocol, research design, the sample size and how the data were collected and analyzed.

In Chapter 5, *Navigating the System*, I present my findings to show which ones support or contradict the relevant literature.

Chapter 6: *Conclusions and Recommendations* will provide a summary of the major findings of the thesis, limitations of the study, recommendations and suggestions for future studies.
CHAPTER TWO: KNOWING THE CHARACTER OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The demographics of our country are changing significantly. These changes have brought – and continue to bring – great changes to our school system. We now have a student population that is culturally, linguistically and economically diverse, especially in our larger urban areas. This, in turn, has resulted in major government and school board initiatives in response to this diversity, primarily; it appears, in ways that harden social class and racial divisions in the society (Robertson & Kushner, 2006). One very clear example of this is the over-representation in Special Education or similar bottom streams of poor, immigrant students of colour, whose culture and language differs from that of English-speaking Canada. There is a general consensus that this disproportionate placement exists for such minority groups, but the literature diverges in the causes for the over-representation.

In this thesis, disparities in ethnic minority students’ placement will be examined in terms of their assessment, referral and placement. In the study, assessment is loosely defined as the testing, observation, or interview used to assess students’ suitability for special education. The referral is defined as the process by which a student who is suspected to have exceptionality will be referred to an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC). Lastly the student will be placed into special education according to their identified exceptionality, a placement that includes the development of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for every identified student (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

In the analysis, two alternative explanations for the bottom stream placement of a disproportionate number of students from working class, immigrant and communities of colour will be used. One takes into account the collection of data that links socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, language and culture. This framework of analysis argues that these groups do not have more disabilities, but that their disproportionate placement is reflective of institutional bias and political pressure that cause more of these students to be singled out for special education services (Artiles, 2003). The other explanation suggests that these student population groups have more disabilities due to their class, language, ethnicity, parents and hence need to be relegated into Special Education which is reflective of ‘innate-deficit’ and ‘cultural-deficit’ theories. Even though the literature differs over the causes of this over-representation, it is also important to note if there were no
prejudice (or pejorative judgment) involved, we would expect more or less equal representation along the lines of race, ethnicity and class.

This disproportionate placement has far-reaching implications since Special Education students tend to have a higher dropout rate, lower graduation rates, and lower academic achievement and expectations in comparison to their non-special education peers (Artiles, 2003).

When dealing with the over-representation of ethnic, minority students of colour in Special Education and related bottom streams, the findings in the literature disagree on how social class, race and cultural background should be interpreted.

The first approach concludes that social class, race, or cultural background should not be a determining factor in the child’s capacity to do intellectual work. It concludes that the relegation of these students to Special Education according to these guidelines is the result of prejudice. This approach is confirmed by US studies that find evidence of institutional bias in the school personnel resulting in the over-representation of these students in special education services (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

In Canadian research, the second perspective acknowledges that cultural, race, ethnicity, language and socio-economic indicators can make a difference in children’s perceived capacity to do intellectual work and lead to their over-representation in Special Education programs. The second kind of data supports the pertinence of the application of cultural deficit/difference and innate-deficit approaches by educators (Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992).

At this point, I should stress that the Special Education programs we are dealing with – from both perspectives – are what have been called “non-normative” programs. According to Curtis et al (1992, p. 55):

Sally Tomlinson distinguishes between two types of Special Education. The first types are those, which deal with students who are truly handicapped (e.g., blind, has total hearing loss, profoundly retarded). According to Curtis et al. (1992), Tomlinson calls this group ‘normative’ “because children were diagnosed and placed in this program on the basis of norms or criteria that were objectively developed and universally applied.” The second type Tomlinson calls ‘non-normative’ because they take in students who have been “diagnosed and placed not on the basis of universally agreed-upon physical criteria but rather on the basis of observations and evaluations of their classroom behaviour. This second group contained students labelled as ‘behavioural,’ ‘slow learners,’ ‘learning disabled,’ ‘over-emotional,’ ‘minimal brain dysfunctional, ‘attention deficit disorder,’ and so forth.
Part A: Referral of Students into Special Education based on Community Experience

In this subsection, I outline the practice of special education for Somali students in Toronto based on my own community experience. Even at this early period of my work, the picture that emerges is very disturbing; particularly for my Somali home community in Toronto. My own personal experience allowed me the opportunity to gain direct entry to the reality facing many other Somali students in Toronto’s inner city schools and this has led to the formation of my thesis: the experience of Somali parents whose children are in Special Education and the bottom streams.

For the purposes of this study, the school used in the analysis of my community experience is not revealed in order to respect the need for anonymity. In this study, two local schools in my community will be compared. They are five to ten minutes apart by driving, however, are very different with respect to class and ethnicity. The local inner city school that serves many Somali students in the area will be identified as School #1 for the purposes of this study and the other school in the comparison will be identified as School # 2.

In my community, most of the students attend the local inner city school in the area and the students primarily come from Somali and Caribbean backgrounds (Toronto Board of Education, School Demographics Report).

School #1 is situated in a low income area where a large percentage of Somali and Caribbean students is placed in Special education. However, the Education Quality Accountability Office (EQAO) does not analyze data according to race, income or ethnicity, and hence the percentage of students in Special Education represents all the students in the school under study. In the chart below [Table 1], it is evident that the placement of these students in special education starts as early as grade 3 where presently 37% of the students at the local school are in some form of Special Education program. The number of students in Special Education is sustained at the middle school levels where more than 30% of the students are in Special Education in grade 6.
Table 1: School # 1 Special Education placement

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<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Students in Special Education (Grade 3)</strong></td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Students in Special Education (Grade 6)</strong></td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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Overall, the over-representation of ethnic minority students in Special Education attests to the societal approach to disability as an ‘individual problem”. At School # 1 more than 30% of the students are in some form of special education class and the over-representation of specialized classes conveys the message that the students from these communities – primarily poor, black and immigrant – are intellectually deficient. This is critical because it shows that the over-representation of minority children in Special Education can be the result, not of more children having disabilities, but of institutional bias in the school personnel and political pressure from school administrators to place more of these students into Special Education services (Harry and Klingner, 2006).
Compared to School # 1, students that attend School # 2, which is situated five minutes away from the School # 2, are far less likely to be placed in Special Education. At School # 2, students are predominately from South Asian countries. According to the Toronto Board of Education (2006), School Demographics Archive, the dominant first languages of the students include Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, and Hindi. According to the Education Quality and Accountability Office (2006) 65% of the school population is made up of students whose first language not English. As indicated in table 2 for 2005-2006, students with special needs (excluding gifted) make up 6% of the student population, which is significantly lower than the percentage of students in special education at School # 1 (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2006). These findings in Ontario schools parallel the representation of Black students and South Asian students in Special Education elsewhere. US studies confirm the over-representation of Black students and the under-representation of other ethnic minority students such as Asian Pacific Islanders in certain disability categories (Muller & Markowitz, 2003).

**Table 2: School # 2 Special Education placement**

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<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Special Education</td>
<td>(Grade 3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Special Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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These school comparisons are noteworthy, since both these student groups come from relatively the same geographic community, but from different racial backgrounds. Students from the South Asian communities had a significantly lower Special Education representation in School # 2 than those in School # 1, who are predominately from Caribbean and Somali backgrounds.

**Part B: Reasons for the Referral of Low Income Ethnic Minority Students into “Special Education”**

In this subsection, analysis will be conducted on the reasons for referral for low-income ethnic minority students of color into special education based on the pre-existing literature. The five main themes that are used to explain the overrepresentation in the literature are as follows:

- Racial Factors
- Linguistic Differences
- Linguistic Differences for Immigrant Parents
- Cultural Differences
- Class and Socio-economic Status Differences
Studiees confirm that special education populations are segregated along the lines of race. This is seen in the disproportionate placement of racialized ethnic minorities in special education programs (Dunn, 1968). This overrepresentation along the lines of race is reflected in the over-representation of Black students in certain disability categories and underrepresentation of other ethnic minority students such as Asian Pacific Islanders in certain disability categories (Muller and Markowitz, 2003). This is confirmed by other studies, whose findings reveal that Black students comprise the highest proportion of representation in all categories of special education, and students from other minority groups such as Chicano/Latino, American Indian, and a few subgroups of Asian American students are also generally overrepresented in special education (Rueda & Windmueeler, 2006). It is important to note that certain ethnic minority students are under-represented while others are over-represented in Special Education, which allows the suggestion that racial factors might not be alone in determining the relegation of students to Special Education.

A study conducted by Condron (2005) discusses, as early as kindergarten, how black and minority students of color from low-income backgrounds are relegated to lower ranked reading groups (Condron, 2005). The findings reveal that disadvantaged low income, black and Hispanic students tend to be relegated disproportionately to lower ranked reading groups than their advantaged counterparts, primarily as a result of gaps in skills that are already apparent when school commences. They conclude that the lower ranked reading groups fall further behind in comparison to their non-grouped counterparts, whereas higher ranked students get further ahead than both their non-grouped and low ranked grouped counterparts (Condron, 2005). Overall, the lower ranked reading groups learned less while the higher ranked reading grouped learned more in comparison to the non grouped students in the previous year (Condron, 2005). Kindergarten programs are critical building blocks for the foundations of success in learning for later years. As argued in this report, assessment will play a role in informal assignment and construction of IEP, which in turn influences informal early indicators of placement in special education.
According to the Ministry of Education report on Special Education (2006):

Children are eligible to receive special education programs and services upon entry to school in Junior Kindergarten. Children who are formally identified as exceptional through the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee process must have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) developed for them. As with all special education classes, the academic expectations are modified for the Kindergarten child who is identified with an IEP (p. 6).

Beyond, kindergarten, many studies focused on special education at the elementary levels from grade 1-8. US researchers have found that black students are frequently overrepresented in self-contained special education classes in comparison to white students (Hosp, J. L., & Reschly, D. J, 2002). As indicated in several studies, race plays a significant role in special education relegation. Black students were also disproportionately relegated to special education and were particularly over-identified with “mental retardation” or learning disability and channelled out of rigorous or gifted classes (Braddock and Dawkins, 1993). Studies conducted by Tidwell (2002) conclude that, “African Americans represented 18.3% of students placed in the special education category of specific learning disability, 26.4% in the category of serious emotional disturbance, and 34.3% in the category of mental retardation” (Tidwell, 2002, p. 7).

The Canadian data appear to support a similar process in Ontario schools. Special education in the literature review was identified as another kind of formal streaming at the elementary level (Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992)

The Canadian studies seem to support the findings conducted by US researchers. According to studies conducted by the Toronto Board of Education (TDSB) on at-risk students are increasingly defined along the lines of race. Studies in 2004-2005, found that “students born in the English speaking Caribbean (36%), Central/South America/Mexico (32%) and Eastern Africa (21%) tend to be more highly at-risk than the average” (Brown, 2006, p.27).

Overall, findings from US and Canadian studies indicate that black students are disproportionately over represented in special education. Studies conducted by US researcher Tidwell (2002) find that in wealthier school districts and higher income areas, Black students are at a greater likelihood of being placed in special education for some form of mental retardation. This is reaffirmed by a study conducted by Hart (2002) which finds that “that the wealthier the school district the more likely black male students were disproportionately labelled “mentally retarded” (p.53).
Other studies document the interactions between race and other demographic variables as reasons for overrepresentation as opposed to solely racial determinants. We shall return to this later in the discussion of social class.

**Linguistic Differences**

In this subsection, linguistic differences were a dominant theme for relegation to Special Education. Students with limited English proficiency had a higher likelihood to be placed in Special Education classes in self-contained settings in comparison to students who have a higher proficiency in the English language (Robertson and Kushner, 2006). According to the findings, roughly 66% of students with Limited English proficiency are placed in a disability program for reading problems (Robertson and Kushner; Klingner et al, 2006; Ortiz, 1997) and hence the literature suggests language to be large factor in Special Education referral.

Alternative studies suggest modifications in testing procedures to accommodate linguistic differences for limited English proficient students. In this framework, the data suggest that a small number of limited English proficient students are assessed in their mother tongue. More often than not, these students are assessed in English without accommodations in their mother tongue. Hence, the findings suggest that these tests fail to distinguish the existence of real disabilities for English language learners as opposed to a weakness compounded by a student’s lack of English proficiency (e.g., Ortiz, 1997; Ortiz et al, 1985). The argument assumes that limited English proficient students cannot be assessed without the inclusion of their mother tongue. The findings reveal that without a mother tongue assessment, it is difficult to distinguish whether the manifested problems occur in that mother tongue or are only experienced in English as a second language.

Hence, within this framework of analysis, it is suggested that these students will gain the proficiency in the English language in setting of strong bilingual education. Otherwise, assessment procedures for limited English proficient students have weak validity (Ortiz, 1997, Stockman, 1986). Studies conducted by Fletcher et al (2002) argue that models such as the discrepancy model have weak validity since they fail to distinguish among students with LD, low achievers and students with cultural and linguistic differences (Fletcher et al, 2002). This is confirmed by studies that find that different language and culture must be incorporated in order to develop environments where culturally and linguistically diverse students can thrive academically (Cummins, 1984). The in-depth understanding of immigrants is applicable to blacks who are born in Canada
and the USA because they speak a strong dialect of English prior to their enrolment in schools (Stockman, 1986). He recommends that black people should be provided with methods of building on their mother tongue along the lines of English as a second language instruction. Stockman (1986) also indicates that all those who are part of the black community will benefit from learning Ebonics [which refers to US native born blacks, not recent immigrants from non English Speaking backgrounds] since it is the foundation for constructing and sustaining social relationships within the external and internal environments, cultural practices, and identity awareness. First language comprehension is significant for learning both oral and written language.

Overall, the literature confirms that linguistic differences should be incorporated during assessment procedures for immigrant students. In Canadian schools assessment usually takes into account the child age and not prior schooling when making decisions regarding a students’ exceptionality (Community Social Planning, 2005). In this study, I intend to look further at how linguistic differences of Somalis who come to Canadian classrooms much older with limited or no schooling impact the type of age appropriate placement they are offered once they enter Canadian schools.

**Linguistic Differences for Immigrant Parents**

Canadian studies conducted by Community Social Planning (2005) provide an explanation for placement based on parental income and education level. In this study, findings suggest that one of the barriers that face minority, low income and/or immigrant parents is the lack of confidence amongst these parents due to language barriers and insufficiency in the English language to communicate with school personnel on behalf of their child. In addition, findings reveal, that these parents tend to lack an understanding of how the educational system works in order to advocate for their child (Community Social Planning, 2005) US studies confirm with Canadian based research which have shown that ethnic minority parents have high expectations for their children but do not know how to advocate for their children (Kelly, 2003).

US studies conducted by Lareau and Horbat (1999) found that Black parents have mistrust and are hesitant to interact with school personnel as a result of their knowledge of history of racial discrimination by schools. This study suggests that parental mistrust of a school’s procedures can be a contributory cause of a lack of parental involvement in schools. This may affect their child’s placement in special education since the
communication with school’s personnel is missing and their opportunity to understand the expectations placed upon them. According to the study conducted by Kelly (2003), students with highly educated parents have about 72.7% chance of being relegated to the highest-level placement in Math versus 20% for students from low SES parents. It should be recalled that highly educated parents tend to be in a higher income bracket and tend to go to schools where there is a higher probability of high-level classes in math. Findings reveal that even when variables such as grades and standardized test scores are controlled, parental income and level of education still correlates strongly with their child’s placement (Kelly, 2003).

**Cultural Differences**

Cultural differences may also play a determining role in Special Education referral for this group. In the literature on this subject, studies conducted by Poplin and Phillips (1993) show that accurate assessment of minority students of color depend on the ability and determination of school personnel to overcome biases and to avoid defining disabilities, in this case learning disability from a “Euro-American, monolingual, ‘dominant culture’ perspective” (p.11). According to this perspective, students’ culture and the behaviours manifesting the norms of their own different cultural group will have a higher likelihood of being labelled deficient or disabled.

According to studies conducted by Obiakor et al (2001), “the dilemma of differences” (a term coined by Minow (1985) – to indicate cultural or linguistic difference for African Americans) plays a significant role in reproducing and maintaining inequalities. The “dilemma of difference” is founded in the observation that the student’s cultural or linguistic differences are ignored in classroom instruction and hence in this framework black students’ cultural styles or needs will be neglected (Obiakor et al, 2001).

This analysis shows that:

I. There are differences in the home and school culture,

II. There is a lack of culturally sensitive assessment tools and,

III. Cultural deprivation plays a stronger role in black student’s relegation in special education.
I. Differences in the Home and School Culture

The literature argues that cultural difference must not be ruled out as a crucial variable if there is a clear finding of discrepancy between the cultural characteristics of the students in their own cultural group and the cultural characteristics of the dominant group in society, which are likely to reflect those of the cultural group of the school personnel. Hence, student behaviours or cultural characteristics should not be categorized as ‘abnormal’ if they are consistent with their own cultural group. According to this perspective the dominant group (in this case white middle class students) should not serve as the comparator for analysis of deviance or “abnormality” for other cultural groups. Deviance or “abnormality” should be assessed by reference to the cultural characteristics of the same cultural group.

This is confirmed by the literature which illustrate that the differences in the home and school culture can play a role in black student’s relegation to special education. Ontario studies conducted by George Martell illustrate that the cultural bias of teachers based on racial, cultural and socioeconomic differences result in these students being viewed as incapable or incompetent (Martell, 2006). Other studies conducted by Ogbu (1988) suggest an alternative perspective which suggests that black students engage in an oppositional counterculture in the school with their dress and language to distinguish themselves from the dominant culture of the school, and that in turn impacts their educational success.

II. Lack of Cultural Testing and Assessment

Lack of cultural sensitivity in testing and assessment procedures play a role for black student’s overrepresentation in special education. According to Canadian research conducted by the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (2005) finds that there is a lack of assessment procedures that take into account cultural background of students. In this report it is revealed that refugee and immigrant students have gaps in formal schooling and/or discontinuous schooling experience (Social Planning Council of Toronto, 2005). The report goes on to argue that school assessors should wait before making an assessment of immigrant children as special needs students. This is especially important, since US estimates suggest “it takes at least five years, on the average, for immigrant children who arrive in the host country after the age of six to approach grade norms” (Cummins, 1981, p. 38).
Studies conducted by Singhal (1999) conclude that school personnel and classroom teachers should include how factors such as cultural and language influence cognitive styles. Within this framework, culture and language must be incorporated into monitoring referral, assessment and programming orientation of students from ethnic minority groups with respect to Special Education if the problem of this group’s overrepresentation in special education is to be rectified (Singhal, 1999).

**III. Cultural Deprivation**

The presentation of the “social capital” (or cultural deprivation”) gap posits that deficiencies in the home and community can play a role in the overrepresentation of students from these homes or communities in special education. This framework of analysis removes responsibility from the school for the lack of success of students.

In particular, cultural capital theories suggest that:

Significant investment should be made in early childhood programs, the expansion of junior kindergarten programs (especially for families who are otherwise unable to provide such opportunities), and full-day senior kindergarten. Families and communities vary enormously in “social capital” they provide to their children, social capital being the access children have to resources of many sorts, and the networks of relationships available to support them as they grow up. Because students with weak family and community resources have considerable difficulty taking advantage of the learning opportunities available through the school curriculum, the schools need the freedom and resources to supplement the students’ social capital (Martell, 2006, p. 8).

Overall, studies that examine cultural differences affirm a correlation between culture, language, bilingual education and their referral and placement in Special Education (Poplin and Phillips, 1993; Ortiz, 1997).

**Class and Socio-Economic Status Differences**

Differences in social class or socio-economic status have long been considered a factor in special education referral. According to Canadian studies conducted by Lind’s (1974) in the “Learning Machine” finds that, students from affluent communities are treated differently from students from inner city communities even though they all attend public schools. In his analysis he found that the children from inner city communities experienced school quite differently from middle to upper class students. Lind (1974) found that:
Parents must give their consent before a psychiatrist or psychologist can give individual tests to their child. From that point on, however, their awareness depends on their principal’s openness and their own persistence. Parents are rarely welcome at Admission Board meetings; they are usually simply presented a solution. If there is a minority opinion on the Admission Board, this is never disclosed to the parent (Lind, 1974, p. 89).

Thirty-five years later, as this paper will argue and as our findings will show, the situation has not changed much.

In 1971, inner city mothers in Toronto schools had spoken out about the problem of overrepresentation of their children in special education and their placement in the lower-streams in the Toronto Board of Education. During this time the Trefann Court mothers, a group of low-income inner city mothers, told the school board that the vocational streams of the high schools where their children were sent were the dead end division of the schooling system (Martell, 1974). These inner city working class mothers were challenging the Ministry of Education to change the vocational streams in which, they said, low income students were disproportionately represented. The suspicions of the Trefann Court mothers were later reconfirmed by Board of Education Every Student Survey data: “the relationship between socio-economic rank and special class placement holds between socio-economic rank and those who are diagnosed as of limited ability” (Martell, 1974, p. 51).

In fact, if we return to the literature on racial factors, we find many studies suggesting that socio-economic status either interacts with race in determining student placement, or is even the dominant factor. This is reaffirmed by US studies, for instance, Oswald et al (1999) found that Black students’ over-representation in Special Education correlates with increased poverty, while under-representation in certain disability categories is associated with decreased poverty.

Alternative perspectives by US researchers suggest that in the case of minority students from Hispanic backgrounds, there is less likelihood for placement in special education categories in poorer states (Blair & Scott, 2002). For instance, students living in higher poverty areas, Black, Alaskan, Asian, African American, and White groups are less likely to be identified as having LD and EBD [Emotional –behavioural disorders]. However, in poorer districts, minority students were assessed and placed in classes for mental retardation (MR) (Oswald, Coutinho, Best & Singh, 1999).
In the case of ethnic minority students from immigrant backgrounds with higher poverty rates, there are disadvantages within an educational system that assumes middle-class experience. For instance, students with limited English proficiency who perceive middle-class behaviours and outcomes as a norm are likely to conclude that behaviours of students from low-income communities are deviant or “abnormal” (Robertson & Kushner, 2006).

Alternative studies confirm that class factors have a significant effect on placement procedures in terms of identification, assessment, and programming instruction. Studies conducted by Blair and Scott (2002) reveal that students from low-income communities with SES risk factors were significantly higher in their rates of relegation into Special Education in comparison to students who do not have the associated SES factors. The findings reveal “30% of LD placements among boys and 39% of LD placements among girls were attributable to what can be considered low-SES markers” (Blair & Scott, 2002, p. 9). The author argued that if SES was not an indicator for over-representation in LD placement, then students from low-income communities will be equally represented in Special Education classes with other students from the general population (Blair & Scott, 2002).

In the literature there are two opposing interpretations for SES and LD placement. According to the etiological case interpretation, low SES is understood to increase the likelihood of LD placement. In this perspective there are some risks for LD in the general population; however, the added risks are associated with low SES (Blair & Scott, 2002; Artiles and Trent (1994). However, the other alternative perspective is the excess case interpretation, which states that SES is the only determining factor for special education placement. According to this perspective, low SES or poverty is the sole compounding factor that affects special education placement This perspective contradicts alternative arguments in the literature that suggest that race, linguistic, cultural or discriminatory procedures play a role in Special Education referral. It is important to note, that under this perspective:

An excess case interpretation of results could at the very most suggest that approximately one third of the learning problems subsumed under the LD designation have an origin different from the standard IQ-discrepant model (Klingner et al, 2006, p. 20).

An alternative perspective suggests that children from low-income communities may risk placement in special education for reasons other than SES and hence SES has no effect on the increased risk for LD
placement (Blair & Scott, 2002). Overall, the excess and the etiologic interpretations suggest that SES has a
determining role but vary in the level of influence for risk of LD placement. Poverty and its correlation with
ethnic minorities’ achievement level did not play a role in the differentiating variations in representation in
Special Education placement for minority groups—although other studies support a link between poverty,
ethnic minority and academic achievement (see Artilés & Trent, 1994; Chinn & Huges, 1987; MacMillan &
Reschly, 1998)

Overall, although various social factors (i.e. race, class, socio-economic status, linguistic and cultural
differences) are often claimed in the literature to be the predominant determinants in skewing the demographic
composition of students referred to special education, I intend to look at all these factors in this study.
CHAPTER THREE: BOARD POLICY ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

How Low Income Ethnic Minority Students of Color are placed in “Special Education”

The Provincial Framework

It is important to take into account the legislative and regulatory framework for Special Education in Ontario, before seeing how it plays out in schools. For parents, and particularly immigrant parents, navigating the system of Special Education involves an almost incomprehensible process.

The current framework goes back to 1980, when Bill 82 made a number of changes to the Education Act to require school boards to provide Special Education, free of charge, for all of its pupils identified as “exceptional.” The Ministry had, and still has, the responsibility for defining such pupils. In broad terms, pupils are to be formally identified as “exceptional” and candidates for Special Education if they have “behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities … (and)… educational needs that cannot be met through regular instructional and assessment practices” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001). Ontario Regulation 181/98, sets the procedure for the identification and placement of students who are deemed “exceptional” into Special Education programming through an IPRC (Identification, Placement and Review Committee). A multi-level appeals process has been put in place to resolve disputes between parents and school boards over the identification and placement of an exceptional pupil, one which includes an Ontario Special Education Tribunal which has the last say if all else fails (See Appendix C). It is little wonder that those without an extended education, a fluent ability to use the English language and/or the means to obtain the advice of professional advocates, find it so difficult to understand.

The Ontario Ministry of Education in the School September Report 2001 to 2002 reports that “in the province’s elementary schools there were 41,716 students in Learning Disability classes, with Mild Intellectual Disability (MID) next in line with 13,679 students. In the secondary schools, there were 44,712 students in LD classes and 10,472 in MID classes” (Webber & Bennet, 2004, p. 35). According to the Ministry of Education report Special Education in Ontario Schools (2004), ‘learning disorder’ comes down much of the time as a
“discrepancy between standardized test scores in academic subjects (like reading, writing and math) and IQ tests of various sorts taken by the student” (p. 21). According to the Ministry of Education Report (2004-2005) “more than 190,000 students were identified by an IPRC as exceptional pupils. A further 99,000 students who were not formally identified were provided with special education programs and services” (p. 45).

This amounts to about 290,000 students in all, who are receiving the provision one way or another. For parents, particularly immigrant parent navigating the system of Special Education is a complex process. Hence, in this subsection the following will be outlined: i) historical and modern era significance of Bill 82; ii) rights and privileges of students who are deemed ‘exceptional’ and iii) the problems in the delivery of special education in Ontario.

i. Historical and Modern Significance of Bill 82

Prior to Bill 82, for students who were deemed exceptional their needs were not very explicit in the classroom and hence these students were left behind and their needs were unacknowledged. For instance, students with learning disability or students with behavioural difficulties were usually the students who tend to drop out of school. “Right through to the final quarter of the twentieth century, these drop outs were regarded and also saw themselves—as poor educational material in any case not likely to benefit a great deal from extended schooling” (Weber, 1999, p.8).

With the implementation of Bill 82, there were two dominating theories of thought that significantly impacted how special education services were implemented but these views gradually diminished in the 1960’s. One theory stressed the importance of IQ tests to be exclusive determinants of a student’s capabilities and potential future prospects. During this period, formally administered tests validity was put to blind faith by the general public (Weber, 1999). The other theory of thought was the medical model approach for students. Within this framework, assessment focused entirely on the child’s deficit, primarily on what the child cannot do. However, later the ecological focus gradually replaced the medical model which assessed student by looking at the whole person including the child’s strengths and weaknesses (Weber, 1999).
ii) Rights and Privileges

In this section, the rights and privileges of exceptional students and provincial regulations of bill 82 (the Education Amendment Act) will be outlined. “Although all of these features continue to apply, it is important to keep in mind that provincial regulation along with Ministry-issued regulations and policy memoranda, is regularly modified and updated” (Weber, 1999, p. 11).

- Every board is designated to provide special education services to students identified as exceptional pupils

- The identification, Placement and Review Committee for special education students must have the involvement of the parents of the exceptional child. Parents have the right to undergo review and appeal process if they disagree with the IPRC committee assessment and placement decisions for their child.

- Special Education Advisory Committee must be established for every board which is standing committee that will advice on the issues pertaining to how special education programs and services are implemented

- For each exceptional student there must be the development of a special education plan and “must be developed and maintained by each school board in which it s programs and services are outlined for public and Ministry examination. The ‘Plan’ is updated and amended as necessary to meet the current needs of exceptional pupils” (Weber, 1999, p. 11).

- Each school board is required to continuously implement procedures that will support the ongoing and early identification for students who are deemed exceptional for learning disabilities and or other needs (Weber, 1999).
iii) Problems in the Delivery of Special Education in Ontario

According to the Ontario provincial auditor, our school system is failing to provide sufficient support to special needs students (Hepburn and Mrozek, 2004). His annual report finds the following problems in the delivery of special education in Ontario:

- There is delay in the diagnosis and placement of students into special education
- Once students are placed in Special education, these students are behind 2 grade levels in comparison to their peer groups.
- “Lack of measureable, specific, individual education plan (IEP’s), individual education plans are characterized by vague language and non measurable, non specific goals. Clear expectations are needed to help focus the efforts of the teacher, students, and parent to facilitate objective assessments of actual programs against planned progress” (Hepburn and Mrozek, 2004, p.5)

Although funding is not the focus of this thesis, there is material in this Auditor General’s report on public value for public money that is relevant to our study. The process by which Special Education placement decisions are made is slow. The intended remedial effect does not seem to boost students’ performance to the point at which they can regain the levels achieved by their peers. There is little by way of clarity to ensure that the claims made on behalf of Special Education can be met. This amounts to saying that the Special Education system in Ontario turns out to be turgid, ineffective and opaque. It is in this context that our Somali parents’ experience needs to be understood.

The School Board Level

Within this complex legislative framework, it is important to describe the practice of special education at the local level (in this case, the Toronto District School Board). What is spelt out in general terms provincially becomes a very complicated process when it is implemented at the level of the board and the respective schools. In the TDSB, as elsewhere, the following process is observed:

i) Identifying students special needs;

ii) Choosing the most appropriate setting to meet the needs;
iii) Planning, implementing and regularly evaluating an individualized program to meet the needs

i) **Identifying Students Special Needs**

At the local level, in order for students to be placed in Special Education there are many kinds of data that local boards and schools must collect in order to profile their students as “exceptional” through the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) process or informally with students being identified as “exceptional” without going through the formal process of the IPRC.

According to Weber and Bennet (1999), many students come into the classroom with their special needs already predetermined. They are students transferring from schools where they were officially identified as exceptional, others who have distinguished medical conditions will come to the classroom with those needs clearly identified and established. Other students will come to the classroom from another school, “or from another class in the same school, tagged so to speak, for careful watching, to see whether suspected needs are genuine enough to be addressed” (p. 35).

Nevertheless, the majority of students come into the classroom without a special needs label and their progress is monitored and special needs may be identified as the school year progresses. These students will become candidates for placement in special education if and when their special needs are formally identified through the assessment process. “In many boards, the core of an assessment is in the observations, commentaries, and anecdotal summaries written by classroom teachers, along with standardized tests they may (sometimes) administer, and possibly, formal checklists or rating scales they may complete in the case of some students, they may be all that is necessary” (Weber and Bennet, 1999, p. 37). However, in other cases additional information will be gathered from special education teachers or specialized medical documents from the appropriate professionals.

The assessment results will be used to make placement decisions for the student who is a candidate for Special Education. The information gathered during the assessment will be used to direct the development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). “Generally, the assessment then becomes part of a student’s file, from where it can provide a useful baseline when the student’s IEP, and possibly the placement and even the needs, are re-
examined at intervals in the future” (Weber and Bennet, 1997, p. 37). Because of the time and costs required to conduct an assessment, full scale assessments are not usually repeated for a student (Weber and Bennet, 1997). It is important to note that during the initial assessment for identification of Special Education, there is little or no parental involvement.

Standardized Tests

The student’s results on standardized tests provide another good indicator of “exceptionality” by school personnel. Standardized tests include criterion-referenced testing and possibly other clinical testing procedures (The Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, 2005). This is further confirmed by the report conducted by the Toronto Board of Education entitled *Measuring Student Success in the TDSB*, which affirms that the at-risk label is assigned as a result of poor achievements on standardized tests and non-objective measures of behavioural problems within the classroom (Toronto District School Board, 2004).

Other objective tools are available to school personnel and include:

- Literacy level tracking mechanisms, Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA), Early Developmental Instruments, and other local testing strategies that provide early indicators of the percentage of students who may be at risk” (Students At Risk Group, 2003, p. 14).

Other non-objective tools are interviews and teacher’s observation of behaviour in the classroom. According to the Ministry of Education report, *The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students With Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6* (2005) the classroom observation and analysis serve as the most important assessment strategy. It is important to recall this when considering ways in which bias creeps into the process. The classroom teacher might examine the correlation between the student’s behaviour and academic achievements in terms of tests, grades and assignments (The Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, 2005). But the teacher’s judgement is expected to play a significant role in the process leading up to a placement decision.

Although the system formally provides some system checks against discriminatory behaviour for the assessment of students deemed exceptional, however, we can see that there are flaws in the system. According
to the literature the system fails to address gaps in communications and inconsistency of expectations between
the schools and the families for special education, and this is exacerbated by the lack of multicultural
competence variously of teachers and other school personnel and the inability of parents/families to find
redress. We can some parallels of discriminatory practice in the treatment of black children in Ontario schools.

According to Martell (2005), students are placed in special education based on objective measures, which refer to assessments based on the results as numerical or quantitative values. Alternatively, students are also assessed based on behavioural aspects, which tend to be non-objective measures of assessment. According to the Board of Education (TDSB) report on Student Success, the students’ indicators of being at-risk consist of objective data from standardized tests. For instance, “utilizing the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) reports on provincial assessment,” Pathways to Success Grades 7-12 tells us, “[board administrators] can gain insights into the percentage of students in the board and in each family of schools performing at a level considered at risk (level 1 or below grade expectations). Other TDSB “key performance indicators” are “absentee rates, violent incidents, drop outs [and] suspensions and expulsion rates” (Brown, 2006, p.6). According to the Toronto Board of Education (TDSB) data (2006) which show that student indicators of “at-risk” are usually students who tend to dominate the lower level courses. The at-risk label comprises students who are doing poorly in school and, as mentioned earlier it means on a deeper level that these students are incapable of doing well (Martell, 2005). In the Toronto Board of Education document on Secondary Student Success Indicators the “at-risk label is reflected in the provincial “Pathways to Success” program, which has stressed the importance of standardized test scores alongside the more usual reportage of “lack of school success” and “behavioural problems” to define student “quality” and their capacity for success” (Brown, 2005, p. 27). This broader array of social indicators that comprises the at-risk label is complicated and does not conform to one unified definition, and hence it is argued that misdiagnosis can occur. This has serious implications, since majority of the students who are classified at risk according to the Toronto Board of Education (TDSB), are students from black immigrant communities of color where Somali students and Caribbean students comprise of over 35% of the dropout rate (Brown, 2006). Within this framework, if Black students are disproportionately assessed to be at risk based on non-objective and objective criteria, then there is something wrong with the categories and the assessment tools that are used to place and profile Black students (Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992; Martell, 2006).
Other studies in the literature confirm that there are flaws and discriminatory practice in the identification of students into special education. A study conducted finds that Black students are perceived “as discipline problems and as incapable of performing to high academic standards” (Hart, 2002, p.51). This is reaffirmed by the findings conducted by Obiakor et al (2001) who finds that students from urban communities are perceived as incapable to learn. This perspective has serious implications, since at the surface it means that the child is not doing well, but the second deeper layer of meaning signifies that the child is incapable of doing well, implying that the child is inferior and incapable of doing serious academic work. Studies conducted by Obi and Obiakor (2001) argued that in many circumstances, African American students have developed behaviours that adapt to their socioeconomic and social realities. In the context of schooling these behaviours tend to contrast with the expectations of the mainstream behaviours that are in accordance to Euro-centric norm. Hence, over time, these students tend to do more poorly than their own peers and in turn the teachers in these circumstances might perceive the Black child’s behaviour as an indicator for special services (Obi & Obiakor, 2001). According to Obi and Obiakor (2001), teachers tend to encounter African American students, whose characteristics differ from their own mental template of what is “normal”, “usual” or usually expected. For instance, African American students might engage in an English dialect that is linguistically different from the dominant Standard English that the teacher is accustomed to using and in turn the teacher might expect that the student should and must speak Standard English in the class (Obi and Obiakor, 2001). Hence, with all these cases, the cultural norms of the teacher influences how African American students’ are perceived against the dominant Euro centric gradient which in turn impacts their educational success since the classroom instruction does not tend to be sensitive to these cultural differences.

**ii) Choosing the most appropriate setting to meeting the needs**

The data collected through formal and informal measures are used to provide profiles of the students. The non-objective measures mentioned above are used to create data of the students and may not be devoid of class or racial bias. From this perspective the non-objective measures of behaviour in the classroom can be perpetuated by “a perception that children from [minority] groups may be stereotyped as ‘slow to learn’ and aggressive, and so are considered to be instigators of any conflict or problems at school. Behaviour that would
just be a “kid being a kid” if engaged in by another child is seen as threatening if a racialized child is involved” (Tanovich, 2006, p. 13).

**Individual Education Plan (IEP)**

The IEP is used for students deemed exceptional. According to the Ministry of Education (2006) all students deemed exceptional must have an IEP. The IEP serves as a profile for the students that go with the student to whatever Special Education program the child is enrolled in or in the regular classroom. At the official level, the “expectations” and “outcomes” of the students with an IEP are modified from the appropriate grade level of the Provincial curriculum. This usually means reduced expectations for students in special education programs with an IEP as well as students (whether deemed exceptional or not) with an IEP in the regular classroom.

After the profiling of the students, there are two official paths determined by provincial regulation through which a child is provided with an IEP. According to the first option, within 30 days of being identified as “exceptional” the child must be placed in an IEP program by the school principal following the official IPRC process. In the second option, an IEP is prepared for students receiving special education accommodations and services but who have not been identified as “exceptional” through the official IPRC process of assessment and placement. According to Webber and Bennet (2003), the proportion of students placed informally within an IEP without the IPRC process is growing in comparison with those who arrive there via the official process of IPRC.

As Webber and Bennett (2004) note:

… non-identified students include students whose parent/guardian refused to agree to an IPRC, students whose IPRC is pending but who are receiving service in the meantime, and students who are felt to be at risk and receiving service but for the moment are essentially under observation (p. 34).

Equally significant is the fact that, as for to non-identified students, students who are labelled during the first stage of early identification, where the “behavioural, psychological and developmental data” are gathered, there
is no parental permission involved. Overall, further research is need to show whether and how social and racial background is taken into account during the evaluation.

iii) Placement

After the initial identification for Special Education, the student and their parents or guardian will enter that placement decision process. In Toronto, the placement decisions for Special Education involve a complex series of steps. For placement decisions of a student to take place, Identification, Placement and Review Committees (IPRC’s) are required by law. The IPRC will decide what educational placement is most appropriate for an identified exceptional pupil. It is important to note that the principal of the school, in referring a student to an IPRC, shall provide a written notice to the student’s parent or guardian. The latter have the legal right to attend an IPRC meeting. The IPRC meetings determines and recommends the Special Education services to be provided; the type of placement expected to meet the needs of the ‘exceptional student.’ In Toronto, the placement options include the following wide array of options which are as follows: a regular class with indirect support; a regular class with resource assistance; a regular class with withdrawal assistance; a Special Education class with partial integration; full-time Special Education class

However, it is important to note, that the board “shall implement a placement decision made by a committee under this Part when one of the following two events occurs:

1. A parent of the pupil consents in writing to the placement.

2. The time period provided in subsection 26 (2) for filing a notice of appeal from the decision expires without a notice of appeal being filed.

The Regulation continues by requiring that a “board that, without the written consent of a parent of the pupil, implements a placement decision made by a committee under this Part shall give written notice of the implementation to a parent of the pupil” (Ontario Regulation: Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils, 2005).
As indicated, the regulatory body for special education says that the written consent of a parent of the pupil is required in order for a placement decision to be implemented.

Section III of the 181-98 regulation contains a reference to the obligation of each board to provide a parents’ guide to Special Education.

“Each board shall prepare a guide for the use and information of parents and pupils that,
(a) explains the function of a committee on a referral under Part IV and on a review under Part V;
(b) outlines the procedures set out in this Regulation or established under section 12 that a committee must follow in identifying a pupil as exceptional and in deciding the pupil’s placement;
(c) explains the committee’s duty to describe pupils’ strengths and needs and to include, in its statements of decision, the categories and definitions of any exceptionalities it identifies;
(d) explains the function of a special education appeal board under Part VI and the right of parents to appeal committee decisions to it;
(e) lists the parent organizations that are, to the best of the board’s knowledge, local associations of the board, within the meaning of Ontario Regulation 464/97;
(f) includes the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the provincial and demonstration schools in Ontario;
(g) indicates the extent to which the board provides special education programs and special education services and the extent to which it purchases those programs and services from another board;
(h) explains that no committee placement decision can be implemented unless,
(i) a parent has consented to the decision” (Ontario Regulation: Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils, 2005)

Overall, the board policy and regulation for identification and placement of students into special education plays a significant step in meeting the needs of exceptional students, however, this procedure can only be effective if the basis of decisions is strictly educational and not not influenced by other factors. It only becomes a problem, when special education assessment is influenced “by social, cultural and economic factors there is, inevitably, a commensurate erosion of that certain….and no jurisdiction in canada has done so to everyone’s satisfaction” (Weber, 1999, p. 20).

However, it is important to note that Toronto has challenges that other boards may/do not have—particularly as the first home of newcomers who are not always well supported by other institutional systems and supports—so it shows in the schools, especially in the delivery of special education.

This failure is explicit and clearly stated in the literature, which shows in Ontario, that the overrepresentation of children of poverty and students from ethnic minority groups in special needs class. It is
not uncommon in Toronto, that students from newcomer communities and or low income families have trouble in meeting the needs of Ontario schools due to the complexity and confusion of the demands of the school culture. It is important to note, that these parents’ lack experience in Canadian schools in addition to lacking clear understanding of how the Canadian schooling system works which can significantly impact students school performance and placement in school (Weber, 1999). Hence, very often what we see is that a child’s needs or problems are not managed by immigrant parents by dealing directly with school personnel, education system or the proper support systems in the schools since these parents’ “either lack support or sophistication” (Weber, 1999, p. 20). In fact, there is or has been no way to address gaps in communications and inconsistency of expectations between the schools and the families, and this is exacerbated by the lack of multicultural competence variously of teachers and other school personnel and the inability of parents/families to find redress.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY AND DATA

In this study, the main research question is examining if Somali Parents cultural capital effects their relegation into Special Education. However, in order to answer these questions in at least an exploratory way, the following focus questions were further examined in this study:

1. Why are Somali students disproportionately represented in Special Education
2. What are the problems faced by Somali Parents in navigating the educational system and the Special Education System?
3. Can Somali immigrant parents with lower cultural capital and limited English proficiency make appropriate placement decisions for their child?
4. Are newcomer parents particularly disadvantaged in advocating for their child in school?
5. Is there lack of school accommodations for Somali immigrant parents to make appropriate placement decisions for their child?
6. What role does parents’ cultural capital play in Somali children relegation and placement into Special Education?
7. What is expected of the educational system in developing such capital for immigrant parents?
8. Has the school system failed or succeeded to provide Somali parents the accommodations needed to navigate the special education system?
9. Have Somali Parents been pressured to place their child into special education?

Given the language barrier and immigrant status of Somali parents, has the school system provided the opportunity for Somali parents’ to make informed decisions during the referral, assessment and placement of their child into special education?

Design

In the writing of this report, I identify myself as a Somali, Muslim female living in the city of Toronto. As a member of the Somali community I have several connections, and “working within my own ethnic and cultural community, I gained access and an insider’s view of cultural practices” (Kobayashi, 1994: p. 74).
Sample

Many factors were taken into account when the sample size was being determined. The amount of time that I had for this study was one factor that I considered prior to determining the number of participants. Eight Somali parents volunteered to participate in the study which includes 3 Somali men and 5 Somali women from all different households. Purposive sampling was used to select the candidates for this study with the following criteria in mind.

First, they had to be Somali parents whose children have been or were currently placed in special education and Somali parents who refused to or subsequently withdrew their consent to special education services for their children. Second, participants had to be residents of a low-income urban community where there is a large concentration of Somalis. In this study, most of the parents describe their experience as initially consenting to special education services prematurely due to multitude of reasons including lack of familiarity with the system and language barriers and subsequently refusing special education decisions as the consequence of their loss of trust in the system.

The recruitment process involved using Somali based organizations in Toronto; contacting Somali school personnel who work in schools with large Somali population to identify parents for the study, as well as distributing flyers on notice boards at Somali based agencies in Toronto. All participants lived in a low-income inner city community and all had migrated from Somalia from 1990 on. The Somali parents were coded with the initial of the first name in any written document in order to maintain confidentiality and the anonymity of the participants.

Procedure

I interviewed all participants in their home individually for 20-30 minutes each initially and then followed up on one occasion. For three of the participants a translator was provided to clarify interview questions and they responded in their mother tongue¹. An interview guide was developed in consultation with

¹ See interview schedule in Appendix B.
the thesis supervisor and committee members. The interviewees were asked to discuss their experience with special education including: their knowledge of: (a) what is Special Education, (b) their child’s learning experience in special education, (c) their understanding of their child's learning disability (d) their child’s progress in special education (e) accommodations provided during the referral, assessment, and program placement of their child in special education, (f) the process of Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) and Individual Education Plan (IEP), (g) and knowledge for the reasons regarding their child’s referral to special education. Somali parents were then asked to provide recommendations for school personnel concerning the changes they would suggest for their child’s program and the process through which their child was placed in special education. The participants were asked to discuss the school’s recognition and accommodation of the parents’ cultural, linguistic, or ethnic situation.

Data collection and analysis

The interviews were audio taped and transcribed for analysis by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews allowed the exploration of the codes and themes derived from the parents’ narratives. The researcher began reading the transcripts and identifying the codes that were corroborated in consultation with the thesis committee and thesis supervisor. The codes were then used to identify the themes, patterns and discrepancies regarding Somali parents’ experience of navigating the special education process in Toronto. The transcripts were then reviewed for a second time in consultation with the thesis supervisor and committee member in order to ensure accuracy and that the themes reflect the experience of the Somali parents under study. The final step involved identifying similarities and differences of the findings to the existing literature on this topic, identifying findings, conclusions and recommendations made by parents regarding their experience navigating the educational and special education system. Thematic analysis of the data resulted in eight main themes. The main themes were derived based on the frequency with which they came up in the interviews as observations or explanations for what the Somali parents reported.
CHAPTER FIVE: NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM

Results

Limitations and Key Assumptions

It is recognized that this is a vulnerable group with language problems, limited knowledge of the Canadian systems and limited contact with school personnel. I will try to mitigate the risk by assuring the participants of their confidentiality and anonymity and to be sensitive to their concerns. In addition, I will provide all supports needed to accommodate the parents’ cultural and linguistic needs in order to mitigate the risks.

Overall, the findings in this data lead to recommendations and services that need to be included in the schools, particularly in low-income communities, in order to better serve minority and linguistic diverse parents and students in Toronto schools.

Key issues

The following subsections include critical analysis of the research findings from parent narratives. Qualitative analysis of the interviews exposed numerous themes that the Somali parents identified regarding the process of special education and their child’s learning disability. The analytical categories of the parent narratives were grouped as follows:

1. Insufficient Parental Knowledge of the Nature of Special Education in Ontario
   1.1. Special Education Philosophy
   1.2. Special Education Identification, Placement and Review system
   1.3. Meaning of Exceptionality: Consequence of Identification
   1.4 Parental Rights Prior to and During Assessment
   1.5. Parental Right to Full Explanation of Placement and IEP
   1.6. Parental Right of Refusal and the Right of Appeal

2. Linguistic Capacities of Parents and Children
   2.1. Incomplete Parental Command of English as Barrier to Informed Consent
2.2. Incomplete Pupil Command of English Skewing assessment

3. Cross-Cultural Communication Barriers

3.1. Differing Expectations of Parent, Child, Teacher in Children’s Learning

3.2. Differing sense of what consent or agreement implies

4. System Deficiencies as Barriers

4.1. Lack of Interpreters (for meetings) or Translation (for documents)

4.2. Lack of Third-Party Support or Advocate for Immigrant Parents

4.3 Lack of Appropriate Monitoring of the Observation of Procedures

5. Consciousness and Resistance

5.1. Sense of Pressure Because of the Persistence of School Officials

5.2. Sense of Pressure by Short Decision times

5.3. Sense of Pressure by Being Made to Feel the Decision is a Standard Procedure

5.4. Later Sense of Betrayal by Trusted Figures of Authority

5.5. Sense that the Process is Driven by Provincial Grants Criteria

5.6 Resistance to the Process of Special Education Placement

Although the data were received from a small sample of research participants; some useful information about Somali parents and their experience with special education for their children has been collected.

**Research Participants**

In this study, I interviewed 8 Somali parents who are living in Toronto and who had their child in special education. Three of the eight participants were males and five were females. In the interests of the participants’ anonymity and confidentiality in this study, limited information is presented regarding the individual profiles of participants. In age, parent participants ranged from 40 to 50 years old. Their length of time in Canada ranged from arrival in the early 1990’s to 1995. The interview questions in the study collected basic demographic information including their level of competency in English, their educational background, employment history, and the time of placement of their child in special education. In addition, the interview
gathered information regarding their comfort level with the English language and their level of reading comprehension of the English language as it applies to their understanding of written school documents. In comparison to the Somali community in general, according to a study that explored Somalis and Eritrean settlement experience in Toronto: “76 percent [of Somali parents] indicated that they were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable in English” (Scott, 2001, p.32) and were still in the early stages of the acquisition of the English language.

Parent S is a Somali woman married with 4 children. Her son was placed in special education when he was in grade 3. She finished secondary school in Somalia and took English as Second Language classes in Canada.

Parent I is a Somali man with 6 children. His oldest daughter was referred to special education when she was in grade 1. He completed English as Second Language classes and completed adult high school in Toronto. In addition, he pursued a college diploma but did not complete his studies.

Parent Z is a Somali mother with 5 children. She completed secondary level education. The interview questions were translated into Somali in order for the parent to be able to answer the questions.

Parent M is a Somali father with 7 children. He completed secondary level education in Somalia and started with English as a Second Language courses in Toronto. He completed a college diploma.

Parent H is a Somali mother with 8 children. She completed secondary level education in Somali and a university degree in Canada. She is working in a community-based settlement agency.

Parent L is a Somali father with 8 children. He completed secondary school in Somali and took university level courses in the United States. He took Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) courses at the University.

Parent K is a Somali mother with 5 children. She completed secondary and university level education in Somalia. In Toronto, she completed high school as an adult and went on to obtain a college diploma. She is currently working in a community-based agency.
Parent T is a divorced Somali mother with 6 children. She completed secondary level education in Somalia. Her main source of income is from the government in the form of Ontario Works payments. Her oldest daughter was placed in Special Education in grade 2. The interview questions were translated into Somali for the participant.

(1) **Insufficient parental knowledge of the nature of Special Education in Ontario**

In this study, the majority of participants are unfamiliar with the school system in many of its aspects. In particular, the results of the findings show the parents’ lack of knowledge about their child’s special education programming. All participants did not know or identify the different exceptionalities such as behavioural, communicational, intellectual, and physical or multiple exceptionalities to describe their child’s exceptionality. Whether there were opportunities to learn about it at the school or not, all participants expressed the view that they did not get any information about special education from the school personnel:

“No I don’t have any explanation for special education. We have no translators and no one explain to me even how long my child will be in special education. Why he needs special education. Nothing. Just they recommend my child to be placed in special education.” (Parent K)

“Special education for me is… when I come to Canada this is what I heard. I don’t know exactly what it means but my understanding exactly is…. it is a modified expectation of a child … who’s challenged with behavioural problems who cannot deal [with] a normal classroom.” (Parent H)

“And no one explain to me even learning disability. They just put him in special education. Special education… I sign.” (Parent K)
“Yes I do understand. But the time I was signing the consent form I was really relying on the expertise of the school but I did not have the awareness that was causing trouble for my child. Just that I did not understand the concept. I understand the meeting with the teachers and principal, I understand. But at the time …[the]… objective was very clear.” (Parent M)

Another major theme that was identified from parent narratives was the lack of parental understanding of the type of program their child was placed in, or even the type of exceptionality attributed to their child. According to the Parent M:

“I am not sure what type.” (Parent M)

The findings from the parents in the study is confirmed with the research on the Settlement experience of Eritrean and Somalis in Toronto (1999) which finds that “the lack of understanding of the Canadian education system makes parenting more challenging and frustrating for both parent and the child” (Scott, 2001, p. 41).

1.1 Special Education Philosophy

Overall, most of the participants originally believed that the reason why their child was in special education was due to one area that needs improvement. Most of the parents did not acknowledge or accept that their child had something as intrinsic as exceptionality. But lack of knowledge of the implications of special education goes further when the process leading to placement unfolds before them.

“I know the word learning disability, what it means. But I never thought they are saying …[that].. mentally your child is not learning well, and I say maybe this [is the] terminology that they used in Canada, but I never thought …[that]… they would put my child … behind.” (Parent K)
Parent K identified a view that is common among all the participants. For them, the idea of barriers of child’s mental capacity to learn is a foreign concept. Most Somali parents find this difficult to grasp because, in Somalia, when a child is not learning, there may well need to be modifications in the instruction, but the child’s capacity to learn is never questioned.

Other parents thought of special education as a booster program to allow their child to “catch up” to students in the regular classroom:

“As far as I know special education is the kids who cannot follow the regular curriculum. They have to get some different or another program [through] which they can catch [up to] their level.” (Parent I)

“Very little, because our own knowledge is that the objective of the program is to assist the child to go to the next level…to lift him up. That was the objective of the program and ……and that’s why we signed for the program, but now we realize it set him back.” (Parent M)

Parent K stated that she allowed her son to be in special education since she assumed it will be a program that will help her son’s English:

“As immigrant I have no clue. I have no knowledge about special education. I thought they want to help since the child comes from immigrant family. Maybe his English is not [at the right] level for his classroom. He does not speak well in English and his home since the parents speak Somali. Maybe he needs someone to teach him more words daily.” (Parent K)
This is reconfirmed by Parent K, which shows that it is not only about language but the concept behind special education:

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Yes, I need someone to translate or someone to explain the philosophy behind special education and [at] that time ...[when]... I read “your child ha[s a] learning disability. I know the word learning disability, what it means. But I never thought they are saying ...[that]...mentally your child is not learning well and I say maybe this [is the] terminology that they used in Canada but I never thought ...[that]... they would put my child behind. But luckily he was in the regular class and he never ha[d] a special teacher, he only ha[d] a document paper that they sent to the government to get money back to the school, but without doing nothing to him.”(Parent K)

1.2. Special Education Identification, Placement and Review system

Parent S states her experience with an IPRC meeting with several school staff present at the meeting. She felt isolated by the experience and she comments on the assumption that she was expected to say yes to this program. We shall return later to the cross-cultural communication barriers inherent in the situation but there is no doubt that the nature of special education assessment isolates the parent amid several school personnel staff is a frightening one for immigrant parents.

“Much, because 7 or 8 professionals in one table with me and my child that’s the fear. That’s the most fear I face and we don’t know what they are talking about. We don’t know who they are talking about. We don’t know what they need to give to us. So that is a big concern and I don’t want any parents to [have it] happen that way. It is not only me I don’t want parents to face that situation. Because English speaker parents told me [that they] fear[ed] for [me] when I face IPRC and I said why [were they] shock[ed]. [One of them] said, “It is the most difficult time -- they are talking about your child and you [have no] support.” What you expect me then, no English..no understanding. Then 8 or 9 professionals talking to me about something I don’t know and they are expecting me to understand and say yes.” (Parent S).
It is important to note that the process for special education for a student that is suspected to have exceptionality is referred to the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC). During the initial assessment for identification of Special Education, there is no parental involvement. For every identified exceptional student, the Ministry of Education mandates the IPRC to be established to come to a decision of what educational placement is most appropriate Ontario Regulation: Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils, 2005). At the IPRC process, the school board must provide the parent the following:

- 10 day notice in writing of the upcoming IPRC meeting
- Parents should be provided with the parent guide to special education
- Provincial regulations states that parents have the right to keep their child in the regular classroom
- The parent have the right to have a person present to provide support at the meeting

(Community Living Toronto, 2009)

It is important to note, based on Parents K account of her experience it is not in congruence with the Toronto board regulation and is a prime example to show the failure in the school to equip immigrant parents the full understanding of the process including their rights as a parent. Based on the parents comment, there is this sense for immigrant parents that she must agree and needs to make decisions at the meeting. According to the Community Living, “recommends that parents do not sign the paper work presented in the meeting, but instead take it home, review it and make sure that you understand what has been recommended (Community Living Toronto, 2009). In addition, Parent K assertion that she felt that there was lack of support at the meeting illustrates the failure of the school to inform parents their right to have someone accompany them at the meeting.

1.3. Meaning of exceptionality: consequence of identification

In addition, these Somali parents’ unfamiliarity with special education generally and their discomfort with the IPRC process are compounded further by two facts. They neither know the meanings of the different kinds
of exceptionalities that may be attributed to their children as a result of the process nor are they aware of the educational implications of the identification at the time that it is made. And this situation may even apply to a parent who has felt they understood the situation up to this point. The true implications were only realized through their later experience.

“Yes I do understand. But the time I was signing the consent form I was really relying on the expertise of the school but I did not have the awareness that was causing trouble for my child. Just that I did not understand the concept. I understand the meeting with the teachers and principal, I understand. But at the time …[the]… objective was very clear. They were telling us that this program will help your child to succeed. I understand that part. But when you put the kids in the program, … they set him back. He was in grade 3 and I felt like he was in grade 1. He never writes any more. His loss of self esteem was the problem.” (Parent M)

“In 1992-1994 they send my older son [to special education]. What I said before no one knows how the system works. People don’t know what they are doing. According to the system, he is learning disability. He is bright kid. No one knows that time after 4 or 5 years [when] the kid refused to go to school. The kid always he does not want to be with other children.” (Parent S)

They called him intuitive child. He is behavioural child. .......................They told us if you refused this [special education] he is going to end up in the streets he is going to be gang, and I said how they know that.” (Parent S)

“It was [a] surprise and it was [a] shock for me. Some parents are struggling and fighting for special education. The day you label [a] child, saying this child needs extra help or he does not work well in the classroom, that is a stigma to give to this child [and that] will go with him. His education is never achieved and the parent becomes frustrated.” (Parent K)
Absolutely yes. After we sign; they were continuously insisting that our child has a problem of attention. Not paying attention in the class is causing problem in the class. When we went to the work plan …it did not say how they were going to help him. In fact he was falling behind both in the class education wise, and …[losing]… he confidence, and we thought he was a trouble maker, that he [was] continuously go[ing] to the principal office. Then we decided [on] this program, and then we wanted to remove him. Then they insisted. And then they wanted to call someone else and that cause[d] more problems. And then that’s when we lost trust with the school system, and we said no it is our child and we know what’s best for him.”(Parent M)

1.4. Parental Rights Prior to and During Assessment

The results of the study also show that none of the participants were involved in their child’s assessment by the school psychologist, a vital need, particularly for immigrant students. The results of the study indicate that Somali parents had not played a role in the process prior to and during their child’s assessment and programming and hence vital information regarding their child’s language needs, former schooling, and cultural differences was not recovered, particularly as it applies to refugee students such as the Somali community.

Parent H alludes to the fact that during assessment parents and teachers need to sit together with the psychologist to help with the proper screening of the child for special education:

“If they go through the proper way it helps the child, but if they [do] not evaluate [properly] the first time it will end up in a disaster. There is no [benefit to me [in] the way they are running [things] because they think that special education children should not [be] in that program. So if need [be], let the parents and the teachers sit down and there is a psychologist to do proper screening and if [it] is [the] case that the child needs the program and the parents agree it is a big program. So if the child [has special] needs, it helps. But what we observe from the past experience that if you really need that kind of support from the teacher, they just dump [the child] in another class and they become way behind. There is no way they have the resources to help the child.” (Parent H)
“The teacher of my child is not her previous teacher. It is a new teacher to her. The school was only open for three weeks. The first three weeks of the school, there is no way a teacher can understand every child in the classroom, what his needs are. So I see it [as a] rush for judgement. I am not a mother who sends their children to school. I am [a] teacher. Also my daughter, when I am reading my email, she stands behind me and read with me. And if they told me she cannot do it I have to challenge … them. Because there was a previous experience with my child who was in grade 1 -- he is a good student … and at home I go after him. When I am teaching my other daughter, he just grabs [me] and tells me the answer. The teacher told me he cannot read 2s and 5s and 10s in his report card. When I go to the principal and said I want you and the teacher who wrote this and my son to sit down and [disprove] these things. And my child start[s] reading, counting by 2s [to] 200, by five 200s and by ten 200s and so [for] the teachers who did [this] to my son I lose the trust, so everything that comes from that day.” (Parent L)

Overall, further research needs to be done to examine how social and racial background is taken into account during these early assessment procedures when the parents’ input is not involved (Webber and Bennet, 2004; Martell, 2006). In this study, race and class bias play a implicit role in special education placement, however, in this study, there is lack of direct evidence in the data to investigate factors more deeply in the study. Parent H comments agree with the literature since she states that the assessment of her child into special education was influenced by racial and social factors:

“You know they always [make] assumption[s about] the school you come from, or the country you [come] from.” (Parent H)
In the Community Social Planning Council research, it is noted that refugee and immigrant students have gaps in formal schooling and/or a discontinuous schooling experience (Social Planning Council of Toronto (2005).

1.5. Parental Rights to full explanation of placement and IEP

The difficulties faced by our informants continued after the IPRC process, since they were not made aware of the full meaning of the decision and the Individual Education Plan (IEP) prepared as the remedy.

Participant H, for example, is quite clear in her statement that she was not fully informed why her child was put in special education and was receiving an IEP. She also explains that she lacked knowledge of the assessment process since it was the beginning of the school year. Her statements also allude to the question of referral based on what previous school the child comes from:

“They put my child in [an] IEP program one week [after] the school started … in September. They did not explain anything. They just assume they need a number of students placed in October. So they are rushing to judgement since the deadline is October. So they did not do [a] proper screening [of] the child. That’s why I went to … the teacher and said I don’t mind … sign[ing] this paper but … only for four weeks. It is not enough to diagnose that [the] child …[needs] … the program. They said it is up to the principal since because if a child comes from a certain school they have to be admitted. Grade 2.” (Parent L)

1.6. Parental Right of Refusal and the Right of Appeal

However, in the case of Somali parents, none of them mentioned that they were aware of their right to decline placement in special education, but, according to them they were instead pressured to consent for their
child to be placed in special education and if they challenged the school regarding placement decisions, their wishes were not considered.

“They pressure me because they send the letter to my house. They did not full explain to me what I was signing. She did not …[tell]… me what I was entitled to do. Therefore, they are forcing me and they are giving me this pressure.” (Parent T)

They did not provide me any options..They just say you have to put your child in special education and he needs.” (Parent S)

“Yes at that time, I [did not ] understand what special education is. They pressured me because they say you have to do and I might have a problem. There is no choice. I have to put my child in special education.” (Parent I)

2. Linguistic Capacities of Parents and Children

Until now, we have concentrated on the disadvantages of immigrant parents that arise from their lack of prior knowledge of how the school system and its identification, review, placement and programming process work and how they may be adversely affected by that lack of familiarity until it has affected their children for a significant amount of time. But in the case of Somali parents, the language differences create almost insuperable obstacles that disadvantage them even further.

Immigrant parents whose dominant language is not English have great difficulty negotiating with school personnel on behalf of their child, particularly as it applies to their child’s placement. This is important not only for parents to understand the features of special education as they are articulated by school personnel;
with stronger parental language ability, school personnel have a better understanding of the needs of the parents. Language proficiency is particularly vital during the time of referral, assessment and placement of a child in special education.

All parents stated that they did not have the ability to negotiate or communicate with school personnel regarding their child’s placement in special education and felt unable to resist pressure to place their child in special education. Studies conducted by the Community Social Planning Group (2005) suggest that the barriers that face minority, low-income, immigrant parents are not only due to a lack of English proficiency but arise from a lack of confidence caused by these language barriers. In other words, as the results of the study show, the challenges faced by immigrant parents during the process of special education are intensified by linguistic barriers.

All except two of the participants in my study said that they had limited English proficiency during the time of assessment. Representative responses are as follows:

“Now it is easy then before. Before, people cannot speak English well and they don’t have support and someone to understand what they need. Whatever concern they have, there [are] fewer acknowledgements. So maybe sometimes they [sup]pressed their concerns without talking to anyone.” (Parent S)

Participant S stated that she had acquired only a high school diploma back home and was taking ESL classes in Canada.

“Before no; the reason I learned English is to understand … what they are talking about. Back then no [I did not know English] but right now yes.” (Parent S)
2.1. Incomplete Parental Command of English as Barrier to Informed Consent

From a legal perspective, the linguistic barriers work in particular to deny the principle of informed consent. During the process of referral into special education all the participants expressed that they had signed the consent form for the child to be placed in special education without understanding what they had signed:

“According to their record, when they take the special education consent form, no one [had] sign[ed]. We don’t understand that [consent form], which they claim we signed.” (Parent S)

This kind of response is confirmed by the literature which shows that parents must have “communicative competence” in order to negotiate effectively with school personnel on behalf of their child’s placement (Community Social Planning, 2005).

2.2. Incomplete Pupil Command of English Skewing Assessment

The research literature shows that school psychologists leave out important factors such as the child’s native language and the number of years of English instruction during psycho-educational assessment. “Only one per cent attempted to determine if a discrepancy occurred in both English and the student’s home language” (Harry & Klingner, 2006, p.115). According to the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (2005) there is a lack of assessment procedures that take into account the cultural background of students. In this report it is revealed that refugee and immigrant students have gaps in formal schooling and/or discontinuous schooling experience (Social Planning Council of Toronto, 2005). The report goes on to argue that school assessors should wait before making an assessment of immigrant children as special needs students. This is especially important, since US estimates suggest “it takes at least five years, on the average, for immigrant children who arrive in the host country after the age of six to approach grade norms” (Cummins, 1981, p. 38). Overall, this refers to the failure of school personnel to recognize linguistic differences of minority and immigrant students.
The results reconfirm the literature. Parent K states that the child’s background was not evaluated during the process of assessment of the child for special education:

“Being in Canada and being a refugee in Canada and our children attend school. There is no knowledge about the background of the children who come from [a] less developed country and when we don’t have schools for immigrant children [so] that when they come to Canada … they take ESL classes and need assessment. When they are ready, put them in public school. But when we come to Canada just, we [are] put right away [in] public school [when] some of our children do not speak the language. Or some of them have no formal education back home due to the war. That [causes] them to [be] put in special education and it is wrong. It is wrong that all immigrant children [are] label[led] or streamed. Like saying you are special, [so] you cannot function in the class.” (Parent K)

Parent K acknowledged and identified her child’s exceptionality. However, she believed strongly that her child was misdiagnosed and did not agree that her child should be placed in the special education program:

“It was 3 years since I signed but he never get one single help. The day I realize, it took me one more year to fight for him. The school is always giving diploma certificate and always asking me don’t come to parent interview because your child is very smart you don’t need parent interview to come. But to …[my]… surprise, when I fight they say he has ADD. They contradict what they say on the report. Finally, they realize it was wrong and they apologize because the reason why they put my child in special education was not because of his […] but because of being an immigrant child from an immigrant mother.” (Parent K)

According to Participant K, she recommends that the school administrator needs to ask vital questions before quickly placing the child in special education particularly where immigrant children are concerned:
“If you see the child physically or mentally challenged, definitely he will need support but when you see [an] immigrant child you need more awareness and assessment why this child is behind. Where is [he] coming from? What is the background of the parents’ education? Talk to the parent. Do research before you jump into special education.” (Parent K)

Parent H alludes to the fact that during assessment parents and teachers need to sit together with the psychologist to help with the proper screening of the child for special education:

“If they go through the proper way it helps the child, but if they [do] not evaluate [properly] the first time it will end up in a disaster. There is no [benefit to me] in the way they are running [things] because they think that special education children should not [be] in that program. So if need [be], let the parents and the teachers sit down and there is a psychologist to do proper screening and if [it] is [the] case that the child needs the program and the parents agree it is a big program. So if the child [has special] needs, it helps. But what we observe from the past experience that if you really need that kind of support from the teacher, they just dump in [the child] another class and they become way behind. There is no way they have the resources to help the child.” (Parent H)

Harry and Klingner (2006) note that in the psycho-educational meetings no discussions were around language needs and how it influences the child’s learning and behaviour in the classroom.

**English as a Second Language**

According to the report by the Eritrean and Somali Parents Coalition (Scott, 2001), many Somali children, especially Somali students who arrived to Canada much older, had their education either interrupted, were exposed to limited schooling, or had no formal schooling at all and hence had lower literacy levels and educational experience in their mother tongue.
Some of the Somali parents experience includes having their child initially being placed in English for Second Language class and then later being placed into a special education program. This raises the question if the school practice is able to distinguish the language proficiency and or learning needs of a student in his first language and in English. In the case of Somalis who have multiple challenges of limited formal schooling, low-literacy levels in mother tongue and problems in the acquisition of the English language, under this educational system, Somali students’ needs are left unanswered. The placement of Somali students initially being placed in English as a Second Language class then later being referred to special education program is re-iterated in the comments of Parent S, whose child was in special education after they were placed in the ESL program:

“Maybe I [was] here for 2 years because he was [classified] ESL [for] learn[ing] English, and he is out.” (Parent S)

“According to their record when they take the special education consent form no one signed. We don’t understand that [consent form] which they claim we signed. Then when he was in grade 1 they put themselves on his record. The child is an ESL child, so it is confus[ing] how he reach that area [in his] first assessment as an English child. So he get[s] in trouble. He understood; most [of] them were high average, some of them low average. So they [are] concern[ed with] the low average area and they said why doesn’t he understand in this area when he understands all this area. The child is in the country for 2 years. They themselves are confused.” (Parent S)

3. Cross-cultural Communication Barriers

The challenges faced by immigrant parents also stem from cultural differences between the families and the schools. Literature and the findings of this study show that parents’ “culture” plays a role in the child’s achievement and placement in school and the level of difficulty the parents have in communication with school administrators.

The literature demonstrates that these cultural differences cause immigrant families to be disengaged from schools
and hence this leads them to have no voice in their child’s placement (Oswald et al, 1999; Scott, 2001) Some studies conducted on the experience of Somali parents settlement experience in Toronto finds that Somali parents have challenges communicating with school personnel due to their own cultural attitudes and beliefs that are different from those of the schooling institution (Scott, 2001).

Some participants stated that they trusted the school system. This is a culturally specific perspective that needs to be explored further in other research studies.

“When I sign the document about special education I have no clue because I was a teacher back home and I believe a teacher is always helping students.” (Parent K)

“No as immigrant mother when we were in Somalia we trust the teacher and we see teacher as someone who wants to help the student to become succeed for his future but when I come here I see discrimination that is happening in school system that is labelling immigrant children and color children to be in special education in order to have not have better education in their future. Therefore, I don’t have no knowledge about if I sign these documents my child will end up his career or his education will be behind for his level. I sign and I don’t have any information. But when I say I don’t need special education for my child and I realize it was wrong to sign these documents. They said you sign; therefore; you have to stick with it.” (Parent K)

Parent H alludes to the fact that some Somali parents trust the school system; that’s why they sign without proper understanding of the program.

“Because some parents they don’t understand they think from the school they trust 100% they sign. And later on they regret.” (Parent H)
This is inconsistent with the literature where Lareau & Horbat (1999) found that Black parents mistrust and are hesitant to interact with school personnel due to a consensus on the schools’ history of racial discrimination. Hence, the mistrust of Black parents towards the school’s procedures can play a role in Black parents’ lack of involvement with schools, and may affect their child’s placement in special education, since the communication with school personnel is missing, as well as an opportunity to understand the expectations.

The literature examined the case for minority parents of Puerto Rican, African American and low-income (Lynch & Stein, 1987). In the study, it argued that minority parents are hesitant to interact with school personnel due to knowledge of the schools’ history of racial discrimination. This study suggests that the mistrust of the parents’ towards school’s procedures can play a role in parents’ lack of involvement with schools. This lack of involvement may affect their child’s placement since the communication with school personnel is missing, as is the parents’ opportunity to understand the school’s expectations of placement/streaming practices.

3.1. Differing Expectations of Parent, Child, Teacher in Children’s Learning

The participants raised the question of the role of parents and teachers back home and how these roles applied in the Canadian context. Findings from the parent interviews illustrate how the roles of schools and teachers in the Canadian context differ from those in the Somali educational system. Many participants pointed out that teachers in Somalia were responsible for the academic achievement of their child, so little parental involvement in the school was required. However, in the Canadian context, the parents identified as a problem their realization that the teachers did not fulfill their expectations:

Parent S acknowledged that this notion of being hands off in their child’s education is shared by many immigrant parents:
“Parents just only know back home that the child does everything it is a child centred. It’s supposed to be [the] child [who does] everything. In here it is different. Here it is parental and child responsibility. So [it] is the gap between the parents’ and the children’s understanding that is why many children are lost [when] there is no parent to support [an] area [of learning] and the child still stands there waiting for support and the school that knows that area but they [couldn’t] care less.” (Parent S)

Parent H acknowledged that teacher’s responsibilities include being second fathers and mothers to the students in the school. This implies the notion that the teachers fulfil their role in the school. How this theory is played in the school can affect their involvement in their child’s education:

“Teacher responsibility for me is [to be] their second fathers and mothers, to educate the kids, to provide loving caring environment, encouraging the kids … always [so] that they can improve themselves.” (Parent L)

3.2 Differing Sense of What Consent or Agreement Implies

In addition to the reluctance to question the authority of the school system, Somali parents are not aware of the binding and inflexible nature of the Special Educations decisions that affect their child.

“According to their record, when they take the special education consent form, no one [had] sign[ed]. We don’t understand that [consent form], which they claim we signed. Then when he was in grade 1 they put themselves on his record.” (Parent S)

“Sometimes person does not understand what special education is. They just sign because they told us… because [our children] will learn from it, so we thought it would be true.” (Parent M)
4. System deficiencies as barriers

The lack of appropriate resources and safeguards on the part of the board further compounds the challenges faced by our Somali immigrant parents, arising from their lack of personal capital in their dealings with complex institutions. This section outlines, the lack of appropriate resources provided by the school board including and not limited to the following such as interpreters for immigrant parents during the process of assessment and establishing placement decisions with immigrant parents; translation for school board documents; and third party support or advocate for immigrant parents during the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) meetings.

4.1. Lack of interpreters (for meetings) or translation (for documents)

*Interpreters*

Research conducted by Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (2005) confirms the importance of translators and interpreters. The literature reveals that the lack of translators in the schools to accommodate the linguistic needs of Somali parents (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (2005). The severe budget cuts imposed on the Board affected the provision of translators and interpreters in the schools, with the consequence that the schools found it too difficult to encourage the participation of minority parents. Their report recommends “school-based translations’ for the different languages of students in the Toronto District School Board in order to improve school and home communications” (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, 2005, p. 13). The present study reiterates the critical importance of translation and interpreting in the process of referral, assessment, placement and programming of immigrant students in special education. All participants confirmed the absence of translation and interpreters during the whole process leading to their child’s placement in special education:
“Basically I needed a translator at the time and they did not provide full detail about the program. They just said your child is going to get extra help and you need to sign here in order for him to get extra help.” (Parent S)

“No one ask me if I need translator or interpreter. When I come to parent interview they call IPRC review for special education for my child. I was sitting with principal and teachers I never meet and I never know. Even my child never meets. And he never even teaches my child for special education. Therefore no one explain to me. Just they said your child is very smart and he is well educated and he is working very hard and we appreciate to have him in the school. But definitely he needs extra help and if he does not get the help maybe he will become frustrated and can you sign these papers to help your child and there is money attached to get support for your child and there is waiting list for a child who needs special education. But we will hope to get him as soon as possible that government to accept for the child to be labelled as special child. But I have no knowledge… no awareness what is behind for special education.” (Parent K)

Translation for documents

Parent S, explained that for it is difficult for the majority of immigrant parents to understand the comments and documents that are sent by school personnel:

“Yes I understand, but [for] 80% immigrant parents it is hard … to understand, even [come] close to understand[ing], because it is [a specialized] language.” (Parent S)

Studies conducted by Harry and Klingner (2006) suggest that the lack of translators and interpreters trained to translate psycho-educational documents creates difficulties for minority/linguistically diverse parents throughout special education placement processes.
4.2. **Lack of third-party support or advocate for immigrant parents**

Parent H stated that during the process of referral of a child in special education, they need to offer special programs to offer immigrants parents in order to have their own understanding of what the program is:

“They need to open up. They need people with different languages. Special programs to tell the parents [what they need to know] to have their own understanding of what this program is.”

(Parent H)

Parent H alludes to the fact that a third party needs to be involved in the assessment of a child for special education that excludes school personnel:

“And also [there must be a third party to analyze this child. Not the teacher, not the principal and not the board. Someone else has to come to see if this child needs this type of program and where his weakness is. And also we need to create a program [for three days]…call [a semi-retired teacher] back to help these child to …[make good]… his weakness instead of writing [an] IEP.”

(Parent L)

4.3 **Lack of appropriate monitoring of the observation of procedures**

What you have here is evidence of a failure on the part of school officials to follow their own due process for obtaining permission and communicating the results verifiably.

Participant K describes how she did not know her child was in special education even throughout her child’s elementary and middle school experience. This result underlines the very deep problem surrounding the special education process: if the parent did not know her child was in special education, what does that say about the school’s willingness to communicate with the parent and what agreement implies if the parent did not know their child’s placement has taken place?
“I did not know she was in special education until later.” (Parent Z)

5. Consciousness and resistance

In the final section of this chapter, we consider the first steps being taken by our informants and their community to overcome the challenge of their lack of personal capital, whether educational, cultural or linguistic, in dealing with a system that frequently lacks the basic supports and safeguards they need. These begin with a growing consciousness of how the system is failing them and continue with preliminary efforts to resist this treatment once they are aware of the need to act on behalf of their children.

The process of coming to consciousness in the first place is a growing awareness of pressures being exerted against them. The parents’ narratives illustrate the pressure of the school personnel to place children into special education without proper procedures in place to allow parents the ability to negotiate placement decisions. All the parents under study commented that they were pressured and were not provided with the time nor the options to appeal placement decisions. According to the Ministry of Education, parents should be notified of their rights to appeal committee decisions (Ontario Regulation: Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils, 2005). However, in the case of Somali parents, none of them mentioned that they were aware of their rights to decline placement in special education, but, according to them they were instead pressured to consent for their child to be placed in special education and if they challenged the school regarding placement decisions, their wishes were not considered.

5.1. Sense of pressure because of the persistence of school officials

The pressures of repeated efforts to acquire consent was cited by most of our informants identified this as critical in their first reaction to board officials.
“Yes [one example of the] pressure is [that] they call the parents many times. If the parent is suspicious, they threaten them. “If you don’t do this, [this or that] will happen” until the parents shrink and they have fear. So they don’t have choice sometimes but to just sign.” (Parent S)

“The first time around, no they didn’t pressure. The second time around they did.” (Parent D)

Parent S alludes to the fact that instead of agreeing with the parent, special education school personnel pressure parents to sign:

“Yes. Anytime you say something they don’t listen. They don’t consult parents because they have their own agenda. So they want to prove what they said is true until they said okay we are going to find why they declined to sign. Why parents have a problem. They don’t look at that area, they keep [pursuing] their own strategy.” (Parent S)

“The principal addresses everything but you understand there is no support from the principal because anytime you [raise a concern] they just [pursue] their own agenda. Like that’s why we need to help you, so sign here, so they [go round and round in] circle[s].” (Parent S)

“What I see since they claim they put the child in special education. What I see is that they are defending even if the child gets an A in every course they look excuse to be put in special education. They don’t want to remove because if they remove the other parents will come and they will want to remove their children and they give more hard time to remove my child from special education. The principal even told me and I will do whatever you want but don’t do this because other parents will come to me. She told me you’re a very smart parent your child is very smart but if we help you everyone will come and they will knock my door saying that they don’t need special education.” (Parent K)
5.2. Sense of pressure by short decision times

The sense that very little time was available for the decision to be made echoes the high-pressure tactics of door-to-door sales representatives and eventually achieves the unanticipated reaction of resistance.

“Yes I did one and I did the last one. The first one I did because I had no knowledge and I sit there waiting for principal. When they open the door for me there were more parents in the line waiting to be scheduled. When I go inside it does not take 5 minutes they told me that my child is improving to be in this program and I am happy and they ask me if you have any questions. I had …[no]… question[s] because there is no information they told me about my son. I sign the second documents.” (Parent K)

“Yes we feel pressure because of the teacher..First they give us a form to sign. So when my child brought the form I said I am not signing it and you are not going to the program. When I met her, she told me that it’s not up to the teacher, the principal took her and … the principal told the teacher, based on her understanding, she has to place them based on the deadline of October. So I went to the principal with a group of parents arguing about what’s going on and the principal told me that it’s the board[’s] responsibility to place them. I try to defend myself saying that there are a lot of parents who does not have no knowledge. I feel sorry for the principal that we respect and trust our children just to place our children in special education.” (Parent H)

Parent H stated that process of referral of her child in special education includes a letter sent home without an initial meeting with the school personnel. She said that she got a letter sent home to sign to place her child in special education:

“You don’t send a letter and tell the parents to sign it. It’s inappropriate because [you] must call the parents [to come and] sit down and have [a] meeting and understanding, then move on. Not just give the child’s back pack and tell [us] to sign. It’s unacceptable.”(Parent H)
5.3. Sense of pressure by being made to feel that the decision is a standard procedure

Another form of pressure, regularly mentioned by our informants, was the sense that the decision was a standard procedure that was bound by precedent and did not allow for exceptions. Once taken the decision was treated by school officials as irreversible.

“Yes, of course, I feel pressure because I see guilt and I see deceit in the system putting my child without knowing who he is. Just they place him in special education because it was discriminating him because of his color and I see it deceiving because logically If you want to place someone in special education. They don’t want to remove because if they remove the other parents will come and they will want to remove their children and they give more hard time to remove my child from special education.” (Parent K)

“Basically, they said if you don’t put [her] in special education your child will receive R and fail the grade. Basically, they said [from] now on you cannot take your child out.” (Parent D)

5.4. Later sense of betrayal by trusted figures of authority

Later resistance to the process and the refusal to acquiesce in Special Education decisions is usually described by the parents as the consequence of their loss of trust in the system and the individual officials they are dealing with. At that point, official persistence and the perception of official deceit encounter resistance and refusal often shored up by the realization they are dealing with racial discrimination.

“Yes, of course, I feel pressure because I see guilt and I see deceit in the system [placing] my child without knowing who he is. Just they place him in special education because [they were] discriminating [against] him because of his color…….
They want to say their mental [development] is not going well [but] you have to have more knowledge. More assessment, more consultation, more psychological teachers, doctors [and] family. Then you will figure out why [the] child is behind but without [changing] anything at all. No reason to put [him] in special education. Not only my child but also millions of immigrant children.” (Parent K)

But the second interview I refuse to sign because I said I won’t sign until I know what is behind all this but they continue their procedure. They said if you don’t come even we will sign for you no problem and then we will continue but that is one I fight for.” (Parent K)

Only participant K, who had a strong proficiency in the English language, negotiated with the school administrators to change her child’s placement in special education but with resistance by school administrators over a year of struggle:

“ I did not know when I was talking to the principal, when the principal did not solve my problem. Then I go to special educational principal. When I see [him] … he gets surprised. I meet the psychologist of the TDSB North West Brian Wilson and they were surprise[d] and they apologize and they say what happens to your child., it does not happen because your child is black or because your child is living in this area but what happens [to] your child it happens [to] more immigrant students and we educate our staff to [be] aware if we put the child in special education or when they want to put the child in ESL. But this mistake happens not only [to] you but it happens [to] many families and it is happening [in] many communities and many societies and many families. Even when I go on Internet and check special education. To my surprise 30 years ago they are [putting] immigrant children into special education and now 20th [sic] century still they are placing children in special education. Therefore, it is deliberate method for destroying color children.” (Parent K)
5.5. Sense that the process is driven by provincial grants criteria

Finally, the lack of trust is compounded by a sense that what is driving official behaviour is not motivated by educational criteria or by a desire to achieve what is best for their children, but by money and grant eligibility.

“The way I see the program is that it’s a business [proposition] from the government. …How many kids we can [place] to get more money. I don’t see [any] analysis of the child to see where his weakness is, or where we should put the child before he moves to the next level so that is the weakness. They should work with a third party that is not involved in this, who should be a retired teacher involved in these things to tell what is the right thing for the child before they decide how many kids we put in this program. I don’t see any help for the children. I see financial support.” (Parent H)

“As I told you because maybe he did poor in one of his exams. I don’t know he was punctual. He was clean. He comes from good family but I don’t know because I heard that the more they put special education the more funding they get.” (Parent K)

It is important note, however, that Parent K assertions regarding more funding for schools that have more students in special education is in fact not in accordance to board regulations. In Ontario for every identified student in special education, the Ministry spends $9,915 (Hepburn and Mrozek, 2004). However, in Ontario, Special education funding does not follow the student and the special education funding is calculated, “on the basis of a school boards total student enrollment and not according to the actual number of special education students” (Hepburn and Mrozek, 2004, p. 7). Hence, the respective schools that have more special education students don’t receive more funding to adequately support their students (Hepburn and Mrozek, 2004).
## 5.6 Resistance to the Process of Special Education Placement

Somali parents’ resistance to special education placement is usually described by the parents as a process that involves the collective efforts of like minded community members to resist placement decisions. Parents who resisted their child’s placement in special education felt that they cannot decline consent solely on their own grounds but required the support of higher level school bureaucratic personnel (such as trustees, superintendents) or through community mobilization.

Parent H understood the process of advocating on behalf of her child. She saw that she can only advocate as a community member and through community mobilization:

“Yes, first I have to go where the problem starts and if I cannot solve it I go to the trustee with the help of the community and we organize a meeting with the school parent council and address [it] as a parent if we have a common problem. If it is only a problem that [affects] only three, then I will skip the teacher and principal, then [go] to [the] trustee, if not [I’ll] go all the way to the superintendent.” (Parent H)
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Introduction

In this chapter, an overview of major findings is provided; the limitations of the study are outlined; recommendations based on the findings and the existing literatures are presented; and the final section concludes with propositions for future studies in this area.

Overview and Major Findings of the Thesis

The thesis used in-depth interviews for the study with eight Somali parents. The interviews were conducted to uncover if parents with lower cultural capital can make appropriate placement decisions for their child. The interview collected information that highlighted the difficulties for Somali parents in navigating the special education system and recognizing the gap in the schooling system to address immigrants’ parents’ cultural capital during the process of referral, assessment and placement of their child into special education. Overall the findings of the in-depth interviews indicate that the Somali parents’ cultural capital can influence their ability to make informed and/or appropriate placement decisions for their children and in turn their ability negotiate/advocate on behalf of their children during the process of referral, assessment and placement into special education. The findings illustrate that the school system has failed to provide Somali parents’ with the appropriate accommodations needed to navigate the special education system and to make informed decisions regarding their child’s special education programming. Hence, parents’ lack of knowledge of special education constitutes to what is referred in the study as personal cultural capital which is particularly critical in the process leading to a special education placement for any parent’s child. The difficulties faced by our informants begin, as they do with so many immigrant parents with their lack of familiarity with the school system itself and the place of special education within it. This is compounded in the case of our group by the linguistic challenges they face in their dealings with school board officials, and, even when these can be managed, there still remain intercultural communication problems that are not immediately evident to them or the board officials. The gaps created by these difficulties could be bridged if certain resources such as settlement workers and/or interpreters were available, but the parents lack the means to afford them and, if they are publicly accessible, parents lack the knowledge of how to go about acquiring them. Despite all these challenges, however, we discovered that
parents were becoming increasingly aware of the nature of the problems they faced and were responding in some cases with resistance. This consciousness and this resistance seem to be the first steps towards the construction of the cultural capital they need in order to be fully engaged citizens interacting with public institutions in their new home. In this subsection, I summarized the findings under the analytical categories identified in this study:

I. **Lack of Knowledge of Special Education is and the Canadian Schooling System:** All of the participants identified that they had limited to no knowledge of what Special Education is, including their child’s exceptionality. Parents’ perception is that the school personnel provided limited to no explanation of what special education is and provided limited to no explanations regarding their child’s exceptionality. Somali parents’ comments argues that if a child is not learning that the responsibility lies on the teacher and accommodations should address changes in instruction. However, this is completely opposed to the intent of special education services which is focused on the child’s ability to learn and addressing the child’s exceptionality. All parents’ in the study perceive special education as similar to a booster program that allows students to catch up to students in the regular classroom. This perception does not correspond with the intent of special educational services which is focused on providing them “special education services that are appropriate to their needs” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Based on the findings from parent narratives, it is recognized that schools should and can play a role to educate immigrant parents about how the educational system works in the Canadian context in order for immigrant parents to dispel common misconceptions of how the ‘educational system’ works in the Canadian context.

II. **Language Barriers:** The findings indicate that all Somali parents’ under study except two indicated that limited English proficiency and linguistic differences between the school personnel and parents impact their decisions and their ability to communicate with the school personnel and this in turn influenced their child’s relegation into special education. Findings in the study, also illustrate that language was not the only factor that impacted their decisions to place their child into special education but interacted with other factors in accordance to cultural capital theory as defined earlier in this study.
III. **Translators/Interpreters:** Findings indicate all Somali parents were not provided translators or interpreters during the process through which their child was referred into special education. Somali parents’ identified that they required interpreters during the period their child was referred into special education and that the lack of translators posed additional challenges for Somali parents to make informed decisions for their child’s special education programming.

IV. **Informed Consent:** Perceptions of Somali parents’ indicate that they were pressured to sign the consent forms and to place their child into special education. Findings illustrate that Somali parents did not have the ability to effectively negotiate with school personnel regarding their child’s placement. All Somali parents’ indicated that they had signed the consent forms without fully understanding what they had signed and the school system failed to provide the proper accommodations to allow them to make informed decisions.

V. **Lack of Cultural Testing and Assessment:** The findings indicate that Somali parents were not involved in their child’s assessment by the school psychologist. The findings address the vital need for parental input during assessment. Findings illustrate that school psychologists need to not leave out important factors when dealing with Somali students, including the child’s language needs, former schooling, cultural differences, the years of English and Somali instruction [for students with limited or no schooling in their home country] and determining the discrepancy in the child’s home language and English. Overall, this study shows the vital need for assessment to include parental input particularly for immigrant students. In the Community Social Planning Council research, it is noted that refugee and immigrant students have gaps in formal schooling and/or a discontinuous schooling experience (Social Planning Council of Toronto (2005)).

VI. **English as a Second Language:** Findings in the study show that some Somali children who were placed in special education had few years in English instruction prior to their placement in special education. This was evidence based on an account of several parents identifying that their child was formally identified as an English as a Second language student and was confused how their child’s language needs be addressed in a special education class. The prior findings shows failure on psycho educational tests to differentiate learning disability for English limited populations in comparison to students that are Canadian born with language problems in special education. Hence, when using
psycho educational assessments, a psychologist should utilize assessment tests that take into account the years of instruction in English and Somali.

VII. **Cultural Difference:** Findings indicate that Somali parents’ cultural understanding of how the schooling system works influences their perception, practices and interaction with school personnel. Somali parents’ cultural capital is influenced their own schooling experience in Somalia which is significantly different than the schooling experience in Toronto schools. This is confirmed by the literature that examined the settlement experience for Somali and Eritrean parents’ in Toronto. This study finds that the difficulties for Somali parents’ in schools are... “related to differences in cultural norms and expectations between Somali and Canadian schools. Certain behaviours that are acceptable in Canadian schools are unacceptable in Somali Schools” (Israelite, Herman, Alim and Khan, 1999, p. 12).

VIII. **Identification, Placement Review Committee (IPRC):** Based on parent narratives, it is evident that there is a failure on the school to provide Somali parents the proper resources in order to make informed decisions during Identification, Placement Review Committee (IPRC) meetings. The findings in this study illustrate that Somali Parents’ are not aware of their rights during IPRC meetings. Hence, it is vital that for Somali parents’ and immigrant parents in general to have a clear understanding of their rights in regards to the following: their child’s placement options; their right to decline placement in special education; the right to keep their child in the regular classroom, the opportunity to have someone accompany them at the meeting, and lastly the right for parents to delay signing the papers at the meeting in order to take it home to review and make sure that they understand what has been recommended (Community Living Toronto, 2009).

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations in the study were that the study was based on eight Somali parents and hence, more families in the study would provide more representative population of the Somali community. The main recommendations in the study are based on a small sample size and hence the sample size restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond the eight Somali parents under study. Also, future studies might examine two ethnic immigrant groups with high and low cultural capital in order to compare the differences in
level of cultural capital in relation to their child’s placement into special education. In addition, the selection of parents were limited to parents who ultimately refused consent but include a small percentage of parents who declined special education services and hence further research studies need to explicitly examine the differences between cultural capital between immigrant parents who declined special education services versus parents whose child received special education services.

Suggested Further Research and Next Steps

Further research on this area can have very far reaching implications for referral, assessment and programming for ethnic minority students. As suggested in the prior literature, students who are placed in special education will have lower academic achievements and higher dropout rate; this in turn leads to fewer jobs, limited employment options, greater stresses of unemployment and/or underemployment (Artiles, 2003).

Overall, the findings in this data lead to recommendations and services that need to be included in the schools, particularly in low-income communities, in order to better serve minority and linguistic diverse parents and students in Toronto schools. This report does not suggest that the findings are representative of the needs of all Somali students because there was no representative sampling; however, the findings suggest key gaps in services for Somali students and parents on the part of the schools, parents and communities. The key gaps addressed in this study needs to be further explored and rectified in schools which are as follows:

- More research is needed to clarify the differences between language problems amongst limited-English proficient students and Canadian born students in special education.
  Recognition of misdiagnosis of immigrant children in special education is needed in order to effectively meet the needs of linguistically different children who are in special education or in the regular classroom
- The accommodation of translator or interpreters for immigrant parents in schools during special education referral, assessment and programming in special education
- The rights to decline placement into special education and provide parents resources of services to access if their child is not placed into special education.
Somali parents input into the process of assessment by psychologist, in addition, to the incorporation of important factors during assessment including the child’s language needs, former schooling, cultural differences, the years of English and Somali instruction [for students with limited or no schooling in their home country] and determining the discrepancy in the child’s home language and English.

The findings shows failure on psycho educational tests to differentiate learning disability for English limited populations in comparison to students with language problems in special education that are Canadian born. Hence, cultural testing and assessment should be able to differentiate language problems amongst limited English proficient students versus language problems amongst Canadian born students in special education.

Schools role to educate immigrant parents of how the educational system works in the Canadian context in order for immigrant parents in the case of Somali parents to dispel common misconceptions of how the ‘educational system’ works in the Canadian context.

Additional research is needed to investigate how immigrant parents’ cultural capital in terms of language competency and “communicative competence” influences disproportionate identification and referral rate into special education.
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

If the interview is conducted via telephone, written consent is not feasible and therefore informed consent will be sought verbally. If the interview is conducted in-person, the participant will be asked to read the attached informed consent sheet. Given the study includes participants from the Somalia diaspora who may have limited English proficiency, the student researcher will sought to provide oral translation in Somali the consent form for participants with limited English proficiency.

Dear Participant:

Description: The purpose of this study is to look at the experience of Somali parents in special education. If you volunteer for this research study, you will be asked to participate in a research interview that will deal particularly with issues surrounding special education and their child’s learning disability for immigrant children of color and their parents. Through interviews, I want to look at the experience of Somali parents of children who are in special education. The total time for your participation in the interview will be less than 40 minutes.

The results of each individual’s participation will be strictly confidential and anonymous where only code numbers will be used in any written document. Information collected during this research will be retained for up to 5 years in case the student researcher should follow up this research in later years. However, if you prefer, your information can be destroyed within one year of completion of the study. Please indicate your choice below:

I agree to have my information retained for up to:

__________ 5 years

__________ 1 Year

The risks to you are deemed to be minimal, while the benefits may be to help promote more research on the experience of Somali low-income students and parents in special education in Toronto’s public schools.

Authorization: I have read the above statements and understand the nature of this study. I agree to participate in this study. I also understand that I have the right to withdraw from participating at any time prior to and during the study.

If you have any concerns about the way you have been treated as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact:
Student Researcher

Fowzia Mahamed

Dept. of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Tel: 416-748-1764 Email: Fowzia23@hotmail.com

Supervisor

Dr. David Livingstone

Dept. of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Tel: 416-978-0015 Email: dlivingstone@oise.utoronto.ca

I have read the above information and agree to my participation in this study.

Signed Parent: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of Somali parents with children in special education and Somali parents who declined to consent special education services for their children.

Knowledge of special education:

1. What is special education?
2. What services does special education provide?
3. What did your child’s (prior) teacher tell you about special education?
4. What did the special education teacher tell you about special education?
5. What type of support do you think special education will provide for your child?
6. What do you think your child receives from being placed in special education?
7. What are the advantages of special education?
8. What are the disadvantages of special education?

Knowledge of their child’s learning experience

1. What type of special education programming is your child in?
2. Do you know how long your child has been placed in special education?
3. How long do you expect him/her to be in special education?
4. Is your child in the regular classroom?
5. What type of support does your child receive based on his exceptionality?

Accommodations

1. How well can you speak and write English?
2. Did you have a translator to explain what special education is?
3. Did you have an interpreter with you during the time your child was placed in special education?
4. Did anyone request or ask you if you would like a translator/interpreter?
5. Did you understand fully the consent form for your child to be placed in special education?
6. Do you need a translator to help you understand what special education is?
7. What options did the school/counsellor outline for you to deal with your child’s special education issues??

Probes: Do you feel pressured to place your child in special education?
Do you know that you can remove your child from?

Special Education?

IEP and IPRC process

1. What is an Individual Education Plan (IEP)
2. What is an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC)
3. Have you attended any IPRC meetings regarding your child’s placement?
4. What happens in an IPRC meeting?
5. How do you interpret your child’s assessment documents? What does this assessment meant to you?
6. When was the last time you spoke to the teacher, special education teacher or school psychologist regarding your child’s placement in special education?

**Knowledge of the reason for their child’s referral**

1. Why is your child in special education?
2. How long do you expect your child to be in special education?
3. Do you understand the reason why your child was referred to special education?
4. Why did you consent for your child to be placed in special education?

**Parent Recommendations on Special Education**

1. What changes would you suggest for your child’s program and for the process through which your child was placed in Special Education?
2. What would you like to see more or less of in special education?

**If the parent declined to consent:**

1. Was your child referred to special education; if so, by whom?
2. How and why did you come to the decision to decline to consent to place your child into special education?
3. Have there been subsequent attempts to place your child into special education?
4. What happened/is happening to your child after you declined to consent?
APPENDIX C: RESOLVING IDENTIFICATION OR PLACEMENT ISSUES

Procedures for Parent(s)/Guardian(s)

Approximately 290,000 students in Ontario elementary and secondary schools receive special education programs and services. In most cases, the process works smoothly, with parent(s)/guardian(s), administrators, teachers, and support professionals agreeing on the needs of the student and on the programs and services that will best meet those needs. In instances where parent(s)/guardian(s), teachers and support professionals cannot agree, the following process is recommended:

While school boards and parent(s)/guardian(s) may agree on special education programs and services for a student without the assistance of an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC), the formal IPRC process provides a good framework for both parent(s)/guardian(s) and school board to ensure that the needs of the student are fully considered. In the event of an issue arising as to whether or not a student is exceptional, or which program placement is most appropriate for the student, the first step parent(s)/guardian(s) and school officials should take is to request an IPRC meeting, as set out in Regulation 181/98 (Section 14).

If a parent/guardian is not satisfied with the identification and/or placement decision regarding their child, as determined by the IPRC, there are three steps that may be followed. The parent/guardian may: request a follow up meeting with the IPRC; and/or appeal the decision(s), in writing, to an Appeal Board set up by the school board through the secretary of the board (who is usually the director of education), within 30 days of the IPRC's decision; and then, if desired, further appeal to the Ontario Special Education Tribunal.

If a parent/guardian or school principal believes that the placement is not working out and the student has been in the program for at least three months, the parent/guardian or principal may request that the IPRC review the identification and/or placement. A request for an appeal in this case must be made within 15 days. Provisions for these reviews and appeals are set out in the Regulation 181/98 and are summarized in Highlights of Regulation 181/98.

If parents/guardians accept the identification and placement but are concerned about the nature of the special education program or special education services their child is receiving, the following steps may be taken: Review the student's Individual Education Plan to determine whether the student's needs are appropriately represented and accommodated in the plan. Discuss the issue with the student's teacher. Include the school principal in the discussion, as necessary. If the issue cannot be resolved at the school, contact the school board,
where a special education coordinator or superintendent of special education may be able to resolve the issue.

In certain circumstances, when a parent/guardian cannot resolve the issue in discussion with school board officials, staff of the regional office of the Ministry of Education may be able to assist. However, ministry staff cannot provide legal advice or direction to parents/guardians or school boards and those seeking legal assistance are advised to contact independent legal counsel.

Various parent associations such as the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, the Ontario Association for Community Living, and the Association for Bright Children, or their local chapters, may be able to assist parents/guardians in their discussion with teachers and school board officials. In addition, the board's Special Education Advisory Committee may make recommendations to the board about matters affecting the establishment, development and delivery of special education programs and services for the exceptional pupils of the board.

In the event of a serious dispute, parents/guardians and the school board should consider mediation as an effective means of resolving the dispute.

As a last resort, when other avenues of appeal have been exhausted, parents/guardians may contemplate an appeal to the Ontario Special Education Tribunal.

As read on January 10, 2010 on the Ministry Of Education’s website at http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/issues.htm
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