

# Discrimination and Social Exclusion in Education Policy: The Detrimental Effects of Ethnic Grading & Streaming Somali-Canadians in the Toronto Schooling System

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines educational circumstances that have led to the social exclusion of the Somali-Canadian community living in Toronto. It explores contemporary challenges, including the disproportionately high homicide rate, unemployment and patterns of marginalization, seeking to demonstrate how it can be traced back to discriminatory education policies. Building on a diverse set of scholars, including a recent research project undertaken by one of the authors, this paper will argue that contemporary sources of social exclusion are primarily due to exclusionary effects of discriminatory educational institutions. Using the existing literature, this paper explores how the perverse use of deliberate streaming, ethnic grading and 'zero-tolerance' policies have negated the educational and enrichment opportunities of Somali youth, effectively excluding a generation of youth from schools. Utilizing process-tracing, this paper demonstrates how these discriminatory practices in the Toronto educational system have created and recreated barriers to integration and have contributed to the further marginalization of an already vulnerable community. Lastly, this paper calls for the using of lived-experiences of the Somali-Canadian community within the Toronto education system to inform better public policy. We conclude that if these issues go unaddressed, serious pushback from multiple channels may lead to a tumultuous clash in and between the Somali-Toronto community.

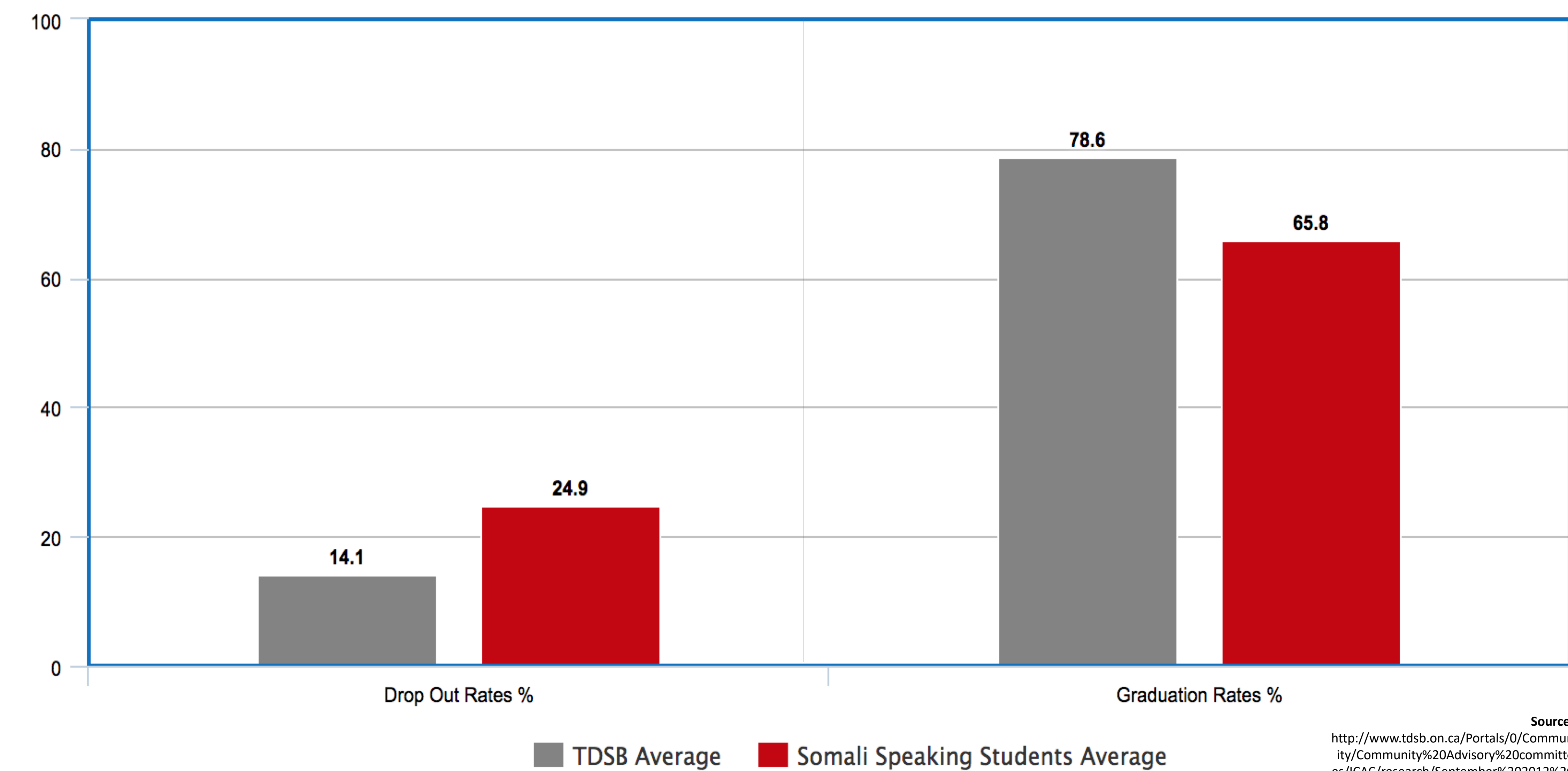
## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study will use Critical Race Theory (CRT) in studying discriminatory policy in the Toronto District School Board against Somali-Canadians. CRT is conceptualized by Daniel Solórzano (1997), who "identified five tenets of CRT that can and should inform theory, research, pedagogy, curriculum and policy. (1) the intercentricity of race and racism; (2) the challenge to dominant ideology; (3) the commitment to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches."

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes process tracing to evaluate the evolution of the educational policy of the Toronto District School Board. Conducting qualitative analysis, this study looks for continued occurrences of discrimination against the Somali-Canadian community within the TDSB institution.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) Grade 9 Cohort 2006-2011: Drop Out Rate % and Graduation Rate % of TDSB Average vs. Somali-Speaking Students



Source: <http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/Community/Community%20Advisory%20Committees/CAC/research/September%202012%20Cohort%20dataAcrobat%20Document.pdf>

**In a 2012 report, the Toronto District School Board analyzed graduation rates in one high school cohort (grades 9-12), and found that Somali-speaking students not only had the lowest graduation rates (65.8%), but also the highest dropout rate at nearly 25%**

**Ethnic Grading:** (Farah, 2011; Mohamed, 2015; Abdi, 2012; Mahamad, 2010; Collet, 2007) The process of assigning marks based on race or ethnicity, not performance and quality of the assignment (Farah, 2011). Research done by Mohamed (2015: 38) shows that students experiences with ethnic grading and differential grading shaped their perceptions of school. Mohamed notes that the experiences of ethnic grading and deferential treatment "[have] a profound impact ...[including eroding] a student's confidence and lower[ing] his or her self-esteem" (Mohamed, 2015: 41). Disciplinary policies continue to shape, reinforce and propagate negative perceptions of Somali students. The negative impacts of Bill 12 (the Education Amendment Act) shape the institutional dynamics of discrimination and stereotyping, particularly in highlighting the role of zero-tolerance policies on racialized youth, instead of accommodation for diversity.

**Streaming:** (Mahamed, 2010; Scott, 2001; Ighodaro, 1997; Curtis et al, 1992; Abdi, 2012). Placing students into special education streams earlier in their academic career based on cultural or social background (Curtis et al.,1992). In examining the special education services in two TDSB schools, Mahamed (2010) found that a large percentage of Somali students were placed into special education programs. The streaming of Somali students into these programs plays a factor in limiting opportunities for educational advancement. Streaming conducted during elementary school years often shaped high school placement, and options for post-secondary education. Abdi found that policies related to "school discipline and streaming" were the "most compelling reasons that have prevented them from graduation" (Abdi, 2012: 85)

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## ADDRESSING RACIAL BIASES AND DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES.

Practices such as ethnic grading, deficit thinking, deferential treatment and streaming continue to limit student's academic prospects. Particular actions that can be taken by decision-makers include the incorporation of culture and ethnic sensitivity training. The promotion of culturally competent educators are vital to ensuring that students feel comfortable in their school environments. Cultural competency in this instance refers to the development of "skills and knowledge [that] effectively serve[s] students from diverse cultures" (National Education Association, 2008: 1).

## ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF DISCIPLINARY POLICIES

Disciplinary policies, such as Bill 12 (previously the Safe Schools Act) continues to criminalize racialized youth such as Somali youth. Zero tolerance policies continue to negatively impact the educational experiences of Somali youth, implying that Somali boys are associated with criminality, which pushes Somali youth out of schools. First and foremost, policymakers ought to look into repealing Bill 12. Lawmakers, in instituting Bill 12, required that school boards "consider mitigating and other factors" in disciplining students, **there exists no "accountability procedure to monitor compliance"** (Mohamed, 2015: 43-44). Policy makers ought to recognize the impact of these policies in serving as mitigating factors for the educational shortcomings of Somali students.

## ADDRESSING THE DIFFICULTIES SOMALI FAMILIES FACE IN NAVIGATING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

Schools need to offer services and programming that assists in the adjustment process for families, including offering language and translation services. There exists other challenges for non-newcomer families, including the parent's persistent feeling of isolation in the learning of their children. Schools ought to develop programming and services aimed at encouraging and fostering parental engagement in the schooling of Somali students, including the creation of outreach strategies targeting Somali communities. Furthermore, more targeted programming is required for assisting parents with navigating the special education system and disciplinary practices in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS