Exploring Intercultural Communication in the Special Education Referral Process with Somali Community Members

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Abstract

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Given the recent growth of Somali-speaking families in American schools, it is important for educators to understand how Somali families and community members experience school processes to integrate feedback and develop an appreciation for their differing perspectives. The dual perspective of Somali liaisons, with fluency in school processes and Somali culture, is also uniquely important, as they act as cultural and linguistic brokers to facilitate shared meaning in high-stakes home-school communication such as in the special education referral process. Since there is a lack of peer-reviewed studies regarding Somali experiences during special education referral communications with schools, this study aims to address

this issue by exploring how Somali parent, community members, and liaisons experience the special education referral process for Somali children. Additionally, this study seeks viewpoints of Somali community members and liaisons regarding culturally responsive communication practices that schools can utilize to enhance mutual understanding. A cross-cultural communication framework is used to analyze concepts such as cultural meaning and responsive communication. Somali interviews and school communication protocols are analyzed in this qualitative study via open-coding for themes. Results suggest that there may be discrepant cultural meaning systems regarding disability and special education between the Somali community and American schools. They also suggest that the congruence of meaning systems may mediate emotional experiences for Somali families and highlight issues of differential power during the special education referral process. Lastly, data suggest several ways that schools might enhance cultural responsivity by adjusting communication practices during the special education referral process; however, this does not address the underlying issue of class-based discrimination at play.

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Chapter I: Introduction

With an increase of the Somali refugee population in the Seattle metropolitan area, schools must evolve to best meet the needs of a changing demographic. Although the estimates of Somali refugee students in the Seattle area vary widely due to difficulty with various methods of data collection, it is noted that Somali students are the second largest group of dual language learners in Seattle Public Schools (Ott, 2010). Given the recent growth of Somali-speaking families in Seattle and neighboring school districts, as one of the largest refugee groups in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013), it is important for local educators to understand how Somali refugee families experience school processes to integrate feedback and develop an appreciation for their unique perspectives. In light of honoring these insider perspectives, Somali refugee families will be referred to as Somali, as the term *refugee* might not match their self-identity; however, issues related to refugee populations will continue to be explored to appreciate the distinctive experiences associated with refugee status. The perspectives of cultural liaisons, or cultural brokers, who might act as advocates for culturally responsive practices in schools, is critical in this work given their understanding of the Somali community as well as the US school system (Jones, 2010). With insider experiences

of how Somali parents, community members and liaisons view school encounters, schools might then be able to adapt in more culturally responsive ways to communicate. More culturally appropriate communication could lead to more understanding and collaborative decision-making.

One often overlooked and high-stakes area in which responsive communication practices are critical, is the special education referral process. Inappropriate eligibility determinations resulting from such referrals could contribute to school failure or the exclusion from general education curriculum. Therefore, understanding parent communication experiences with schools is essential, and particularly so with populations that represent a linguistic minority in a foreign system (Hardin et al., 2009). With federal guidelines requiring specific types of formal and written communication, Somali families may be marginalized due to a history that is rich in poetry, informal learning, and memorization of oral communication (Olden, 1999). Moreover, many Somali families arrive in the U.S. after spending several years in refugee camps or other countries and, consequently, have less familiarity with American schools or cultural norms (McBrien, 2011). Therefore, the Somali community might experience additional challenges regarding culturally responsive care in school communications.

Given the serious implications of the understudied domain of cross-cultural communication in the special education referral process with Somali families. This study addressed this knowledge gap by examining case studies of Somali community members, liaisons and parents in the context of the special education referral processes in public schools. Understanding these experiences is a crucial first step in determining the cultural appropriateness of common special education practices in order to provide equitable opportunities for this growing population to participate meaningfully in critical educational decision-making. A theoretical cross-cultural, or intercultural, communication framework was used to conceptualize major constructs such as responsive communication and cultural identity. Since research at the intersection of intercultural communication in special education referral processes with Somali families is scarce, relevant literature was reviewed regarding the Somali community, special education referrals, and intercultural communication.

Statement of the Problem

The literature indicates a need for educators, such as school psychologists, to increase the capacity for culturally responsive practices during communication with immigrant families in the special education referral process (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Despite this need, there is little research regarding this critical special

education practice with immigrant populations. There is a lack of research regarding the Somali population and their experiences of such processes. This study aims to begin the dialogue in fostering responsive intercultural communication in the special education referral process with Somali families via rich narratives of experiences. The study also seeks the perspectives of Somali parents, liaisons, and community members regarding communication strategies that might support cultural responsivity.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter begins with a brief history of Somali people as it pertains to their resettlement into the U.S., followed by research regarding common experiences of and knowledge about the Somali people. Next, pertinent aspects of special education are explored to understand the complicated processes that immigrant families must navigate during a referral for special education assessment. The study is situated within intercultural theoretical literature. Lastly, a conceptual framework is presented to aid the investigation of concepts that guide analysis, such as cultural identity (linked to meaning systems) and intercultural responsivity.

Somali Immigration into the U.S.

Many of the Somali immigrants living in the U.S. today have been impacted by war and have entered the U.S. with refugee status. Those who lived in Somalia

before the 1990s may bring fond memories of life prior to the Somali Civil War (Bennaars et al., 1996). Before 1991(peak of the civil war), many were able to cultivate land and live in relative peace; younger generations however might have been born in refugee camps and have little recollection of Somalia (McBrien, 2011). The sections below describe some commonly reported experiences of Somali immigrants entering the U.S. These as vague filters from which to refine knowledge through individual relationships.

Diaspora. Somalia has faced periods of discord since the mid-1800s, including colonization by France, Great Britain, Italy, and Ethiopia, which defined borders of the country in the 19th century (leaving many Somalis outside the country's borders in Ethiopia and Kenya), British and Italian areas of the country became independent in 1960 (Bennaars et al., 1996). Although 95% of the population share the Somali language and culture, one's community was based upon clan membership and lineage relationships (Bennaars et al., 1996). Divisions between these clans and subclans undermined the republic's weak infrastructure, and in 1969, Somalia became a dictatorship under Mohamed Siad of the Darood clan (Bennaars et al., 1996). In 1991, Siad was deposed and Somalia emerged from the most violent parts of the civil war (Bennaars et al., 1996). The steady growth of Somali communities around the world can be linked to the duration and extent of

the war, as large numbers of men were killed, and a disproportionate amount of women and children sought refuge (Nilsson et al, 2012).

Definition of a refugee. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1996; page 2). Refugees typically flee their countries due to civil repression, conflict, terror, or war (McBrien, 2011). In assessing reasons for fleeing Somalia, Bhui et al. (2003) reported a variety of causes. These included risk to own life [86% of men (79/81) and 96% of women (56/89)]; risk to family's life [62% of men (56/91) and 61% of women (51/89)]; oppression on the basis of race, religion or politics [23% of men (21/91) and 7% of women (6/89)]; war [88% of men (80/91) and 96% of women (85/89)]; clan rivalry and ethnic cleansing [6% of men (6/91) and 3% of women (3/89)]; and famine [7% of men (6/91) and 3% of women (1/89)].

Refugee camps. Some Somalis spend several years (as much as 20) in temporary refugee camps run by foreign organizations, possibly with insufficient nutrition, water, shelter, medical/mental health care, education, and/or employment

(McBrien, 2011). In refugee camps, basic needs are of primary concern, while education, job skills and mental health care are often not adequately addressed (McBrien, 2011). Bhui et al. (2003) noted that over 70% of Somali adult participants have a great need for English language supports. More than half of the Somali participants in their study indicated they lacked shelter or food, and felt close to death at some point. Somalis who entered refugee camps lost their homes and sometimes loved ones due to death or separation (Nilsson et al, 2012). Many have witnessed violence and injustice, as well as faced prejudice based on clan relation (McBrien, 2011). Bhui et al. (2003) also indicated that more than 80% reported poor health. These factors are important to consider, as many Somali children in the U.S. were born in this environment.

Reception in the United States. Although some Somalis migrated to the U.S. prior to = the civil war in early 1991, typically for educational or political reasons, many more migrated afterwards during the “second wave” of U.S. immigration (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004). During this second wave, when the Somali people became more numerous and more visible, there was some U.S. hostility as this group sought housing, transportation, health care, schooling and jobs. The strong Somali cultural presence was perceived by some as oppositional to U.S. culture and schools that were not prepared to receive them. For instance, in Maine in the early

2000s, there was neo-Nazi backlash that attempted to drive out the Somalis. Although this is an extreme example, there are more subtle variations of discrimination that impact immigrants.

Many of the studies that exist regarding Somali refugee experiences place emphasis on problems, such as mental health (Bhui et al, 2003; McGraw et al, 2004) and educational disadvantages in host societies that result from mistrust and fear (McBrien, 2011). Other studies seek to recognize social capital (Ramsden & Taket, 2013) or valuable insights regarding knowledge structures (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004) to reframe differences as a mismatch of values between the host society and Somali culture. In a study regarding Somali Bantu students in American schools, Roy and Roxas (2011) documented multiple perspectives regarding school dress codes. Some schools did not permit Somali religious and cultural dress with skirts and headscarves, so parents attempted to meet religious and school codes by having students wear pants underneath skirts. The school misunderstood this behavior as challenging, rather than accommodating, and considered it as evidence of behavioral problems. In this case, the school uniform policy conflicted with cultural dress, and school staff did not understand that Somali families were trying to be flexible by following both school and cultural rules. Students described “getting in

trouble" and going to the office to take off their skirts, missing valuable instructional time while being chastised for uniform violations. These behavioral violations were associated with the deficit view that Somali Bantu children were not able to behave, and were consistent with reports that general education teachers tended to have the children removed from class rather than work through behavioral challenges. Applying an ethnocentric framework for behavioral norms resulted in discriminatory views of Somali student behavior. Such studies identify how cultural mismatches might lead to discrimination in schools.

Discrimination and decreased opportunities have long-term costs for families. One national study reported that long-term consequences of discrimination include lower graduation rates, fewer employment opportunities, and lower wages (Sullivan et al, 2009). New refugees to the U.S. may struggle to find work due to use of a different language, unfamiliarity with American culture, and lack of U.S. professional networks to gain support. Somalis may be subject to more socio-economic discrimination than European refugees as they are "visible minorities" in terms of physical appearance and dress (Kapteijns & Arman, 2004). In addition to socio-economic class differences associated with refugee status, Somalis might also have interrupted school experiences. Decreased educational opportunities and lower economic resources have led to disproportionate amounts of marginalized

populations in special education, as school struggles might then be attributed to a student disability rather than lack of opportunities (Carter & Welner, 2013).

Within the U.S. educational system, research suggests that disproportionate amounts of children of color are placed in some categories of special education, such as emotional-behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, and intellectual disabilities (formerly known as mental retardation) (Sullivan et al., 2009). In the past three decades, black students have been more likely to be identified as emotionally or intellectually disabled than their white classmates; such students are more than 14 times more likely to be identified as intellectually disabled, and tend to have more restrictive placements (Sullivan et al., 2009). Disproportionality might also be compounded by assessment tools that are culturally and linguistically biased (Sullivan et al., 2009). For instance, the differences in Somali educational expectations may result in lower standardized test scores that are based upon American student expectations.

History of education. While Somali refugees have very diverse experiences with education, the conceptualization of schooling in Somalia is different than schooling in the U.S. (Bennaars, 1996). For thousands of years, Somali history was passed down primarily through poems and songs, as the Somali language was strictly oral until 1972, when the Somali alphabet was developed (Mansy &

Ghahremani-Ghajar, 2010). There was robust oral literature and memory storage, as composition, memorization, transmission and dissemination all took place without written communication (Andrzejewski, 2011). Historically, education was mostly informal and took place within the community (Macharia, 1990). Rich poetry was memorized and "published" by reciting poems for others (Andrzejewski, 2011). Home-based teaching and religious literacy were accepted as more culturally relevant than school-based literacy, which was associated with colonialism and foreign values (Mansy & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 2010). Given the cultural relevance of informal education, some Somali children did not attend formal schooling and there was little opportunity for secondary or vocational options. Some clans, such as the Somali Bantu, were not able to access education at all (Bennaars, 1996).

While experiences vary by location and circumstance, refugee camp school programs for Somali refugees were typically limited to foundational skills, focusing on the alphabet and numbers (Abinoor, 2008), although, some camps provided higher quality education than in Somalia (Bennaars et al., 1996). Due to different school expectations and variations of educational opportunities prior to entering the U.S., the concepts of learning disabilities and special education may not have been culturally applicable to past experiences of the Somali people.

Research on Somali Perspectives

With estimates of over 65,000 Somalis who have resettled across the U.S. since the 1980s (Góñez- Santos, 2009), researchers are studying cultural values and practices that may mediate experiences within American schools and institutional systems. Although the study of differences may provide useful areas of consideration when working with individual families, it is equally important to understand that over-reliance on such differences might lead to stereotyping or invalidating individual experiences (Leung et al, 2013). Keeping this in mind, common differences in value systems and interactional styles will be reviewed to begin the work of perspective-taking.

Islam and identity. Scholars believe that Islam provides significant cultural grounding for the Somali community (Ingstad, 1995). Religious centers are a gathering place for the Somali community, where they can maintain their language and values as a community. Some scholars draw connections between the Muslim identity of Somalis and their perceptions of disability, as some Muslims believe that Allah determines the fate of a child (Greeson et al, 2001). Expressions of Muslim identity are also common, such as wearing the *hijab* which acts as a visual identifier (Langellier, 2010). Islam also prescribes ideals for religious conduct and traditional gender roles between husbands and wives (Boyle & Ali, 2009). Thus, Islam is a

central factor in Somali identity. It creates guidelines for social roles, values, and clothing, while helping to maintain a system of support by providing a religious network.

Acculturation. Some refugee groups or individuals may assimilate or acculturate in different ways, blending in with American norms. Interviews with Somali refugee parents reveal that they are often concerned about discrimination and desire to learn English to dampen prejudice and improve success possibilities (McBrien, 2011). They have high aspirations for their children and value education. Outside of these areas of acculturation, Somali families prefer to maintain their cultural orientation more so than other immigrant groups according to a study in Australia (Wise, 2002). Some Somali parents are concerned that youth have less investment and knowledge of the Somali language, culture, and religion, and this difference sometimes causes generational rifts (Betancourt et al, 2015).

Community and family values. Somali culture is collectivist, as the group is prioritized over individuality. Community is a source of inner strength and empowerment for the Somali people (Ingstad, 1995). Community in Somalia is based on lineage relationships, and family is also an important source of support in refugee communities (Bennaars, 1996); families care for each other, just as neighbors watch over neighborhood children (Nilsson, 2012). In an apartment

building with multiple Somali families, Nilsson (2012) observed families looking after each other's children and sharing the responsibility of raising children as a community. The definition of family is more inclusive, as grandparents, uncles, and others are considered family members (Boyle & Ali, 2009). Large families are traditionally valued, as family is seen as a support network in terms of responsibilities and social activities. For instance, people often care for elderly or extended family members when needed.

In addition to providing social support and sharing in responsibilities, the community is important for problem solving and education. Elders and family members help support married couples by talking through difficulties and providing solutions (Boyle & Ali, 2009). Leisure time is often spent in social gatherings, which is a venue for informal learning as well as social interactions (Macharia, 1990). Therefore, the social communication is valued, and this may be particularly true for new Somalis to the U.S., as many are not academically literate they may rely on others for information rather than reading material (Macharia, 1990). Given the value placed on oral communication within the Somali community, American schools with different values and meaning systems may encounter a mismatch in certain areas of educational programing for Somali students. One such area of mismatched meanings is in the realm of special education.

Construct of disability. As special education services are based on American schooling and laws, it follows that Somali refugees would have difficulty understanding disabilities and special services. To Somalis, the term *disability* might have severely negative implications for children and families (e.g., incurable disease, curse) that American educators may not grasp the gravity of without some perspective-taking (Ingstad, 1995). People with disabilities were reportedly sometimes treated as though they are gravely sick or beyond care (Ingstad, 1995). In more extreme cases, children with disabilities have faced beatings, verbal abuse, and abandonment (Brunswick, 2013). Such instances of abuse are not exclusive to or characteristic of the Somali culture; however, knowledge of them might impact perceptions.

In war-torn areas such as Somalia, many are unable to seek help from the government, and therefore, children with disabilities may be seen as a liability (Brunswick, 2013). These specific issues may have implications for special education processes specific to newly-arrived Somali families. For instance, it seems the Somali meaning of *disability* may be associated with very severe conditions and social consequences outside of educational settings. In terms of *disability* in the American education system, the meaning might be more wide-ranging, which includes less noticeable or severe impairments, due to a variety of

services and disability categories that are commonly known and associated with government resources.

Special Education in the United States

Special education is defined by Wilmshurst and Brue (2010) as educational practices that address individual needs of students with wide-ranging special needs with the goal of increasing independence and success in schools. Special needs are associated with learning and communication challenges, physical disabilities, and emotional and behavioral disorders (Turnbull, 2002). The field began with the experiences and education of deaf and blind children that lead to the development of braille in 1829, and has expanded since then (Wilmshurst & Brue, 2010).

Special education law. The United States federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was enacted in 1990 and continues to guide the special education referral process for children with a wide range of disabilities (Kupper, 2000). IDEA only applies to agencies that receive federal funding, such as public schools (Kupper, 2000). Particular provisions of IDEA include eligibility for individualized education programs; related services that benefit students in special education; free appropriate public education; assurance of the least-restrictive-environment; discipline of a child with a disability; prohibition on mandatory medication; early intervention programs; and procedural safeguards. The special

education referral process falls under related services to identify students with disabilities that require services (Fagan & Wise, 2000).

IDEA does not recommend special education for all disabled children; rather, the disability must adversely impact the child's educational functioning in schools and require specialized instruction (Kupper, 2000). Within IDEA, a child with a disability is defined as follows:

> A child... with an intellectual disability, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance..., orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; AND, who... [Because of the condition] needs special education and related services. (20 U.S.C. 1401(3); 1401(30)

When there is a suspected disability and special need, a special education referral is initiated in order to determine whether or not the school meets eligibility requirements, specifically, that there is a disability, an adverse educational impact, and a need for specialized instruction (Kupper, 2000).

Special Education Referral Process

This reviews relevant special education referral literature. It begins by detailing the typical special education referral process including its common participants, followed by descriptions of parent rights for participation, and the

specific role of cultural liaisons who assist culturally diverse parents with special education processes.

Referral process. The special education referral process usually begins with teacher concerns regarding academics or behavior (Ysseldyke, 2001). A pre-referral meeting is typically held to discuss student progress. It includes administrators, general education teachers, a special education teacher, a parent or caregiver, psychologist, and sometimes a counselor or a social worker (Algozzine, Christenson, & Ysseldyke, 1982). Team members suggest strategies for the teacher to try to help the student, and may decide to immediately initiate a special education referral for an eligibility evaluation depending on district guidelines. Klingner and Harry (2006) assert that many of the decisions are dominated by the perspectives of school psychologists and educators with limited cultural knowledge that may marginalize others. For this reason, culturally responsive practices and the ability to communicate effectively with diverse families are particularly important during special education referrals with immigrant populations. In order to protect parents, IDEA also provides guidelines for parent rights (Kupper, 2000).

Parent rights and participation. The decision whether or not to refer a child for special education assessment is fundamentally an individualized decision depending on suspected need. Thus, *procedural safeguards* are specified to protect

student and family rights (Kupper, 2000). The Procedural Safeguards are a series of protections that parents must be informed of to ensure participation and power in this process. For instance, the law requires a variety of team members (i.e. parents, teachers, administrators) to consider the individuality of the child in different settings, and determine what is in the child's best interest (Klingner & Harry, 2006). The law grants parents the right to "give or withhold permission to have their child tested for eligibility for special education services, re-evaluated, or placed in a different classroom or program" (Heward & Cavanaugh, 2001, p. 311). Parents bring other knowledgeable individuals to advocate for them as a means of equalizing the "'balance of power' between professionals, who have traditionally wielded power, and families, who have felt they could not affect their children's education" (Heward & Cavanaugh, 2001, p. 311).

Despite intended parent participation and rights, Klingner and Harry (2006) indicate that the special education referral process often does not employ practices that provide parents equal representation. They contend that the processes are not democratically structured for equal input from all members, as school psychologists tended to dominate the decision-making while teachers and parents were marginalized. One outcome of the Klingner and Harry study was a concern regarding "the pervasive negative attitude toward parents and the lack of effort to discover

and build on family strengths" (p. 2277). This imbalance of power might be particularly prevalent if culturally and linguistically diverse parents are not afforded accessible notice of rights and protections. Given concerns regarding the lack of cultural awareness, negative emotions, and de-emphasis on parent input, educators and other participants in the referral process may benefit from using more culturally responsive communication practices that forefront the representation of parent perspectives.

Bridge between cultures. One way that schools might seek to facilitate culturally responsive communication during the special education referral process is by using cultural liaisons. Cultural liaisons are individuals who are both bilingual and knowledgeable the local education system such that can facilitate the development of trusting relationships between parents and school personnel (Clark & Dorris, 2007). Key characteristics of cultural liaisons include cultural responsiveness (the ability to interpret "ethnic and cultural standards" for communities), experience with the US school system, and community connectedness (shared background or experiences) (Smiley et al., 2008; Howland et al., 2006). Some schools have on-site cultural liaisons, while others must access community resources in order to identify a cultural liaison to assist families as they navigate an unfamiliar education system (Clark & Dorris, 2006). These trusted members of the community, with specialized

knowledge of the schools, may potentially reveal valuable strategies to enhance responsive communication across cultures during the special education referral process, thus, serving as advocates for parents and communities (Jones et al, 2010). Since cultural liaisons are fluent in both cultures in the exchange, they hold insights regarding ways that schools can connect with different communities to engage them rather than distance them as suggested by Klingner and Harry (2006).

Since literature regarding the special education referral process suggests a need for identifying responsive cross-cultural communication strategies, the concept must first be defined. Given the diverse meanings associated with similar terminology (i.e. cultural competence, cultural sensitivity, or cultural responsivity) it is important to explore various approaches to cross-cultural communication. Different underlying assumptions guide different approaches and it is necessary to be intentional about assumed goals of communication and ways of identifying the interacting communities. Without first considering an appropriate objective of the cross-cultural communication, and a system of defining cultural identities in special education referrals, the concept of cultural responsivity might not align with the intentions of this study. The goal was to increase competence by challenging monocultural assumptions and understanding the distancing aspects of communication in the special education referral process with Somali parents.

Cross-Cultural Communication Theory

Since the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965, which abolished the quota system, immigration into the U.S. has increased to the rate of about one million per year (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002). The influx of new immigrant families brings a wider cultural array to American schools, dramatically increases the need for school personnel to share meaningful dialogue with diverse parents, and highlights the necessity of clearly defined constructs as a prerequisite to engaging in such reform. The concept of responsive cross-cultural communication, or intercultural responsivity, is not clearly defined in literature. Multiple approaches are symbolized by key terminology, such as cultural identity, responsiveness, and communication (Leung, Lee, & Chiu, 2013). For the purpose of this study, “intercultural” and “cross-cultural” are used interchangeably. What some researchers refer to as “competent communication” is referenced as “responsive communication,” as the term “competence” implies that one can reach a level of expertise, minimizing the complexity of diverse interactions and the need to continually adapt.

In the following sections, the dominant approaches to intercultural communication frameworks will be explicated as a means of recognizing underlying assumptions that are associated with various theoretical orientations. Next, an

interpretive view is used to define the concept of responsive intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication approaches. Three major research approaches are commonly used to frame how culture and communication interact. These are social-scientific/positivist, interpretive/constructivist, and critical perspectives (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011). The social-scientific approach was predominant in the 1980's and continues to be used to explore cross-cultural, or intercultural, differences and patterns, using more quantitative data and discrete categories as identifiers. With this approach, there is the potential to stereotype cultural differences or view difference as a problem (Leung et al., 2013; Xu, 2013). The constructivist approach aims to provide rich descriptions of various speech communities that share sensemaking systems, communication norms, and linguistic features (speech codes, or ways of using language) (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011). The critical perspective seeks to challenge existing intergroup power structures, examine the impacts of privilege, and understand communication experiences in a historical and structural contexts (Xu, 2013). In addition to differing research goals, each method has unique definitions of communication, cultural identities, and competent intercultural communication. Given the desire to gain a more in-depth understanding of the personal experiences from lesser known perspective (Somali

parents and liaisons), the constructivist approach is used to frame the conceptualization of responsive communication.

Cultural responsivity. Researchers generally agree, however, that the discerning use of culturally appropriate behaviors is required to prevent educational inequities, such as disproportionality in special education, decreased expectations, and lower graduation rates of students of particular backgrounds (Harry, 1992; King et al., 2015). The interpretive view of intercultural responsiveness in the field of communication aims at successful outcomes through the ability to engage in empathic perspective-taking, follow the same speech code, and share a sensemaking system (King et al., 2015, Leung, Lee, & Chiu, 2013). Cultural identities are embedded within these shared communication norms (e.g., speech production and interpretation), which may or may not coincide with one's ethnic background (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011). Individuals who are familiar with cultural communication norms of two interacting groups, may provide access to insider meaning, values, and contributions when communication is mismatched.

Intercultural responsivity in special education communication:

Coady, Cruz-Davis, and Flores (2009) conducted parent interviews regarding culturally relevant communication practices in special education with immigrant Latino families. Data analysis indicated a strong preference for non-traditional

communication approaches that were dissimilar to the current practices, such as home visits rather than school conferences. Parent participants valued "personalmente," or more personalized, informal, and direct communication via home-visits, general check-ins as opposed to only problem-focused meetings, and cultural liaisons to bridge intercultural communication gaps. The population studied offered rich details regarding an insider's experiences to facilitate perspective-taking, empathy, and shared meaning between special educators and the speech community.

Qualitative information, as in the details above, may lead to the development of culturally responsive special education practices through understanding and implementing culturally relevant communication practices. Responsivity in the special education example above would be the ability for educators to appreciate the cultural meaning and value placed on informal interactions and personalize communication practices to demonstrate care (King et al., 2015, Leung, Lee, & Chiu, 2013). Constructivist communication researchers emphasize this need for empathy towards others' values, feelings, beliefs, and goals, in order to connect to emotional experiences and increase feelings of support (King et al., 2015; Le Roux, 2002). Research also suggests that this is particularly important in the highly emotional context of special education, which may have different meanings and implications

across cultures (Conroy, 2012). With this lens, the cross-cultural communication framework of this study is presented and used to define concepts such as community identity, communication practices, and intercultural responsivity in the specific context of school communication with Somali families during the special education context.

Constructivist Theoretical Framework

The goal of the constructivist perspective is to identify ways of knowing and understanding within a cohesive culture from an insider perspective (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011). Communication and culture are interwove. Culture is defined by interpretive intercultural communication scholars as a shared code of communicating, rather than an ethnic group. Thus, communication is viewed as a link between individuals to a shared identity. Cultural identity, then, is defined as "a communally shared system of communicative practices that is unique to the community and enduring over time" (Kim, 2007, p.246). Given the wide scope of cultural identities, the constructivist approach seeks effective communication outcomes. Culturally apt actions, culturally responsive communication from this standpoint requires perspective-taking and experiencing the feelings associated with culturally appropriate interpretations (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011). The research interest of the current study is the unique perspectives of the Somali

refugee community, namely parents interacting with schools during special education referrals to develop empathy and inform practice. By situating the research design within this perspective-taking frame, a lesser known narrative may provide greater understanding of marginalized viewpoints. More specifically, the goal is to describe the inner experiences of Somali community members, liaisons and parents, as they reflect on their past involvements in the special education referral process. The justification for this line of questioning is that little information exists regarding Somali experiences of the special education process, and there is great value in personal descriptions of the typical referral process through the Somali viewpoint. Developing this type of cultural sensitivity could help schools adapt practices to communicate in ways that increase mutual understanding and collaboration with Somali families. Thus, the concepts of cultural identity and culturally responsive communication are further refined as a means of explicitly exploring cultural meaning and responsivity in the context of the special education referral process.

Cultural identity. From an interpretive lens, cultural identity does not necessarily align with ethnicity; rather, it aligns with shared speech codes, or unique communication practices shared by a group. Hence, the specificity of cultural identity may vary depending on the level of variation a researcher seeks (Harry,

2009). While greater specificity in identity definitions allows for more nuanced knowledge, it does so at the expense of relatability, as the referential population decreases in size (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011). Intergroup communication exchanges will be explored between school personnel and the Somali community, mediated by Somali liaisons that are fluent in the meaning systems of both communities.

Somali parents. The Somali community has unique meaning systems based on their language, culture, history, location, and roles. Somali parents may have different priorities and underlying assumptions that outsiders may not be privy to. As newcomers to the United States, often from refugee camps in different parts of Africa, they bring different structural knowledge that may not align with common United States concepts. Based upon prior school experiences, some parents may not have a concept for some of the roles at school, which may cause more cultural disconnect when unfamiliar people are speaking at meetings or seeking personal information.

School personnel. Although roles may vary greatly, school personnel share exclusive knowledge bases (e.g., US education policy), formal terminology (e.g., technical labels of performance), ethnocentric communicative protocols (e.g., required written notices), and routine social scripts (e.g., commonplace processes

assumed to be understood). There are specific special education terms and policies that schools use that define a meaning system, which may not be accessible to outsiders of that speech code. For instance, educators are required to perform certain communication acts per state or district policy and/or federal law (e.g., required "prior written notices" under IDEA, 2004). Often both written and verbal communication is not easily accessible to the general population due to jargon i.e. required disability labels and legal standardized forms. Special educators may not immediately recognize cultural assumptions that limit diverse parent participation. One example is the assumption that a parent will be able to read and understand a formal Procedural Safeguards booklet required by law (IDEA, 2004) to inform parents of their many rights, such as revocation of consent for services. If a parent does not understand the right to disagree and provide input, for instance, this severely reduces meaningful participation and inhibits culturally responsive communication.

Somali liaisons. Some schools utilize cultural liaisons, or brokers, to facilitate intergroup communication. Cultural liaisons are individuals who are fluent in both the language and culture of interacting groups and knowledgeable about the local education system (Clark & Dorris, 2007). Therefore, they can facilitate the development of trusting relationships between parents and school personnel.

Unique characteristics of cultural liaisons include the ability to interpret “ethnic and cultural standards” for communities, experience with the US school system, and cross-community connectedness (shared background or experiences) (Smiley et al., 2008; Howland et al., 2006). Some schools have on-site cultural liaisons, while some must access community resources in order to identify a cultural liaison. Somali liaisons, are a central piece of this study, as they not only reciprocally represent the voices of the Somali community, they mediate intercultural responsiveness by negotiating meaning and facilitate mutual understanding between Somali parents and schools.

Responsive intercultural communication. Responsive intercultural communication includes adapting practices to the preferences and knowledge base of another culture. It also involves the ability to understand and empathize. Thus, given the aforementioned concerns regarding the lack of parent perspectives in the special education referral process, parent and liaison perspectives are important aspects to developing intercultural responsivity during the process. Somali parent and liaison perspectives may provide insights regarding cultural preferences, knowledge, strengths, values, and emotional experiences to develop empathy and appreciation for different viewpoints.

Another aspect of responsivity is adapting practices based on culturally relevant strategies. Once the Somali experience is understood, educators can apply that understanding to guide future practice. Currently, common communication processes in schools favor less direct and low context methods, which are less time consuming for schools, such as formal letters, emails, and occasional phone calls. These practices may be culturally responsive dependent upon a cultural group's communication norms. For instance, Somali refugees have expressed the importance of the culturally appropriate method of disseminating critical information in oral format rather than written notices, as Somali traditions favor oral communication and oral documentation of history (Olden, 1999). If school personnel do not adopt more culturally appropriate practices by continuing to provide written notices rather than interpreted verbal messages, Somali parents may not understand the importance of the message. Hypothetically, one might assume that if information was crucial, one would literally hear about it as one does other important information within the culture. Given the significant educational consequences of intercultural communication in special education decision-making, it is important to seek understanding of Somali perspectives to guide practice.

Chapter III: Methods

Broadly, the study goal of seeking rich descriptions from the Somali perspective falls within the tradition of basic qualitative research, which is grounded in constructivism as it assumes that reality is constructed by individuals as they interact within a certain environment (Merriam, 2009). Participant knowledge is viewed as variable and the goal of research is to understand a complex natural phenomenon within a rich context to develop understanding through interviews and artifacts (Glesne, 2011). The interview questions sought in-depth, descriptive knowledge to convey complex alternate meanings from the perspectives of interviewees.

Purpose of the Study

The study goal is to understand the experiences of Somali families, as they reflect upon interactions with schools in the special education referral process. In order to understand a variety of Somali experiences, meaning systems, and preferences, three phases of interviews gather insights from Somali liaisons, parents of children who were referred for special education, and community members. A cross-cultural communication framework was used to aid the conceptualization of terms and enable the analysis of core concepts, such as intercultural responsivity in schools and intergroup communication between school

personnel and Somali parents. With increased understanding of Somali perspectives, educators might begin to rethink standard practices with Somali families to consider more culturally relevant communication strategies. More specifically, the research questions were:

1. How do Somali community members experience the special education referral process for Somali children?
2. How might schools adapt communication practices during the special education referral process in response to Somali community feedback?

Participants

The goal of this study was to gain insights regarding cross-cultural communication between Somali families and schools during the special education referral process; therefore, it is important to target this population for the Somali perspective. Hence, data were collected in three phases from Somali participants. In Phase 1, completed in 2014-2015, Somali liaisons were interviewed during a preliminary study of communication practices during the special education referral process with Somali families. These Somali liaisons facilitated community access for the proposed parent interviews in Phase 2 by recruiting members of their community in early 2016. In Phase 3, Somali community members were interviewed between June and September, 2016 to offer additional perspectives and contrast to

the previous groups that had been directly involved in the referral process.

Phase 1: Somali liaisons. Somali liaisons perspectives were sought because they are members of the Somali community and serve as cultural brokers between Somali families and the school during special education referral meetings. Purposeful sampling was used to seek information-rich cases on a narrow research focus (Merriam, 2009). Sampling began with one participant due to seven years of liaison work with a known school district as well as his experience as a Somali refugee youth who learned the new system of schooling of the U.S. first-hand. Snowball sampling (referral-based) was used to recruit three more participants (Merriam, 2009). A total of four Somali liaisons were interviewed in a setting of their choosing. Two participants were Somali males in their mid to late twenties who spoke Somali as their first language and were members of the Somali community. One participant was a retired European American female who worked as a nurse in Somalia and refugee camps for over 30 years. A young Somali female in her mid-twenties was also interviewed, but she did not have significant experience as a cultural broker during special education referral meetings (she had one or two prior experiences). Given her lack of experience and detailed reporting, only the three experienced Somali liaison interviews were used. Participants provided informed consent for recorded interviews between January and March, 2015 in compliance

with the University of Washington College of Education internal IRB process.

Phase 2: Somali parents. Phase 2 of the data collection process included five Somali parents interviewed by the researcher and two experienced Somali liaisons in June, 2016. Purposeful, snowball sampling was used to obtain participation (Merriam, 2009). More specifically, two selected Somali liaisons were asked to refer two Somali parents each and facilitate the confidential parent interviews. One interview involved both the mother and father; however, the mother was the primary informant and the father only added two elaborations so his data were not used because it was incomplete. The Somali liaisons each organized the two separate parent interviews, at a time and location that were convenient for the parents (i.e., community center meeting room, liaison's home). No parent names were collected and parents were not contacted for follow-up. Oral consent was obtained, without written documentation to protect their privacy, and because there may be a cultural-historical proclivity toward oral communication given the significance of verbal exchanges in Somali culture (Guiterrez & Rogoff, 2003).

Prior to the interviews Somali liaisons were given explicit instructions regarding parent recruitment, the consenting process, and the interview questions. For Phase 2, liaisons were asked to recruit Somali community members who had prior experience with the special education process: parents that might have declined or

consented to testing in the special education referral processes. The goal was to interview both parents who consented and declined testing during the special educational referral process as a point of comparison. All of the parents consented (reluctantly, in two cases) to special education assessment and three of the parents were previously aware of a disability. Therefore, the discussion shifted to the difference between a “seen” versus “unseen” disability. Somali liaisons were given guidelines for providing information to parents regarding the nature of their participation and rights in the study. Parents were initially asked for their consent to participate in the interviews and allow for audio recording. At the recommendation of the dissertation committee, the parents who had already been recruited were then asked if video-recording would be acceptable. All of the parents preferred not to be recorded on video.

Prior to the start of the interviews, liaisons were given a copy of the questions and asked to interpret them to get at the intended purpose of each question and so the liaison could use culturally informed judgment about phrasing. For example, with the questions, “How is your child doing in school?” and “How do you know?” the purpose of the questions was to get an idea of what the parent thinks of the child’s school performance and what types of indicators are used to determine that. These questions also might help provide examples of how the school communicates with

parents knowing the intended purpose of the questions allowed the liaisons to form open-ended questions to allow the parent to define performance, rather than add specific details like “grades.” The researcher probed as needed for further information after hearing interpreted parent responses,.

Phase 3: Somali community members. Phase 3 took place between July and August, 2016. It was comprised of Somali community members interviewed to understand general experiences and views of school for Somali people that may not have direct experience of the special education referral process. Community members were included to represent another Somali perspective because they have valuable cultural knowledge and may have different experiences that could show the complexity of Somali backgrounds and familiarities. Participants were informed of their rights and the researcher obtained consent to interview and record (audio or video depending on their preference). The participants were interviewed in a location of their choosing (at a coffee shop, in their home, or at their workplace); three consented to audiotape and one preferred only written notes for comfort and confidentiality. Therefore, interviews were transcribed as in Phases 1 and 2. Three of the Somali community members interviewed were fluent in English and did not require an interpreter as specified in Phase 2. Unexpectedly, one of the community participants had a child with Autism, and that interview data were analyzed as

Somali parent data, as the same interview protocol was used for parents and community members. This changed the total Somali parent participants to five and the Somali community member participants to three.

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily from interviews and artifacts. This includes interviews with Somali liaisons, parents and community members, and artifacts from local school districts.

Phase 1: Somali liaison interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three Somali liaisons in the Seattle metropolitan area. Each interview lasted over 120 minutes, took place in various locations in the Seattle metropolitan area, and scheduled at the convenience of the liaisons. Open-ended questions were used to elicit detail. Interviews were used to gather descriptive information from the liaisons' perspective regarding instances in which they served as a cultural broker in the special education referral process with Somali refugee parents. The goal was to understand and disseminate the participant perspectives (Patton, 1980).

The semi-structured interviews included descriptive questions of the Somali population the liaisons worked with, the interactions that took place during the referral process, and personal experiences and reflections from the Somali liaisons

regarding communication practices. For instance, participants were asked the following questions: *(1) What are the main concerns that Somali refugee families typically have for their children in school; (2) Are there common areas of misunderstanding during the referral process?* Each participant provided similar insights, showing patterns across liaison interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the principal investigator.

Artifacts provided by liaisons. Somali liaisons were also asked if they had any artifacts to share that might provide insight into school communication practices with Somali refugee parents. One Somali Cultural Panel Agenda was provided from a 2012 district-sponsored employee information session in which Somali community members shared some cultural knowledge relevant to education needs—all identifiers were immediately redacted. Liaisons also provided blank templates of Somali parent notices that are required by law during the special education referral process as well as district protocols (e.g., Prior Written Notice for meeting announcements).

Phase 2: Somali parent interviews. Semi-structured interview protocols were developed to gain data from Somali parents. Interviews were interpreted by the trusted Somali liaisons that recruited them. Oral consent was obtained prior to beginning the interview and there were no records of the parents' names. Obtaining

oral consent (instead of written consent) and maintaining confidentiality by not collecting parent names was thought to be more culturally responsive given reports of preferred oral communication and stigma around disability. A pseudonym was given to each parent to aid data organization and analysis. The interview, comprised of open-ended questions, lasted approximately 120 minutes and the parents were given a token gift of appreciation of $10. The goal was to gain rich personal narratives regarding the experience of Somali parents during the special education referral process.

Somali parents were asked to describe their cultural community, background experiences, and their perceptions regarding schooling to access prior knowledge that can impact sensemaking (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011). Next, parents were asked to describe their experiences with special education as an open-ended way of gathering personal narratives. As an example, one question asked, "*Can you walk me through the story of how the school talked to you about the possibility of special education?"* The last section included a sentence completion task, which was used as a way of allowing participants to project their voices onto the sentence stems (Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2006).

Phase 3: Somali community member interviews. Background information similar to that provided by parents was collected from Somali community members.

An example of a question regarding the concept of special education that was broad enough for community members as well as parents was, *What are some reasons that Somali children are referred for special education?* In addition to questions that addressed background knowledge, such as clarifying one's view of special education, sentence completion was conducted with Somali community members. As with the parent participants, community members were referred by the liaisons, who were prepared to interpret as needed. Oral consent was obtained prior to beginning the interview and there were no records of the community members' names; again, oral consent (instead of written) was thought to be more culturally responsive, as was the lack of documentation of real names, given reports of preferred oral communication and stigma around disability. A pseudonym was given to each participant to aid data organization and analysis. The community member interview, comprised of open-ended questions, lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data are analyzed continuously as they are being collected (Merriam, 2009). Data were collected using a constructivist grounded theory approach, which assumes that the researcher collects the data with the participants (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Also, this approach begins with concepts that are viewed as "points of departure" for developing ideas (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This allows

for fluidity in the data collection so that participants can to expound on ideas that are relevant rather than prescribed.

After interview data were collected and transcribed, the data were organized to identify themes in text. First, a data display (see Figure 1) was created to assist the researcher in organizing general profiles of participants aid coding (Dornyei, 2007). To facilitate theme development, initial coding took place via line-by-line coding was done to help the researcher to think carefully about materials in new ways (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Selected sections of transcripts and initial codes were reviewed by external qualitative researchers in a course on qualitative methods to increase reliability as a form of an external code check (Dornyei, 2007). Coding procedures frequently suggested in scholarship were not utilized given the lack of representation of Somali populations in special education communication studies, and the desire to let themes emerge naturally from the data. Despite the use of open coding, the researcher had some expectations regarding what might be revealed based on prior scholarship claims (e.g., stigma associated with special education, lack of trust during the referral process). These expectations were taken into consideration, and caution was exercised in interpreting related results to limit researcher bias. For instance, the researcher expected the theme of “stigma associated with special education,” but this was not used as a code. Rather, the

data revealed a similar but related pattern that named stigma as an aspect of a more nuanced concept of disability, rather than simply tying stigma to a special education setting.

After reading through transcribed data line-by-line and noting patterns as indicated by repeated words or phrases, metaphors, topic shifts, and comparisons, emergent themes were color coded (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). An analytic memo, intended to aid inductive reasoning, was written to begin to explore the emerging coding scheme by reflecting on similarities and potential relations of themes (Dornyei, 2007). Initial codes were then reduced to form themes of similar meaning (e.g., fear, terror, and afraid were coded as Fear) and a coding hierarchy was created that further developed larger themes (e.g., Fear and Anger were coded under the theme of Emotions). Then data were color-coded again according to the higher-level themes. Next, another analytic memo was written to process higher-level themes by making comparisons, identifying patterns (reoccurring words), reflecting on intervening variables, and building chains of evidence to make claims (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Member checks were completed to increase the validity of findings during following-ups with the Somali liaisons to reduce bias and increase accuracy of interpretations (Meriam, 2009). For instance, during different points in the data analysis, liaisons were asked if they thought the themes

or claims were representative of the interview data. Triangulation was also used to strengthen validity, by comparing Somali liaison, community member, and parent interview data as well as district documents (Meriam, 2009). For instance, communication practices were compared from various sources: parent and community member reports of how they were informed, liaison reports as a communication bridge between schools and parents and communication protocols from a local school district that list standard practices and legal requirements.

Chapter IV: Results

The following findings are results from the three phases of data collection and analysis that included integrating the Somali liaison, parent and community member interviews as well as school artifacts. Findings were generally organized by the research questions which were:

1) How do Somali community members experience the special education referral process for Somali children?
2) How might schools adapt communication practices during the special education referral process in response to Somali community feedback?

To address the first question, results were reported according to themes that elucidate insider meaning systems of key concepts, relevant background information (i.e. experience with schooling, literacy) and personal narratives of the special

education referral process. Participants' statements and school district artifacts were compared, contrasted, and incorporated into chains of evidence to support thematic claims (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Findings pertaining to the second research question were organized by themes that emerged from Somali parent, community member, and liaison information. The participants suggested ways schools can adapt processes to facilitate more effective communication practices with them. These preferences were presented in contrast to the practices specified in the school district protocols and participant reports. Although these findings represent the perspectives of a limited number of Somali participants in the Seattle metropolitan area. They provide insights into navigating the special education referral process.

How Do Somali Community Members Experience the Special Education Referral Process for Somali Children?

The findings were examined in terms of background knowledge, meaning systems and individual narratives of the special education referral process as described by the Somali participants. The background section provided educational history, entry into the United States, language, and information shared about the Somali community. Meaning systems around disability and special education were

then described, followed by more personal accounts of the special education referral process that was interconnected with their backgrounds and concept knowledge.

Background of participants. The Somali liaisons included two young adult Somali males, Abdi [1]and Ibrahim and a retired European female, Faduma, who lived in Somali for 30 years. Self-identified Somali parents included one middle-aged single father, Daahir, and four mothers: 1) Idil, a young married woman; 2) Canab, a single, middle-aged woman; 3) Garun, a married, middle-aged woman; and 4) Khaali, a married, middle aged woman. Somali community members included two Somali females in early adulthood, Waris and Najmo, and a middle-aged male Somali teacher, Yusuf. Participants relocated to the U.S. from a variety of places including refugee camps (i.e., Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya) or other countries (i.e., Uganda, United Arab Emirates, Syria). Most participants were born in Somalia and left at different times due to war or desire for better opportunities. Basic participant demographics and their background experiences with schooling and special education are presented in Figure 1.

[1] All names used are pseudonyms.

Figure 1.[2] Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Brief Description	General Schooling	Experience with Special Education
Liaisons			
Abdi	Young adult male	College educated in US	Five years of work at a Somali community center assisting families during educational processes
Ibrahim	Young adult male	Working on advanced degree	Seven years as a Somali liaison in the school system
Faduma	Retired female	Professional degree	More than 30 years working with Somali families in medical field and in school districts
Parents			
Khaali	Middle-aged female	Some schooling in refugee camp	Married mother; child with a learning disability
Idil	Young adult female	College educated in US, working on advanced degree	Married mother; child with Autism
Canab	Middle-aged female	Some schooling in Somalia	Single mother; child with Downs Syndrome
Daahir	Middle-aged male	No schooling	Single father; child with a learning disability
Garun	Middle-aged female	Some schooling in Somalia	Married mother; child with Autism
Community Members			
Yusuf	Middle-aged male	College educated in US	Teaches and tutors Somali students, some in special education
Waris	Young adult female	High school in US	Former special education student
Najmo	Young adult female	High school in US	No personal experience

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

Somali participants' educational backgrounds varied from no formal schooling to advanced degrees, with the majority having some secondary schooling (63%). Those with or working on advanced degrees (18%) either studied in another country or the U.S. after relocating at a young age. One parent, Daahir, whose statement was translated by a Somali liaison, did not have a formal education because "school was not mandated in Somalia; it was only if you wanted to go. I did take ESL classes in the camp." This parent spoke some English but was not able to read or write in any language.

Languages used. Participants were asked about languages that they used for oral and written communication. In total, 80% of parents indicated that they spoke limited English and preferred Somali. One parent was fluent in both oral languages. In contrast, all liaisons and community members interviewed spoke both languages fluently and were comfortable speaking in either language.

In terms of the written Somali language, 2 of 5 parents were able to read and write to some extent in both Somali and English; one was able to read but not write in Somali. Two parents were not able to read or write in any language. All three community members could only read and write in English. The three liaisons had some written Somali language skills. One participant indicated that he had limited exposure to Somali reading materials both before and after entry to the U.S. due to

lack of availability of Somali books. Findings regarding language were consistent with the reports that many Somali families require English support (Bhui et al., 2003), and that there is more oral than written Somali communication (Andrzejewski, 2011; Mansy & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 2010).

Differences after U.S. entry. When asked an open-ended question about general differences before and after life in the U.S., most Somali participants stated that there were more or higher quality educational opportunities in the U.S. and that the U.S. is safer, overall. However, many also spoke of challenges. Khaali, a Somali mother, said on her family's relocation to the U.S.

> It's safer here than Somalia. There's more peace and medical care. There is better schooling, but I liked the culture and religion in Africa better. The community always helped out."

Khaali, who entered the U.S. as an asylum seeker, expressed fondness for her home, which she considered to be Somalia, despite some benefits living in the U.S. Specifically, she mentioned safety and education, concerns noted by McBrien (2011). She reported better schooling, as she later indicated that her husband did not have any education in Somalia, while her children in the U.S. are able to "go to school and get help from teachers." She also revealed that another benefit for her

family in the U.S. was increased physical safety, due to access to health care and less risk of harm from warfare.

Of the participants, 10 of 11 mentioned either higher quality schooling or increased access to educational opportunities; 6 mentioned better health care due to access to doctors and areas of specialization; and 5 indicated that there was less risk of physical harm due to less warfare. However, 2 of the participants mentioned that there was continued fear of physical harm due to prejudice or violence in U.S. culture. One referred to an attack on a local mosque a week prior to the interview. The same participant mentioned that a “white woman” threw a brick into the window of the mosque while there were children present and made a negative statement about Islam. Despite some reported improvements in education and safety, several participants reported receiving more general support in Somalia due to the familiar cultural and religious community.

Importance of Islam in a communal identity. Somali participants shared insight on strengths and challenges of their community and described how they identify their community. Most participants indicated that the mosques and community centers were locations where the Somali community members gather. 10 of the 11 participants said Islam was a central part of the community. They explained how their faith encourages kindness to neighbors, which is linked to the

support provided in the community. This finding was consistent with scholarship regarding the importance of Islam as a central part of the community (Ingstad, 1995). Garun spoke about the mosque as a Somali community gathering:

> You feel at home, like there's a safety net. You look out for each other and are accountable for one another. Some people look out for themselves as individuals and some people fall through the cracks but they know the community is there and at least understands the struggles.

In the first two sentences, Garun uses language of comfort, reassurance and understanding as well as protection. The community treats its members like family and provides security when needed and called upon. Other participants described situations in which the Somali community combined financial resources to pay for someone's rent or for a lawyer when the need arose, signaling the collectivist society described by Ingstad (1995). In the last sentence, Garun acknowledges that not all Somali people access these supports or participate in the Somali community, but that they are welcome to do so and she feels as though they share common struggles as Somali people in the U.S.

Discrimination. Many (90%) of the Somali participants mentioned discrimination as a source of struggle for the Somali community in the U.S. Visible identity markers such as skin color and Muslim dress communicate difference from

dominant American culture. Although many mentioned race and religion, Idil described the very complex intersection of race, gender, immigration status and religion as a Somali Muslim woman in the U.S., which adds depth and nuances to the explanations provided in previous research and scholarship:

> Race-related issues used to be the foremost struggle with discrimination. Now there are immigrant Muslim issues with Islamophobia. Women in Muslim dress experience microaggressions every day and it gives me anxiety—I'm always looking out for it. Even if your English is great, you are Othered.

Idil's statement begins with a suggestion that there has been a recent shift in her struggle with daily discrimination such that Islamophobia appears to be more pervasive. She describes a sense of constant anxiety due to subtle ways in which she is reminded every day that she is not viewed as a part of the U.S. dominant culture. She also indicated that as a female who wears the hijab, her "Other" status is more visible than a man that does not wear hijab, even though she might not sound like an "Other" when she speaks. This implies that the discrimination she experiences based on her appearance is not moderated by her English education and ability to communicate as other native speakers. The way she looks as a Somali Muslim woman automatically places her in an "Othered" position. This portrayal of

her inner world demonstrates distance between her worldview and that of dominant American culture, which includes the U.S. school system. Although her religion was a source of discrimination, it also was a major target of personal and community strength.

Somali meaning systems. Given different background knowledge and cultural experiences of the Somali participants, it follows that they would have different meaning systems surrounding concepts such as “disability” and “special education.” During the first phase of the study, liaisons described challenges associated with using words of the U.S. school system with a community that had different views. The three liaisons each gave similar meanings to the terms “special education” and “disability,” which differed from the meaning used in the documents from schools. The term “disability” was initially described in severely negative and distancing terms, then refined with more nuance. According to Abdi:

> If a child is disabled, the parents don’t want to talk about it because they don’t want people to make fun or hurt the child. If it’s not a visible disability, they might want to avoid it.

All three liaisons discussed the stigma associated with disabilities and unwanted reactions from the community. One referred to disabilities as a “cultural

taboo that people want to keep private." In addition to shame associated with disabilities and potential harm to the child, the liaisons implied an element of protection for the child as well. The second sentence in Abdi's statement suggests that disabilities that are not visible are more likely to be avoided and visible disabilities are less likely to be avoided. If others can see the disability, it is more difficult to avoid or hide and therefore more likely to be accepted. Thus, responses may be moderated by the "visibility" of a disability, adding to the complexity of the construct.

Aside from describing "visibility" as a moderating variable for responses to disabilities, the complexity of the construct was advanced in terms of degrees of severity. According to Najma:

> They may be very ashamed of children with mental health problems. It may be less shameful if it's a learning disability or if it's something physical. People may think the parents or the kid did something wrong.

Najma's statement reveals that within the construct of "disability," there are degrees of severity, and mental health issues may lie at the most extreme end. Physical disabilities and learning disabilities are considered as less severe than mental health problems, which is consistent with another participant's statement

that the term “disabilities” comes with stigma attached to being “crazy.” This perception also includes the element of shame, suggesting that there may be implied blame on the parents or the child for having a disability. Two liaisons reported that blame and shame may be due to traditional beliefs that a disability is a “curse from God.” This belief was also noted by Ingstad (1995).

The Somali meaning system for “disability” expressed by participants in this study appears to differ from the meaning system used by the schools. School district communication protocols did not provide conceptualization of disabilities from the U.S. standpoint. Instead the definition appeared to be assumed or referenced by legal codes. The protocols did indicate that a disability is suspected when there are learning problems that cannot be remedied with interventions. These conditions are explained further as follows:

> All students suspected of having a handicapping condition will be assessed and provided specially designed instruction in accordance with procedures outlined in the State of Washington Rules and Regulations for Programs Providing Services to Children with Disabilities, Chapter 392-172 WAC…The Student Services process is designed to ensure that appropriate interventions have been utilized to help the student overcome their learning problems before beginning a referral for special education services… When

> intervention plans have failed to ameliorate the problems or when, based on the available information a disability is suspected…

This implied meaning of disability differs from the Somali concept of disabilities. In the Somali concept, the importance placed on "visibility" as well as suggestions of doing "something wrong," indicated a sense of social judgment associated with having a child with a disability. Mental health issues, which are often factors in disability assessment, might be a particularly emotionally laden topic given the associated shame.

Views of special education. When exploring the meaning system surrounding special education, several themes arose with consistency across most participants. These included the concept of special education appeared to be new to the relocated Somali community; special education was associated with potentially harmful consequences; experiences of past discrimination may impact school interactions; and disability determinations may be considered inappropriate due to different cultural definitions.

The term "special education" was a new term for 5 of the Somali participants, as many parents and community members reported that "there was no such thing as special education," or "the child would not go to school." Since "special education"

was linked to the stigmatized term, “disability,” the negative connotations with “disability” appeared to become a central feature of the meaning of special education. All three liaisons who have worked with many families in the special education referral process indicated that there is an inherently negative connotation with the term that creates a challenge during special education referral meetings. This is consistent with the report of 2 of parents who initially refused to have their children tested. Ibrahim, a liaison, made the following statement that touched upon multiple themes from parents he worked with:

> I think people born before the war are more likely to be skeptical of special education. It might be something environmental [in Seattle] because it wasn’t like this before. There was no special education in Somalia. You were either normal or crazy. The terminology doesn’t sound good to them, like ‘retarded.’ They think there are no other options-- like there’s only self-contained and isolated classes. I think in the past parents haven’t had a good experience because of the over-identification of African students—they’re just putting our kids in there.

Ibrahim spoke about both the newness of the term, “special education,” as something that was not a part of cultural knowledge, and as an association with

the most severe aspect of the concept of "disability." His comments also addressed fears of isolating and stigmatizing children, and experiences of discrimination that parents face daily.

Inconsistent views in special education. Abdi added detail to the potential harms and introduced concerns regarding inappropriate disability determinations in stating that:

> A lot of times, the perception is that those kids [in special education] will be isolated. It's true in a way, like in a self-contained class, you're not with the rest of the students. It's an extreme and there is no middle ground like pull-out services. Also, they think that it's permanent—it's going to stick with you—and that schools are pushing for extra funds. We're better at identifying students now than before. Kids were being pulled out for special education if they were ELL and not given time to learn.

In the above statement, special education is seen as something, severe, permanent and inappropriate for many Somali speaking children that simply need time to learn. This concept of needing "time to learn" is a point of divergence between cultural definitions of disability. More specifically, disability was defined as a "learning problem" tied to performance standards by the school district protocols that was not "ameliorated by interventions." To Somali families, the district may not have

provided enough time or appropriate interventions to determine a disability. Hence, disabilities are not being determined appropriately due to different cultural definitions. Given these differences, the concept of special education may be viewed more negatively as it may be associated with a visible indicator of blame, such as placement in a special education class.

Faduma, who spent most of her adult life in Somalia, described the long-term negative consequences associated with special education as follows:

> Some concerns are tied in to special education because there are fears that their child will be bullied in society or in the apartment complex where a lot of them live. This is especially true for learning disabilities because special education means “not good enough” or they can’t do normal classes. There is almost an allergy to the term… There’s no such thing as special education. The term means, “not normal” so there is a shame factor. It’s a shame-avoidance culture so to be told, “your kid has to go to special education,” it means, “my kid is not good enough and should be doing better and I don’t want to tell people because they will be bullied by others.” Parents see it as a label that holds children back-- that they’ll never get a GED or go to college—that they won’t succeed or finish high school. It depends a lot on what other people say, too. People who have lived here for ten or more years might be

more familiar with the school system and what it is. They might have had kids that were too quickly labeled.

Liaisons, community members and parents linked similar meanings for special education, which were associated with negative social consequences such as isolation, bullying, and being considered as lower than others in educational status. Five of the participants described the lack of special education services in Somalia, and Abdi stated that the term was new to the community, indicating that the social construction of the meaning of special education is relatively recent, likely after 1990s given Ibrahim's reference to the pre-war era as a distinguishing boundary. Also, the definitions were associated with "no other options," "won't succeed", and "no middle ground."

Taken together, "special education" for the Somali community was constructed after entry into the U.S. school system, which sometimes discriminates against Somali children. The scholarship indicates that non-majority students have historically been placed in special education with more subjective disability determinations (e.g., learning disabilities or emotional-behavioral problems) and more restrictive settings (Sullivan et al., 2009). These concerns were recurrent themes in the participant narratives of special education interactions, but they were mediated by the congruence of meaning systems around "disability." Two of five

parents who had children with less “visible” disabilities, such as learning problems, spoke more about cultural discrimination in the special education identification process. For instance, Daahir felt that more time was needed for his child diagnosed with a learning disability. The remaining three of the parents with children with more visible, congruent disability diagnoses, such as Autism, tended to agree with special education eligibility and shared a different view. Canab, a parent with a child with an intellectual disability was pleased with the qualification for special education because she recognized the existence of a disability.

Special education as a forced choice. Two parents, Khaali and Daahir, who initially refused special education testing eventually consented, but did not feel that their children had a disability. The children of these parents were both diagnosed with learning disabilities in the schools. Daahir indicated that the child was referred due to lack of schooling early on and was not afforded the opportunity to catch up. Khaali indicated that her struggling child was “quickly referred to special education because she couldn’t sit still and didn’t know the alphabet, but she was not prepared for school because she is from a different culture.” Both parents were concerned there was “no other option,” as if they needed to choose between school failure and special education. Khaali also reported that the she was not allowed to take her child out of special education.

An alternate view of special education. Although most participants expressed concerns regarding special education for Somali children, three parents shared a more positive viewpoint due to their personal experiences with special education. Also, Waris, a community member, indicated that as a former special education student, she felt appreciative of the experience.

Of the parents, three had children with disabilities that they were aware of prior to the referral had somewhat different views toward special education. One parent had a child with Down Syndrome and two had children with Autism. These parents described special education as a necessary range of services to help their children improve. According to Canab:

> When we were refugees, there was no schooling for him because there were no special schools. He couldn't go to the school because he couldn't function in it and he would get teased by other kids… Special education is for kids that aren't up to their age level in school or they can't participate in normal school. Now the teachers explain so that my child can learn and do things. They are teaching him to use a computer and he likes school.

The narrative provided by Canab differs from the majority of views detailed previously. Special education was described as a necessary place of educational

opportunities for her child. It is described as a place where her child is happy and can learn without being teased by the other students.

Garun described special education from both angles:

> The Somali community would respond differently if the disability was not visible. If the child needs help, not special education, then they would be afraid that it would show on the record… The normal class was understaffed and they couldn't teach him because of his behavior. He needed help from the occupational therapist and speech therapist.

Garun's statement demonstrates that she views special education as providing services that are therapeutic and necessary.

Another perspective came from a former special education student and community member Waris had a positive view of special education:

> I really liked my special education classes because the classes were small and had the same people so I made friends with my classmates. The teachers cared about me and helped me with my work. I feel like I needed those classes to learn because I had a learning disability and I felt like I could do the work there.

Unlike the common viewpoint of special education expressed regarding students in isolation that are inappropriately placed, Waris was a U.S.-born Somali high school graduate who felt like she needed special education to succeed. Special education was a place where she felt social acceptance rather than isolation, and she believed that the program was necessary for her learning.

The cultural concept of special education is more complex than a list of common themes. It appears there is a common negative view of special education that is linked to inappropriate placement due to the discrepant views of a disability. Some students are inappropriately qualified as having a disability and this can have harmful and discriminatory effects. When there was an agreement regarding the presence of a disability, particularly when a visible one, the services can be helpful and necessary for learning. This more complex meaning system around special education highlights the importance of individual experiences in special education referral meetings. These inner experiences affect how future educational services are determined.

Personal experiences. The following section describes emotional narratives of Somali parents during the special education process and how they responded to those situations. Two themes arose: Somali parents reported strong and varied

emotional experiences during the special education process, and Somali parents reported various forms of advocacy.

Emotional experiences described by liaisons. If special education is perceived as a potentially harmful system where Somali children are sometimes inappropriately placed, the special education referral process would bring about strong emotions during interactions between the school and Somali parents. In this section, Somali liaison recollections of various parent reactions are compared to first-hand parent reports.

Somali liaisons described several emotions during the special education referral process. These included referenced fear, denial, shame, anger, and acceptance. Faduma said parents “fear they are doing the wrong thing and fear they are holding their children back from a good future.” She also referred to the “shame factor in the community of having a child with a disability.” Ibrahim touched on these as well as denial and acceptance in stating that:

> Parents fear that the special education label with stay on [the child’s] record. I noticed that they don’t want to talk about it. There’s a negative stigma and they don’t know what special education is about. There’s a fear that the child will feel different and have low self-esteem-- or they’re afraid because of the stigma or because of pride. It’s not about the program, it’s about the way they

> will be perceived. They are thinking on an emotional basis, not just logic. If it's something that is visible, like severe Autism, or if it's a medical problem, they might be more likely to accept it.

While Abdi also discussed fear and shame, he spoke of anger, avoidance and acceptance in the following statement:

> Reactions vary. They might get pissed off: "How dare you say that my kid needs to be tested!" Others say, "I don't want it and I don't want to talk about it" and "My child is fine." Half the families oppose the idea—less so when the disability is visible to them. Some parents say it's OK to evaluate, but once they qualify for a disability, they will say no [to services.] Others will say, "Whatever will help my child."

Liaisons identified a variety of emotions that Somali parents might experience during the special education referral process. Shame and fear tended to be the most frequently emphasized reactions, which were also tied to the perceptions of special education and disability. Liaisons considered the perceptions of others as a source of shame and the fear of negative consequences for their children, yet parents greatly value education according to the liaisons. This claim was supported by a district document from a Somali cultural panel that stated, "The Somali community defines success in terms of a good education. They want their children to graduate,

go to college, and get a good job." Weaving together the implications of special education and the value placed on education, fear of negative consequences appears to be an appropriate response in context. In terms of the polarizing social implications of having a disability in addition to the value placed on social belonging, it also is understandable why shame was a large factor influencing the special education referral process.

Emotional experiences reported by parents. With respect to first-hand experiences, parents reported various emotions. Daahir reported that he did not consent to testing initially out of fear. He was "afraid for his child" who he saw as "different from the other children in those classes." Khaali was initially very angry and upset that the school believed her child had a disability. She wanted to keep her child home because she felt that the school was not providing appropriate services for struggling Somali children.

Unlike the parents above who did not agree that the child had a disability, Canab believed that her child had a disability and had a different reaction. She said, "I was not surprised when they talked about special education. I felt happy that he could enter school and learn something." Her child had not been able to go to school in the refugee camp so her experience was different than the other Somali parents because special education was compared to a complete lack of education.

Of the parent participants, two had with children with Autism and they shared more detailed stories of the special education and doctor referrals that they had initiated. Both parents reported taking their children to the doctor due to their concerns and experiencing deep emotions during the process of disability determination despite knowing there was a need for disability services. Idil described the following experience as she slowly processed the fact that her child had a disability:

> At 12 months, I noticed that he was regressing—he was so good, so calm and quiet, not fussy like before. He would tune-out and started talking less. He forgot words so I was afraid he was going deaf. He had surgery for tubes and adenoids, but he kept getting worse. When the specialist told me he had Autism at 18 months, I was hysterical and did not take it well… I took him to the school to get tested while I waited for language services that I demanded from Children's. The special education testing was conclusive because there was such a delay in language. I was screaming on the inside and left the room and was sobbing on the floor—it took a year to get to a place of acceptance. I knew it, but it's impossible to describe the horror. It was the worst thing in my life. I couldn't believe—it was impossible to take. It's a lifetime as a mom—my hopes and dreams for him.

Idil's statement reveals that she was aware that there was a problem—there was a visible disability to her. She took her child to the doctor and eventually school district for testing, but even though she "knew" something was wrong, she experienced profound sadness and fear for her child's future. She proceeded to describe the process of writing a will to assure her child would be taken care of, as she needed to be practical and protect his future if something should happen to her. Despite knowing that her child had a disability and would need special education services, she reported that it took her a year to feel acceptance. In the present study, one of parents immediately felt hope, two were angry or denied the possibility of a disability (the veracity of the belief is unknown) and two were fearful but with a sense of necessity.

These results were somewhat similar to those reported by Haley et al. (2013). In a sample of mostly Hispanics (language was not specified) regarding reactions to the referral process, about half of the initial responses included shock, denial, and anger, and 45% indicated acceptance, relief, and hope for improvement. Less frequent experiences were sadness or worry.

Overall, there was a wide variety of strong emotions experienced by parents when a child is referred for special education, as many are greatly invested in the futures of their children and want to make the best choices for them. Parents

described mixed emotions that included fear, anger, sadness and acceptance. Often, responses were related to a desire to advocate for the needs of their children.

Examples of Somali parent advocacy. Somali parents often advocated for their children in different ways by denying consent for a special education evaluation they felt was not appropriate, requesting student services they considered necessary, and asking for parent needs (e.g., request for more frequent communication) to be met.

Trainor (2010) identifies ways that parents participate in special education decision-making, including addressing the individualized preferences, strengths, and needs of their children. Somali liaisons explained ways in which Somali parents sought to protect their children when they suspected harm. Given that some parents may perceive special education as oppressive or do not believe their child has a disability (based on the Somali meaning), they might resist the process that might harm their child. However, some Somali participants in this study and others (Haley et al., 2016) acknowledge that there might also be an element of denial. Despite the reason, some Somali parents resist the passive "consent giver" role. For instance, Faduma described the following situation in which a parent defended her child:

> There is a suspicion that America wants to hold [Somali] kids back and they don't want them to succeed. It takes a long time to overcome these suspicions

and the referrals go so quickly. They just think, “Why not just give my child more time?” Everything is so fast-paced and special education meetings are so intimidating and overwhelming. They feel bad because everyone else is talking about the child and they listen but don’t grasp what they are talking about because they don’t know the concepts. After the others talk about the child, there might be time for the parent to ask a question or two, but there is often not enough time for good translating because there are lots of concepts to explain and sometimes the interpreters don’t even know the concepts. Some Somali women are like the mother lion. One mother fought for lower work that the child can do instead of putting the child in special education. She cornered the special education director—Somalis don’t want to be disrespectful, but they are fighting for what they think is best.

Abdi provided a different example of Somali families protecting children during this process:

> Recently I met a father of a child that was referred for special education testing and everything seemed OK, like he was alright with it, but then the sister in law came in and the tone changed. I don’t know if she had a bad experience or basically was just hearing negative things about special education. So relatives and community members will come to meetings

> because that person knows more and the person can protect them and help them… There is a power difference. It depends on whoever the parent feels has more knowledge or is close to and they will listen to that person.

Parent participants also detailed ways that they have advocated for the needs of their children during the special education referral process. Two parents asked the school district for the specific services when requesting the special education evaluation. Two other parents denied consent for the evaluation initially. Daahir explained that he initially refused special education testing:

> My child was placed in the 4th grade at 9 or 10 years old. He had no school before and others went to preschool. I told the school it was hard for him to catch up based on what he should do for his age. He is going to struggle. The only way he could get help was special education. I said they should have something else to offer. They should have other things.

Daahir understood that his child was struggling and raised his concerns at the special education referral meeting. He indicated that the age-based standards were not appropriate given the child's educational background and that the school should provide help outside of special education. He was advocating for fair assessment of progress for students with different educational backgrounds and other options for support besides special education. Daahir's perspective represents the viewpoint

that his child did not have a disability and that the discriminatory measures of progress were being used because his child was being compared to inequitable standards.

Two other parents indicated that they advocated for more appropriate services for their children during the special education process. In both cases, parents referred their children to the school district due to a medical diagnosis and made specific requests they felt their children needed.

According to Idil:

> Advocating for equitable treatment is resistance. Systems benefit only some—white affluent people-- and I'm tired of fighting politely… The school didn't have ABA therapy for my son. I talked to the school and said it was ridiculous. I just want better for my son.

Idil's felt she had to resist the system and advocate for her child to get what he needs and what is equitable. The comment, "tired of fighting politely," implies that she has made numerous "polite" attempts to fight on her son's behalf and will continue to advocate for her child with fewer reservations about appearing well-mannered. She is now using a more direct approach to get equitable treatment for her son, by telling the school that the systems in place are "ridiculous" and suggesting remedies to the situation.

In the absence of a trusting relationship, Somali parents and schools may not come to mutual understandings. In some cases, an educator might believe that the Somali parent is being difficult by "resisting." Thus, the lack of cultural responsivity in communication may result in misunderstanding of meanings, motivations, and feelings of Somali parents. The consequences of these misunderstandings could impact the education outcomes of Somali children. Thus, it is important to explore ways to facilitate shared meaning systems through culturally responsive communication practices.

How might schools adapt communication practices during the special education referral process in response to Somali community feedback?

Prior to reflecting on culturally responsive communication practices during the special education referral process, Somali participants described their interactions and experiences with schools in this context. In the next section, the typical school communication practices are described in terms of district communication protocols and Somali descriptions of the referrals. After indicating typical communication practices, Somali participants provided insights regarding practices that hindered or facilitated mutual understanding, or culturally responsive communication.

Current Communication Practices

Current communication practices meant to support culturally and linguistically diverse families may not be effective with Somali populations. Documents provided by school districts detailing the procedures of the special education referral process provide limited communication guidelines for working with diverse families. School psychologists typically facilitate the referral process and are provided with some multicultural pre-service training. The responsibility placed on individuals indicates that there is variation in practices, as some school psychologists might be able to adapt practices more effectively. Findings also indicated that there are a variety of practices used, but overall, the guidelines specified by district and legal procedures do not appear to be sufficient.

District artifacts. District protocols provided by the liaisons listed legal requirements: “1) written referral received; 2) procedural safeguards (to parents); 3) notice of meeting to discuss results of the review of referral information; and 4) prior written notice to the parent detailing the decision made.” The conclusion of this process is “parent consent secured for assessment.” The Procedural Safeguards packet of parental rights is offered in the Somali language in the form of a 42-page booklet. In addition to the Procedural Safeguards language not being understandable to most English-speaking parents (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006), many Somali parents are unable to read in any language and have limited

educational backgrounds in the American system. The notice of a meeting below is often provided in English, but sometimes given to parents with some Somali text, and some English text. It consists of a check-box style list to indicate the reason for the meeting, which is sometimes scheduled at the convenience of the educators and presented to parents:

Figure 2. Meeting Notice

You are invited to attend a meeting concerning

_____
Student's name

PURPOSE OF MEETING ***(check all that apply)****:*

- ☐ IEP Development/Review
- ☐ IEP Amendment
- ☐ Secondary Transition Planning
- ☐ Manifestation Determination
- ☐ Discuss Special Education Referral
- ☐ Discuss Evaluation/Reevaluation Results
- ☐ Consider Extended School Year (ESY) Services
- ☐ Other:

The meeting has been scheduled for:

_____ _____ _____
Date *Time* *Location*

Once a decision has been made whether or not to pursue special education testing, a similar check-box form is sent home to indicate that decision. Although there are variations to the additional communication components during the referral process, these forms are typically mandated by the district.

Somali participant reports of communication practices. The Somali liaisons, community members, and parents provided descriptions of communication challenges in schools from their perspectives. All but one of the eleven participants

(one community member did not respond to the question) spoke to the common practice of the school's use of "mostly English papers," such as report cards and notices. They also reported going to the school to "ask the teacher questions," sometimes with their children to help them interpret. Most reported the availability and use of interpreters or liaisons. Despite the ways that the Somali participants stayed informed about school processes and performance, they criticized current practices and provided suggestions about how the school could improve communication practices with Somali families.

Critiques of current practices. Somali participants generally agreed that the language and procedures used in special education referral meetings are distancing to parents and may decrease trust. Areas of need included barriers to accessing information and lack of trust that hinders relationship-building. Faduma reported the following:

> It's a big wordy meeting. They see the school psychologist as a judge and there are so many constraints. Time and the use of jargon are always a factor. Sometimes when parents ask questions the teacher seems irritated like they know better. Teachers should not be defensive or talk down just because they don't have the same education. Also, there are hardly any books in

> Somali—it's more oral and visual. You can throw all the papers at them and it won't work.

Faduma's statement highlights that parents may not be getting sufficient information due to time constraints, mode of communication, and inaccessible language; and there may be a power differential experienced by parents as they try to get information, since school psychologists are positioned as a "judge" and teachers, higher in status.

In terms of receiving insufficient information, participants spoke of ways that they were not able to access the content of meetings or reading materials. Half of the parents and community members shared that they had experienced meetings in schools that were "too quick to get all the details" or during times that were not convenient. Some were not able to attend the meetings due to "12-hour work days" or "no transportation." Five of the participants mentioned that they were not able to understand the readings, either in English or Somali. One parent reported that "even though there was a Somali interpreter, and translated papers, the Somali interpreter did not understand the terms and could not explain well." Although, Idil is working on an advanced degree, the special education process with all its forms and terms were "impossible to navigate." Idil also spoke to the issue of power in the following statement:

> I felt like a nuisance…If you are not English proficient, the system doesn't work. I have a college education and I can't understand all the language, testing, recommendations—the system is not geared towards everyone, just those who can take time off work, have insurance, resources, grandparents to help with childcare.

The fact that Idil was not the type of person the system was "geared toward" made her feel like a "nuisance" because she required more support and more time than others. Such barriers to access and feelings of disempowerment led to mistrust in the collective Somali community.

Lack of trust and relationship-building. Abdi, a liaison who previously spoke about off-putting terminology used, also noted the lack of trust due to unfamiliarity with the complicated referral process and the people involved in special education meetings. He said,

> Trust is always an issue. A lot of parents don't know the school very well systemically…For the most part, Somalis see the school as positive and trying to help the child. There's still a handful that are pessimistic about people they don't recognize. Also, people are trained to talk in a good way professionally—they have some kind of strengths and people might say the child is doing well for his level because of where he came from. Families might not like when the

> bar is set low. Families don't like sugar-coating because it doesn't sound honest.

To Abdi, although most Somali people have a positive view of the school, some simply do not trust the school. Abdi offered explanations such as lack of familiarity with certain people or the strengths-focused school culture that "sugar coat" information in a way that does not seem authentic to Somali parents. This may reinforce feelings of discrimination and disempowerment by the system that is not "geared towards" them. Idil, who often spoke of biased systems, stated:

> I told the principal face-to-face 'I'm holding you accountable. I don't trust you, but I like you. Know that everyone knows I will hold you all accountable and I want to work together as equal partners in education.'

While Idil "likes" the school staff, she does not trust them, as they are part of a system that does not work implicitly for her or her child. She is informed and educated and views herself as an "equal partner" that wants to participate in and be genuinely informed regarding the education of her child.

Overall, the district protocols and Somali participant reports verify the standard use of specific communication protocols who are in written format, which is not the preferred mode of communication for Somali parents. When parents arrive

for meetings, there may be some feelings of mistrust that could be exacerbated by jargon, feelings that their views are not being valued, being in an unfamiliar situation with unknown people, and having information shared in less direct ways that are "sugar-coated" as if there are lower expectations for the child. With such issues in mind, the Somali liaisons offered suggestions for ways to enhance culturally responsive communication with Somali parents during the special education referral process.

Reforming the System

Somali liaisons, parents, and community members shared various ways that schools might address their concerns above. Liaisons shared ways that schools might facilitate shared communication, demonstrate respect, build trust and reach out to the Somali community. Somali parents and community members touched upon similar themes about ways special education communication systems might be reformed, however, four of the five Somali parents of students in special education raised critical questions that challenged the nature of special education.

Culturally responsive communication. Many Somali participants shared insights regarding procedural changes to adapt processes in more culturally responsive ways. All participants agreed that community awareness and Somali liaisons are essential, as trusting relationships require time to grow and cannot be

created in a few formal meetings without Somali representation. In diverse school districts, the issue of being a cultural outsider will often arise, and cultural brokers can assist educators by identifying areas of incongruence that interfere with shared knowledge or shared understanding. The following sections include a summary of recommendations from Somali liaisons to build shared meaning through trusting and respectful relationships with the Somali community within the current special education system.

Strategies to increase shared knowledge. Somali participants frequently indicated that schools should limit jargon and check for understanding to provide opportunities for questions. Khaali described a meeting in which she felt like she was not informed:

> They were just like, 'Here are the papers to sign,' and 'the child will be better off,' with no further explanation. My husband and I didn't understand.

Khaali's experience is an example of what a meeting might feel like when paperwork and terminology are not adequately explained. Similarly, Daahir reported that he did not know at the initial referral meeting that they were talking about special education. These appear to be common examples of the lack of shared understanding between schools and families during the special education process.

To assist with this issue, Ibrahim, a liaison, stated that schools and liaisons should “explain concepts, even things like special education or different kinds of disabilities, especially if a parent looks confused.” Liaisons recounted frequently needing to address common concerns such as what testing looks like, parent rights to revoke consent to test or services at any time, and high school graduation requirements. Another concern mentioned was fear of isolation so another recommendation was to assure parents that special education includes a wide range of services (e.g., resource room, self-contained, etc., depending on the least-restrictive environment), and indicate where services will likely be provided and what they might look like. Informing parents that there are usually a few students with special education services in a given classroom, may help alleviate the fear that the child will not be alone according to a parent who also mentioned that she felt better seeing a resource room that “looked like a normal class.” To this parent, normalizing the experience of special education and students with disabilities seemed important.

In terms of disability discussions, emotional or behavioral disabilities (e.g., mood disorders) are viewed as more severe and are less familiar than physical disabilities (e.g., blindness) and neurodevelopmental or learning disabilities. Clarifying these different categories of diagnosis are important because addressing

mental health issues may elicit more negative emotions. Therefore, it may be beneficial to explain things in medical terms if possible. For instance, describing a student with attention problems as possibly struggling with an underlying medical condition that affects alertness. The biological explanation may be more understandable than stating that the student has behavior problems.

Lastly, having a Somali liaison available to contact the parents with a short, general phone call explaining the purpose of the meeting may help according to a parent who wanted to understand the nature of meetings ahead of time since notices are generally in English. Even when a translation is available, it may be helpful to summarize lengthy legal documents verbally, as oral communication is generally preferred over written and conversations over paperwork may facilitate the process of building trust through relationships.

Strategies to build trust. Many Somali participants (55%)stated that they prefer informal learning and value social relationships. Sending written communication home and “speaking at them” in formal meetings are not conducive to building a trusting relationship according to Yusef, a Somali community member and teacher. Since such formal meetings are required, liaisons recommended that school staff undergo cultural responsiveness training to demonstrate respect for

their culture and community. Abdi shared the importance of including trusted community members or staff in these meetings:

> That's why it's always important to always bring a couple people that they know and people that have worked with them. A meeting won't start well if they don't know people. It's human nature to be pessimistic if you don't know people. It's also important to have those people start the meeting, too, and allow them, or the Somali liaison, to begin the meeting. Ask the family if there are any important people they would like present to support them in the process and invite them as well.

Another liaison, Faduma, stressed the importance of limiting the amount of unknown team members to prevent overwhelming the family. Ibrahim added that staff should be honest and objective about performance, comparing the student progress to comparable peers. Idil, a parent, felt that parents should be given extra time to assure that the meeting is not rushed, as it may be perceived as pressure. She also stated that some interpreters do not understand school processes.

Strategies to equalize power. Two of the parents indicated that they at times felt like they were a "nuisance" or looked down upon because of limited knowledge of educational systems. Liaisons said it is important to listen to parent

concerns, validate them, and problem solve with them to assure they are “equal partners.” For instance, Yusuf suggested that staff acknowledge that Somali families care about educational opportunities and brainstorm ways to help students succeed at their optimal level. One father, Daahir, wanted the school to “set the bar high enough instead of having low expectations” for Somali children who are struggling. This implies that Daahir’s thought that the school did not believe in his child’s success.

As part of this study, a sentence completion opportunity was provided to gain more insights regarding participants’ views of what the school thought about Somali children and parents. However, most parents and community members did not complete this section of the interview protocols. They thought that the task was confusing or they did not know how to respond to the sentence stems. The two liaisons who helped with interpretation indicated that this “may not make sense” because Somalis are used to direct questions. Therefore, the sentence completion task was dropped because it was not culturally responsive practice for the participants.

According to Faduma, many parents need to be assured that accepting special education services does not mean their children will not go to college. In fact it may increase the likelihood of college success by improving academic skills early.

Ibrahim recommended that school staff consider these high educational goals and understand the history of trauma, sources of knowledge and social stigma associated with special education when working with Somali parents to show respect for common aspirations, and experiences in the community.

Community involvement. Another area, which extends beyond the referral process but is vital to improving culturally responsive practices in schools, is community involvement. The three liaisons agreed that educators should partner with parents and advocate within their schools, districts, and states for more culturally appropriate communication practices. They suggested that if the goal of the school is to build mutual understanding regarding special education meaning systems and practices, the Somali community leaders would be an important place to start. Four of the five of the parents also recommended more meaningful involvement; more awareness of community needs, strengths, and preferences; and developing trusting relationships through more communication, particularly oral. As Ibrahim stated,

> Trust is not a one or two-meeting thing. It takes time. Proactive work needs to be done. Not just a reactive special education meeting… They give the school respect, but the school is closed off to family engagement, unlike back home; you don't know the families on an individual basis. Here, it's an assembly line

> with a few events per year. The ideology of school has to change—family engagement should be between all staff and families and not just the liaison. To be proactive is to hold more frequent workshops in the community, to debunk myths about special education using data and stories, to meet with religious and community organizations, and to share knowledge with each other.

Strategies to increase access. Most Somali parents who participated in this study provided other ways that the schools could help increase their involvement in decision-making processes and meetings. Garun spoke of the struggle that she encountered getting transportation to meetings. Idil offered the following suggestions that would increase access for parents:

> Schools should do home visits because it's very difficult to get to the school with kids and work. They need to have more appointments that are convenient for the family. Things can be done outside of the school. There are also no checks in the system so I have to do everything myself. There needs to be more planning ahead and talk before decisions are made.

Idil addressed the difficulty that many families have getting to the school at the times that are presented by the schools. Paired with her previous comments

regarding economic standing, immigrant families have fewer resources, and therefore, more challenges getting to appointments at the convenience of the school. Taking these factors into consideration and going to the homes of Somali families could increase their ability to participate. She also commented on the lack of "checks in the system," which ties into her comments about the lack of accountability in keeping parents adequately informed to facilitate a true partnership. Three of the parents reported that they needed to go to the schools and have their children interpret to get information. Idil advocated for increased communication initiated by the school in advance so families can be prepared and participate meaningfully in decisions.

Critical questions. Four of the five parents interviewed asked critical questions about the special education system that went beyond the scope of the intended purpose of the study. The theme of differential power was explored regarding the barriers to participation and feeling that "there is no other option" besides special education for struggling students from Daahir's perspective. He asks, "Why can't they just give the support without calling it special education?" Similarly, Faduma reported a common parent concern when students perform below grade level:

> Parents think, “If my kid can’t work at the third grade level but can do first grade work, why not put them in first grade?” They don’t understand that age goes with grade because in their country, they can stay at the level they can cope with.”

Faduma and Daahir describe solutions that are seemingly logical in a different and more informal educational system, but do not fit with the U.S. educational system that separates funding for special education services and has grade level expectations with age boundaries. Underneath the theme of mismatched educational procedures and policies, there is a current of discontent with a system that is “not geared towards” Somali families, in Idil’s language.

Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of the research was fulfilled in that valuable insights were provided by Somali parents, liaisons and community members regarding the research questions, but analysis of results identified assumptions and limitations of the research questions themselves. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to identify more culturally responsive practices, that could exist within the current system. However, parents provided insights that challenged the current system. In the discussion section, findings are related to relevant scholarship according to overarching themes that emerged from the results. Two larger themes surfaced:

1) Congruent meaning systems around disability and special education may lead to more positive experiences during the unfamiliar special education process.

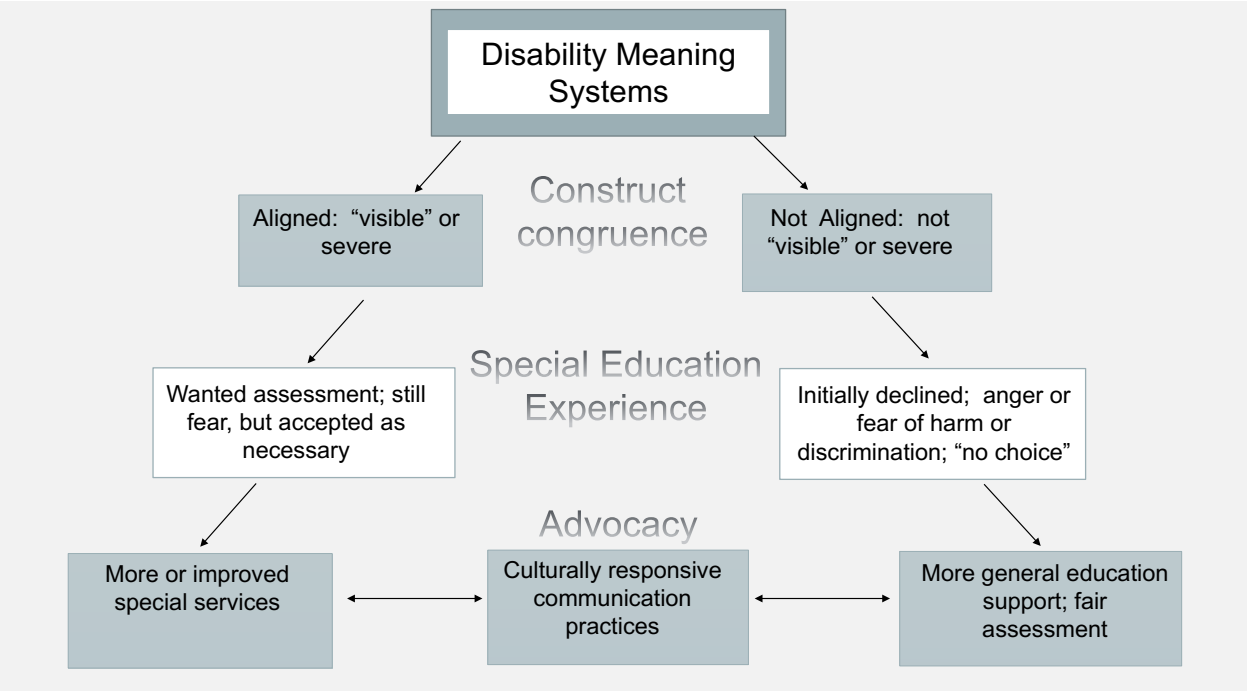
2) Communication practices recreate oppression due to the monocultural nature of the current system.

Congruent Meaning Systems and Special Education Referral Experiences

The Somali participants had a variety of backgrounds and educational experiences that differed from the U.S. school system. As Kapteijns and Arman (2004) suggested, Somalis have different knowledge structures that may lead to misunderstandings with schools. Roy and Roxas (2011) also described instances of differences in perspectives and how they lead to negative interactions with the schools. Consistent with these claims, the current study indicated that some Somali participants and school district protocols used different definitions of "disability." Figure 3 demonstrates different pathways described by parent participants. When school and parent views of disabilities were different, parents were more likely to decline services and describe more negative experiences. These parents tended to advocate for more general education supports or fair assessment practices. When parent and school concepts of disabilities were aligned, parents were more likely to agree to an assessment and experience

acceptance. These parents advocated for more or improved special education services.

Figure 3. Disability Meaning Systems



Disability and special education. Given the different educational backgrounds of the Somali participants, it would not be appropriate to assume that this population would have knowledge of U.S. systems and ways of viewing disability. The school district procedures loosely referred to "learning problems" as an indicator of a disability, which may not be considered a disability in places with less systematic learning objectives and optional formal schooling (Macharia, 1990). The school district protocol also alluded to an assumed definition of disabilities that is tied to state law, and requires "intervention plans that fail to ameliorate the

problem." Essentially, the school district protocols revealed formal meaning systems that are not automatically understood or shared by outsiders to the U.S. school system. In contrast, descriptions provided by the Somali participants were deeply tied to social stigma and harmful consequences. Therefore, the implied meaning of disability during the typical special education process might not be culturally relevant and could impact the ability of schools to develop shared meaning when communicating with Somali parents.

Rather than defining disability in terms of meeting educational standards, the Somali participants described it in terms of "visibility" and severity. Disabilities were associated with negative consequences, not to the extent as described by Ingstad (1995), but in terms of social stigma with levels of severity. The three parents with children with "visible" disabilities in their opinions, immediately consented to testing or sought testing themselves. The two parents who did not "see" a disability did not consent to testing initially. They expressed anger or frustration with the system that provided them with "no other option" for support but they eventually agreed to special education testing, even though they did not agree with it.

Descriptions of special education provided by several participants in this study suggests that special education is viewed as a harmful source of unwarranted

restriction of opportunities for social participation and educational outcomes that disproportionately effects the Somali community. The harm may be social or physical through separation or bullying, which also has been suggested in the literature (Ingstad, 1995). Special education is perceived as socially restricting access to peers and academically restricting access to higher levels of education (Harry, 1992). Results from the present study indicated that some parents believe special education placement is unwarranted at times because the U.S. concept of disability (vaguely described as a learning problem in the school district artifacts) may not map onto the more polarized construct traditionally known to the Somali community. The Somali parents and community members were aware of the disproportionate placements of African English language learners in the community, which also is discussed in scholarship by authors such as Harry (1992) and King et al. (2015). Overall, the special education process might be commonly viewed as oppressive and possibly detrimental to Somali school outcomes, which scholarship and study findings suggest is a critical concern for parents (Wise, 2002).

Emotional responses to special education referrals. The participants offered different instances of emotional reactions to special education referrals and ways that Somali parents advocate for the needs of individual children. From the viewpoint of an educator working within the U.S. school system, this may appear

adversarial as suggested in the study by Kapteijns and Arman (2004); from the view of the parents interviewed, this is a necessary means of advocating for Somali children to shield them from the potential harms of special education and a disability label. Although there are circumstances in which a child genuinely requires special services to advance in school, from the Somali perspective, parents are attempting to protect their children from discrimination, maintain their sense of agency in decision making (so that they are not "stuck"), and ensure they are doing right by their children (Harry, 1992).

In a situation in which a child requires special education to succeed in the American system, both the school and the Somali parents might be advocating for the needs of the child. However, given the discrepant views of what a disability is and what special education means, it becomes apparent that each group has a very different idea of how to best serve the child. Specifically, the school might be concerned about a 4th grader who is unable to decode unfamiliar multi-syllabic words despite being in U.S. schools for 5 years and receiving intensive phonics interventions, while English learning peers of similar backgrounds are able to read grade level books. The family might see that the child can recite a three-sentence story, participate in community activities, and perform home duties as well as others. This situation might be emotionally challenging for the child in a room of

same-aged peers with such a great different in ability level, thus increasing the importance of making an appropriate decision. From the Somali perspective, there may be no visible problem in the home-- the child may need more time, more tutoring, or a lower grade level reading curriculum. From the school perspective, all interventions and accommodations have been used and the type of lower work requested is the school's definition of special education (modified work below grade level). The parent might hear special education and learning disability and think that the school is calling the child "retarded" and promoting isolation (Ingstad, 1995; Brunswick, 2013). The two groups want the best for the child, but there are different ideas of what constitutes a disability, what intervention is needed, and what special education means or looks like. There may be strong emotions and disagreement regarding services when meaning systems are not aligned. Thus, it follows that fostering congruent meaning systems may foster more agreement and more positive experiences for parents.

Different types of advocacy. Each parent interviewed voiced concerns about current communication practices in schools, but parents advocated for different types of services depending upon their agreement with the school regarding the concept of disability. When the concept of disability was congruent between the parent and the school, parents advocated for more or improved special education

services. One parent requested that her child with Autism receive Applied Behavioral Analysis and Occupational Therapy. Another parent with a child with Autism asked for more communication service hours with a speech and language pathologist. Parents who did not share the school's perception of disability advocated for general education supports such as more time to catch up academically with US-born peers, lowered curriculum, and placing students based on skill rather than age. These parents also indicated asked for fair assessment that considers language-learning and different schooling experiences.

Addressing Communication Practices that Reinforce Oppression

The Somali participants offered several ways that school staff could reduce discriminatory communication practices, which was the original intent of the study. The recommendations were divided by two major themes: 1) reform strategies that schools could use to improve practices within the current system, and 2) critical questions that challenge the current system as inherently unjust.

Reforming oppressive strategies. District protocols and Somali participant reports in this study are aligned with research that indicates the standard modes of communication used during the special education process. This includes lengthy written documents to communicate parent participatory rights (Kupper, 2000). Participants generally described a preference for more personalized communication

practices which was similar to findings in a study by Coady, Cruz-Davis, and Flores (2009) of Spanish speaking families. The participants offered some helpful strategies to increase equity. These included strategies that facilitate shared communication, demonstrate respect, build trust and reach out to the Somali community. These adaptations connect in to the interpretive conceptual framework of culturally responsive communication practices as strategies that are likely to promote shared meaning, adjust to specific populations, and result in empathic relationships (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011). Although these are admirable goals, they do not address the underlying issue of equity the parents advanced. The improvements proposed implies that Somali parents do not feel valued, as discrimination impacts them across settings including schools. They also perceive numerous restrictions to their meaningful participation linked to issues of lower social class.

Addressing deficit-based communication. Narratives of subtle acts of discrimination arose during the present study within the school context that are embedded in the larger U.S. setting were presented. Somali participants in the study spoke of “microaggressions,” such as subtly conveying lower expectations or “talking down” to parents, that indirectly impact confidence and agency (Sue et al., 2007). In essence, parents described a deficit-view towards them, linked to race,

education, language, culture, and immigrant status. Research supports accounts that many school personnel (knowingly, or not) continue to view students of color, particularly those from lower income families, through a deficit lens (Harry, Klinger, & Hart, 2005). School staff may be unknowingly maintaining subtle forms of discrimination within the special education process by failing to recognize high expectations, acknowledge the value of Somali perspectives, and ensure meaningful participation.

Addressing class-related barriers. Parent reports of barriers to meaningful participation align with a class-analysis argument, which examines the role of educational processes in maintaining class differences by reproducing stratifying forces (Valdés, 1996). Stratifying forces were reproduced in the Somali parent accounts by disproportionately advantaging middle-class English-speaking families with communication practices such as written notices and standard school meetings. The school acts to legitimize and obscure inequality, in this view, leaving non-majority parents to feel like there are no other options and that they have to accept being passive or non-participants.

The challenges parents faced were directly related to class and prevented them from involvement in decision-making. Economic and educational differences prevented parents from equitable opportunities to participate. Meetings were held

at the school at the school's convenience, thus, one parent noted the disproportionate economic impact when a single mother that works 12-hour shifts needs to lose wages and find transportation to school. There was the additional challenge of navigating mostly English paperwork, unfamiliar terminology and sometimes inadequate interpretation. The Somali participants made recommendations to diminish such obstacles and enhance equity in special education referral meetings, a responsibility that will typically fall to individual school psychologists as they facilitate meetings, according to special education research (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The participants also confronted the monocultural U.S. special education system that unintentionally and intrinsically oppresses non-majority families by favoring English speaking middle-class families through standard policy regulations.

Challenging the System

When the embeddedness of oppressive forces is not challenged by school personnel, they may unintentionally perpetuate the existing class structures and cultural expectations, which reinforced inequitable systems (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). If an immigrant student does not meet a cultural expectation, there is a possibility that educators may place blame with the child, other cultures, or the parent

(Valencia, 1997). This may lead to more negative views and interactions, which then cause differential opportunities within the school setting. Thus, inequities may be reproduced and damage trust, a salient theme from Somali participant interviews (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Invalidating social transactions may lead to less shared meaning, more stereotyped assumptions, and less trusting and empathic relationships that define culturally responsive communication (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011).

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations are present within this study. Given the specific populations of interest, such as Somali liaisons with multiple years of experience and Somali parents of children in special education, very few participants could be recruited. For instance, in the Seattle metropolitan area, many school districts utilize interpreters, but few employ Somali liaisons to assist with cultural and language interpretation services to support families in special education. In terms of parent participants, with the stigma regarding disability and special education, in addition to the non-Somali researcher, it was difficult to recruit parents and community members. Moreover, participants were not comfortable with videotaping and many did not respond to the sentence-completion portion of the study as they did not perceive the task to be culturally appropriate or were not sure how to respond. This

raises questions about lost data-gathering opportunities in the interviews with parents and community members.

The cultural and language difference between the researcher and participants, mediated by a Somali liaison, also posed issues regarding interpretation of meaning and rapport building. Riessman (1987) indicates that differences in background characteristics of the researcher and participants act as barriers that can hinder rapport and trust. This could result in censorship in what the researcher is allowed to hear or see, thus limiting the scope and depth of the data gathered. It is also possible that cultural concepts could be misinterpreted or translations might not be exact. During interviews, the items were translated by liaisons to parents; the parent response was then transplated back into English for analysis, leaving more room for misinterpretation of concepts. For instance, if a researcher uses the word *family* to mean nuclear relatives, but the liaison or parent views *family* in a broader sense, such as community or extended family, communication may be mismatched and result in inaccurate information.

Lastly, the interpretivist conceptual framework of this study was intended to gain insights on improving practices. Findings suggest that the framework was useful, yet limited because it assumed that the work of improving culturally responsive communication practices could be done within the current special

education system. A critical framework would better explore questions raised by the parents, as many characteristics of special education in the U.S. may preclude culturally responsive practices with non-majority populations by contributing to experiences of discrimination. Despite these limitations, this research is valuable because it focuses on the descriptions of Somali participants-- either through their own words or interpreted through other members of the Somali community-- and how they make meaning of the special education process.

Future Research

With the intended goal of enhancing responsivity in cross-cultural communication, the current study suggests that educators could improve communication practices during the special education process as it is. However, educators interested in social justice must join parents in questioning educational processes that disadvantage them. Delpit (2006), suggests that rather than using school resources to look for disabilities, educators should just "teach the children what they need to know" (p.3). Stepping back from the current special education system, Delpit makes a reasonable claim. For instance, if schools received adequate funding for multi-tiered student support services and educators could employ more diverse practices with lower student-to-teacher ratios, could intensive interventions take place without the labels associated with special education?

Moreover, the results of the study indicate that there are multiple cultural meaning systems around the definition of a disability; by adhering to the U.S. special education standards of a disability, educators invalidated Daahir's cultural knowledge and took away his agency, leaving him with "no other option." Are we too readily labeling non-majority children as having a disability as Daahir suggested? Thus, the work of cultural responsivity in communication practices extends outside the framework of this study, which met the modest goal of seeking to understand

experiences and identify ways to adapt practices in the current system of special education. The findings suggest that educators must listen to parent concerns and critically reevaluate systems with a lens on equity to build empathy and shared meaning systems.

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APPENDIX A: SOMALI COMMUNITY MEMBER INTERVIEWS

Somali Community Member Interview Questions

"Thank you for agreeing to share your thoughts with us today. I'm a student at UW and I'm interested in your experiences of schooling for Somali children. *(We) are not working with any schools and simply want to know how schools can support Somali families when talking about special education testing. In order to get a bigger picture, we will be asking about your cultural community, your personal background, your view of school, and your thoughts on special education. Your honest opinions would be greatly appreciated because it gives us a better understanding your experience."

["We" is used rather than I given that typically Somali families are more oriented toward the liaison in meetings and I want to respect that the liaisons are present both physically and in the line of questioning that was developed after interviews with liaisons.]*

A. Cultural Community:

First, we would like to know more about your culture and community from your perspective.

1. How do you identify yourself culturally? Who do you consider a part of your cultural community?

[Listen for/Probe: Activities? Religion? Community centers? Influential members?]

2. What are some concerns or common struggles of the Somali community in the US? What are the benefits?

[Listen for: Prejudice? Violence? Opportunities?]

3. Is the term "special education" commonly used in your culture? For example, in the US, a child with a learning disability might get special education classes in reading and writing.

B. Background Section

"The next questions are to help understand more about you and your family."

1. Where did you spend your childhood?

If not U.S… Please tell me about how your family moved to the US.

[Listen for/Probe: Family composition. Separation? Ages? Reunions?]

Compared to life before the US, how are your family's lives different now?

[Listen for/Probe: Clan status? Schooling? Special education? Living conditions? Trauma? Relocation preparation? Social network? Maintain culture and religious practices? Authority? Language?]

2. What language(s) are spoken at home? What language(s) are read?

[Listen for/Probe: Who uses what? How?]

C. Perception of School:

Now that we know more about your family and community, we would like to know about your view of schooling.

1. What experiences do you have with school?

If experience other than U.S. schools…

What, if anything, surprises you about schooling in the US?

[Listen for/Probe: Participation/Involvement? Concerns? Strengths? *Feelings?]

2. How do you know if a child is doing well in school?

[Listen for/Probe: Type of information? Communication mode? Languages? Informal/formal settings? Frequency of feedback?]

3. What are your feelings about American schools?

D. Special Education Referral:

Thank you for helping us understand your view of schooling. Now, we would like to hear about your views of special education.

1. What are some reasons that Somali children are referred for special education?

[Listen for/Probe: View of the "problem?"]

2. Do you have a child that was referred for special education?

If yes…

3. Why was your child referred for special education?

4. Can you walk me through the story of how the school talked to you about the possibility of special education testing?

[Listen for/Probe: Modes of communication? Feelings? Setting (who, where, timeframe)? Immediate thoughts? Understanding of terms? Number of meetings? Modes of communication]

5. Some schools provide an interpreter or community member to help understand the process. Others explain parent rights to make sure you understand or do home visits to try to support parents. Has the school done any of those things or other things to support your involvement?

[Listen for/Probe: Liaison/interpreter? Translated materials? Enough time? Respected/valued perspective? Trust?]

What else could the school have done?

6. What happened after the conversation about testing for special education? For instance, did you give consent or not give consent?

E. Sentence Completion

Please complete the following incomplete sentences so that they feel true to you. For example, for the sentence, "I like to eat _____," you might fill in the blank

with things like “vegetables” or “with my family.” There is no right or wrong answer. Just give the first response that comes to your mind.

[Probes: Tell me more about that.]

When at my child’s school, I feel _____.

I wish my child’s school would _____.

During meetings with my child’s school, I am _____.

My child’s school believes that my child _____.

My child’s school believes that parents _____.

Is there anything that I didn’t ask that would help us understand your experience and how the school could do a better job supporting Somali families during the special education referral process.

APPENDIX B: SOMALI COMMUNITY MEMBER CONSENT

Investigator: Alicia Romero
College of Education
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
akromero@uw.edu
Phone: 206-660-6464
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Janine Jones
Jjones2@uw.edu (206-616-6370)

Investigator's Statement

I am asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you all the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please listen to the information carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this verbal agreement that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." I will give you a copy of this verbal agreement for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to improve practices of special education referral teams during special education referral meeting with Somali refugee families by understanding parent experiences. The study will address the following questions:

1. How do Somali community members experience the special education referral process for Somali children?
2. How might schools adapt communication practices during the special education referral process in response to Somali community feedback?

PROCEDURES

If you choose to be in this study, I would like to interview you once about your experiences as a parent of a child that was referred for special education testing at school. This interview will last about 120 minutes. For example, I will ask you, "Why do you think your child was referred for special education?"

With your permission, I would like to video or audio tape your interview so that I can have an accurate record of our conversation. Within three weeks of the interview, I will create a written transcript of the conversation that will identify you by a pseudonym only, and then I will destroy the original recording, leaving only the coded transcript of the interview. Only I will have access to the recording, which will be kept in a secure location. If you would like a copy of the interview transcript, I will gladly provide you with one.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. I have addressed concerns for your privacy in the section below. Some people feel self-conscious when notes are taken or interviews are recorded.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

You may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study, aside from a $10 gift for your time. One benefit of this study is the opportunity to reflect on your experiences and your child's schooling. I may use information from this study as a foundation for my doctoral dissertation.

OTHER INFORMATION

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You can stop at any time. Information about you is confidential. I will assign you a pseudonym and code the study information. I will not record your real name. If the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your name, or any other identifying information.

Government or university staff sometimes review studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm.

I will not re-contact you for future related studies.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Alicia Romero at the telephone number or email listed at the top of this form. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Dr. Janine Jones at the University of Washington College of Education 206-616-6370.

_____

Signature of investigator Printed Name Date

Participant's statement

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research, I can ask the investigator listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call Dr. Janine Jones at the University of Washington College of Education 206-616-6370. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

____ I give permission for this researcher to audiotape my interview.
____ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview.

____ I give permission for this researcher to videotape my interview.
____ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to videotape my interview.

Copies to: Investigator's Participant file

APPENDIX C: SOMALI LIAISON PARENT RECRUITMENT LETTER

[University of Washington address]

Dear [Somali Liaison],

Thank you for lending your expertise as a Somali liaison in my current study. As you know, I am hoping to complete two parent interviews with you. I am writing to provide more information regarding this study, which I am undertaking as part of my doctoral studies and dissertation at the University of Washington. Again, your participation, and parent participation, is completely voluntary.

Study Goal

The goal of the study is to understand the experiences and communication preferences of Somali refugee parents who have a child that was previously referred for special education testing (they do not need to have consented to testing). The information will be used to help

me understand how schools can improve communication practices with Somali refugee parents.

The study will address these questions:

1. How do Somali community members experience the special education referral process for Somali children?
2. How might schools adapt communication practices during the special education referral process in response to Somali community feedback?

Recruiting Parent Volunteers

In order to assure the comfort and confidentiality of parents, I am asking that you recruit two Somali refugee parents (who have experienced a special education referral for their child) for two separate audiotaped or videotaped interviews. It would be helpful to have a range of participants, for instance, males, females, those who consented to testing, and those that did not consent.

Please highlight the following information with the parent:

- The study goal and questions above.
- Participation is completely voluntary—parents and liaisons may stop at any time.
- I have no ties to any school districts and am a student at UW.
- I will not ask for names or contact information—they may use an alias if they would like.
- All information is confidential—audiotapes will only be heard by me.
- Interviews will be scheduled at a time and place that is convenient for the parent.
- Parents will receive $10 cash for their time (approximately one hour)
- If the results of the study are published or presented, I will not use the names of people or schools/organizations, or any other information that would identify participants, the school, or the organization.

Prior to interviews, I will meet with you to go over the various interview questions and the purpose behind the questions to help you with interpreting items into Somali. For instance, the question, “How do you know if a child is doing well in school?” is intended to get at views of school performance and possibly ways that schools communicate student progress.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. I will be contacting you shortly by phone or email to discuss this with you further, and to set up interview times. Should you or the parent volunteers have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact me by phone (206) 660-6464 or via email at akromero@uw.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Dr. Janine Jones at the University of Washington College of Education 206-616-6370.

Sincerely,

Alicia Romero, M.Ed., NCSP, PhD Student
Educational Psychology
College of Education
University of Washington