MINDING THE GAP: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF RACIALIZED/ MINORITIZED BODIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

By

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ABSTRACT

The issue of special education in the United States has been a contentious issue, at best, for the past 40 years. In Ontario, to a lesser extent, there have been issues of equal access to education for minoritized and racialized students. Special education in the Toronto area has not been without its issues surrounding parental advocacy, the use of assessments, and disproportionate number of English Language Learners in special education. This project examines how racialized and minoritized families understand special education practices and policies, specifically within the Toronto, York, Peel, and Halton Regions. The investigation is informed by nine interviews with students in grades 7 to 12, their respective mothers, and five special education administrators and educators. Students and parents identified themselves as Black, Latino/a, and South Asian. Within these categories, parents identified themselves as Somali, Trinidadian, Jamaican, and Punjabi-Sikh. Students were identified with a range of disabilities including learning, behavioural, and/or intellectual.

This research focuses on ways to interrogate and examine the experiences of minoritized students and their parents by bringing forward otherwise silenced voices and understanding what it means to "speak out" against the process of identification and placement in special education.

The findings of this investigation suggest a disconnect how policies and practices are implemented, and how, parents' rights are understood. In particular, policies are inconsistently applied and are subject to the interpretation of educators and administrators, especially in relation to parental involvement and how much information should be released to families. The issue of language acquisition being read as a disability was also a noted concern. This investigation points to implications for teacher education programs, gaps in parental advocacy and notions of parental participation within schools, and re-examining special education assessments, practices, and policies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1   Context: Situating the field

Special education funding has become a provincial priority in Ontario, as funding to these programs has increased 54 percent in the last five years (Auditor General of Ontario, 2008). Special education for the purposes of this investigation will follow the definition designated by the Ministry of Education (2001); special education students are defined as "exceptional" through "behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities," and special education accommodations are modified through ongoing assessments and evaluations, in which additional services are provided through resources, or "support personnel and equipment" (Ministry of Education, 2001, pp. 15-16). Despite an increase in funding, special education identification processes continue to reinforce structural inequities and racism by overrepresenting Black and Aboriginal students in non-academic streams (Coelho, Costiniuk & Newton, 1995; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Given how special education is understood in the United States, as well as the issues, concerns, and perceptions regarding programming in Ontario, this investigation focuses on special education through a critical race theory and anti-racist discursive framework to conceptualize special education through the lens of parents and students in the Greater Toronto Area. My thesis addresses the educational achievement of minorities, through an anti-racist lens, while adding to studies that examine dropout/push-out, zero tolerance policies and the tracking/streaming of minorities. Moreover, given what we understanding of how racialized/minorities are overrepresented in special education in the United States, this provides an important foundation on which we can learn and understand the application of special education procedures and policies in the Greater Toronto Area. This study addresses and understands the disproportionality and parental concerns and voices in the context

of special education. Minoritized or racialized families are defined for the purpose of this dissertation to include students and parents who are demarcated by various intersecting oppressions or differences that include race, gender, ethnicity, religion, spirituality, socioeconomic status, and sexuality. It is important to note that I am not assuming that White families are "raceless" but my definition focuses on non-White families, to include Brown, Black, and Latino/a families. This chapter will outline a brief history of minorities and education in Toronto, policy and legislative reforms in special education, my research objectives, and my subject location as a researcher. Finally, I will provide a brief outline of the chapters that will follow.

1.2   History of minorities and education in Toronto

Brathwaite and James (1996b) have traced the province of Ontario's long history of segregating and stratifying racialized bodies. Beginning in the 1970s, Ontario school districts increased their reliance on psychological testing and special education identification procedures to administratively manage an influx of immigrants from Caribbean backgrounds who, according to educational professionals, were having problems adjusting to the Canadian curriculum (Brathwaite & James, 1996b). As Glaze and Wright (1998) summarize from the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, minority and Black students have been "casualties" of curriculum, streaming, testing bias, and low expectations (p. 165). Further, Canadian researchers (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller 1992; Radwanski; 1987; Smaller, 2008) have argued that from 1960 into the 1980s, minoritized and low-socioeconomic status students were streamed, tracked or placed into ability groupings as a mechanism to deal with racialized bodies. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, racialized students were disengaged and pushed out of the school system as demonstrated through Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Zine's (1997) three year study involving

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Black students, administrators, and parents, students who had dropped out or pushed out. The study confirmed that racialized and underachieving students were disengaged and pushed out of the school system. The students were socially excluded from the school community and felt disconnected from the curriculum, educators, and the wider environment. Brathwaite and James (1996b) further argue that the education system has failed, and continues to fail, to meet the needs of Black Canadians, as evidenced through the overwhelming steaming and representation into basic and vocational programs. In a similar vein, Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Campbell (1995) report that a number of political, social, and economic structures have led Black students, in particular, to make the informed decisions to leave school. The structural push factors influencing such decisions, includes subtle messages from educators and administrators about their suitability for post-secondary education and professional employment, curriculum that is removed from learning, and an absence of Black and minority teachers, all of which create instances of alienation and exclusion (Dei, James, Karumancherry, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000). Smaller (2008) draws on Toronto Board of Education and Toronto District School Board data to show how parents with professional occupations are more likely to have children in gifted and enriched programs, while the parents of students placed into learning disabilities and behavioural programs tend to work in unskilled professions. Indeed, the history of education in Ontario reproduces the social hierarchies seen in society more broadly; class structures reproduces themselves, as the educational opportunities, and consequently employment opportunities, of lower socioeconomic class individuals are restricted (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992).

Over the past several decades, schools in the Greater Toronto Area have implemented policies which have resulted in varying degrees of exclusion for minoritized students. As

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recently as the late 1990s and into 2000, Ontario implemented a Zero Tolerance education policy under the banner of "safe schools," which lead to the alienation of particular students. The Zero Tolerance Policy was adopted to reflect similar practices and policies implemented in the United States to address violent incidents and safety in schools. Specifically, the Act attempted to address aggressive, threatening, bullying, or other forms of violent behaviour by suspending students permanently or temporarily. After the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) determined that minorities were disproportionately affected by the Zero-Tolerance policy (OHRC, 2007), the Ministry of Education (MOE) reversed the decision of the previous government and revised the *Education Act* to reduce the likelihood of the occurrence of such discrimination.

As we move into 2012, we continue to see a vast disparity between the graduation and dropout rates of the general population and Black and Portuguese students (Brown, 2006; Brown, 2008; Nunes, 1999). Brown's (2008) study on the 2002 Toronto District School Board cohort reported dropout rates of 38 percent of both Portuguese and Spanish speaking students respectively, and 35 percent for Somali speaking students, as compared to a dropout rate of 23 percent for "English speaking" students). It should be noted, however, that "English only" could refer to other racial and ethnic characteristics. Accordingly, these numbers indicate an increasing gap between non-racialized students and those who are at a disadvantage based on markers of race, ethnicity, language, and culture. Despite current research on inequities in the education system in general, there continues to be gaps in our understanding of how special education in particular affects minoritized and racialzed students and parents. Moreover, mounting evidence suggests that several communities, including the Somali community, have little knowledge of the procedures and processes related to special education (Mahamed, 2010). The frustration has been

evident in community consultations with School Board officials, Somali educators, support workers, and community activists, during which all but of the School Board officials arguing that their children are overrepresented in special education programs (West Humber Collegiate, Community Consultation, March 23, 2011).

In the United States, the overrepresentation of Latino, Blacks, and Aboriginal students in special education has been well documented by academics and supported by statistical data (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Skrtic, 1991; Tomlinson, 1982). Additionally within the United States, stemming from issues of overrepresentation, the literature explicitly names institutional racism, Euro-centric curriculum, accountability and reform practices as further exacerbating the disproportionate number of minorities in special education. In Canada, the current academic literature provides a historical context to the issues and experiences of minoritized students in the Greater Toronto Area. Issues of dropout/push-out and disengagement were explored in the late 1980s and early 1990s and dropout rates remain a key concern of school officials in the Greater Toronto Area. Further evidence of the streaming of particular groups into special education continues to mount. Yet, the issue of special education in Toronto remains relatively under-documented and under-theorized. More research is needed in order for us to understand whether disproportionate special education streaming is occurring in schools and whether racialized/minoritized groups are more likely to be affected.

While the religious, racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic make-up of the student population becomes increasingly more diverse, there continues to be issues of streaming, dropout/ push-out, and disengagement of minoritized bodies in the Greater Toronto Area. Special education appears to be a particular area in which groups are being organized according to race, culture, ethnicity, and language, as seen in the United States. While the political and economic

landscape in the United States differs considerably from Canada, the racial, cultural, religious, and ethnic patterns of immigration are similar in parts of Canada, including the Greater Toronto Area. School Boards and their policies have not kept pace with changing demographics, nor have they addressed how school policies affect minoritized and racialized families in distinct ways.

1.3   Demographics of the Greater Toronto Area, York Region, and Peel Region

In order to highlight the changing demographics and the increasingly diverse linguistic backgrounds of students in the Greater Toronto Area, York Region, and Peel Region, I will outline the self-reported data by these School Boards. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) (which includes the cities of Toronto, York, East York, North York, Scarborough, and Etobicoke) is the largest funded public School Board in Canada and one of the largest in North America (TDSB, 2011). The TDSB (2011) reports that its students speak more than 80 languages: 53 percent speak a language other than English as their primary language; 26 percent of students were born outside of Canada; and 17 percent of students receive some form of special education service. Information collected from a 2008 voluntary Parent Census survey reveals that of the 95,000 students from junior kindergarten to grade six represented in the survey, White students make up 29 percent, South Asian students (India/Pakistan/Sri Lanka) 27 percent, East Asians (China, Japan, Korea) 15 percent, and Black students 10 percent (O'Reilly & Yau, 2009). In 2007, the TDSB reported that 13,046 of the 177,262 elementary students were in special education.

York Region District Board of Education (YRDSB) is the third largest school district iin Canada (YRDSB, 2012) and includes the municipalities of Richmond Hill, Newmarket, Vaughan, Aurora, Markham, East Gwillimbury, King, Thornhill, Whitchurch-Stouffville and Georgina. YRDSB is made up of 119,000 students in 166 elementary and 31 secondary schools

and it has reported a total of 16,910 elementary and 1,646 secondary English Language Learners (YRDSB, 2012).

Peel Region includes the cities of Brampton, Mississauga, and the town of Caledon. Brown (2011) notes that in the Peel Region, one in three students are South Asian and 57 percent are visible minorities. The Peel School Board of Education (PDSB, 2012) operates 226 schools, serving more than 145,000 students, with 3,000 to 5,000 new students a year. As of September 2011, 11,585 students have been formally identified as requiring special education (PDSB, 2011).

As the aforementioned data suggests, all three regions have an ever changing racial, cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic demographic that School Boards must reconcile through policies, front-line workers, and instruments used to measure abilities and skills.

1.4   Policy and legislative reforms in special education

The Ministry of Education (MOE) (2004) defines special education as instruction, curriculum, and assessments that differ from the practices provided to the general school population. In Ontario, students can be designated as "exceptional," under five categories as prescribed under the Education Act: "behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities." In 1980, Bill 82 was passed in the Ontario legislature which requires that all School Boards in the province provide special education programs and services for students designated "exceptional" (Wilson, 1989). By 1985, all School Boards were required to identify and place students according to their "deficits" and pre-determined limits (Wilson, 1989). Over the last 40 years, since the inception of special education, students who have struggled with the mainstream curriculum have been removed from regular Canadian classrooms and placed into special education programs. In the current system, students who are identified as

exceptional are usually referred for testing and assessment, which can include psychological assessments, by an educator. Once a student is designated exceptional, the Independent, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) determines the placement. The IPRC is composed of a minimum of three individuals, one of whom must be a principal or an official from the School Board; other individuals on the committee can include a special education resource teacher, classroom teacher, and vice principal. The team of individuals determine whether a student should be identified as "exceptional." They determine the appropriate designation/category, how to meet the needs of the student, and they review the placement annually, after a parent request, or after three months (Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board [BHNCDSB], 2009). The IPRC team determines identification and placement, not the specific accommodations or services the student requires. Student in special education can be removed for part of the day or the entire school day or they can be accommodated in an inclusive setting, whereby services or an additional educator is available for the student within the regular classroom. The choice of either an inclusive or segregated setting is determined by the educator, administrators, and/or psychologists.

The MOE (2011) reports that 290,000 elementary and secondary school students in Ontario were placed into special education programs. To date, the accurate percentage of non-White bodies enrolled in special education programs in Ontario is unknown, because the province does not collect race-based statistics. However, the TDSB (2009), in consultation with the Ontario Human Rights Commission, has recently agreed to conduct research on "differences in gender, race, ethnicity, mother tongue, income and place of residence" (p. 1) in the form of parent surveys for students in junior kindergarten to grade six and student surveys for students in grades 7 to 12. Information contained in the 2008 elementary school parental surveys discussed

above, reveals that 30 percent of Aboriginal and 9 percent of Latin American parents identified their child as requiring special education support (TDSB, 2009, p. 21). Moreover, parents indicated that their male child were more likely to be in special education. Families with two incomes were less likely to indicate their child had a disability, as were parents with university degrees (TDSB, 2009). This type of information, however, is not available for secondary school students or parents with children in secondary schools as they were not asked about the type of services or identification they received from the School Board. Accordingly, we have little information on the types of students in high school special education programs. Moreover, these surveys were voluntary, with a total of 95,000 surveys were returned, and therefore they do not necessarily reveal a complete and accurate composite of the racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural make-up of the students who are receiving the special education services or accommodations. Additionally, the survey does not address any language barriers families may have in understanding what accommodations or services entails for their children.

A report from Auditor General of Ontario (2008) indicates that parents are inadequately informed about their children's special education placements. More problematic than the lack of information going to parents is the unidirectional flow of this information from School Board officials and imposed on students. A related finding in the report (Auditor General, 2008) states that parents are generally excluded from the construction of the Individual Education Plan (IEP), despite explicit legislation that mandates parents participation. In particular, "Regulation 181/98, clause 6(6)(a), requires the principal, in developing the IEP, to consult with the parent and, where the pupil is age 16 or older, the pupil" (MOE, 2004, p. 13). The MOE (2004) refers to the IEP as a written plan of accommodations, services, modifications, and expectations. The IEP is a written document identifying learning expectations for a student who has an identified

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exceptionality, outlining alternative expectations and accommodations for subjects(s) or course(s) for the student (MOE, 2000). The IEP is not a daily lesson plan, but an ongoing document to monitor and communicate a student's progress to parents (MOE, 2000). In some cases, students may receive an IEP without a formal "exceptional" designation, as determined by the school principal if the student requires modified expectations and/or the "student requires accommodations for instructional or assessment purposes" (MOE, 2004, p. 7). The MOE (2004) lists the following information to be included in an IEP: the strengths and needs related to the student's learning; applicable assessment information that supports the identification of an exceptionality, or reasons to support special education programs and services; relevant health support services required; accommodations required to assist the learning; a list of courses/subjects for which the student requires accommodations/modified expectations; the type of accommodations required in order for the student to achieve; the current level of achievement in each course/subject; goals and learning expectations in each reporting period; methods used to assess the student's progress; how a student's progress will be reported; documents to support consultation with parents and or student, if s/he is 16 years of age or older, with updated records to indicate updated learning expectations by school staff; and a transition plan, when required (MOE, 2004, p. 8).

The TDSB (2009) reports similar findings from their own audit in 2008, citing that learning outcomes in IEPs for subjects other than numeracy and literacy were not clear. While parents and caregivers are considered a valuable source of information, there is no explicit information on how parents are consulted, what processes are in place, or how the insights parents bring to meetings are used to develop the IEP. According to Lupart (1998), the number of students who have been removed from regular classrooms, for all or part of the day, has

mushroomed in recent years. People for Education (2012) reported that "in elementary schools, the average ratio of special education students to special education teachers is 36:1, up from 22:1 in 2000/01" while in "secondary schools, the average ratio of special education students to special education teachers is 69:1, up from 48:1 in 2000/01" (p. 1). Overall, the current reports and data indicate that while special education programs and services are on the rise, there is a gap in the information communicated to parents. Further, how IEPs are planned and implemented do not necessarily clearly demonstrate how students will be successful and eventually integrated into regular programming.

1.5   Research objectives

In light of the previous discussion, I will now focus on the research objectives of this investigation. While race must remain central to the issue of overrepresentation of minorities in special education, as a researcher I am interested in how race contributes to the placement of particular students in special education. I am concerned with why inclusion has not remained a fundamental principle at the school and classroom level: I ask how can 'segregating' students by identifying their Indigenous knowledges, culture, values and religion as limitations rather than strengths, be done under the auspices of inclusion? The purpose of my research is to interrogate and examine the experiences of minoritized students and their parents by bringing forward otherwise silenced voices and understanding what it means to "speak out" against the process of identification and placement in special education. In addition to "giving voice" to historically marginalized people, my study reveals the racism implicit in Canadian educational practices. My research will add to the existing scholarship on special education and racism in Canadian schooling by adding new theoretical debates and including a data set different from the students typically investigated, to include other ethnic, cultural, racial, and religious groups.

The purpose of this study is to investigate current curriculum practices and strategies as they affect parents and secondary school students in special education and how educators are implicated in the process. I will address how various forms of oppression further alienate, stigmatize, and place students of colour in precarious positions. My study will acknowledge and critique the "marginalization of certain voices in society and, particularly, the failure to take serious account of the rich knowledge and experiences of subordinate groups in the educational system" (Dei et al., 1997, p. 27). Participants will be subjects, not objects, of their own experiences and histories. This study gives a "voice" to those who have been rendered voiceless by the authoritative processes in the education system by examining the power relations, privilege, and structural inequities that continue to disproportionately affect students of colour in Ontario schools.

The purpose of this investigation is not to suggest that special education is not needed in the Greater Toronto Area or that there is no validity to the services and programs available. It is important to understand that my intentions are not to negate that some students require individualized attention; students have different ways of learning and accommodations in many cases are necessary. Nor is my focus to suggest that that programming such as special education should be eliminated. Instead, the purpose of my research is to interrogate and trouble the use of these programs when they reproduce structural inequalities in society, particularly as they affect racialized bodies. I propose that the tools used to conduct special education assessments should not be relied on as stand-alone instruments to define students as exceptional. We cannot assume that these tools are objective; thus if the tools are "broken" or ineffective, we must question their use in determining the lifelong educational abilities and opportunities for students, especially non-White students. As I highlight in *Chapter Two*, there is a long history on the use of

instruments for testing and their proposed usefulness. Herein I argue that there is a place for special education, as long as these programs are not targeted to specific students, and particular bodies are not overrepresented. I am suggesting that parents must know the entire process and services must be more streamlined to provide programming in class for those who require it. I am against documenting difficulties for the purposes of tracking students and streaming students throughout their schooling and being used as a tool to limit future educational and employment opportunities.

This investigation seeks to inform broader school policies while highlighting the need to re-examine inclusion efforts and special education programs. Accordingly, I will examine the position I occupy, in relation to the participants, to uncover the value-laden assumptions that I have formed. It is important to note that the objectives of this study are not to argue that some of the students participating in this investigation should not be in learning disability programs; rather my objective is to examine areas of special education programming that are used to justify placement through markers of difference. The purpose of this study was not to determine whether special education programs are legitimate for some students who have physical disabilities (that can be measured through assessments) or for students whose needs do not allow for accommodations within an integrated setting. Furthermore, the objective of my study was not to measure the usefulness of special education or negate the fact that some families and students with an identifiable disability do require a great deal of support. Rather, I argue that special education is problematic when it is used to marginalize particular groups who have been deemed by the system as "unable to educate" within in a regular setting.

The rationale for conducting this research is threefold. First, while there is an increased dependence on special education in Ontario, very little is written about the implications of

special education practices as it affects students and parents in the Canadian context. Second, while parents have been documented as an "unvoiced minority" with little autonomy and agency in relation to decision making surrounding their child's education, there remains a considerable gap in the literature to address the issue. Third, the voices of minoritized students and parents are necessary in any institutional analysis in order to uncover whether special education practices may be discriminatory towards particular non-White students.

This investigation explores special education in Ontario and Canada and contextualizes the issues within an anti-racism discursive framework to investigate issues of power, identity, representation, resistance, and agency, while exploring Indigenous education and counter issues of schooling.

1.6   Research questions

This qualitative research project is based on nine interviews with students grades 7 to 12 nine parent/ guardians, and five special education administrators/educators from across the Greater Toronto Area. The objectives of the research were to fill the gap in knowledge regarding our understanding of racialized and minoritized students' experiences in special education in Greater Toronto Area and neighbouring cities, by answering the following questions:

(1) How do racialized students and their parents interpret what it means to be labelled and placed into special education?

(2) What consultations/procedures, are put in place to ensure that parents are informed and are equal participants in the decision making process? What agency do parents have in the special education process?

(3) What do students and parents believe about the benefit (or lack thereof) of the special education identification process?

(4) How have judgement categories (e.g. categories that cannot be explained through medical testing and instead are subjected to value laden psychological testing) and behavioural problems been constructed to explain difference and/or failure? Why are particular students in special education and to what extent is the process racialized and racist?

(5) How do educators and administrators understand the role of parents in the special education process and what patterns do they notice?

1.7   Subject location: An entry point into special education

In order to contextualize this investigation through an anti-racist discursive framework, the principles surrounding anti-racist education must be outlined bearing in mind my own subject location. The researcher must first disclose his/her behaviours and assumptions and how these may impact the study under investigation. Dei (2000) argues that anti-racist work begins with the educator analyzing his/her social location and position of power, privilege, and identity. Similarly, Scheurich and Young (1997) argue that researchers' identities are critical to the research process. The researcher's motives and objectives cannot be divorced from their history and lived realities. Milner (2007) contends that "who conducts the research, particularly what they know, and the nature of their critical racial and cultural consciousness—their views, perspectives, and biases—may also be essential to how those in education research come to know and know what is known" (p. 397). That is to say, what is known and how a researcher understands their world, is directly linked to the type of knowledge that is being produced. Accordingly, I uncover my own biases as a researcher, privilege, and identity, to ensure that minoritized bodies are not simply the objects of research.

As a racialized Punjabi-Sikh student who is a product of special education in the former Toronto Board of Education (now the Toronto District School Board) in 1989, I have experienced firsthand how one's socioeconomic status, parental immigration status, race, ethnicity, and "shyness" in my case, was constructed as "unable to learn". As Amjad's (2009) findings illustrate, parents of Pakistani descent have suggested that their cultural values of being reserved, quiet, and shy have been constructed as deficiencies and learning disabilities in the Canadian school system. I would like to build on this cultural framework that assumes a particular deficit for ethnic students. Similar to my own experiences, being quiet, reserved, and conforming to the cultural norms of my family conflicted with norms established by my educators. A binary identity was created: there was a way of being and doing at home and a way to act in school.

 As a former student, I am an insider to the community and the experiences that racialized populations face. However, I also recognize my lighter-skin as a site of privilege in relation to how Blackness is taken up as an institutional barrier. If we are to believe research and reports that argue that the "darker your skin, the less you fit in" (Taylor, 2009) I may be considered an outsider by many minoritized families as I am simply unaware of the lived realities experienced by Black bodies on a daily basis.

As a PhD Candidate at a prestigious university, I occupy a position of privilege in relation to the participants and parents in my study. My position within an educational institution may have acted as a barrier in my ability to access information and some participants may question the critical gaze I am using to explore special education. As the history of minorities in research dictates, minoritized and racialized bodies have every right to question my motives as someone who belongs to a large institution. Accordingly, although I may believe that I am a

racialized insider, I occupy an outsider position through my affiliation with an institution of higher education and this may be how my body is read by other minoritized communities. I am aware that my social location, individual history, experiences, and behaviours have shaped this research and how I read the world yet, at the same time, they have allowed for a unique insider perspective to the experiences of special education.

1.8   Organizing the chapters

Chapter One, focuses on the research problem through the lens of the broader context in North America, outlines the context of minorities in Ontario, the history of special education, the historical implications, and the current state of special education. In *Chapter Two* the discussion focuses on the current literature in the field in order to understand the structural and institutional inequities in schooling and specifically special education. I examine the current literature on the role of parents and students, the understanding of inclusion, and the understanding of curriculum through the lens of special education. I further outline the use of assessments and instruments in special education, other studies in special education, how English Language Learners and language is read as a disability, and other studies in special education. I also address and highlight the gaps in the current literature.

In *Chapter Three*, I focus on the theoretical perspective and framework used in this investigation. I begin by outlining theoretical approaches to anti-racism education, the anti-racist discursive framework, and critical race theory to contextualize issues related to special education. Key tenets of race, racism, schooling, privilege, power, Whiteness, resistance and change, liberalism and multiculturalism are discussed as they relate to the anti-racist discursive framework, critical race theory, and special education. The chapter ends with an understanding of how both theories intersect, converge, and diverge to contextualize special education.

Chapter Four discusses the methodology, including the principles, theories, and perspectives as well as the tools and strategies, used to collect data during this investigation. I justify and outline the research design, the qualitative framework, and the use of grounded theory. I further explain the research site and context, and the recruitment of parents, students, and educators. Profiles of parents, students, educators, and administrators are also provided. The data collection instruments, how the data were analyzed, the limitations of the methods and methodology, ethical considerations, challenges, and tensions are also considered.

In *Chapters Five* and *Six,* I examine the patterns and use of exceptionalities and the identification processes, as described by parents, students, and educators. The barriers identified related to with the documents and policies, stigma, and the self-esteem of students are also outlined. Both *Chapters Five* and *Six* highlight special education policies and practices, the consent and appeal process, testing, and parental involvement, as described by the project participants. The use of assessments and other measures, safeguards, and appeal processes are further discussed.

Chapters Seven will focus on the significant findings that were uncovered in this investigation, including (a) hidden racism (which incorporates systemic and institutional responsibilities); (b) the erasure of difference; (c) the inconsistent application of special education policies; (d) the impact of assessments and evaluations; (e) the responsibility of educators; and (f) notions of agency, being voiceless, and power relations.

 Chapter Eight, the final chapter, will discuss contributions to knowledge, implications of this research for teacher education programs, gaps in parental advocacy, notions of parental participation within schools, and re-examining special education assessments, practices, and policies.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous chapter, the context of special education in Ontario was outlined. Specifically, I contextualized the history of special education against the background of historical, political, and regional demographics, while outlining policy and legislative issues in special education. This chapter focuses on current structural inequities in the field of special education, including disproportionality in special education as examined through the literature from the United States, and the role of parents and students in the assessment and placement practice. This chapter also examines the curriculum, assessments, and instruments used to measure and place students into specific categories. Further, I discuss how English Language Learners and language is read as a disability in the system and I explore the gaps in the current literature.

2.1   Understanding structural and institutional inequities

Overrepresentation, as described by American educational scholars, refers to a higher than average proportion of particular student groups in an organizationally defined educational program or category (Harry & Anderson, 1994). The term overrepresentation, also referred to as disproportionality, is used by critical educational researchers to reveal educational inequities by highlighting the disproportionately high numbers of racialized students in special education and lower-stream programs (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002). The push of non-White students into lower-stream programs becomes a problem when it reproduces the existing inequities in society. In North America, racialized bodies and members of lower socioeconomic classes tend to work in more labour intensive positions than non-racialized or higher class individuals. Much like the cycle of poverty, this group is pushed into the lower echelons of society and this cycle often repeats itself.

As Ayers and Ford (1996) aptly argue about the structures and systems in the United States, "all the structures of privilege and oppression apparent in the larger society are mirrored in our schools" (p. 88). American researchers (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Grossman, 2002; Oswald, Couthino, & Best, 2002) have found that racialized bodies are disproportionately placed into lower academic streams and special education programs, thus attributing to the legacy of low levels of education and labour intensive positions.

The literature suggests that overrepresentation of racialized students in lower academic streams results from the biases of educators and administrators against particular linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds and their abilities; it does not reflect the knowledge or ability of particular students. In Riley and Ungerleider's 2008 study, Canadian teacher candidates/pre-service teachers completing their Bachelors in Education were asked to recommend student placements into advance, remedial, or conventional programs based on fictitious records, in order to understand perceptions and biases towards attributes of race, ethnicity, and sex. In their study, which was the first of its kind, Riley and Ungerleider (2008) found that pre-service teachers were more likely to rank Aboriginal students lower than non-Aboriginal students and even more likely to rank ESL students lower than non-ESL students, despite identical educational information in the fictional records. The study demonstrates that teacher candidates were in fact basing their opinions on perceived abilities, official language use, and visible markers of identity, rather than the students' merits. These findings indicate that even before educators have formally entered the field, they have already formed opinions about particular ethnic, racial, and linguistic groups, which will continue to have consequences for students throughout their educational career. The study also demonstrates the need to address and disrupt such biases in teacher education programs.

The push of racialized students into lower-stream programs is aggravated by the labelling or naming of students as 'at-risk'. Gonzales (2003) stipulates that those who are different are called "disabled, special, dropouts or children at-risk" (para. 10). Such labels further marginalize students in precarious situations by setting them up to fail; the student is assumed to be incapable of "success" (also defined in narrow terms) or unable to excel. Underlying these labels and placements is the presumption that students and families are responsible or are the problem, rather than examining the education system, which is responsible for placing them "at-risk" in the first place. Pedagogical approaches, curriculum instruction, and poor teaching practices are not considered when a student of colour displays "inappropriate" behaviour. Rather, if a student fails to comprehend the curriculum or is not engaged, it is considered the failure of the student, as opposed to a failure of the system. The student is problematized. Attention is paid to the "problem," shifting the focus from the "inadequacies of the educational institution [and the] bureaucratic, cultural, and economic conditions" that created the labels (Apple, 2004, p. 128).

Gonzales (2003) further argues that those who are suspended, expelled, or labelled 'at-risk' are often minoritized students. Political agendas, along with pressures to standardize curriculum practices under the guise of accountability, have been detrimental to minoritized students in that they have functioned to further marginalize particular groups. Indeed, Brady (2006) notes that reforms aimed at increased accountability and higher graduation rates have taken precedence and been at the impediment of engaging students. Similarly, Daniel (2005) found that a drive by school officials to increase funding in Ontario schools has dictated an increase in the number of students placed into special education under the guise of equitable practices; school personnel are compelled to classify students in order to ensure funding through the Ministry of Education (MOE). Beratan (2008) contends that overrepresentation of minorities

is encouraged by a bounty or to "trigger maximum funding" as an incentive (p. 346). In other words, funding by the Ministry is dependent on the number of students identified as "exceptional" and thus requiring additional services.

The consequences of disproportionality are far reaching. Overrepresentation in special education (Learning Disability [LD] and behavioural classes) has been linked to an increase in school dropout, disengagement, suspension, and involvement in the juvenile justice system for racialized students (Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Oswald et al., 2002). Socioeconomic status has been attributed to failure and used to justify the placement, labelling, and further demarcation of minoritized bodies. Immigrants, low-income families, and other stereotypical pieces of information are often used to justify labels and placement (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001) rather than examining larger systemic and structural barriers. School curriculum that includes testing, labelling, standardization, and conformity has not been considered problematic. Yet, as Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) suggest, through a deficit thinking framework, students who embody difference are taken up as deviant and placed "at-risk." Research suggests that special education functions to re-segregate racialized bodies (Artiles, 2003; Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Hilliard, 2002; Losen, 2002; Thomas & Loxley, 2007) and inclusion efforts have been inadequate and ineffective (Lupart, 1998). As Lupart (1998) explains, special education and regular education has created dual programming governed by different policies, networks, and funding, and inclusion can only occur when policy, organization, and legislation reforms are addressed. Whether a student is in a classroom for the entire day does not necessarily mean that they are integrated and engaged by educators and the curriculum. As Dei et al. (2000) contend, inclusion requires that equity and justice practices go beyond understanding minoritized bodies who are on the peripheries of the curriculum, to re-centering the curriculum and bringing about

and "structural and social transformation" (p. 13). Structural and social changes, such as educator training, policy improvement and integrating Indigenous knowledges that take into account the history of minoritized students are needed in order for equity to occur. As Artiles and Trent (1994) argue, special education has historically, and continues to segregate and marginalize students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Students from lower classes are invariable streamed into lower level classes and consequently end up in lower-end positions. Thomas and Loxley (2002) aptly use the term "psycho-babble" to contextualize how special education has been reified through psychology; they argue that "psychology and psychiatry have infiltrated our everyday understanding of disorder and deviance" (p. 53). Moreover, the authors suggest that physical appearance (such as clothes, hair, and manner of speech) has become the catalyst for "problems" or "disorders." Invariably, these social and biological traits result in biases and perceptions. Yet understanding the processes involved in special education should go beyond socioeconomics. We should recognize the lived experiences of minoritized students and parents implicated in the process. The nuances and complexities of the experience of minoritized students have been oversimplified by a straight socioeconomic analysis; the reasons why students do poorly have often been explained in terms of income and not in terms of how perceptions of these families are implicated in the interactions and decisions made by educators.

The Canadian literature on racialized youth has focused on disengagement/engagement, (Dei, et al., 1995; Dei, 2003), alienation (Dei et al., 2000), streaming (Brathwaite & James, 1996b) and dropout rates (Dei et al., 1997) amongst minoritized students who have been suspended. On the other hand, American researchers have used statistics to reveal how many racialized students are placed into special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002) along with research that highlights the implicitly racist practices that have led to the overrepresentation of

minorities in special education (Ferri & Connor, 2005a). As I argue below, structural inequities are covertly and overtly evident in Ontario curriculum practices today. What is absent from the Canadian literature is the narratives of minoritized students and parents in special education. The voices of the *Othered* must be considered for a complete institutional and historical analysis of the dynamics of special education. The process of "Othering" may be defined as not only the stratification of individuals based on skin colour and physical attributes, but also by cultural and economic characteristics which legitimatize the position of the dominant and the inferiority of the other, for example Blacks (Carty, 1999). To ignore systemic and institutional barriers is to deflect the onus and responsibility away from the education system and on to parents and students. As Dei (1997) argues, there must be a clear "conceptual/theoretical distinction between asking parents to take responsibility and blaming parents for educational failures" (p. 58). Families are often led to believe that they should be accountable for why their child is failing, thus deflecting the responsibility and gaps in the education system. Parents and educators must be equally accountable for students' academic promise and failure. Additionally, there is little information that addresses whether the re-integration or re-entry into regular classrooms is a priority, an option, or whether successful integration into an integrated program is even possible. In other words, we need to understand not only the graduation rates of students placed in special education, but also if post-secondary education is an option for those placed into specific programming. There is little information available which reveals what occurs to these students after they graduate. Without this information, we cannot clearly understand the implications of special education in Canada.

In Ontario, it has long been recognized that there are considerable disparities in the academic achievement of racialized students, and that many students are less than fully engaged

in the curriculum (Brathwaite & James, 1996a; Coelho, Costiniuk, & Newton, 1995; Dei et al., 1995; Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993; TDSB, 2008; Zine, 2001). Rather than focusing on the strengths, cultural richness, abilities, and capabilities students possess, the majority of educators, Harry (2008) contends that the focus is on gaps in cultural, linguistic, family and "intrinsic deficits" or the medical model of deficiencies. Indeed, labels appear to be a product of institutional practices as dictated by school administrators' agendas. Seemingly innocuous bureaucratic practices and administrator preferences can actually be quite damaging to students, particularly when these preferences translate into discriminatory labels. Labels are the product of comparisons between racialized student and a White, middle-class, Eurocentric "norm," a norm that is contradictory to the classroom reality of cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. For instance, the Safe Schools Act that was introduced in Ontario in 2000 led to a disproportionate number of racialized students being penalized due to incidents in which an object, such as a knife was constructed as a weapon (Bhattacharjee, 2003). Incidents such as these led to unwarranted suspensions of Black youth, based on implicit cultural assumptions not readily understood by educators and administrators. By using the White body as the norm, these identification processes function as a systemic barrier to the education of racialized students. The deficit mentality inherent in special education identification processes has worked against inclusion, equity, and diversity in special education programming as students who differ from the White, Eurocentric, able-bodied standard in any way are perceived to be lacking ability or skill.

In order to comply with the legislation, as outlined in Bill 82, school boards must label a student and comply with the Ministry's directive in order to place a student in special education (Centre for Research and Education in Human Resources [CREHS], 1985). Crux's (1989) critical analysis of Bill 82 argues that in theory, Bill 82 is well-intentioned, "but in practice it

legalizes inequity and categories of deviance" (p. 259). More concerning, Daniel's (2005) research in Ontario schools found that in order to maintain school funding, educators and administrators are financially driven to find creative methods to label students as "disabled" and place them into special education. Consequently, a student must be removed from a mainstream class and curriculum in order to receive "specialized" instruction. More problematic, is that it is unclear what the "exit strategy" is for students placed in special education. Once, students are designated under this label, how will it impact their educational careers? What programs are students placed into once they no longer require special education? What are the graduation rates of special education students? In the Canadian context, the implications of these issues are not clearly understood.

Despite the fact that inclusion and integration are articulated as School Board values, the literature suggests a bleak picture for minoritized bodies in Canadian schools (Brathwaite & James, 1996b; Coelho et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1995; Zine, 2002). Similarly, in the United States, Fine et al. (2005) argue that the call for integration emerging from *Brown v. Board of Education* (the landmark legislation to formally end the use segregated schools for White and Black students by considering it unconstitutional) has yet to be realized. It is not clear whether educators and administrators are being merely compensatory in providing remedial programs, nor is it clear if remedial programs, such as special education, are an effective tool to address student disengagement in the current curriculum. Remedial programs have been used as a tool to address the problems at the surface, rather than examining the systemic/institutional barriers that prevent students from engaging in the current curriculum. In the United States, special education has been used to re-segregate racialized/minoritized groups, rather than addressing the curriculum standards to encompass Indigenous learning, or take into account the ethnicity,

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culture, language, and racial background of the learner. It is unclear whether special education

has functioned as a "band-aid" in an effort to address larger issues of why some students are

alienated from the current curriculum. As Milner (2007) contends, students of colour, from early

years to graduate school, are "often placed in remedial courses to "catch up" or "live up" to a

norm for which the model is their White classmates" (p. 389). Moreover, absent from the

discussions on special education are alternative forms of schooling and Indigenous learning as

pedagogical tools (Dei et al., 2010) to address difference. As in the case of Afrocentric schools in

Toronto, alternative approaches to schooling have been dismissed despite their importance in

examining education from a perspective that takes into consideration the student's history,

language, culture, and ethnicity. Current programs have been fragmented and in essence,

ineffective at addressing the systemic issues that continue to exist in Ontario schools. Afrocentric

schools place the Black student (rather than the White student) at the centre of learning and do

not assume a racial superiority in terms of how the curriculum is taken up (Asante, 1991). Lesson

plans related to Indigenous proverbs, fables, tales and folklore offer a site in which students can

learn discipline, respect for self-worth, self-esteem, and community pride. The nature of

Indigenous learning provides a connection to community, a sense of ownership, pride,

accountability, and respect for self and others (Dei et al., 2010). Furthermore, such approaches to

learning highlight the failures of traditional education to connect with students: how are students

expected to develop moral and character education when the curriculum is inherently removed

from what they know? How can these skills be developed and learned through handouts and

lectures? There is a collective responsibility to ensure that the curriculum is valid to the learner

in ways that acknowledge their historical, cultural, racial, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds.

However, in the curriculum content, difference is accounted for through a multicultural-liberal

approach where race, disability, class, gender, and sexuality are placed at the margins. The foundations of the curriculum are basic notions of diversity and tolerance, rather than broader understandings of history, language, and the impact of colonization and imperialism on groups. Euro-centric values are imposed on students of colour, rather than examining Indigenous cultural capital as a rich form of knowledge.

The Auditor General of Ontario (2008) reported that effective service delivery and support of special education was not sufficient and that individual program plans for students with special needs varied in quality and expectations. As Thomas and Loxley (2007) write, special education is built on the premise and rationale that students benefit from being educated separately, yet the empirical evidence surrounding the benefits is "often illusory" (p. 22). These findings suggest a silence on structural discrimination (Artiles, 2003) as it concerns the rights of students' voices within special education programs. Further, intersecting oppressions, such as language, religion, culture, ethnicity, race, and sexuality, may make some families particularly vulnerable to understanding the implications of educational policies and decisions on their children.

2.2   Role of parents

This section focuses on identifying the role of parents and students in the special education process, as discussed by scholars. For the purposes of this study, the conceptualization of parents will go beyond traditional, Western notions of parents, to include dual, lone/single, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ), interracial and/or parents with multiple identities. Little attention has been paid to the role of parents and the voices of families in the special education placement process in provincial and territorial jurisdictions across Canada. The non-dominant identities and subordinate families do not always have the same access to resources and

information, nor do they necessarily feel comfortable approaching school officials. As Brandon and Brown (2009) aptly summarize, Black families feel disconnected and alienated through a sense of discrimination, real or perceived, or experience indifference when interacting with educators. Yet as Artiles (2003) argues, the "scholarship is painfully devoid of the voice of minority families and students" (p. 178).

In theory, Jordan (2001) writes that while there are guidelines developed for parents within the Ontario context, in practice parents are "likely to find themselves in an unvoiced minority without power or influence" (p. 363). For immigrant parents whose first language is not English, the problem may be compounded by the perceived unapproachability of school administrators (Campey, 2002). Jordan (2001) further explains that under the current Ontario legislation, as understood and implemented by school personnel, parents are left with few choices in the special education process and must rely on professional expertise to guide their decision making. Families are limited to the knowledge provided to them by psychologists, through the academic and psychological assessments conducted by the administrators and educators, and through the principals that make-up the team of professionals assessing their child's placement.

The Ontario MOE (2011) has a website dedicated to "Resolving Identification or Placement Issues- Procedures" for parents/guardians, that attempts to provide information for parents concerned with the special education identification and/or placement decisions. However, the guidelines are complicated with timelines and procedural information making them inaccessible to most parents. CREHS (1985) argues that while explicit legislation suggests that parental involvement is valued, actual participation is "subject to professional control" (p. 10). Indeed, CREHS (1985) has found that parents are involved in "only a token manner" (p. 13). In

the United States, Kalyanpur, Harry, and Skrtic (2000) suggest that despite legal mandates that require parents to be a "partner" in their child's education, caregivers continue to be passively involved in decision-making regarding special education. Harry's (1992a) study found that Puerto Rican American parents silently accept decisions made by educators due to a deep-seated respect for educators. On the surface, they agree with the educators since they do not want to appear disrespectful, but without having a complete understanding of special education or with the belief that the decisions made are not necessarily the best for their child.

CREHS (1985) further finds that on the surface it appears that parents have significant control over the placement of their children; however, placement discussions are restricted to parameters dictated by linguistically complex and unclear legislation. Compounding the challenges of unclear policy is the tendency of professional educators and psychometrics to control the implementation process resulting in many parents being unaware that they can actively participate in Independent, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) meetings. In practice, parents are invited to IPRC to agree with decisions that have already been made, rather than to contribute their own narratives, data and information, which is negated and rendered void in the process (CREHS, 1985, p. 12). Similarly, Smith and Foster's (1996) assessment of equal educational opportunity for students with disabilities in Canada, through an examination of provincial and territory policies, found that parental participation was a considerable concern in Canada. These findings are similar to Mehan, Hertwerk, and Meihls's (1986) results, as their extensive study revealed that placement decisions are made prior to formal meetings and are a "ratification of actions taken early" (p. 164). That is to say, parents are an afterthought after educators have made their decisions. A clear imbalance of power is evident in both theory and practice, as parents are stripped of their agency in the assessment process.

Freeze, Bravi, and Rampaul (1989), who conducted research on special education in Manitoba, found that parents receiving support for their children's long-term learning difficulties and parents of post-secondary school students were not satisfied with their level of involvement. The researchers attributed this dissatisfaction to a lack of parental involvement in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. Indeed, many of the teachers in the study stated that parents were not involved in the development of IEPs. Accordingly, parents appealed for regular communication between home and school and for increased collaboration between administrators and families. Issues highlighted by Freeze et al. (1989) are indicative of broader systemic issues of power relations and authority involved in the assessment process.

Indeed, the IPRC meetings can be uncomfortable and threatening to many parents. CREHS (1985) reports that at one specific IPRC meeting, 32 people were in attendance, while only three individuals actually knew the student. This case is particularly unusual as only three professionals tied to the school should be in attendance at these meetings. Such studies point to the lack of value placed on parental decisions and values and the lack of agency they have in the special education placement and referral process. Parents of cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority backgrounds are doubly marginalized and subordinated, facing more systemic barriers in the identification process. Bodies are read differently, while the myriad of oppressions are conceptualized as disabilities.

Jordan (2001) further argues that the procedures and tribunals associated with Bill-82 that specifically classifies students as "exceptional," were highly prejudicial in representing the School Board and impartial towards parents. Arguably, the interests and values of school educators and administrators are overwhelmingly defended around the table, while the voices of parents continue to be a small minority. The interests represented by school officials, may be as

simple as not wanting to "deal" with a student who does not conform to the expectations set by the educator. Similarly, CREHS (1985) reports that many School Boards have not taken parental involvement seriously, by providing short notice to parents about upcoming meetings and telling some parents "they do not have to attend the meetings unless they have 'something significantly new' to raise" (p. 14). This anecdotal evidence suggests a clear lack of desire for parental input. Decisions are made devoid of any parental input, with parental involvement coming as an afterthought, or simply a legal requirement, while the appeal process for parents is buried under professional jargon. Families are not given the opportunity to conduct their own assessments, evaluations, and observations at home with their children, despite the fact that parents spend more time interacting with their children than educators.

Further to the lack of agency parents have in the special education process, parents are also conceptualized in monolithic terms which may further marginalize minoritized parents. Parents are generally normalized as a heterosexual couple, while other forms of families are considered deviant. Specific definitions of families may affect teacher bias and further influence the conceptualization of how families are deprived. Furthermore, conventional definitions of parental involvement, which encompasses a limited number of activities, are another part of the problem. As Sheehey's (2006) study on rural Hawaiian parents found, some parents defined participation to include informal exchanges and participation in the classroom; however, for educators, only participation in formal IEP meetings were considered part of the decision making process. Advocacy by parents may be constructed as disruptive behaviour rather than parental involvement, while other activities, such as Parent Advisory Councils (PACS) are normalized in the school system. Furthermore, as Crozier (1999) argues, educators do not adjust their strategies to accommodate parental involvement, regardless of "class, parental needs, [or] individual

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circumstances" (p. 316). If the involvement of parents in the decision making process is not possible due to barriers such as the type and hours of employment, or lack of family leisure time, educators should adjust their approaches to meet the needs of minoritized families.

The underlying discourse is that parental involvement, if considered at all, is only considered after the decision to place a child in special education has been made. Yet despite legislation and reforms to the Education Act in Ontario that aim to make the special education identification process more accessible, parents still cannot "appeal the nature and content of the programmes or services provided by the school within the placement" (Jordan, 2001, as cited in Usher, 1987, p. 352). Even more troubling is that the literature suggests that professionals, such as psychologists and social workers who have little firsthand knowledge of the child's learning, dominate the meetings (CREHS, 1985; Mehan et al., 1986). As Harry (1992b) suggests, the discourse behind special education centres power around the professionals' attitudes and behaviours, whereas difficulties belong to families. Absent from the literature, and from special education assessments, are the anecdotal records and voices of parents whose children are constructed through a deficit mentality as inferior to the "norm." In other words, while parents have a great deal of insight and information on their child, parents are either ignored as a rich source of knowledge or are not considered "experts."

Interviews conducted by Harry and Klingner (2006) in the United States, revealed that school personnel openly acknowledged inappropriately placing minority students in special education and noted that referrals or recommendations were imposed on parents rather than providing parents with a choice. Such decisions and mechanisms reinforce structural inequities and further suggest historical overtones of racial oppression. Students' academic gaps are explained through poor parenting and are further used to justify systemically racist institutional

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practices (Dei, 2003). These findings confirm that school personnel not only subjugate racialized students, but racialized parents are also constructed through a deficit lens. In Harry and Klingner's (2006) study, school personnel strongly believed that the home environment of Blacks was more detrimental than that of other immigrant and minoritized families and they also reported strong feelings that both nature and nurture attributed to the deficits. Brathwaite and James (1996a) argue that racialized parents are fully aware of implicit racism they experience through the lower quality of education available to their children. Brathwaite (1989) maintains:

> The history and collective experience of Blacks in Canada indicate that Black students and their parents occupy an unequal position and their interest is not served to any significant degree by the institutions which regulate their lives and their future in this country (p. 195).

Both researchers in Canada and the United States have led us to consider the voices of minoritized parents and the suitability of special education. Not only are racialized students marginalized (Dei et al., 1995), but racialized parents are further alienated and fragmented as a result inadequate consultation, and their inability to exercise their rights when it comes to their children's academic needs (Brathwaite & James, 1996b). Graveline (1998) states that the term "minority", from a sociological stance, refers to "people who are relatively powerless in the hierarchy of power and authority. In Western scientific, capitalistic discourse, numbers talk" (Graveline, 1998, p. 10). This description of minorities best describes the position of parents in the special education decision making process.

2.3 Students; "delusion of inclusion": Re-segregation of minoritized bodies?

Thomas and Loxley (2007) argue "children who are difficult to teach have become by default 'special' children" (p. 27). Indeed, several reports point to the arbitrary nature of the special education referral process (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Harry, 2008; Hilliard, 2002). Students

who do not fit within White middle-class norms are deemed "problematic" or "different" (Artiles, 2003) and are more likely to be placed into special education. Racialized difference is a complex issue and continues to be a predetermining factor in the placement, identification, and stratification of racialized students. As Spivak (1988) suggests, "the ways in which difference is articulated also has a hidden agenda" (p. 243). Researchers and academics continue to theorize that special education, in the shadow of *Brown v. Board of Education,* has functioned to re-segregate or stratify students according to their race (Beratan, 2008; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). Beratan (2008) contends that special education has become "legal segregation by race" through which systemic and institutional practices are understood as individual deficiencies (p. 345). Difference and race is complex and continues to be a predetermining factor in the placement, identification, and stratification of racialized students.

Research in the United States has found that African Americans and Native Americans are three times more likely to be placed into judgement categories, versus categories based on verifiable biological information (Harry & Klingner, 2006). While there is no statistical information in Ontario on the number of racialized students placed into special education, Coelho et al. (1995) report that non-White groups are overrepresented in lower-level academic or special education programs. Moreover, the educational level of Aboriginal and Black children has been reported below that of their counterparts from other racial and ethnocultural backgrounds (Coelho et al., 1995). Such a situation begs the question: do "deficits" inherently exist in students, or are inadequacies manufactured as the school's response to the student (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Wilson, 1989)?

The literature suggests that the identification and placement process is extremely ambiguous and that categories are based on interpretation and value judgements, rather than

measurable scientific criteria. Furthermore, social processes that sort, classify, and categorize students reflect "societal beliefs, and values, political agendas, and historical events that combine to construct identities that will become the official version of who these children are" (Harry & Klingner, 2006, p. 7). Cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic values that are unlike the majority have become synonymous with 'difference' and 'deficiency.' Accordingly, when minoritized bodies fail, the tendency is to pathologize families and children as being lazy and parents as unable to provide for their families.

2.4   The role of curriculum

Education is not neutral; it is a political act, whether the educator is conscious of it or not (Apple, 2004; Freire, 2006). The educator is involved in reproducing the social order, the status quo, and economic and political structural inequities. Those in positions of power tend to have a vested interest in maintaining and reproducing the social order because their cultural understandings of the world match the standards upon which the education system is based (Thomas & Loxley, 2007). Special education is no exception: hidden rules and larger structural inequities are at play. The "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 2004), or the unwritten norms, beliefs, values, privileges, interests, and knowledges represent the majority in Ontario classrooms.

As racialized and immigrant populations increase, and schools continue to fail to address difference, it has become easier to place those who differ from a standardized norm in a separate or segregated classroom. It has long been documented that the curriculum, while engaging some learners, tends to marginalize those deemed the *Other* (Apple, 2004; Brathwaite & James, 1996a; Dei et al., 1997; Dei, 2003). Dei et al. (1997) have found that many Black students who dropout are in effect pushed-out because their strong ethnic identity conflicts with the ideals embedded in the White curriculum. Indeed, the culture associated with Whiteness is considered "raceless" and

thus becomes the norm by which educators evaluate, teach, and classify students. Racialized bodies that do not fit within these parameters are seen as being deviant and are relegated to the margins.

Educators in Ontario continue to embody privilege and power as teachers and other school personnel predominantly come from White, middle-class backgrounds. According to the 2006 Statistics Canada census, visible minorities make up 43 percent of the Toronto city population (Statistics Canada, 2012) while only 18.6 percent of the city's teaching staff are members of visible minority communities (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). Furthermore, systemic racism and privileging of Whites in the education system continues to be deeply entrenched within the formal Ontario curriculum. The current Ontario curriculum incorporates Indigenous knowledges in a token manner through the lesson plans, while a multiculturalism and tourist approach is used to explain religious, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Canadian curriculum is reduced to moose, mountains, and Mounties, while difference is dress, dance, and diets (Troyna, 1990).

In the context of special education, we as researchers must recognize not only the bodies who conduct the assessments –White school personnel – but also the considerable amount of authority these educators have over the lives of students. Educators embody privilege and possess the cultural and economic capital that is valued and dominant in society, and accordingly, valued in schools (Apple, 2004; Chambers 2003). Educators have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, social stratification or hierarchy of power, through which the values and norms of the dominant group and dominant ways of knowing are reproduced. Freire (2006) writes, the "interests of the oppressors lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them" (p. 74).

The placement, classifying and sorting of students into special education is a bureaucratic process buried under the jargon and guise of equality. Parents' and students' concerns and voices continue to be silenced, as curriculum standards and placements become formalized and legitimate through the surveillance and documentation of student behaviours using suspension letters, bus reports, behavioural reports, and letters (Daniel, 2005).

2.5 Assessments

Daniel (2005) argues that Ontario's mandate of accountability "has not left any aspect of school life untouched, including the increased use of tests or assessments to measure curriculum outcomes and learning" (p. 764). The current education and curriculum reforms of accountability, standardization, and efficiency, as articulated in Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing and other Ontario documentation, divides and classifies the student in a way that removes the learner from their ethnicity, race, culture, religion, and language. Moreover, epistemology and ways of "knowing" have further alienated and perpetuated the inferiority of particular bodies by not valuing alternate ways of knowing. Banks (1993) observes that students are taught to accept textbooks and knowledge as their lived realities. Indeed, students in Ontario schools are not encouraged to critique the system, but rather to accept the curriculum content. Similar to Dewey (1956), Freire (2006) argues, "teachers talk about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable" (p. 71). Dewey (1956) discouraged the fracturing, fragmenting, classifying and categorizing of students that create social divisions in schools and he further cautioned against the use and nature of testing, as it reproduced "natural divisions of labour" (p. 14). As Hilliard (2002) writes, testing and assessments are disconnected from the cultural-linguistic backgrounds of Black bodies. School should be an extension of the learning that is familiar to the home environment, and when

schools are separated from the interests of home and community, schools reproduce the voices of the privileged and the status quo. Beratan (2008) has coined the term "institutional ablism" to refer to the embedded processes, structures, and practices that reinforce the status quo. In other words, students are expected to ascribe to certain norms and ideas that represent a particular ideology, or assimilate to the dominant ways of knowing.

Under the rhetoric of meritocracy, and as Dei (November 17, 2008, SES 1921) argues, terms such as dropout, disadvantaged, and at-risk, have furthered the discourse on pathologizing Black students as underachievers. Similarly, Apple (2004) argues that institutional labels to imply a deviance such as "slow learner" and "poor reader" implies an inferior, essentializing quality, linked to the student's relationship to the school. Marked inferiority and incompetence is seen as inherent in non-White students and their parents, rather than a product of inequitable systems that privilege some bodies and alienate others. As Harris (1993) observes, merit is not an objective fact, but an ideological construct. Excellence is also defined through a restrictive lens, ensuring that privileged bodies continue to maintain their positions in the social hierarchy. As Gutierrez, Asato, Santos, and Gotanda (2002) note, maintaining the status quo is part of the North American culture and a way of life. Indeed, labels and the power and knowledge of the majority dictate curriculum norms. Further, Mehan et al. (1986) contend that schools are set up to transmit the American values and ideals of "individualism, hard work and effort" (p. 172). Special education programs have marginalized and subjugated those who do not fit within the prescribed curriculum norms as merit and categories of success are narrowly defined to fit the normative discourse.

Educators are often disconnected from the lived realities of students. Consequently, the rhetoric and implementation of policies around "economic sustainability," "accountability,"

"standards," and "transparency," have been detrimental to racialized bodies. "Standards," such as those set out by the EQAO in Ontario and the No Child Left Behind policy in the United States, are devoid of cultural nuances, differences, and the long term implications of marginalizing and subjugating students. For instance, the No Child Left Behind policy (which begs the question, left behind what?) functions as a lever to induce competition and invokes a neo-liberal discourse that suggests students should be competing against each other in a race for successful jobs in an ever-shrinking economy. As Fine et al. (2005) note, "school vouchers, high stakes testing, No Child Left Behind, [and] accountability schemes" have further humiliated and punished youth of colour through inequitable funding, "tracking, zero tolerance, mass incarcerations of youth of colour" (p. 521). Testing and streaming under accountability models have further legitimized unjust practices and undermined students' abilities. Those tested and identified for special education under accountability measures have been further left behind.

Existing research reveals that special education in Ontario functions to reproduce the structural, procedural, cultural, and social inequities seen in society. The most privileged are expected to express their knowledge, while the knowledges of *Others* are considered secondary, "interesting," different, and segregated as such. Canadian curriculum reinforces normative practices and disparaging definitions of racial categories (Chambers, 2003). As Matus and McCarthy (2003) argue, culture and identity are "undertheorized and undigested within the curriculum field" (p. 74), as culture and identity continue to be at the periphery. Indeed, curriculum standards are structured in a way to classify and stratify students according to prescribed societal norms.

2.6   English Language Learners- Language acquisition as a disability

In contextualizing special education, the issue of how immigrant students and their language acquisition are implicated in special education must also be understood. Coelho et al. (1995) contend that the methods of assessment and evaluation may be biased against students who are recent immigrants to Canada. Immigrants and refugees are marginalized and alienated in the school system, as they have not had the same opportunities to learn English or become familiar with the school curriculum (Coelho et al., 1995). Accordingly, academic testing only serves to further alienate them and incorrectly identify their language and academic skills. Ogbu (1994) argues that involuntary minorities and their descendants (defined as groups who were incorporated into the Western society against their will by Euro-Americans through slavery, conquest, or colonization), consciously and unconsciously perceive test-taking situations as falling within the cultural frame of reference of their "oppressors" (pp. 373, 386). Consequently, educators must acknowledge the historical, structural, and psychological biases for minoritized students' low academic achievement and low test scores (Ogbu, 1994). Cummins (1994), as cited in Rueda (1989), argues for a restructuring of special education assessment (pp. 44-45), as current assessments underestimate the academic potential of students. English Language Learners (ELL) or students who are placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, may be further marginalized, as their first language, experiences and potential are not recognized by educators.

Cummins (1994) argues that schools communicate covert and overt messages to ESL students concerning the value of their prior experiences, their first language, and culture. A longitudinal study, conducted by Watt and Roessingh (1994) between 1989 and 1993, reveals that ESL students are more likely to drop out of school when compared to the overall population.

Indeed, the researchers found that 74 percent of ESL students who chose to "exit" Queen Elizabeth High School in Calgary did so by dropping out, as compared to 30 per cent of the overall high school population (Watt & Roessingh, 1994). Similarly, Derwing, DeCorby, Ichikawa, and Jamieson (1999) conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 high school ESL students and found that not only are students "pushed-out" because of a provincially mandated age cap (although educators recognize that these students still require additional support) but also that the students felt degraded because they were learning curriculum designed for kindergarten students. Indeed, this study demonstrates that while there may be several indicators that ESL students have felt exclusion, racism, and alienation, little is done to address the subjugation of these students. Watt and Roessingh (2001) further contend that there are several "studies [which] suggest that ESL learners remain disadvantaged in high school and that graduation remains an elusive goal for the vast majority of these [ESL] students" (p. 204). Indeed, the aforementioned studies are indicative of larger systemic issues at play, as ELL/ESL students are doubly marginalized.

The issue of language minorities and how language gaps are ascribed as deficits in knowledge capacity is an issue that will be further explored in this thesis. While I do not suggest that language should be excluded as part of our understanding of learning disabilities, we must interrogate and examine why language in select immigrant groups is perceived as deficit knowledge and whether special education instruments can effectively measure learning disability in language minority groups.

2.7   Other studies in special education

There are many qualitative studies on special education that have been conducted in the context of the United States that serve to inform our understanding of current issues in special

education. Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) discuss, Mercer's (1973) study documented the poor performance of Black children on school IQ scores and the simultaneous devaluation of the culture and values Black children learned at home. Consequently, Mercer (1973) found that African American children were what she referred to as "6-hour a day retarded child" to underscore the invalidity of academic tasks and psychological assessments as well as the power that professionals have over poor families (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Other qualitative studies include a comparative study in the United States and South Africa (where the legacy of racism continues) by Kozleski et al. (2008) examined the ways in which families and personnel understand disability, as well as the way services are accessed, and families are offered support. Another influential case study is Harry and Klinger's (2006) U.S. study, titled *Why Are So Many Minority Students in Special Education?: Understanding Race and Disability in School*, which was based on observations from 24 classrooms in 12 schools over a 4-year period and included interviews with parents, students, school officials, observations, and an analysis of psychological evaluations. These studies are helpful in contextualizing our understanding of non-White families and students in Ontario special education programs.

2.8   Gaps in the literature

The literature that currently exists on the experiences of students and parents in special education in Ontario provides a useful historical context. However, the voices of racialized parents and discussions of disproportionate representation is limited to a few bodies of work from the late '80s and early '90s on disengagement/push-out, and marginalization of racialized parents. The majority of the information that currently exists on special education is based on data and literature from United States as noted above. Yet it should be clearly outlined that the

literature and studies in the United States inform the Canadian literature along the continuum to understand special education policies and the marginalization of non-White students. In other words, the studies cannot be understood in insolation, rather they help construct what is understood about special education in Ontario. The connection between race and special education in Canada is still unclear. Much of Canadian discourse is focused on research that denies the persistence of racism in the school system which may contribute to the justification of a disproportionate number of minorities in special education. However, as Canadian Race Relations Foundation (2000) reports, Canadian schools are still plagued by the same problems of streaming and low student expectations, while anti-racism policies are considered unnecessary and therefore left on the shelf to collect dust.

Current studies in special education have focused on issues of inclusion/exclusion, the use of assessments, and the need for educator training. The academic literature examined the ways that Indigenous knowledges can be used as pedagogical tools as an alternative to placement and identification in special education. The current system is set-up to identify the "problem" and "remedy" it through Ontario MOE standard procedures which are filtered through educators' and administrators' understanding and practices in addressing learning disabilities. Identification for special education has become automatic, standard, and normalized as the correct way of how to remedy those who are having difficulties in the classroom. Indigenous knowledges such as those that focus on African-centred perspectives or the knowledge of the learner, moves away from a Euro-centric curriculum, in which the dominant history is imposed (Dei, 1999). As Thésée (2006) aptly suggests, "Western knowledge, based on the scientific model, became the standard knowledge, and its process was considered the standard way for achieving knowledge."

Accordingly, the current curriculum is focused on imposing on students a particular way of learning and doing things.

To date, while the Toronto District School Board has acknowledged the racialization, marginalization and dropout rates of Caribbean and Portuguese students, the experiences of parents in secondary schools have not been discussed. Instead, parents have been relegated to the margins and constructed and pathologized as inattentive, lethargic bodies who are not concerned with their child's education. The Canadian literature on the voices of parents is limited to a few dated studies. Thus, my project addresses the gaps in special education policies and literature that do not specifically address the concerns raised by racialized parents and students that a process of segregation and/or streaming may be occurring and that special education may be functioning as a tool for exclusion. This study differs from previous research as it examines the voices of families, students, and educators to contextualize the understanding of minoritized and racialized families in special education classrooms in the Greater Toronto Area.

Given the current literature by American scholars and the historical data of the experiences of minorities in special education, this study will focus on the role of families implicated in the special education process, how their histories and intersecting oppressions affect their experiences and interaction with the education system, and their ability to voice concerns. While there is not enough empirical data to measure disproportionality in schools, this study questions educators and students about the types of racial, ethnic, and gender patterns they have seen in their classrooms and schools. The next chapter focuses on critical race theory and anti-racist theoretical perspective and framework which I use in this study as a lens through which to explore issues of disproportionality and the role of families in special education.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE/FRAMEWORK

The previous chapters focused on situating the research problems within the broader context of policies, practices, and existing literature in North America. The history of special education in Ontario, how special education has been constructed in Ontario and the United States, the role of parents, and of curriculum, and issues of inclusion were outlined. As highlighted above, the schooling experiences of minoritized bodies in Ontario and Toronto continue to remain in the margins. While minoritized and racialized bodies continue to be disproportionately affected by school policies, few changes have occurred to address the failure of minorities within the system. This chapter discusses the theory underlying this research, which interrogates the experiences of educators, racialized and minoritized parents, and students who are involved in the special education process.

Special education in the Greater Toronto Area provides a distinct landscape in which to analyze contemporary and historical issues through the anti-racist discursive framework and critical race theory lenses. The Greater Toronto Area is distinct from other metropolises due to the consistent and changing influx of racialized and minoritized populations, which consist of a variety of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic groups. This constantly changing landscape of racialized and minoritized bodies presents unique challenges to education policies and practices. In particular, there continues to be structural inequities that exist within and across public schools throughout the Greater Toronto Area. I use the analytical lenses of anti-racist discursive frameworks and critical race theory to inform and analyze the data. By highlighting key literature from anti-racist discursive frameworks and significant work from critical race theorists, this chapter provides an overview of anti-racism education, the anti-racist discursive framework, and critical race theory in order to frame how special education may be operationalized and

understood in the context of the Greater Toronto Area. I will further discuss how both theories converge and diverge. Ultimately, this chapter discusses the possibilities and implications of using anti-racist frameworks and critical race theory in understanding special education in the Greater Toronto Area and analyzing the experiences of families, educators, and students.

3.1 Contextualizing anti-racism education

Anti-racism practice has its roots in the United Kingdom before becoming part of the education discourse in Canada, Australia, and the United States (Dei, 1996). In Canada, anti-racism education can be traced back to Judge Rosalie Abella who not only coined the term Employment Equity, but commissioned the report titled *Equality Now* (1984) discussing the participation of visible minorities in Canadian society (Canadian Human Rights Commission [CHRC], 2008). The report and the terms Judge Abella outlined regarding "equality" and "discrimination" were implemented by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1989, followed by their adaptation by the Governments of Canada, New Zealand, Northern Island, and South Africa (Supreme Court of Canada, 2012). Another key work includes Enid Lee's *Letters to Marcia: A teacher's guide to anti-racist education* (1985) (published in Toronto), which outlined her experiences as an educational consultant and formed the basis of anti-racist educational practices (McCaskell, 2005). Another critical Canadian piece was Barb Thomas's *Principles of anti-racist education* published in 1984. In the early 1980s, McCaskell (2005) explains that in Canada there was a political division between multiculturalism and anti-racism. These key works moved away from the contemporary rhetoric of multiculturalism to a discussion that confronted and dealt with issues of race and racial equality.

For the purposes of this investigation, it is important to provide a working definition of anti-racism. Lee (2006) argues that anti-racism is a strategy for "dismantling racist structures and

for building racial justice and equality…[and as] a perspective cuts across all subject areas and institutional practices" (p. 5). Anti-racism seeks to address the inherent inequities that Willis (1981) contends are embedded in capitalistic societies. Mansfield and Kehoe (1994) posit that anti-racist education confronts the "structural, economic, and social roots of inequality" (p. 420), while understanding that both the social and political give rise to those same inequities and maintain existing power structures. As Stanley (1992) contends, anti-racism is about addressing the realities of racism as opposed to shifting to explanations of why something is occurring. Dei (1999) defines some key aspects of anti-racism: (a) race is salient and central; (b) individuals and groups possess different identities and these identities are salient; (c) the context and situation of oppressions vary in intensity; and (d) there exists an intersectionality of oppressions (race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, language, religion, and ethnicity which are linked and intersect.

Anti-racism begins by examining structural and societal oppressions through the lens of race (Calliste & Dei, 2000), thereby placing race and racism at the forefront. McCaskell (2005) argues that the issue of racism is not considered "a human failing, a misunderstanding, or a lack of awareness, but as a problem of ideology, of a worldview that categorized people on the basis of 'race' and justified and reinforced power imbalances between groups" (p. 74). Contextualizing the work of Thomas (1984) and Lee (1985), Dei (1996) draws on these works to list ten (non-hierarchical) principles of anti-racism: (1) understanding the effect of race; (2) understanding race as it intersects with other forms of social oppression, or the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, language, and religion; (3) questioning White power and privilege; (4) the marginalization of particular voices and delegitimization of particular knowledge and experience; (5) advocating for holistic education (encompassing the social, political, ecological, and spiritual) experiences and learning through collective experience;

(6) linking race to identity and issues of schooling; (7) encompassing inclusive education and being responsive to minoritized students and their needs; (8) acknowledging the role of schools as a site of reproducing the status quo (racial, gender-based, sexual, and class-based inequities); (9) understanding that schooling cannot be divorced from the social and economic circumstances that families face; and (10) recognizing that pathologizing of families and environments as the source of failure does not address societal and institutional barriers (pp. 27-35). For the purposes of this investigation, I derive five themes from the aforementioned principles that are central to my research agenda: (a) linking race to identity and issues of schooling; (b) naming and acknowledging how race informs the issue of knowledge production; (c) naming and acknowledging privilege and power; (d) addressing institutional and systemic barriers; and finally (e) addressing resistance and change (Dei, 1996) through our understanding of special education in the Greater Toronto Area.

Anti-racism is an action oriented educational practice and strategy designed to bring about institutional or systemic change in schools, to address issues of racism and the interlocking or intersecting systems of oppressions (Dei, 1996, 2000). This practice addresses inequities in substantive ways, rather than understanding racism as individual actions and prejudices (Dei, 1995). Brantlinger (2006) suggests that *Others* are held accountable for not attaining the norms, while the norms are rarely questioned. Those who do obtain what is considered the baseline are labelled as failures, yet the standards, such as those in special education are upheld in the interests of a particular agenda. As Mark (2003) points out, anti-racism is a "system that questions inequity and power relations…and seeks corrective action" (Conclusion section, para 1). The action is taken when it is understood how the dynamics of social difference are understood and the conditions that oppress are pursued actively (Thomas, 1984). Students placed

into special education are in some shape or form seen as unable to adjust to the set standards in the schools. It is not understood how special education in the Greater Toronto Area is as much the responsibility of a collective action and a series of pushes, rather than an onus on the family for a failure and deficiency. Special education in the United States has been contextualized through the lens of power dynamics, race, racism, and assessments as contributing to the placement of marginalized groups in special education, contributing to their oppression. In the Greater Toronto Area, issues of socioeconomics, race, gender, language, culture, religion, and ethnicity need to be situated within the current issues of schooling. The systemic practices in special education must be examined in order to determine how race and racism plays into and reinforces these practices.

3.1.1   *Race and schooling*

One aim of anti-racist education is the naming of practices and policies that privilege one group while oppressing others. This action is directed in particular at school practices and programs that either covertly or overtly disadvantage one group. Placing race at the forefront of the discussion by labelling it and addressing special education practices that may be discriminatory are critical pieces to understanding special education in the Greater Toronto Area. As Dei (2000) argues, naming race goes beyond discussing skin colour as a signifier; it requires an understanding of how race has become manifest in supposed classifications of educational abilities. It addresses the stratification of abilities based on labels such as "at-risk," "academic," and "applied" and consequently who is placed into these categories.

One example of how a framework of understanding race can be applied is the "model minority" discourse which presumes that Asian students excel in particular subjects (Wu, 2002) including math and sciences. Asian students are often framed through a fixed understanding of

Asian youth as "model minorities" and Asian immigrants as highly successful (Osajima, 2005). Osajima (2005) notes that the model minority myth emerged as a means to placate Latino/a and Black groups by suggesting that if Asians could "make it", so could other minorities. The model minority theory suggests that some groups, namely Asians, are high achievers in the areas of work and school and are able to do well, despite their perceived barriers, such as language, race, and ethnicity. However, as Min (2006) points out, since Asians are portrayed as "successful and problem free," they are often excluded from social programs and funding. Accordingly, these discourses conceal the difficulties that some Asian Canadian students experience in the classroom and the systemic inequities in school curriculum and teaching practices. I argue that these model minority discourses mask systemic barriers and the interlocking levels of oppression minoritized students and parents experience. The model minority myth has constructed Asian Americans through a meritocracy framework, at the expense of other groups who continue to be disenfranchised (Osajima, 2005).

The issue of race, accordingly, cannot be divorced from a discussion of the issue of special education, since there are numerous accounts of overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs and a great deal of data on Black and Spanish/Latino/a groups in special education in the United States (Coelho, Costiniuk & Newton, 1995; Harry & Klingner, 2006). As Artiles (2003) discusses, the issue of disproportionality in special education has been evident for several decades and it is well known that overrepresentation in special education is linked to disproportionate numbers of minoritized students involved in justice systems, criminal activity, and fewer opportunities in post-secondary education. All of this speaks to the urgency of addressing and taking action in special education in Canada.

3.1.2 *Race and knowledge production*

Understanding race and knowledge production involves unpacking the societal structures, tensions, and pressures implicated in relations of power that construct knowledge. In particular we need to understand that knowledge is produced and reproduced in schools and constructed as valid by those who have power; this has become a part of the Canadian educational landscape and everyday curriculum. As policy makers and academics, there is a need to question who constructs special education, how, and for what purpose? In other words, has special education in Ontario, much like the United States, been created as a system for haves and have-nots? Knowledge and policies have been constructed in such a way that they meet the needs of the majority. Yet, as the dropout statistics from the Toronto District School Board demonstrate, the system does not work for many.

As Goldberg (1993) asserts, knowledge is not produced in a vacuum. Accordingly, there must be a questioning and understanding of how, why, and what we learn becomes pertinent in formal education, and how and why the tone and agenda are set in particular ways. For instance, in kindergarten and early years programs across the Greater Toronto Area and across Canada, children are taught modules such as "all about me and families" in September, Hallowe'en in October, Thanksgiving in November, and Christmas in December. Thus, the outcomes of such lessons in the hallways and classrooms in many schools are reflective of Westernized, European, Anglo-Saxon traditions and lifestyles and not necessarily the realities of what many children celebrate and understand at home. The tensions and contestations of power may be internalized in educators as this is what teachers have learned and therefore must be reproduced in the assessments, language, and very nature of special education. Furthermore, educators and

administrators are indirectly or directly suggesting that this knowledge is necessary, through the privilege they command.

3.1.3 *Privilege and power*

At the heart of anti-racism is power and privilege. Power is understood differently within different theoretical frameworks. For the purposes of this investigation, I will rely on Foucault's (1991) understanding of power, which suggests that power is not necessarily gained through coercion by authority; rather it can be a "discursive practice" that remains influx, where individuals have come to understand and internalize what is acceptable, normal, and deviant. Foucault (1972) explains that power is complicated; it is used by those who choose to utilize it. Power is a:

> "network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess; one should take as its model a perpetual battle… this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege' of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated" (Foucault, 1972, p. 26).

Corson (2001) further elaborates that power is "exercised through the production, accumulation, and functioning of various discourses" (p. 16). Privilege and power address the type of education students receive and who and what is driving this agenda. In other words, in whose interest is it to learn a particular type of knowledge and the way we learn it? As Dei (1996) argues, the "historical processes of European enslavement, colonization, (mis)representations and (mis)capturings of knowledge about the human condition of Indigenous, non-Western peoples" are critiqued by anti-racism (pp. 28-29). Indigenous knowledges, for example, have been misrepresented by Whites who have gained from forcing their cultural, religious, and linguistic knowledge on the Indigenous Other. Put differently,

institutions privilege a particular type of curriculum driven by what is seen as normative and Western. Schools in the Greater Toronto Area have been shown to favour a specific type of knowledge without readily acknowledging its impact on minoritized students. Recently, in Toronto, we have seen debates about Afro-centric schools (Carter, 2008; Hopper, 2011). Public opinion and the media focused on the perception of reverting to a segregation of Black students, rather than focusing on the school's agenda to study the "world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view" (Asante, 1991, p. 171). Other forms of knowledge and knowing, in particular Indigenous types of knowledge, are seldom formalized and addressed in the current school curriculum or ultimately rejected by educators. As Asante (1991) contends, racialized students rarely understand their own history through the standard curriculum; they are forced to learn about the world through a Eurocentric lens. Thus in special education, the education and curriculum are disconnected from the realities of the students in the classrooms, as it is based on what has been perceived as privileged; students are expected to learn what is foreign.

3.1.4   *Foucault, power, and special education*

Special education can be theorized through a Foucauldian perspective, which as Allan (1996) suggests examines special education through the discourses of medicine, madness, and discipline (p. 220). She outlines Foucault's concept of a "box of tools" (Foucault, 1977, p. 205), to understand the classroom and how special education operates, as students are "constructed subjects and objects of knowledge" (Allan, 1996, p. 219). Put differently, students are controlled and "subject tied to their own identity by their conscience and self-knowledge" (Allan, 1996, p. 220).

Further to the issue of power, is understanding Whiteness that is directly correlated with understanding power and privilege. As Tator and Henry (2006) contend, Whiteness studies is a field in which White individuals should recognize and name their sites of privilege based on their skin colour and how this privilege is manifest in different spheres. Frankenberg (1993) outlines three interconnected principles to understanding Whiteness: (1) a location of structural advantage within systems (namely education for the purpose of this investigation) which benefit White individuals, yet operates in different degrees, depending on gender, class, and socioeconomic status; (2) a standpoint from which Whites and non-Whites view the world, others, and society (as a White and non-White individual will view the criminal justice system and education systems differently based on their perceptions and experiences); (3) a set of structural practices, norms, symbols, values, and behaviours that are largely unmarked and unnamed. As Tator and Henry (2006) further contextualize, "white identity is based on the concept that those who have traditionally held hegemonic positions of power over all other groups have done so by constructing hierarchical structures of exclusion and marginality" (p. 21).

In the context of the current study, I address how the education system is equipped to benefit Whites, subtly and covertly, as those in power, namely principals and educators remain predominantly White. The language, traditions, and type of education in the current system continues to be English and based on Eurocentric beliefs. Consequently, this creates undue barriers to integration for immigrant families who are unable or uncomfortable to express their beliefs and concerns and vice versa; educators may not articulate everyday school expectations or the learning difficulties experienced by students. Furthermore, assessments and evaluations of competencies and activities are completed against an accepted baseline. As Blanchett (2006) maintains, African American and other minoritized students' academic skills, behaviour, and

social skills are "constantly compared with those of their White peers" (p. 27). Finally, the norms of individualism, how to "act" in school are based on what is considered "universal;" these norms have been readily accepted without question. As an early childhood educator, I have seen firsthand how competencies such as sitting down for long periods of time have been normalized. Families and educators feel that this skill should be mastered before age five in order to conform to institutional expectations. However, a simple skill such as sitting is difficult for children as they are naturally curious and want to move. Institutional norms such as "sitting" and "listening to an educator" are far more valued and rarely questioned for their importance.

3.1.5 *Institutional and systemic barriers*

Anti-racist educational work opposes the dominant knowledge system and current systemic inequities that further marginalize and subordinate racialized students and parents. The education system, including instruments used to measure students' abilities, is based on universally accepted principles of what a child must achieve by a particular age. These skills and behaviours are deeply ingrained in the system. In line with this, the majority of educators, administrators, and educational leaders are White individuals who maintain the status quo and embody a great deal of authority and leadership. In the recent article, "Changing face of Peel Region a challenge for schools and police," in *The Toronto Star* (2011), it was reported that only two of the 37 principals in the Peel Region are visible minorities, while 90 percent of the community is made up of diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities that are not reflected in the teaching force (Grewal, 2011). In the same region, Peel educator Nankissoor withdrew a compliant in front of the Ontario Human Rights Commission after being passed over for a promotion four times (Brown, 2011). The compliant was withdrawn after reaching an agreement, yet Brown (2011) reports that the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario has reported only

five percent of educators as being non-White. Nankissoor is one of two recent cases where there is evidence of systemic discrimination in the School Boards. What these cases illustrate is that administrators in the Greater Toronto Area embody a particular culture and as such they have the ability to exercise a great deal of authority concerning placement and identification decisions. Identifications or "exceptionalities" have become routine within particular communities and legitimatized as a normative practice. There are many communities who have learned about the norms and standards within schools, while many non-White families have not learned the values and beliefs that are accepted. Some parents are insiders to the type of knowledge and education that is valued, while many other parents are outsiders to particular rules and policies. In other words, parents who have grown up in the education system have come to understand what practices are normalized, accepted, and recognized. However, immigrants and families whose cultures differ from a Eurocentric curriculum do not necessarily understand what is considered mainstream. Practices and policies regarding special education largely remain unchallenged since they are well ingrained into everyday norms. The cultural norms of society have become universal norms expressed through "a social structure, an economic structure, and a political structure" (Cox, 1993, p. 62). Hegemony, as described by Gramsci, is not natural but socially constructed (practices, beliefs, and institutions) and reproduced to maintain the position of those in power (Cox, 1993). Countering these hegemonic practices, beliefs, and normalized discourses in relation to special education falls under the purview of this research.

Examining institutional and systemic barriers uncovers a vital dimension of privilege and power relations that are entrenched in schools. In addition to administrators and educators, the curriculum is permeated with Eurocentric values and normative language that objectifies other languages, cultures, ethnicities, and religions, which continue to remain on the peripheries,

despite Canada's changing landscape. Many students who fit as part of the "norm," may do better in schooling, while the languages and cultures of others may differentiate and stigmatize them as less than equal. Accordingly, the system is set up for winners and losers, as Brantlinger (2006) notes, and in the United States the data suggests that the majority of the "losers" are of low-socioeconomic status, racialized, and minoritized students. Winners are identified as such based on normative standards that ensure some excel, while others are deemed incompetent. Brantlinger (2006) contends that individuals and groups "who fail to achieve dominant standards are identified (marked, labelled, branded) with stigmatizing names (e.g. failure, disabled, at-risk) and sent to separated locations (special education rooms, low tracks, vocational schools)" (p. 200). Accordingly, the systemic practices in special education will be examined from the lens of the families.

3.1.6   *Resistance and change*

Resistance and change in Dei's (2000) formulation, is attempting to address the inequities that exist and change the status quo. As Dei (2000) argues, minoritized and racialized bodies are not simply passive victims waiting for change. Indeed, minoritized parents in the educational system are often advocating and attempting to change the system but they are often met with closed doors, resistance, and remain on the margins. These acts of resistance and advocacy cannot be negated in order to assume and pathologize that parents of children who do not do well are simply lazy or uninterested in learning (Dei, 2000). Resistance is related to this investigation, as parents do not always have all the information related to special education processes including assessments and evaluations, yet they are active in their child's schooling. Non-White families aggressively attempt to change the status that their child is in, despite the resistance they many encounter. Families can only advocate on the child's behalf if all of the information is presented

in an impartial manner, in clear and transparent terms, and in many cases, in their own languages. Families are not passive, but their role in their child's education may be restricted by not only misinformation but also cultural rules that may impede the questioning of an educational authority. As Harry (1992a) identified in her study on Puerto Rican-American families, educators have constructed parents as passive yet the parents' on-going experiences of being undermined as well as traditional respect for authority has a significant impact on their participation with school officials. That is, their ongoing relationship with figures of authority in the school system and feelings of being unheard has created a situation where families are passive.

3.1.7 *Anti-racism and Indigeneity*

Bourdieu's theorization of societal reproduction (as written in Driessen, 2001), rightly argues that social structures responsible for organising society, typically benefit those who fit into particular conceptions/categories of the norm. Dei et al. (1997) suggests that an anti-racism discursive framework acknowledges and critiques the "marginalization of certain voices in society and, particularly, the failure to take serious account of the rich knowledge and experiences of subordinate groups in the educational system" (p. 27). The experiences of the majority overshadow the lived experiences, culture, ethnicity, race, spirituality and knowledge of what is inherently a part of an individual's identity. Wane (2006) notes that to "control people's culture and way of thinking is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (p. 88). Learning should be responsive to the diverse bodies in the classrooms and not something that is foreign, alien, or disconnected. As Fanon (1967) suggests, there are consequences to taking up the culture, language, and that which is alien, to the racialized body. Fanon (1967) explains at length that:

>…every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country… He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle (p. 18).

The learner must be connected with that which is applicable to his/her lived experiences. Memmi (1965) contends that the role of the educator is to create a space which is not unlike their home: "The teacher and school represent a world which is too different from his family environment…far from creating the adolescent to find himself completely, school creates a permanent duality in him" (p. 106). This duality, dual-consciousness, or double-consciousness as Memmi (1965) and Fanon (1967) argue, creates two conflicting bodies of knowledge. Students are forced to internalize these messages and wrestle with themselves to understand their roots and understand what is valued. Through their educators, curriculum, and schooling students come to realize what is important and what is valued by the majority and consequently may accept the way things are done at school into how they conduct their own life. The conflict between dual identities as constructed through schools should be challenged in a way that honours diversity in more than a token manner.

3.2   Anti-racist discursive framework

Building on the aforementioned principles of anti-racism, Dei (2005) defines an anti-racist discursive framework as a framework that challenges "both the exclusionary politics of social institutions and institutional settings, and the universal claims to truth that have historically been propagated by conventional, dominant systems" (p. 95).

I have used a discursive theoretical framework to shift away from theoretical frameworks that employ grand/meta-narratives that have been accepted as everyday practice. The anti-racist discursive framework in particular should not be read as prescriptive or imposed, but rather a

lens to investigate an issue. The fluidity of a discursive framework allows for participants' voices to be heard, themes, questions and ideas to emerge and allows the research to move beyond the rigidity of traditional frameworks. The anti-racist discursive framework shifts from a meta-narrative (a grand discourse and dialogue embedded with particular values) to a narrative that will allow marginalized voices to be at the forefront, enabling me to understand the experiences and knowledge of the oppressed. The framework allows me to go beyond "categorizing" the content in the interviews by placing the wording, policies, social location of participants and norms of society under examination. Anti-racism is about troubling out power relations and moving away from discussions about "tolerating diversity to pointed notion of difference and power" (Dei, 2005, p. 3). For the purposes of this dissertation, I seek to identify, challenge, and contest the values, structures, and behaviours embedded in special education which have functioned to subjugate minoritized bodies.

The anti-racist discursive framework provides a theoretical underpinning of anti-racism as a way to conceptualize how structures work and is a "useful analytical framework for understanding society" (Dei, 2000, p. 23). Notions about race as being salient and a principle for organizing society, interactions, and social relations are critical components of this framework. Race has a currency and is a powerful marker of identity and identity formation. The anti-racism and anti-racist discursive framework not only challenges the dominant knowledge system, but questions the pathologizing of families and home environments (Dei, 2000). In other words, families and children are inherently blamed for deficits and failing rather than the educator taking responsibility for why a student may be acting out or not excelling in school. The families are often accused of being inadequate parents or not taking responsibility for their child's education. However, school officials are rarely held accountable for their own failures. Anti-

racism research places racialized bodies at the center of analysis and further examines these power relations (Dei & Johal, 2005). The focus becomes how minoritized students' lived experiences impact their daily realities in the system. Dei (2000) argues that anti-racism is not about confronting conscious intentions to restrict social power for a particular group, but it is about reconstructing and uncovering inequities that are embedded in social structures. In particular, it focuses on revealing injustices in every day norms and schooling practices that are prevalent yet remain unchallenged.

As the anti-racism discursive framework is action-oriented, the overarching goal of this project is to examine policies and practices that disadvantage parents. Dei (1996) argues that anti-racism education should be considered a vehicle for social change. Accordingly, injustices and inequities should be addressed through direct changes, as evident from policies on the ground. The purpose of the anti-racist discursive framework is not to argue that racism exists, but rather acknowledge its existence and question Whiteness and privilege and how they are manifest in everyday practice. In other words, borrowing from Critical Race Theory (CRT), an anti-racist discursive framework takes the position that racism is endemic in society and in institutions. In a school, for instance, it recognizes that the majority of the curriculum is geared to and from an Anglo-Saxon, Euro-centric framework. Such a framework challenges these inherent biases and places the learner at the centre. The goal is to understand the learner's lived realties from a holistic perspective that includes and values the learner's Indigenous backgrounds. Therefore, the educators' role is to do more than reiterate what is known; their role is to value the student's language, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender in a way that privileges what students know.

Using the praxis termed by Freire (2006), Dei (2000) argues that anti-racist praxis (acts which shape and change the world) must mediate how educators govern the classroom. They must be interested in creating a place where students' intersecting identities are acknowledged and valued. By challenging norms and standard practice, I will challenge the assumptions and particular ideologies that are inherently biased against particular groups, such as special education programs. In other words, racialized and minoritized families are often informed that their child(ren) would benefit from special education, remedial programs, or other 'add-on' programs, as their child(ren) cannot be accommodated in an integrated setting. Many non-White families are informed that these "add-on" programs are necessary and that only "at-risk" students benefit from these services. Therefore, understanding special education allows us to understand what Dei (1996) refers to as the "study of how the dynamics of social difference (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, physical disability, language, and religion) are mediated in people's daily experiences" (p. 55), it allows us to understand the asymmetrical power relations of schooling. The role of educators should be to identify ways that power and privilege are reproduced (Apple, 2004), while acknowledging how Whiteness is embedded throughout educational institutions and reproduced at many levels.

The anti-racist discursive framework allows for an interrogation of structural barriers for social change (Dei, 2000) by examining notions of power, privilege, and dominance that are reproduced through Whiteness, and colour-blind approaches. Further to the values outlined by Dei (2005), Applebaum (2005) suggests that there are "three common, seemingly 'good' anti-racist discourses" (p. 282), which includes the rhetoric of meritocracy, colour-blindness, and individual choice. Applebaum suggests that within these practices, "colour-blindness not only ignores the positive contributions of racialized groups, but also ignores or denies the systemic

harms that people of colour experience. In a world where race still matters, refusing to take race into consideration results in the dismissal of systemic oppression" (pp. 282-283).

The notion of being "raceless" negates the significance of race, while colour-blind approaches suggest that all things are equal since race is not a significant factor. However, these ideologies negate how race impacts the daily lived experiences of particular groups. In this project I will examine and demonstrate how practices and policies privilege the majority, while delegitimizing and subordinating minoritized bodies. Anti-racism identifies, challenges, and disrupts the "values, structures, and behaviours that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppression" (Dei & Johal, 2005, p. 3).

3.3   Connecting anti-racist theorizing to special education

Related to the prevalence of racism in education in general, is the effect of racism on student placement in special education and the identification process. The National Research Council (2002), Ferri and Connor (2005a), Harry and Klingner (2006), among others, have found that race is a salient indicator of a student's placement into a particular category. Accordingly, in order to deconstruct and rupture the systemic barriers used to place students in special education, race must be central in the discussion. To negate the complexity of race is to deny the hegemonic, systemic barriers that relegate difference to the margins. The anti-racist discursive framework allows race and the effects of racism to remain central to discussions of how special education is constructed. Also at the forefront of the anti-racism discursive framework are issues of equity and rupturing race-based hierarchies, while naming sites of power and privilege (Dei, 2000).

The issue of discursive power of the marginalized and racially oppressed, in this case parents and students, is needed to understand lived realities. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995)

write, "the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system" (p. 58). An anti-racist discursive framework has allowed me to understand, change, and adapt to the histories and experiences of the interviewees and further take into account how cultural nuances have had an impact on their life histories. While taking into account various interlocking oppressions, my focus is on bringing the voices of minoritized students and parents to the forefront to better understand how special education functions. As noted above, race, identity, representation, power, knowledge, and Eurocentricsm (Dei, November 24, 2008, SES 1921) underpin daily schooling practices. Therefore, there is a need to focus on special education policies, practices, assessments, and administrators through this framework in order to understand the complexities of how they affect non-White families.

3.4   Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is also of historical significance in terms of understanding special education and its limitations. I begin with a discussion of what critical race theory is and how it is linked to this project. I will then focus on the use of counter-storytelling and liberalism, and finally, CRT's connection to special education. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is focused on understanding "race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2), in particular through a legal discourse. Villenas, Deyhle, and Parker (1999) argue that CRT addresses "deep patterns of exclusion … [challenges] what is taken for granted with respect to race and privilege" (p. 34). As Roithmayr (1999) explains, CRT has no legal set of doctrines, but there are two overarching agreements in CRT that have deep roots in civil rights and critical legal scholarship. These agreements describe the relationship between race-neutral ideas and the "structure of White supremacy and racism" (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 1). It also uncovers ways to utilize law and racial power in order to build up social structures while further advancing racial issues. Further to the

two pillars listed, scholars, activists, and academics explain that there are five basic tenets of CRT: (1) explaining that racism is a normative, permanent, and ordinary fixture in everyday life, difficult to address and point out (Delgado, 1995); (2) understanding that storytelling or counter-storytelling is used to understand the voices of the oppressed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001); (3) critiquing the discourse of liberalism (Ladson-Billings, 1999); (4) understanding the notion of interest convergence (Bell, 1980), where people in positions of power and privilege are interested in racial issues only if it will benefit them; and (5) understanding the permanence of Whiteness as property (property that has the right to be possessed, used and enjoyed exclusively by Whites) (Harris, 1993). Further to this, another component of CRT is understanding differential racialization in which society stratifies which groups and individuals have more power than others (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For the purposes of this project, I will address several aspects of CRT, including how racism is a fixed entity, the use of counter-storytelling, and the critiques of liberalism, as these pillars are most closely linked with issues of special education. As it relates to schooling practices, schools are organized according to race, as seen in the United States and in Canada. Schools in impoverished regions do not have the same resources as schools in affluent areas, including technology and physical resources. In more affluent areas there are more supplies and equipment available, thereby creating different opportunities for learning.

Delgado (1995) contends that CRT was brought into the discourse by Derrick Bell (an African American) and Alan Freeman (a White American) concerned with post-civil rights racial reform in the United States. As Ladson-Billings (1999) reports, civil rights activities, such as marches, protests, and "appealing to the moral sensibilities of decent citizens" (p.11) were not enough to further civil rights issues. It became clear that more was needed to directly address

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race and racism in the United States. The concern was that the civil rights won in the 1960s were delayed and therefore social, economic, political, and legal gains were eroding (Delgado, 1995). CRT was also influenced by and shares roots with a movement referred to as Critical Legal Studies (CLS) (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Beginning in the 1970s, CLS challenged legal scholarship and was informed by Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Within CLS, hegemonic studies focused on "oppressive structures in American society" (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 12); yet CLS failed to provide practical applications to address these concerns. At its core, CRT addresses race, racism and systemic inequities in a hegemonic state, governed by Whiteness. As an "eclectic and dynamic area of legal scholarship" (Taylor, 1999, p. 183), critical race theory emerged in the United States to address legal and civil rights issues and has been adapted by academics as a framework used to describe inequalities in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Zion and Blanchette (2011) suggest that the principle of interest convergence (in which the interests of Blacks can only be achieved when Whites somehow benefit) can be used to "critique the current system of special education referral, identification, and placement" and further to "question, understand, disrupt, and leverage change" by uncovering the notion of inclusion (who is included and who is not) (p. 2196). That is, interest convergence in CRT allows a critique of why Black students are not given the same opportunities in schooling, as they are overrepresented in special education, while White students continue to be educated in inclusive settings.

In Canada, however, CRT has been slow to develop recognition, mainly because of the exclusion of minoritized and racialized scholars from the Canadian legal academy, which has consequently led to an "under-representation of legal scholars of colour" and thus the adaptation of CRT in Canada (Aylward, 1999, p. 49).

3.4.1   *Racism and Critical Race Theory*

Scholars, activists, and academics of CRT argue that while race and racism remain valid constructs, racial inequities, especially related to racialized students, continues to be muted (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Villenas et al., 1999). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggest that race is significant in "determining inequity in the United States," as evident through "statistical and demographic data" (p. 48). However, they are quick to point out that race should be understood as more than an objective condition. Yet race remains undertheorized in the field of education. In other words, even though race is biologically identifiable and problematic, it is infiltrated in every facet of our daily lives yet not clearly and directly understood in education. Race and racism should be understood as more than covert (hidden acts) or overt (blatant) racism. In order to address this lack of theorization, CRT attempts to uncover the "unequal power relations in society" that permeate schools and classrooms (Villenas et al., 1999, p. 38). Moreover, as McCarthy and Crichlow (1993) point out, the "race question" challenges and brings to the "foreground omissions and blind spots" (p. xvii). Race continues to be significant and a permanent structure of lived experiences. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggest gender and/or socioeconomic status on their own do not explain educational outcomes for students (but quickly point out that they do not mean to suggest class and gender simply do not matter). In the United States, class and gender has a significant impact on the outcomes of particular students; but being a racialized male and coming from a low socioeconomic status, places many racialized/minoritized students in double-jeopardy and increases their chances of being identified for special education or failing altogether. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) cite Oakes' (1985) research findings to suggest that poor, minority students are at the lowest echelons of school structures, but it is unclear whether race or socioeconomic class is a more significant factor.

3.4.2 *Understanding counter-storytelling*

Counter-storytelling, DeCuir and Dixson (2004) argue, exposes and critiques "normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes" and challenges "privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups" (p. 27). Critical race theory attempts to debunk the master script that is the official school curriculum which is further used to maintain the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1999). The master script essentially means that the narratives of minoritized bodies have been ignored, sanitized, or muted to fit into a normative discourse of how privileged bodies would like to tell a story. The purpose of CRT is to re-write particular doctrines or narratives, based on intersecting oppressions that have ascribed values on students. By moving these narratives to the forefront, the storytelling or what Delgado (1995) contends as analyzing the "myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render Blacks and other minorities one-down" (p. xiv), become the focus. Ladson-Billings (1999) argues that storytelling is a powerful tool for the oppressed. "The story of one's condition leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated, thus allowing one to stop inflicting mental violence on oneself" (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 16). Accordingly, storytelling allows researchers to understand the *Othered* experience or to uncover the voices of those who are often unheard.

CRT theory is then attempting to move a "researcher's gaze from a deficit view of people of colour to a critical view of discriminatory social practices that limit people's educational and life opportunities" (Villenas et al., p. 48). The deficit mentality that makes assumptions of how language, culture, race, religion, and ethnicities function to limit a child's ability, have prevented educators and researchers from taking up education in ways that recognizes the students' life

experiences. Through the holistic lens of the counter-storytelling, voice is granted to parents who have traditionally not been afforded the opportunity to share their discontent with the education system and how special education services have functioned as limiting and prohibiting. CRT, through the use of counter-storytelling, therefore, shifts the focus to minoritized groups and their experiences. Counter-storytelling is a significant part of the methodology used to uncover what non-White students and families believe about special education.

3.4.3 *Understanding liberalism*

Under CRT studies, DeCuir and Dixson (2004) explain that there are three important concepts of liberalism that need to be critiqued: "the notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and incremental change" (p. 29). West (1993) argues that critical race theorists question dominant discourses surrounding liberalism as normalized in American society, in particular, its "inconsistencies, incoherencies, silences, and blindness" (as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 12). CRT argues for drastic changes in the system but liberal systems are slow to enact dramatic change as practices are deeply embedded within institutions. Colour-blindness in liberalism, as DeCuir and Dixson (2004) argue, fails to take into consideration the way racism operates and how particular bodies are privileged based on skin colour. In other words, to argue that "we are all the same" negates the lived realities of many racialized bodies. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggest civil rights laws, have been insignificant in addressing fundamental injustices as they overwhelmingly benefit Whites, and further maintain the status quo (yet largely remain unchallenged). Alternatively, the rights of Whites continue to undermine the privileges and gains made by minoritized peoples. Ladson-Billings (1999) further stipulates that the "race-neutral or colour-blind perspective, evident in the way the curriculum presents people of colour, presumes a homogenized "we" in a celebration of diversity" (p. 22). Liberalism, being the dominant

discourse in the United States has had an impact on education particularly, for racialized youth in special education.

3.4.4   *Critical Race Theory's connection to special education*

CRT specifically addresses how racial inequalities in schools have manifested themselves and explains why racialized and minoritized people are continually defined as 'underachievers'. While CRT has its roots in legal discourse, Ladson-Billings (1999) suggests that equal opportunity, in terms of curriculum, instruction, funding, and facilities must be considered for racialized and minoritized students. In a similar vein, Villenas et al. (1999) suggest CRT analysis can reveal "the racism undergirding typical schooling practices related to tracking or ability grouping, disciplinary procedures, testing, and curriculum and instruction" (p. 33). Testing acts as a scientific measure to justify why some students do not fit within the norms of the curriculum. As Tyack (1974) suggests, intelligences tests are used to measure the "able, the normal, and the slow from the start, to provide them with the appropriate instruction, and by secondary school, to sort them out according to their likely careers" (pp. 203-204). Issues with tracking and ability grouping are interconnected with concerns related to special education. As the literature in the United States and Canada suggests, minoritized bodies are more likely to be placed into lower level ability groupings than their White peers. Testing and tracking are "entrenched in the meritocratic culture" (Green, 1999, p. 246) as is the concept that those who do not succeed cannot do so because of their own limitations and failures.

CRT has dealt significantly with research in education because "schooling and 'colonial' education are the greatest normalizers of White supremacy" (Villenas et al., 1999, p. 48). Scholars of CRT recognize that notions of 'truth', fairness, justice, and objective facts (Taylor, 1999) reflect the position of the majority and accordingly this has worked against understanding

the lived experiences of marginalized bodies. Specifically, CRT "offers a way to understand how ostensibly race-neutral structures in education -- knowledge, truth, merit, objectivity, and 'good education'-- are in fact ways of forming and policing the racial boundaries of White supremacy and racism" (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 4).

CRT and education are interconnected with "theory to practice and activism on issues related to race" (Villenas et al., 1999, p. 31). As Villenas et al. (1999) contend schools are systems of winners and losers and they mimic every day societal structures and hierarchies. More importantly, in a system of meritocracy, the education system is believed to create equal opportunities where "everyone can succeed, if they try hard enough." Through a social justice lens, CRT scholars seek to dismantle truth claims of "fairness" or "neutrality," as these colour-blind ideologies only benefit White bodies. The theory attempts to expose unequal power relations and how these relations are insidious, entrenched through the pervasive privilege of Whiteness. In other words, Whiteness permeates all structures and practices, such as schools, curriculum, textbooks, and it is reproduced through educators and administrators who embody norms; CRT attempts to critically analyze these structures and power relations through the Whiteness lens.

Further to exploring the pervasive structures of Whiteness in schools, theorists examine how racism is embedded in schools and attempts to explain why Black students in particular are disproportionately affected by school policies. Specifically, critical race theorists in education challenge "claims of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 56). These basic claims benefit dominant groups socially and economically. Meritocracy in particular, is an important concept to consider when analyzing both special education and educational practices in general. Meritocracy assumes that all conditions for

success are equal, thus negating the historical and racial underpinnings within society. It assumes that those who succeed and 'excel' are the most deserving and capable; that every student has the ability to rise above their conditions; and that those who are not motivated will be relegated to the bottom. However, the notion of meritocracy ignores the argument put forward by CRT scholars that racism is ingrained within social practices and schools only benefit those who are considered the "best and brightest" according to White normative and universal standards. Normative discourses have been assigned to the activities of White parents, while minoritized parents engage in activities that remain on the peripheries. Taylor (1999) contends that "standards are chosen, not inevitable" (p. 184). Thus, there is a concerted effort to choose what is learned, what concepts have merit over others, and why educators choose to teach what they teach. CRT allows researchers to challenge the objective truths that have marginalized and subjugated minoritized students and parents who have not acquired the 'appropriate' social capital.

Roithmayr (1999) argues that CRT scholars have broadened the lens of the theory to include racial emancipation and critical thinking. Indeed, Roithmayr (1999) contends that many scholars have negated the concepts of colour-blindness, merit, and integration, which have "perpetuated institutional racial power" (p. 2). In other words, "merit standards, which are purported to be race-neutral and objective are actually race-specific because they were constructed in a context of racial exclusion, by elites who had acquired social power by explicitly excluding people of colour" (p. 3). As Villenas et al. (1999) suggest, while CRT does not add a new set of methodological tools, it is a "race-based interpretive framework aimed at social justice" (p. 32). CRT involves a shift in focus, in conjunction with the grounded and critical

theories, and will allow for a critical examination of the barriers that may be present in special education.

Finally, CRT adds an important component to investigating how policies, practices, standards, and the rhetoric of accountability have functioned to maintain the status quo. In particular, research indicates that special education has been viewed as a form of re-segregation. As Roithmayr (1999) aptly notes, schools are where knowledge is "constructed, organized, produced, and distributed" (p. 5) and where social and racial hierarchies exist. To contextualize this in the context of special education in the Greater Toronto Area, knowledge, testing, constructs of "validity" are created through a Eurocentric lens. Students who do poorly on particular measures are stratified according to their lived realities and their deemed failures before they are given an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and capacity. Ladson-Billings (as cited in Villenas, et al., 1999), suggests academic testing is driven by a desire to label racialized children as deficient, rather than understanding their strengths. The measures of testing paint a partial picture of a child's ability and the onus for improvement is placed on children and their families, rather than addressing systemic inequities in the curriculum. Meanwhile, educators and administrators continue to view learning through a singular lens rather than a holistic lens and the system that is built on a particular cultural capital continues to marginalize those who do not conform.

One of the shortcomings of CRT, as argued by Farber and Sherry (1995), is that CRT does not have a distinct Black voice; rather it is a homogenous collection of voices, a collection of oppressed voices, understood as a collective oppression. However, I believe one of CRT's strengths is that it does not have a singular voice. If the aim of research is to understand the voices of those who are unheard, or shift away from meta-narratives, one cannot argue that there

is a distinct voice that represents the African American or minoritized experience. Indeed, there are many voices that are silenced and no single voice that can speak for an entire group. Moreover, since CRT is a discourse rooted in legal studies, issues of power are contextualized through legalese, while education is constructed through a legal lens.

Carbado and Gulati (2003) contend CRT's limitations lay in the belief that racism is endemic and it, "fails to take seriously notions of agency," while its political effects result in privileges for Black individuals (p. 1758). Accordingly, criticism is focused on how CRT has failed to fulfill its goals to address social inequities and oppressive structures in a meaningful way. Initially, there was significant discourse and dialogue, but the application of CRT was difficult to sustain. As Ladson-Billings (1999) contends, for CRT to work within schools, we must expose "racism in education and propose radical solutions for addressing it" (p. 22). If educators and institutions are not willing to acknowledge privilege and systemic barriers to uncover unpopular notions and biases, CRT will remain unable to reach its full potential.

3.5   Convergences and divergences

Anti-racist discursive frameworks and critical race theories have some principles that differ in distinct ways. Some ways in which CRT and anti-racist frameworks are similar include the belief that race is salient and the understanding the pervasiveness of Whiteness, privilege, power, and accountability. Moreover, ensuring responsibility from dominant bodies to uphold principles of social justice and equity are at the forefront. Recognizing the gaps in liberal and multicultural discourses that subsume racialized bodies, challenging hegemonic structures such as labelling, and understanding the role of knowledge production are also central to these frameworks.

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that most race related policies and practices function without a strong theoretical framework. Critical race theory and the anti-racist discursive framework take into consideration the importance of race, the way in which race is prevalent in our everyday lives, social relationships and the systemic nature of racism. One of the notions of critical race theory is built on the understanding that colour-blindness renders social hierarchies invisible and denies how race impacts the lives of racialized bodies on a daily basis. As Delgado (1995) and Ladson-Billings (1999) argue, racism has become normalized and part of everyday culture; therefore, the goal is to unmask its power and privilege. Both frameworks attempt to uncover, explain, and provide the structure through which we can understand the distinct experiences of people of colour and their lived experiences of racism. Part of understanding race is examining the role Whiteness plays in education generally and special education in particular. How do we understand the connection between Whiteness, education, and labelling that informs the identification process with regards to these programs?

3.5.1 *Contextualizing Whiteness and race*

Understanding race and racism and critiquing liberal and multicultural discourses are other ways that both CRT and anti-racist discursive theories are similar. Both theories address how ideologies of meritocracy, colour-blindness, and neutrality have functioned to render race as a non-issue. In other words, simply suggesting that one does not see race has been more harmful than helpful. Race being at the forefront is not to suggest that there is a hierarchy of oppressions, but how race has often been negated by educators and its continuous demarcation, is at issue. Put differently, how race affects the daily lives of students and families, inside the classroom and in the community, is not something that is necessarily on the radar of administrators and educators.

3.5.2 Privilege and power

The anti-racist discursive framework and critical race theory aim to uncover oppressive domains that are operationalized both covertly and overtly. This includes explorations of how some individuals as well as structural and political systems convey racist ideologies directly (through actions, words, meanings, and inactions) and indirectly (through practises, curriculum, or testing measures) that allow for less than equitable access to education. Yet, the underlying theme is that race remains at the forefront of the discussion. The purpose of this investigation is to determine how race is left nameless and examine how race is often a taboo issue in the Canadian schooling context. Often the discussion in schooling is that we are in a post-racial era with "all things being equal" or that equality exists. However, social justice and equity is often considered secondary or is poorly understood. Race and racism continue to play out in the lives of minoritized families and this type of meta-narrative has often discounted the various school practices that marginalize particular bodies.

3.5.3 Liberalism and multiculturalism discourse

Lopez (2003) argues that "justice for all" assumes a level playing field that is radically neutral. Meanwhile, educators often assume that equity and justice are the same as equality. Equality assumes the same access to resources for everyone, regardless of their oppressions and realities. Equity considers an individual's multiple oppressions and how their individual circumstances affect their abilities or outcomes. For example, the educator who considers equality marks every student the same way on an assignment, regardless of their low socioeconomic or immigrant status. The teacher who considers equity evaluates students based on whether their output was influenced by individual life circumstances. However, what needs to be considered is that not all students have the same resources outside and inside the home and

school. Anti-racism education requires shifting from the discourse of liberalism and multiculturalism, which are based on the belief that everyone has equal footing and that everyone is oppressed in the same way, to understanding how interlocking oppressions affect educational outcomes. Thus, those who do not have the same resources or are not afforded the same opportunities are often told to "pull themselves up by their boot straps", but have no boot straps with which to pull themselves up. These ideologies deny the invisibility of normative practices and how these practices are passively accepted by administrators and educators. Moreover, the identifications associated with a 'label' in school files may affect a student's lifelong educational outcomes. As Zine (2002) argues, anti-racism education is about moving from a multicultural celebration of diversity and difference to dealing with "issues of power and subordination that are often masked" (p. 37). Therefore, this study attempts to shift from how educators understand diversity as the three S's (samosas, saris, and steel bands) (Troyna, 1990), or three M's (mountains, Mounties, and moose), to uncovering how everyday practices and structural inequities affect the lived experiences of minoritized students on a daily basis. The question remains: how can educators address everyday inequities? Furthermore, how can these injustices be addressed in school policies so that the status quo is not reproduced?

Issues of multiculturalism and liberalism are connected to special education in particular ways. Fixed notions of identity such as diet, dress, and dance, are constructed as normative, while markers of difference may be taken up by educators as deviant and problematic. Identifying difference is further complicated by what are conceptualized as accepted norms. Some aspects of identity, such as food, are accepted and "exotic" while others, such as religion and cultural practices may be seen as problematic. Notions of liberalism, which suggest all students are on equal footing, also impacts students who fail to achieve particular milestones. Put

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differently, if a student is failing, the onus is put back on the family and student, rather than assessing how the curriculum could be modified to ensure all students maintain particular standards.

Both theories also uncover how racism is deeply embedded in everyday practices, institutions, and lived realities and further notes the limitations of liberalism. To systemically address racism, Ladson-Billings (1999) argues that liberalism has done little to make significant changes in addressing the status quo.

Just as anti-racist discursive framework moves from a single narrative, CRT allows for counter-storytelling to take place and brings marginalized voices to the forefront, as these voices are often muted. The position of the voice is central, ensuring that the voice of the oppressed is salient. CRT and the anti-racist frameworks attempt to uncover what schools present to students of colour as "objective, historically accurate, and universal" while making assumptions about the homes of non-White students are "primitive, mythical, and backward" (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 4). Both these theories discuss ways in which the home lives of students are not as deficient as educators may assume and value the richness and culture that exists. CRT also debunks our understanding of value laden words such as "educational achievement" in order to understand how these constructs have a racial context for a student who does well and a student who does poorly.

Villenas et al. (1999) point out the stories of "merit, equality, the market, and objectivity that are so deeply entrenched and are accepted without question by society at large" (p. 34) are interrogated by CRT. These ideals are similar to the anti-racist discursive framework which questions these fixed constructs of who excels and who does not.

Despite the opportunities, CRT and anti-racist frameworks offer, there are some limitations worth mentioning. It is well documented that school policies and practices have not kept pace with changing Canadian demographics (Dei, 2003). While Canada has had a long history of segregating racialized bodies, it is unclear why mainstream education and inclusion are not the fundamental principles and the foundation of curriculum practices. Mansfield and Kehoe (1994) suggest that "institutional barriers, material inequalities, and power discrepancies" (p. 427) can be addressed through the use of anti-racist frameworks. However, they note race and racism has been narrowly constructed as violence against "Black" bodies through an anti-racist framework (Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994). It is further suggested that antiracism is "too political" (Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994), yet as Dei (February 9, 2009, SES 1921), notes education is anything but universal, neutral, or 'apolitical.'

A further limitation noted by Lawrence and Dua (2005) is that antiracism has failed to take into consideration Aboriginal people, their culture, and history. As the authors aptly argue, the "failure of Canadian antiracism to make colonization foundational has meant that Aboriginal peoples' histories, resistances, and current realities have been segregated from antiracism" (p. 132). Accordingly, we cannot discuss anti-racism as a pedagogy of change for all non-white students, when issues of decolonization are not yet addressed. Another limitation of the anti-racist framework is managing how the framework is adopted in schools. Educators must recognize their own privilege, power, biases, and identities, and many educators are uncomfortable or unable to recognize how this in fact may lead to policies and practices that are less than favourable for minoritized students. Attempting to penetrate large educational systems, such as that in Ontario, is also a difficulty. Policy makers must first recognize that the growing racial, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic populations of students are a mismatch with the educators

who teach. Educators continue to embody a history and identity unlike the students they serve. Instead, often courses are optional add-ons which are can be met with resistance by students. As the funding and the number of students labelled and placed into special education increases annually, and standardization and accountability measures increase the disparities between minoritized and non-minoritized students, there is a need to re-examine the practices which marginalize and alienate minoritized bodies within the Ontario curriculum.

To summarize, this chapter examined the theories informing and underlying this investigation, including anti-racist discursive framework and critical race theory, and how these theories can be used to understand how special education is operationalized. The next chapter outlines the methods and methodology used conduct the investigation and the methodology and examines the reasons why particular tools were used to address the research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

In the previous chapter, the analytical lenses it's theoretical underpinnings of the anti-racist discursive framework and critical race theory in relation to the issues of special education were outlined. In this chapter, I discuss the methodology and more specifically: (a) the research design; (b) the research site and context where the study occurred; (c) the recruitment of participants; (d) the profile of parent, student, educator and administrator participants; (e) grounded theory and its use in data collection and analysis; (f) data collection instruments; (g) how the data were analyzed; (h) the limitations of the methods and methodology employed; and (i) the ethical considerations, challenges, and tensions.

4.1   Research design: Qualitative framework

For the purposes of this project, and in order to bring to the forefront how parents, students and educators understand special education, I used a qualitative research methodology to gather, analyze, and discuss the research data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Punch, 2005; Bryman, 2001). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as a critical framework that allows a researcher to interpret a phenomenon through the lens of the research participants in order to increase the depth of understanding and to better examine nuances in the research by contextualizing the issues. Similarly, Jackson and Verberg (2007) write that qualitative researchers place "emphasis on understanding the social world from the participant's point of view" (p. 183). Brantlinger et al. (2005) assert that while qualitative research is difficult to define due to its history and complexity, the researchers argue it is "a systemic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature of a phenomenon within a particular context" (p. 195). Qualitative interviews, much like social research (such as direct communication and dialogues with parents and students), are the focus of this research project as they enable and examination of

the informant's perceptions and experiences in order to go beyond what Dei et al. (1997) argue are mere statistical accounts of the issues.

In order to understand the nuances and complexities of special education, a purposive sample (Jackson & Verberg, 2007; Neuman, 2003) was chosen to include individuals that were: (a) students in special education; (b) educators working with students in special education programs; (c) parents with children in these programs. A purposive sample, as defined by Neuman (2003) is a group that fits all the criteria set out in particular research project. Participants were specifically chosen based on predefined categories (such as race, ethnicity, culture, gender) in an effort to understand how multiple identified sources of oppression affected their perceptions and experiences with special education identification. This project identified particular ethnic groups in the Greater Toronto Area in order to understand and uncover how different cultures, races, religions, and genders view their subjectivity and social location as impacting their experiences in special education. The participants were chosen because they offered "useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Within purposive sampling, a qualitative method referred to as "maximum variation" was used in which the researcher attempts to include a diverse group of participants to uncover the commonalities in their understandings and experiences. Such an approach allowed for a broader understanding of what is known about the experiences of educators in special education and what is not known in terms of the processes and systemic barriers in schools across the Greater Toronto Area. In designing the study, I was interested in moving beyond understanding the experiences of White educators/administrators, as this provides only a partial picture into School Board policies, practices, and assessments, to examine how minoritized parents/students and White educators understood the impact of School Board policies and procedures.

In Toronto, the education and schooling of Somali, Black, and Latino/a students has been characterized by community advocates as problematic with high dropout rates and considerable gaps in student learning. As a researcher, I was interested in understanding what families felt was occurring in order to understand what factors interacted and interrelated to form their lived experiences. I was further interested in what White and racialized educators/administrators believed about the patterns and the assessments, policies, and practices in their respective School Boards.

One of the purposes of qualitative research is to study an issue in depth in order to understand the social context and issues surrounding a particular phenomenon. Moreover, qualitative research involves understanding multiple socially constructed realities through the lens or understanding of the participants. Accordingly, theories and interpretations are developed and modified throughout the study, rather than being pre-determined by the researcher. As described by Creswell (2009), the research process shifted and adapted as I began the field work. To add richness to the study and to bring marginalized voices to the forefront, the qualitative research method was process oriented and included rich descriptions of the narratives of the participants. Research that is process oriented relies on the participants' voices, views, and lived experiences to shape the direction of the research findings. Accordingly, this process allows participants to lead the field work, rather than the researcher who may attempt to contain the views of participants. Qualitative research can include case studies, personal narratives, life stories, interviews, cultural texts, and observational data to understand the matter in depth (Bryman, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A quantitative description of the current numbers of students enrolled in special education only paints a partial picture and does not provide a full and accurate portrayal of special education and how racialized students and parents experience it in

their everyday lives. Based on historical literature and the data in the United States, my study attempts to document particular trends in through qualitative interviews in Ontario, rather than discovering a new phenomenon. Through deductive research (Charmaz, 2005), I move from general ideas about special education to specific cases and ideas.

4.2   Grounded theory

The methodology was shaped by grounded theory, in which the participants' voices informed the themes, rather than the researcher imposing a narrative and theory on the information collected. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) discuss, grounded theory is a methodology for "developing theory that is grounded in data systemically gathered and analyzed" (p. 72). The theory is developed in consideration of and thoughtful negotiation with the data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that there is an on-going comparative analysis used in grounded theory often referred to as "constant comparative method" (as cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 72). Grounded theory can be defined as a method, an approach, a strategy for research, a way of analysing the data (Punch, 2005), and a product of inquiry (Charmaz, 2005). There is a need to reconcile how grounded theory employed in relation to critical race theory and the anti-racist discursive framework, as outlined above. Using the grounded theory methodology does not contradict the use of anti-racist discursive theory, which is meant to be an investigative lens to examine issues of race, allowing new ideas and themes to emerge. Similarly, critical race theory is examined through counter-storytelling, liberalism, and racism. Counter-storytelling in particular, does not conform to a particular narrative or lens, but provides a voice for unvoiced narratives. Grounded theory adds yet another layer of analysis in examining and conceptualizing the experiences of educators/administrators, non-White parents and students, as it goes beyond Black families, to include Somali, Punjabi-Sikh, and Latino/a experiences in the Greater Toronto

Area. CRT and the anti-racist discursive frameworks have been used to understand the Black and Latino/a experience, but rarely to understand other racial groups. Grounded theory explicitly allows for a local perspective to understand the nature of each family's nuanced cultural, religious, ethnic, and linguistic experiences. Accordingly, grounded theory brings to light facts and themes that go beyond structural racism and liberalism.

As Charmaz (2000) explains, grounded theory is "the study of experience from the standpoint of those who live it" (p. 522). What emerges from the theory are voices of the participants, or what Bryman and Burgess (1999) suggest, "a more general theoretical statement about the data" (p. xxv). On-going data collection and analysis generates a concrete theoretical standing on the ideas and concepts that the participants discuss. Yet Strauss and Corbin (1998) caution that the researcher should recognize his/her distinct role in interpreting the data; researchers are not merely reporting, but interpreting the narratives through their subjective lens.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) further caution that those who use grounded theory, use it because it is "fashionable" yet have a poor understanding of how to conceptually develop grounded theory or its "conceptual richness" (p. 78). In this study, I was not interested in using grounded theory because of its current mainstream use; rather, I took into consideration the process of theoretical coding as suggested by the aforementioned authors. Theoretical coding, as understood by Glaser (1978), involves conceptualizing how the central codes interplay with other theories to form a more encompassing theory (as cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) also argue that theoretical coding can be connected to theoretical sensitivity, which includes the researcher's personal and professional experience, as well as sensitivity to "issues of class, gender, race, power, and the like" (p. 84). As a researcher, it was important for me not to merely discuss issues of oppression but to meaningfully incorporate how interlocking

levels of oppression played out in the participants' lives. While grounded theory was not developed to explicitly examine the experiences and histories of non-Whites, it shares similar principles to critical race theory and the anti-racist discursive framework, in that these perspectives recognize the voices of those unacknowledged by traditional frameworks. Accordingly, the data, concepts, and theories are driven from the participants in the research. The grounded theory approach was used in order to understand what participants understood about special education, relationships with school officials, and the administrative process of identification in special education, against the backdrop of critical race theory and anti-racist discursive framework. Grounded theory, for this investigation, was used to explain the theory or processes involved how adequately non-White families are informed about special education.

4.3   Context/Research site

Educators, parents, and students participating in this investigation were from across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Educators spanned included participants from the Peel Region School Board, the Toronto District School Board, and the York Region School Board. The nine racialized/minoritized parents and nine students identified as having a learning disability were from Rexdale/ Etobicoke, Jane/Finch, Halton Region, Peel Region, Jane and Weston Road, York Region, and Scarborough. Toronto was used as a site of analysis as the city is significantly racialized, with 47 percent of its population belonging to a visible minority group and 22 percent of youth aged 15-24 self-identifying as immigrants (City of Toronto, 2010). The make-up of school populations and the communities surrounding schools are diverse and not necessarily segregated by ability and class. Toronto has a varied socioeconomic landscape with pockets of lower income and higher income areas located within kilometres of each other. For instance, it is not unusual to see a neighbourhood like Cabbagetown, a higher income, business class area

within a kilometre of an area like Regent Park, which has a reputation in the media for poverty, low-income housing, drugs, and crime. Toronto provides an interesting context through which to examine issues of special education because of its changing demographics, varied socioeconomics and issues of schooling,

4.4   Recruitment of parents and students

The purpose of recruiting parents was to determine whether their voices or choices regarding special education and the education of their children were addressed by the educators who hold positions of authority. In other words, to understand how the voices of families are taken into account and/or if parents felt like an "unvoiced minority" (as discussed in Chapter One) specifically concerning special education and the identification and placement decisions that are made in schools.

The following agencies and grassroots organizations were contacted to post flyers and to make initial connections with parents: Education Action, Pathways to Education, On Your Mark Tutoring, Colour of Poverty, People for Education, African Heritage Educator's Network (AHEN), Ontario Black History Society (OBHS), and Toronto Public Libraries. These grass-roots/community organizations were primarily chosen for their work on issues of equity and the diverse range of racialized/minoritized families they assist in the Greater Toronto Area. Additionally, approximately 300 emails with attached flyers were sent out to various organizations, personal contacts, and agencies in order to connect to informal networks. Agencies made confidential referrals, postings, announcements and distributed my information to email listservs. Participants were recruited from parents who responded to my "call for participants". Research was initially aimed at recruiting high school students from grades nine to

12. However, some parents who responded to the call for participants had children in grade seven and eight. The ethics protocol was modified and approved to include students in grades seven to 12.

While many families expressed their interest in the study, the exclusion factors included the nature of the disability (e.g. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]), or not belonging to a racialized/minoritized group, as defined by the study criteria. Other parents responded, but did not follow up after initially inquiring about the study. The aim of the interviews was to include the perspectives of both mothers and fathers with children in special education; however, all the parent/guardians who participated in the study were mothers. Since fathers did not take part in the study, this lead to a gender imbalance. It is not clear whether the experiences of fathers with children in special education may have shaped the data in different or specific ways. Furthermore, it is unclear how fathers perceive, understand, and interact with school officials and how these interactions differ from the experiences of their partners. Since no fathers participated in this study, it is unclear what is lost or gained by using only the experiences of female parental figures and how they are misinformed or inadequately informed about their child's schooling. Some parents followed up on the study by word of mouth, while the majority of parents responded to flyers they had seen in emails or posted in a physical location. The goal was to have a total of ten families participate in the study, but only nine families agreed to participate. In total, nine parents, nine students and five educators or special education administrators were interviewed.

4.5   Recruitment of educators

Educators and administrators were initially identified through personal contacts I had developed as a graduate student at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (O.I.S.E.) as well as through national conference presentations and community events from 2007 to 2011. I also

employed snowball sampling technique (Bryman, 2001) to recruit more educators directly involved in special education. The snowball or chain sampling process is based on locating more participants based on referrals made by previous participants in the study, who share or know others whose experiences are related to the phenomenon under investigation. The snowball process is multistage and involves contacting a few participants who in turn refer others to the study (Neuman, 2003). The advantages of using this sampling technique lie in accumulating "information-rich" or "critical cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 237) as it relates to the objectives of the research. The pitfall of using snowball sampling is recruiting participants who may represent similar traits or demographics to the initial participants. In other words, participants may have similar characteristics, such as socioeconomic class, culture, likes or dislikes, which may be problematic in terms of the type of the experiences these participants represent. Since the purpose of my project was to ensure that the participants reflect a diverse population of various intersecting oppressions, I was conscious of including that participants reflected a wide range of experiences. Potential participants were given my information confidentially through the snowball technique; personal information was only provided to me by participants at the appropriate time. Educators responded to inquiries by referrals, through the snowball effect and emails sent from other educators or administrators.

4.6   Profile of parents and students

All students who participated in the interviews had an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and were receiving special education support through a Resource Room or Self-Contained class. A resource room is a designated classroom for students identified with a learning disability where they receive individualized assistance and support. The resource room may be used for part of the day, or for particular subjects, and the room has one or more educator present to

provide individualized attention. A self-contained classroom, on the other hand, involves a removal from an integrated setting to an excluded setting for the entire school day. Self-contained classrooms are comprised of students with multiple disabilities. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2012), integration in a regular classroom is preferred before a complete removal. Five options are available for those identified as requiring special education: (1) a regular class with indirect support where the teacher receives support and services; (2) a regular class with resource assistants where the student receives support one-on-one or smaller group attention in the classroom by a special education teacher; (3) a regular class with withdrawal to a resource room for less than half of the school day; (4) a special education class with partial integration, where a student is part of a regular classroom for at least one period; or (5) a full-time special education class, where the student is removed for the entire school day (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2012, para. 3).

Table 4A provides demographic information about the nine families as provided through the demographic information survey. Students, parents, educators, and administrators names provided in this project are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Participants' pseudonyms reflect their ethnic, culture, and/or religious identities. Six of the students were male and three were female. As mentioned earlier, only mothers participated in the study with their children. All nine students who participated in the study were identified as "exceptional", with learning disabilities through a formal Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) assessment by a team of professionals. The following are brief descriptions of the families interviewed.

Dominique and Andre

Dominique was the first parent I interviewed. We met at the First Annual Leaders of Tomorrow: African-Canadian and Diaspora Student Conference, at New College, University of Toronto, in March 2010, where I presented a paper. She was attending the conference with her family, and approached me at the end of the conference to tell me "your story is my story." She told me she would love to talk to me and was touched by my willingness to discuss my narrative and struggles with the school system. Dominique invited me into her home for the interview and as she read the consent letters, she asked "How come it is that educators are always listed at the beginning?" Dominique was suggesting that educators are always seen as more critical than the voices of parents. She made me realize that the mere articulation of my project goals made her feel as though her story was less important because of how I had listed the goals on the consent letter. Yet, in conceptualizing the project, parents were more critical than educators, and I was not trying to rank them. I kept this in the back of my mind as I moved forward with the research.

Dominique mentioned that others would argue that her family was "at-risk": she identified herself as low socioeconomic status. Her son Andre was placed into special education because of a learning exceptionality in grade two. She also noted that when she was in high school with the Scarborough Board of Education (before it's amalgamation with the Toronto District School Board), she and her father were told that despite the graduation requirements of having a French credit, she should not take the French course because she would not be able to handle the workload. Dominique was then forced to take the course in summer school and did exceptionally well.

Melisenda and Gracia

Melisenda immigrated to Canada in the early 1990s, at which time she completed high school in the Toronto area. Gracia, her daughter, was 7 years old when she was identified with a mild learning disability. Gracia was starting high school when I interviewed her. Melisenda also has a younger son, who is 6 years old, and has been questioned by school officials for his "behaviour." Initially she described that her son was given some labels such as ADHD and autistic and she did all the testing to rule out all of these concerns. However, she believes that because of his behaviour of "humming" and "hugging," his educator is "picking" on him and trying to find a label that is not reflective of his abilities, but of his cultural and affectionate attitude toward others. Melisenda was in the process of finding a new school for her son during the interview. Gracia was 14 during the time of the interview and described her school as a place where there were a lot of "fights."

Clairice and Terrance

Clairice and her son Terrance invited me to their home in the Jane/Finch area on a Sunday morning. The family dog was walking around and the local news was playing in the background on the television. Terrance was from Clairice's first marriage. He was identified with a learning disability at age seven. Clairice believes that her son's identification began with his love of video games, such as Nintendo.

Haweeya and Aziza

Haweeya and her husband immigrated to Canada in the late 1980s. All three of their daughters were born in Canada; the family lives in the Rexdale area. Aziza, the eldest daughter, is a grade 12 Somali student. Aziza, her mother, and her two sisters, all wear a hijab. In junior/senior kindergarten (JK/SK), Aziza was identified with a learning disability and she is the

only child in her family who had been designated. Haweeya dealt with a great deal of angst and anger throughout the interview, breaking down and crying several times to recount her story. Haweeya is unsure of what support and services were available, despite being connected to many community organizations.

Sukhjeet and Jasmeet

Sukhjeet found my email address after she read an article in which I was interviewed for the local community newspaper, South Asian Focus, and an interview with South Asian OMNI News. Sukhjeet immigrated to Canada when she was two, while her husband was 12 years old when he immigrated from India. Jasmeet is her oldest son and he has two younger siblings. Jasmeet was identified with a learning disability in grade seven. Sukhjeet was in the process of removing Jasmeet out of the School Board completely because of the years of frustration and being ignored by school officials.

Kiranjeet and Balvir

Kiranjeet immigrated from India in the late 1970s. Kiranjeet described how her family decided to remove their son's *patka* (a type of headdress younger Sikh boys usually wear before taking responsibility for a turban) by cutting his unshorn hair in order for him to fit in at school. Balvir was incorrectly placed into a development disability category or life skills program in JK/SK, a designation that involves doing everyday tasks such as shopping and how to use public transportation. When I had an opportunity to interview him, he was adjusting to being in an integrated high school setting and using a resource room when necessary, to make up for the gaps in his learning. Balvir has three siblings. As a second generation immigrant, he identified Canada with ideals of justice and fairness. After several years of requests and the use of a

community advocate, educators agreed to test him and recognized that Balvir did not belong in a life skills program.

Donna and James

Donna immigrated to Canada in late 1980s and both her children were born in Canada. Donna, describes herself as African with British roots and as an Anglican. James, Donna's son, is a Black male who describes himself as "atheist" as written in his responses to the biographical data. James has one other sibling who has a physical disability. James was identified with a designation in grade five.

Annette and Gabriella

Annette is a Black mother who was born in Canada and has two children. Gabriella, her daughter, was placed into a learning disability category at age 12. Gabriella was in grade nine at the time of the interview. Annette was in the process of considering an alternative to Gabriella's schooling, since Gabriella felt as though she was not being challenged by the curriculum. Annette and her husband have considered moving to Montréal to avoid the special education designation, as they believe that there are fewer special education programs in the city.

Monica and Ronell

Monica is a Caribbean mother of two children, one of which child, Ronell, has been identified for special education. Ronell received his designation in grade two and was in grade seven during the interview. As an "insider" to the process of special education, Monica feels at an advantage and has called educators out if they were not providing the appropriate accommodations. She also recalled different tensions when educators were not following the appropriate mandate. She feels that special education accommodations should be everyday strategies and tools that educators use, whether or not a student is identified with an IEP. In other

words, she believes special education is just good practice and should not require a special

designation or label.

Table 4A- Parent and student profiles

Pseudonym given	AGE	GENDER OF STUDENT	LOCATION	IDENTIFICATION	CULTURE/ ETHNICITY, RELIGION, RACE, SOCIO-ECONOMIC
P: Melisenda **S: Gracia**	26-35 14	Female	Rexdale/ Etobicoke	Mild learning disability	Spanish, Catholic, Hispanic, Low SES
P: Clairice **S: Terrance**	36-45 13	Male	Jane/Finch	Mild learning disability	Jamaican, Catholic, Black, Low-middle SES
P: Haweeya **S: Aziza**	36-45 18	Female	Rexdale/ Etobicoke	Mild learning disability	Somali, Muslim, Black, Arabic/Somali, Middle-class
P: Sukhjeet **S: Jasmeet**	36-45 15	Male	Peel Region	Specific Learning Disability-language based	South Asian, Punjabi, Sikh, Middle-class
P: Kiranjeet **S: Balvir**	46-55 16	Male	Halton Region	Life skills program	South Asian, Punjabi, Sikh, Middle-class
P: Dominique **S: Andre**	36-45 12	Male	Peel Region	Learning Exceptionality	Afro-Canadian, Christian, Black, low-SES (at-risk)
P: Donna **S: James**	46-55 17	Male	Scarborough	Language Processing	Black-West Indian, African, Middle-class, Anglican
P: Annette **S: Gabriella**	46-55 14	Female	Jane and Weston Road	Learning disability	Black, Canadian, Protestant
P: Monica **S: Ronell**	36-45 13	Male	York Region	Learning disability	African-Canadian, Caribbean, Christian, Black, Middle-class

4.7   Profile of educators

Table 4B presents information about the five educators and administrators who participated in the study, their educational and employment background, and self-identified key demographic information. All five educators and administrators were female and had a range of work experience from under five years to over 20 years. Their positions ranged from principals and vice-principals, to special education resource teachers all having a background in special education services in the Greater Toronto Area. The School Boards they represented ranged from York Board of Education, Peel Board of Education, and The Toronto District School Board. These administrators also had a range of education from doctoral degrees to Bachelor of Arts and other specialized certificates of training.

Table 4B – Profile of educators

EDUCATOR *(pseudonym)*	AGE	POSITION/ ROLE	GRADE LEVEL	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	CULTURE, ETHNICITY, RELIGION
Kulvir	55+	Administrator	Elementary	20 + years	Punjabi, South Asian, Sikh
Nikki	46-55	Special education resource teacher	Intermediate	under 5 years	West-Indian, British, Christian
Alicya	46-55	Special education resource teacher	Junior/ Intermediate	10+ years	Jamaican, Scottish, Black Christian
Jocelyn	36-45	Special education resource teacher	Secondary	under 10 years	Northern-European White
Stacey	36-45	Administrator	Secondary	under 10 years	Caucasian, European, Canadian

4.8 Data collection instruments: Individual interviews

Interviews with all the participants were conducted face-to-face, in order to build rapport and a sense of trust. Interviews with the parents and students began by introducing my own narrative and the reasons why I was conducting this research. I decided this was the best course of action in order for the participants to understand that they were not an object to be gazed at or the object of my research, but rather that they were active in helping me understand what was occurring and how they felt. In other words, I wanted to build a rapport in terms of helping them understand I was not just another researcher who was removed from their lived everyday reality, and that I had an understanding as an 'insider.' The nine participant parents and students had a diverse range of backgrounds including Somali and Muslim, Punjabi and Sikh, West Indian, Spanish and Latino/a, African, and Black (see *Table 4A*). In addition, the five educators and administrators participants who agreed to participate ranged in ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (see *Table 4B*). In exchange for their participation, parents and students were each given $10 gift card to Chapters/Indigo bookstores.

Interviews were conducted at a mutually agreeable location, most often a Toronto Public Library. In two cases, the interviewees' graciously invited me into their homes, while another interview was conducted in a spare room in the Sikh temple, the Gurdwara. Interviews with parents often occurred first, with the student present, and were followed by interviews with the student with the parent present. Consecutive interviews allowed for parents and students to "fact-check" with one another about particular incidents or cases that they wanted to highlight. Throughout one interview, one parent frequently spoke in Punjabi. This interview was translated and transcribed into English. Students were interviewed in the presence of their parents to understand how their views, experiences, and subjectivities diverged and converged with their parents and to mitigate any

negative feelings associated with the identification process. In other words, I was interested in how students understood what it meant to be in special education and how parents understood the same process. This particular interaction between parents and students allowed for a unique dialogue between both groups.

Individual interviews were used for the purposes of this project to generate what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) contend as "useful information about lived experience and its meanings…[and] is a negotiated text – a site where power, gender, race, and class insert" (p. 641). Interviews ranged in time from 30 minutes to 140 minutes. The variability differed depending on the comfort level of the interviewees. Some discussed the history with their respective schools at length, while others were more reserved. Interviews with educators and administrators lasted more than 60 minutes, while parents ranged from 25 minutes to 50 minutes and students averaging 10 minutes to a maximum of 30 minutes. Interviews took place from September 10th to December 10th 2010 and February 15th to March 30th 2011. During this time, I was travelling to and from Vancouver, where I was residing. Interviews were digitally recorded with the interviewees consent and understanding that their voices and information were being documented for the researcher's purposes only. In sum, a total of 23 hours of interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Before interviews were conducted, parents, students, and educators/administrators were explained their rights as participants and asked to sign a letter of consent, guaranteeing anonymity and ensuring that they could stop the interview, and withdraw from the study at anytime (see *Appendix VII, VIII, IX)*. The participants were given a copy of this letter for their own records. Subsequently, participants were asked to complete a "*Demographic Information Survey"* (see *Appendix X, XI, XII*), with the understanding that their biographical information

would never be connected with their personal information and their voices and narratives would not be connected with any personal information.

The interview questions were semi-structured and involved questions around the students' understanding of the types of students who are placed in special education, the types of trends they notice, their feelings, and their understanding of what it feels like to be in special education (see *Appendix I*). Parents were asked about the identification process, the types of relationships they had with educators and administrators, and the resources and support they received or were receiving (see *Appendix II*). Educators and administrators were asked about their experiences, trends, patterns, their understanding of testing/assessments, parent-teacher relationships, and perceptions (see *Appendix III*).

Initially, I thought that note-taking would be beneficial during the interview process, to pick up tones and other cues. However, it became a distraction to the participants and to myself. After the first two interviews, I stopped taking notes during the interviews and instead, I took notes about the environment and any other information that would not be captured on tape at the end of the interview.

4.9   Data analysis and interpretation

The process of interpreting and analyzing the data involved: using grounded theory; interpreting and understanding how the data informed the themes, concepts, and events; triangulating the narratives of parents, students, and educators; coding the data; and data reduction. The data was analyzed with everything I heard and saw through body language during the interviews and how I interpreted the data through several readings and transcribing. As I transcribed the interviews, I questioned whether informants were describing something different than what currently exists in the literature, and whether this furthered our understanding of what

special education was and what I knew about the particular issues (or thought that I knew). I examined how the categories or themes would connect to make a story about special education. I analyzed the data in relation to my research objectives and whether there was a connection between the two. I actively examined and understood my own biases and perceptions of schooling and how this may have influenced my analysis.

Data was analyzed using a grounded theory analysis. Charmaz (2005) identifies grounded theory methods as flexible and allowing for "middle-range theories through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development" (p. 507). For the purposes of this investigation, the "middle-range" was the identification of assumptions, forming of concepts, and understanding of structural inequities. This method can be used as a tool for "analyzing processes, and these tools hold much potential for studying social justice issues [and] entails developing increasingly abstract ideas about research participants' meanings, actions, and worlds and seeking specific data to fill out, refine, and check the emerging conceptual categories" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 508). Grounded theory allowed for theories to develop through ongoing themes, ideas, and concepts. Data was sorted and coded based on categories, subdivisions, and themes that emerged out of what the participants were expressing. For instance, understanding special education from three points of views (the parents, students, and educators/administrators) led to new themes and ways to analyze the data.

Miles and Huberman (1994) pose the question "How can we draw valid meaning from qualitative data?" (p. 1). Since the narratives given by the participants provided rich descriptions, I continuously needed to tease out the events and consequences of their experiences. Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. After each interview, I would assess the questions and data provided by from the participant, which would further inform how much time

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I would spend on a particular area of discussion or how I would rephrase a question that I believed could have been worded with a better understanding of the participants. As Merriam et al. (2002) suggest, "simultaneous data collection and analysis allow the researcher to make adjustments along the way…to wait until all data are collected is to lose the opportunity to gather more reliable and valid data" (p. 14).

In order to determine the "trustworthiness" of the findings, and not the validity of the findings, the narratives of students, parents, and educators were triangulated (Brewer & Hunter, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) throughout the study. This enabled me to get an in-depth understanding of the issues from different, perspective, to determine whether views on a particular theme converged, and to understand the processes and practices involved in special education. Data triangulation is the use of various sources to understand converging views on the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002). I used triangulation to understand the data in the context of existing literature to understand inconsistencies and contradictions (Mathison, 1988). The aim was not to uncover the "truth," but to understand how the views of parents, students and educators may differ and converge. Moreover, significance was placed on the experiential knowledge or the knowledge gained through firsthand experience of the parents, students, and educators. The views, opinions, and experiences of all three participant groups were analyzed not to uncover a common reality or, as Patton (2002) describes, the purpose of triangulation is not to produce the same results. Rather, the purpose of examining converging and diverging the experiences was to understand that "different kinds of data may yield somewhat different results because different types of inquiry are sensitive to different real-world nuances" (Patton, 2002, p. 248). Accordingly, educators, parents, and students construct and understand special education differently, as their lived and social realities differ, and no single method can address all the diverse ways of knowing. The findings were used to

enable the voices to speak to one another (or in dialogue) as opposed to against one another, based on the literature and how the voices converged and diverged. In other words, the data demonstrated that each group had both converging and diverging views on special education, school practices, and the role of administrators and staff.

Responses derived from the various data sources were subjected to content analysis to identify themes through the use of open and focused coding (Punch, 2005; Silverman, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I identified themes throughout the transcribing process by assigning codes, noting reflections in the margins, sorting and shifting through the interviews to identify what Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to "similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups, and common sequences" (p. 9). As Charmaz (2005) writes, coding in grounded theory involves an analytic position toward the data, in which the "codes are active, immediate, and short…focus[ing] on defining action, explicating implicit assumptions, and seeing processes" (p. 517). The sorting and the process of coding were based on the literature review that was conducted and the research objectives for this investigation. Accordingly, I was integrating grounded theory and the literature review at the same time. In addition to teasing out terms, concepts, and theories, a constant comparative method was used. The constant comparative method, as defined by Jackson (2003), is comparing and contrasting "similarities and differences in the lives of those interviewed" (p. 157). Comparing and contrasting allowed me to understand of how families experience different aspects of special education. Throughout the transcribing and coding process, there was constant comparison between the data through an anti-racist and critical race theory perspective, as well as forming new interpretations based on what each group of participants stated. Strauss and Corbin (1998) contend that while grounded theory is about "multiple perspectives," the

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researcher determines whose voices are significant in determining the theory, while forcing the

researcher to also be "questioning, questioned, and provisional" (p. 84).

In addition to analyzing data, the researcher is also involved in data reduction. Data

reduction, the process of "simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data" (Miles &

Huberman, 1994, p. 10), occurred throughout the data analysis, up until and including, the final

write up. The narratives of key informants were used, as there was simply too much data from

the 23 interviews and not all the information that was conveyed was significant for the purposes

of this project.

4.10 Limitations

Within the methods and methodology conducted for the purpose of this project, there are

some limitations. In the interview process, and through the formulation of the questions and

objectives of the study, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) caution that the interviewer is not neutral, but

rather is motivated and shaped by the researcher's own social class, which includes power, race,

class, ethnicity, language, culture, sexual orientation, and gender. Similarly, Fontana and Frey

(2005) suggest that interviewing is not simply data gathering but "interactions between two (or

more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results" (p. 698). That is to say, that no tool

is neutral in its aim to be objective, but rather, all tools are subjective, bias, and leading. To avoid

any potential biases, I had my committee members read my interview questions and provide

feedback.

Generalization and representation is also a limitation in this investigation. The results cannot

be generalized to all educators and minoritized students and parents who are involved in special

education. However, the purpose of the study was not to generalize, but to describe what has been

on the margins of research: discussing race issues and how special education is constructed in

schools in the Greater Toronto Area. Moreover, while my study attempted to interview a diverse range of families from different sexual orientations, ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, only some of the families or educators disclosed their sexual orientation as heterosexual. None of the families or educators openly discussed their backgrounds or experiences as a member of the LGBTQ. Accordingly, this study does not incorporate the voices of LGBTQ families and educators and how these experiences compared to other minoritized bodies.

Another possible limitation is the how special education is read and understood by particular individuals. While there is a significant body of literature to suggest that special education is detrimental to minoritized bodies, there is an equal body of literature that argues that disabled bodies have fundamental rights under Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The body of literature that advocates for individualized programming suggests that the only way to secure and maintain funding for equity-seeking groups is to ensure that programming is exclusive. Accordingly, many individuals and educators may not have seen the limitations and restrictions of special education, as I have contextualized it, to limit rights of racialized groups.

Parent and student interviews took place at the same time, which created an instance of interview dyad. However, the dyadic relationship was not an anticipated outcome or a "true" dyad, as it was not a dialogue between parents and students. During the first interview, I realized that students and parents were relying on information from each other, fact checking, and in some cases, discussing situations that had never or rarely been addressed in their family. I decided that the best method of obtaining the most qualitative and perhaps detailed information from students was having their parents present during the interview, which consequently led to richer descriptions and narratives. Often times, when a student or parent was unsure of their experience, they would provide each other with a prompt, such as "do you remember when?" For instance, some mothers

would ask "Remember that really good teacher you had?" Having both mother and student present also helped students overcome any uneasiness and comfort issues they may have had. Kashy and Kenny (2000) suggest that the dyad or group should be the "unit of analysis" and involves "analysing the data as if [the] dyad of group were the 'subject'" (p. 453). However, it should be noted that the dyad is commonly discussed in the context of social psychology and measures are discussed as scores. As Smith (2000) explains, dyads between a parent and child creates non-independence within the pair and influences the responses each participant provides due to the defined and undefined roles of the family. In this case, the parents who participated and their responses will invariably affect the type of response and the degree to which their child responds. As Griffin and Gonzalez (1995) suggest, the degree of interdependence between the partners can produce "carbon copy" responses, in the extreme, or gestures from one member may influence the responses of another member. Due to the age of some of the participants, in some cases parents did "rush" their child to respond quickly or provided prompts such as "do you remember when?" In some cases, these students needed more time to think about their experiences and parents may have been uncomfortable with the silence. In other cases, when the student did not understand the question, parents attempted to rephrase the question in a particular way to assist their child, or provide examples to their child of what they felt were appropriate responses. However influential one person was in responding to the questions, the relationship between mother and child is indeed persuasive in determining many life events. It is important to note that while each family presented a dyad, these dyads were not directly compared to each other in the analysis. Overall, however, the dyadic relationship acted as a part of the larger picture of what was occurring.

4.11 Challenges, tensions, and other considerations

As a researcher who is not officially tied with a particular School Board, I encountered a great deal of difficulty accessing students who were identified as requiring special education. I do not contend that favourtism exists with School Board administrators and educators, but rather that I may have been seen as "just another researcher" who had little connection to the lived experiences of those working in special education. As Smith (1999) indicates, the "pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices" (p. 2). In other words, there is no innocence in pursing research on the oppressed, as history dictates that scientific research has been at the expense of non-Whites. Many researchers continue to locate the "problem" within a community, rather than examining structural inequities, and communities are often negated as a rich source of information to address the concerns (Smith, 1999). With this information in mind, I did not want to pursue this investigation as self-serving, nor did I want to locate the research as a minoritized issue. As one School Board official suggested off the record, there is a clear mistrust of researchers, particularly in relation to how their data would be used. Given the nature of research and the history of how research has been conducted to deceive racialized bodies, there appeared to be a lingering uncertainty and hesitation amongst many racialized individuals. I approached one school administrator, unofficially, to ask for his advice on how to recruit participants. In his unofficial capacity, he stated the following to me in confidence: "If they [parents] have had problems with the schools and teachers, and they don't know you, why would they talk to you? Do you know what I mean? Like, who are you and what are you doing with their information?" The apparent stigma attached to identification and lack of faith in School Board officials made it extremely difficult to get in touch with racialized parents and to openly and candidly discuss their issues. Indeed, while the

original intent of my research was to recruit parent participants through the snowball technique, no families were referred to me from other parents. I had anticipated only spending three months in the field, from September to December 2010, but because of this difficulty with recruiting, I was required to collect data again from February to March 2011.

4.12 Resistance and race research

The following is the call for participants I used to recruit parents:

"Is your high school child in special education?;
Are you a minority with a child that has been labelled with a learning, behavioural and/or intellectual disability?;
Are you concerned about your child's placement in special education? If you answered "yes" to these questions, I would love to hear from *you!"* I would like to invite you to participate in a study, which will look at the experiences of minorities in special education and how they understand what it means to be labelled and placed into special education. I will be looking at the role of minority parents with students in special education and the problems/issues they may be experiencing with the process and placement. The research is being conducted to fulfill the requirements of a PhD degree at the University of Toronto. Interviews should not take more than 30 minutes to complete and can be arranged at a time, date, and location of your choice. Thank you for considering being part of an exciting study."

Throughout the interviewing and recruiting process, I encountered a great deal of outrage, anger, resistance, and challenges from community members. Some of the resistance was in the form of emails from parents, whom did not want to be included as a part of this research. In addition to the emails and phone conversations, I had many "informal" dialogues with individuals who wished to remain anonymous because of their position with a School Board or simply because they believed there were consequences for speaking out. The mere idea of just discussing race issues in schooling, angered some, including teachers. The following email was sent to me in response to my call for participants:

Email September 16, 2010

I am sure you are not conducting research from a bias that believes that "black boys" are in spec ed because of their skin colour???? or at least if you are then frankly you owe it to all Spec ed teachers and all parents of the so called "black boys" to stop.

I cannot believe your statement.

Here's a free suggestion that you may want to consider. Landing in spec ed doesn't have anything to do with skin colour......what does it have to do with????? heh what about socioeconomics?? try that!

Yes I sound pissed off because I am. I am a spec ed teacher AND I'm the mother of two " black boys". As an educator you should be embarrassed.

Although I attempted to follow up with this parent and educator, she was not interested in engaging in a dialogue. Before officially collecting data, I encountered conversations that completely negated the need for open and transparent dialogues on systemic and institutional barriers that may be present in the lived realities of many families. On a separate occasion, I was asked about the validity of my research and whether I had ethical approval to conduct it. The following is a telephone conversation on September 23, 2010:

Vice Principal: "Hi, thanks for returning my call. A parent in my school received an email about your study and I am concerned about your study."
Do you have TDSB approval?"

JG: "No, I am not recruiting parents or students through the school, I have not campaigned or put posters in or around schools."

Vice Principal: "Do you have TDSB approval?"

JG: "I have U of T Ethics approval, I don't need TDSB approval."

Vice Principal: "Do you have School Board approval to do this study?"

JG: "Again, I have U of T Ethics approval and there is a line in my letters to educators and parents that this work has not been approved by the School Board, interviews will not take place on school property."

Vice Principal: "Well, if parents decide to participate in the research they will have to deal with the consequences and back lash from the School Board." (Pause).

Vice Principal: "My second concern is the word 'label' on your flyer. You are doing a disservice to parents and giving them the wrong information. Do you know anything about special education and the identification process at the TDSB?"

JG: "Well, I am a product of the TDSB and special education, so I know a little bit about the program and process and why I am doing this research."

Vice Principal: "It sounds like you had a hard time, but we don't use the word 'label' anymore. The correct word is 'identification' and you are misleading parents. The identification is made to give students the proper services and you should familiarize yourself with the Ministry of Education and TDSB policies and practices. Labels are demeaning and maybe they were used in your time because no one knew better but they are not used now. The School Board policies have changed since the '90's and 2000's or whenever you went to school. If you talked to educators who taught special education to teacher candidates, you would know what you were talking about. I have a Masters' degree and live with an academic who has a PhD too—"

JG: "Umm, just so you are clear, I was not using the word 'label' in a demeaning way, but way to simplify the language for parents and students on the flyer. Not everyone knows what 'identification' refers to."

In this particular conversation, the vice principal had received a flyer from a parent and the parent had asked her to disseminate this information across the school. This particular dialogue seemed to be about the administrator's discomfort and her perceptions, rather than truly understanding the objectives of my work. Moreover, this conversation could also reflect the differences in the vocabulary used by academic researchers and people involved in the implementation of identification and placement in special education.

4.13 Ethical considerations

As a researcher, before I started my study and throughout this investigation, I was cognizant of recognizing that methodology cannot be divorced from the historical, Western

notions of racism and how research has been used at the expense of and to subjugate minoritized bodies. Uncovering the theory of knowledge (epistemology) is recognizing that racism is still deeply rooted in methods and methodology and recognizing that racism has been continuously reduced to individual acts. Scheurich and Young (2002) warn researchers that we must move away from viewing racism as individualized and examine "epistemological racism" that has been embedded in our institutions and practices over time. Indeed, while I seek to use an anti-racist discursive framework and critical race theory to challenge systemic practices, notions of "the real, the true, and the good" (Scheurich & Young, 2002, p. 56) are still embedded in White, Eurocentric history and culture. In a similar vein, Patton (2002) reminds researchers that ethnography first emerged as an approach to understand the 'other' as researchers became interested in the exoticized 'other.' I have chosen an anti-racist framework and critical race theory to de-centre the White, Eurocentric norms that are systemic in education. However, this framework is also a tool that has emerged from practices that have *Othered* racialized bodies.

Equally important, Spivak (1998) rejects the notion of speaking for others, or that the oppressed can truly, openly, and freely discuss their own interests. As a researcher, I was continuously juxtaposing the confines that I was working within while not misappropriating terms, variables, labels and concepts that may be used to further objectify the communities that I was working with. While no theory, method, or methodology can avoid misappropriating harmful terms, I ensured that participants were comfortable and conscious of their rights as participants. Furthermore, I used a discursive framework to shift from theoretical frameworks that employ grand/meta-narratives. The anti-racist discursive framework recognizes issues of specificities and context, and it functions as a lens to investigate the issues. The fluidity of a discursive framework allowed for participants' voices to be heard, themes, questions, and ideas

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to emerge and it enabled me to move beyond the rigidity of traditional frameworks. Put differently, the data was compiled by putting the voices of the participants together to create a dialogue, rather than my interpretation being fixed by a theory. I went beyond "categorizing" the content in the interviews by placing the wording, policies, social locations of participants, and norms of society under examination. Anti-racism is about troubling power relations, and moving away from discussions about "tolerating diversity" (Dei & Johal, 2005, p. 3) to acknowledging the role of power and differences. For the purposes of this investigation, I attempted to identify, challenge, and contest the values, structures, and behaviours embedded in special education that have functioned to subjugate minoritized bodies.

It was also critical for me to consider the ethical implications of my work. My moral and ethical obligations to my participants extended beyond the ethics approval process and the interview stages. I handled the data in a manner that safeguarded the identify of participants at all times, providing pseudonyms to participants before transcribing and keeping all demographic information separate in locked cabinets. No revealing information about the participants is provided in the dissertation. I was also cautious of *how* the data would be reported. In other words, how particular information revealed in the interviews may oppress groups that are already marginalized. It may be harmful to ignore particular information, but the purpose of this project was not to oppress particular groups, or use this investigation as a means to *Other* the participants. Accordingly, I was conscious of the implications of determining which information I would report and the consequences of what to include and exclude from the final thesis.

During the interviews, I realized that I did not anticipate the range of issues and emotions families were dealing with. A few mothers cried during their interview. While I expected some emotion about their concerns, I realized that I was not properly equipped to deal with that level

of sadness, grief, and anger. In these cases, I asked the mothers if I could somehow assist them in advocating on their behalf and connect them to appropriate community members or school administrators. In two cases, I referred families to community services that could assist them with situations that I could not.

In considering ethics and research, I am aware of the responsibility I have in portraying the knowledge and information I received. As a researcher, my responsibility is more than protecting any personally identifying information. This includes the information I decide to include and omit, particularly as it affects vulnerable participants, such as minoritized students. It also includes how I may implicitly or explicitly sensationalize linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and racialized communities in how I might take-up difference. I did not want the investigation to be a "Somali issue", or a "Punjabi-Sikh issue", rather, I wanted to understand how identity is linked to the way special education is contextualized within different communities. Another issue of vulnerability was the trust and rapport that I developed as an insider to the issue amongst educators and mothers, in such a short timeframe. They spoke about personal, administrative, and family issues at length, which left them open to a great deal of exposure. In some cases, participants double-checked if personal information would remain confidential. Accordingly, I have an obligation to the participants on how I use their narratives and represent their communities.

The purpose of my work is to produce more than a dissertation; simply placing this research on a shelf in an institution would be a waste of participants' time and it would not provide any insight for those included in the study. Participants are not just objects of the research, but co-producers of knowledge and thus, my hope is to improve policies on how families are informed about their child's education and the conditions in school. As I was

contacted by the Ontario Human Rights Council (OHRC), which is reviewing similar cases, this investigation may serve to illuminate more information on how parents are informed of decisions related to special education and what can be done to improve communication between schools and homes. In addition, I have shared my research and information with community media, including South Asian Focus, The Voice of Brampton's South Asian Community, South Asian OMNI News, Sin Barreras (Without Barriers), CHHA Voces Latinas (Spanish radio station), and TVO Parents. I hope that I will be able to continue to share the narratives of families and discuss how the gaps in special education can be addressed. The information I disseminate should go beyond publications to provide communities' with information that will allow families to understand their rights.

This chapter focused on the method of qualitative interviews that were used in this study and how grounded theory was employed. I outlined the research design and provided the context and overview of the Greater Toronto Area where the research was conducted. A detailed discussion of the profiles of parents, students, educators and administrators was also provided. The data collection instruments, how the data was analyzed, and the limitations of the methods and methodology were clarified. Finally, the ethical considerations, challenges, and tensions were considered. In the next chapter, I focus on the data findings as re-told through the mothers, students, and educators.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH FINDINGS - UNDERSTANDING EXCEPTIONALITIES AND THE IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES

Chapter Four outlined the methodology, the methods of interviewing, and the use of grounded theory as an analytical framework. In this chapter, I will discuss the themes and concepts that emerged from the narratives. The students and parents told counter-stories which were analyzed through an anti-racist discursive framework, critical race theory, and grounded theory. The narratives allowed me to interrogate the institutional practices as understood through the participants' lived realities. For their part, educators started to unpack institutional and systemic barriers in the education system, how they understood what practices were occurring at the schools they were working and how knowledge production reinforces the social hierarchies seen in society. The purpose of this project is not to negate that physical and accessibility needs exist and that funding and resources to meet these needs must be allocated accordingly; the purpose is rather to interrogate how judgement categories and behavioural problems have been constructed to explain difference, failure, and why minoritized bodies are disenfranchised in the process. In this chapter, the issue of overrepresentation based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status, the incorrect identification and placement of students and English language learners (ELL), and the use of medication to address learning disabilities are explored through the use of storytelling.

Specifically, the research questions were: (1) How do racialized students and their parents interpret what it means to be labelled and placed into special education?; (2) What consultations/procedures are in place to ensure that parents are informed and are equal participants in the decision making process? What agency do parents have in the special education process?; (3) What do students and parents believe about the benefit (or lack thereof) of the special education identification process?; (4) How have judgement categories (e.g.

categories that cannot be explained through medical testing and are instead subject to value laden psychological testing) and behavioural problems been constructed to explain difference and/or failure? Why are particular students in special education and to what extent is the process racialized and racist?; (5) How do educators and administrators understand the role of parents in the special education process and what patterns do they notice?

I asked students about their perceptions, feelings, and observations about the process of being identified for special education. Parents were asked about their relationships with school administrators and educators, whether felt they were some families were given more attention, and whether they felt adequately aware and involved in decisions regarding the placement and identification processes. Educators and administrators were asked about their observations and implementation of policies and practices that affected parents and students.

As the data was transcribed and analyzed, a number of themes emerged from the discussions, including the issue of gender overrepresentation along with race and socioeconomic status. The themes of student displacement, the use of medication, and the placement of ELL students into special education were also discussed. Moreover, the disproportionate representation of lower socioeconomic status groups and a system that essentially conveyed messages of "disabling" students were addressed. The language and documents that were used by school officials were identified as problematic and difficult to understand by families, while the appeal process was not effectively communicated or explained. Parents felt as though their agency had been stripped from them, as testing was not understood and consent was not always required for particular tests. Two of the nine parents discussed how educators wanted to push drugs or medication onto students who did not fit the norm. It was also suggested that ELL students may be identified with a learning disability before they have had an appropriate amount

of time to learn English. Students discussed issues of stigma, self-esteem and feeling as though their learning had been undermined or they were not being challenged. In some cases, students were not given the opportunity to integrate into an inclusive setting. The following is an analysis of the narratives and counter-storytelling articulated by participants in this study in light of the themes identified.

5.1   Evidence of overrepresentation? "Brown and Black bodies"

In the United States, there is considerable evidence of disproportionality in special education (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Blanchett, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Harry & Klingner, 2006) with particular impacts on racialized students including, school dropouts, suspensions, involvement with juvenile justice and underrepresentation in placements such as gifted programs (Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Oswald et al., 2002). In Ontario, the statistics available pertaining to students in special education do not indicate race, ethnicity, religion, or culture of the students placed in learning disability categories (MOE, 2012). However, evidence suggests that some student groups are disengaged from the curriculum and disproportionately dropout of school (Mahamed, 2010; TDSB, 2009). In Ontario, Aboriginal, Latino, Black, and Somali students are more likely to dropout and anecdotal evidence suggests that these students are more likely to be placed into learning disability categories.

Stacey, a White educator and administrator at the secondary level, noted that ethnic groups may have different perceptions of what it means to be identified with a learning disability. While recognizing that she was being stereotypical in her generalization, she argued that many Asians, in particular South East Asians, feel that there is a great deal of stigma attached to exceptionalities and actively resist the labelling of their children. She further stipulated that many Asian families, who are generalized as overachieving, feel as though the identification of an

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exceptionality is somehow a personal failure, a reflection of being less than "perfect" or not

being "a perfect human being." She further noted how family composition affected placement

and identification:

> I have also noticed that based on ethnicity, that accepting learning disabilities or
> other kinds of exceptionalities is very difficult for certain ethnic groups. Others
> have been fine with it. I have also noticed difficulty in experiencing it when there
> are split families... when it's a stable family, there tends to be less resistance to be
> told there is an exceptionality. But I have found that a lot of single parent families
> we have had to explain that there are exceptionalities, they have more difficulties
> with (Stacey, 16/9/2010).

It is interesting to note that single-parents are perceived, in this case, as "unstable." Accordingly,

perceptions of lone-parent families may be adversely implicated in decisions related to

placement and this may act as a double-jeopardy for students who are not only racialized, but

also belong to a single-parent family.

Kulvir, a South Asian educator and administrator with 20 years of experience at the

elementary level, reported that there are clear inequities in terms of those placed into special

education. She has seen firsthand evidence suggesting that particular racialized, ethnic, and

increasingly linguistic groups, are streamed into specific levels:

> …I would say that in my 20 years that I have taught, I have always seen
> overrepresentation of minorities in contained classes, where the minorities [were]
> not the main group in that population...What I am seeing more is now, is a lot of
> the ESL kids coming into special education, at too early of a grade. And that
> could be my shift from where I used to teach to where I am teaching now. Umm,
> definitely I would say that they are—I have seen too many minorities in the
> [special education] classrooms (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

In cases where particular ethnicities are consistently overrepresented in special education, Kulvir

argues that parents begin to question the legitimacy and authenticity of special education.

The overrepresentation of Black bodies in special education echoed what other educators

and administrators were seeing in their classrooms. Alicya, a Black, Jamaican, special education

administrator working at the elementary level, outlines that her role is often to ensure that

educators are not hastily identifying and placing students who embody a particular type of

ethnicity in special education:

> So, we do have some diversity at the school, so even in terms of looking at those
> kids — let's say for example we have a child right now who has never been to
> school before, and he is in grade two, and this is his first time, so right away,
> everyone jumped. "Oh, he's special ed because he is an immigrant, English is not
> his first language, can't sit still." So, my job then, go in and observe that student,
> see is it really special ed or is it because this child does not have the experience
> (Alicya, 14/9/2010).

Alicya's comments are indeed indicative in understanding how placement decisions are being

made without adequate consultation and/or broader contextualized understanding of the cultural

and linguistic capital. Kulvir noted similar sentiments to Alyica in describing how educators are

not only attempting to expedite the placement process, but that the labelling is being used as a

mechanism to argue that some students can only be helped, or can only learn, *after* being

identified through this process:

> And there are still teachers who go with that old attitude, you know, if we don't
> do an assessment, we are never going to be able to help them…That mindset is
> very hard to change in teachers, sometimes (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

In Kulvir's case, she is seeing that teachers' biases and perceptions precipitate a push for an

assessment that could lead to a placement. As an administrator, she cautiously warns against the

haste of assessments and further questions educators' motives.

Jocelyn, a White, special education resource teacher who works at the secondary level,

also described a clear pattern among those attending special education as "brown and black"

bodies. She also described how "some poor White kids" are put into special education and noted

that she has rarely witnessed a "rich White kid" identified as requiring special education. I asked

Jocelyn to elaborate on why she believed that education was reserved for a particular class or

type of child, and she suggested that systemic barriers are often reframed as individualistic and inherent deficits of the child:

> ...the standard that's been set that there's informal and formal curriculum, and that's who schooling is for, that's the standard that's out there. And the kids that don't achieve that standard, it's not that there's a problem with the school system, there's a problem with the kid (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

Learning disability categories assume a medical model and positions the problem within the child (Cummins, 1989a). Thus, notions of medicalization, complacency and blaming parents for failure have put the onus on the family and the child; the designation is understood as the family's failure rather than a systemic or structural barrier. Furthermore, Fine (1991) found in her study, rhetoric such as "the culture of poverty," "the underclass" and "no one cares about education in these homes" (p. 155), are commonly used to explain failure while implying that why schools are not accountable.

Nikki, a West-Indian educator at the intermediate level, also discussed some inequities she has witnessed and called into question. She explained that while Black students make-up approximately one-tenth of her school population, a third of this group has been identified as requiring special education. Further commenting on what she believed were the causes of disproportionality, Nikki discussed the relationship between the racial make-up of the school and placement issues:

> Nikki: They are all minority students, Blacks, make-up a large percentage, make-up a third. Which is well over what our school is. Our school is probably not even a tenth Black, but I have a third of my students identified…

> Jagjeet: Is there any Whites?

> Nikki: No Whites!

> Jagjeet: And why do you think that is?

Nikki: (Laughs!!) Because we have one Black teacher, who is me. Two Brown teachers and the rest of them are White (16/9/2010).

Nikki also connected the racial make-up of administrators and educators with the overrepresentation of minorities in particular disability categories. As a minoritized body, she feels as though she must hold her administrators accountable for their hiring practices and argues for hiring a teaching population that reflects the student populations:

> We just changed principals and I asked him why all the 12 teachers they hired have Blond hair and blue eyes and yet the majority of our school are South Asian, Vietnamese and a few Blacks. And I said "students need to see themselves."...He never answered me. He still hasn't spoken to me—It's very difficult within [this] School Board and the education system because the teachers who get in, it's a very closed-off thing. What has happened is that, principals will hire their nieces or nephews and they will get them in that way. So how is that a few teachers of colour are getting to be principal? That is the only way we will get more and more teachers of colour. By teachers who come in through the principal (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

She noted that while she saw her role as an advocate to address what she considers blatant racism in both hiring practices (including principals who were enforcing the status quo by hiring their nieces) and placement practices that over-represent minorities in special education, there was little she could do as one of the few racialized educators in her school. Nikki also questioned the systemic issues and discrimination that are evident in the hiring, promotions, and leadership at her school and within the School Board she is employed.

When asked further about what percentage of the school population was White, Nikki noted that it was approximately 40 percent and, as noted above, stated that there were no White students identified as requiring special education. She later indicated that race continues to impact placement, as students are identified by educators who have formed value laden assumptions. She also mentioned that there are students who have been inappropriately placed/labelled in special education. In one particular case, she knowingly kept a student in the

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incorrect placement for two years until she felt that this student had reached a particular level. It is curious to note why she felt that this was suitable; perhaps she felt it was the best solution for the solution given that there is little or no support in larger classrooms; or perhaps she has a different agenda.

Nikki's views were similar to Stacey's observations and feelings surrounding special education. In one of my initial emails with Stacey, she noted that special education was a "dumping ground" for those who did not fit into provincial educational standards. More specifically, she suggested that the particular ethnic and linguistic groups she has primarily worked with are readily identified as requiring special education, through this "catch-all" category, to address gaps in learning:

> In some cases, I have seen there being more of an emphasis towards pushing certain ethnic groups into special ed., yeah…Yes, for certain ethnic groups [I have seen it as a dumping ground]. Yes. Especially, and I see this in the Southeast Asian population, and I found this throughout my career—they are immigrants into this country—that the education and academic standards may be very different, for the countries that they are coming from. And therefore, rather than, when the kids get here, they don't really know what to do with them because there is such a disparity in, for example, what a grade four looks like, compared to what they present as grade four. And I find that they get talked into special education rather than looking at it really isn't a learning issue, it's a disparity from their country to our country (Stacey, 16/9/2010).

The assumptions made by educators is that international students are not on par with Canadian curriculum standards. Thus, students of particular ethnic groups, as Stacy identifies, who do not fit within the prescribed curriculum norms are assigned into special education because educators do not know what to do with them. It is not clear whether the disparities in education are linked to English language acquisition or cultural, national, and ethnic discrimination which assumes that other countries' education systems are below Ontario standards.

Accordingly, specific immigrants families may be compelled to make these decisions based on the information they receive from the school which only presents a partial view of the child's abilities. Rather than students being tested in their mother-tongue, they are tested in a particular type of English (based on Eurocentric patterns, discounting other forms of English) that is problematic for most students. Cummins (2001) illustrates that psychological assessments in English have a tendency to undervalue the ELL students' abilities as the norms are geared towards native English speakers. In *Chapter Six*, I will discuss in further detail the implications of the instruments and assessments used in the special education process and their impacts on measuring a student's learning needs and knowledge.

Alongside the issue of overrepresentation in special education in the United States, is the issue of the underrepresentation of minorities in gifted and talented education streams. In Canada, it is not clearly understood whether minorities are underrepresented in gifted education. Duffy (2004) notes that one of the few reports emerging from the former Toronto Board of Education shows that "poor and non-White students were underrepresented" in French immersion and gifted programs (p. 10). Pointing to other studies, Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, and Holloway (2005) indicate that that less than two percent of "more than 4,000 articles on the issue of gifted and talented students since 1924 were about students from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds" (p. 25). Much like the issue of overrepresentation, the lack of non-White and cultural minority students underrepresented in gifted education has been recognized as problematic due to test bias, selective referrals, and reliance on deficits, rather than strengths (Gray, Ali, & Favaro, 2009). Erwin and Worrell (2012) have also reported the discrepancies between Black, Native Indian, and Hispanic students who are placed into what is referred to as gifted and talented education, compared to their East and South Asian peers. As

Johnsen, VanTassel-Baska, and Robinson (2008) indicate, educators' cultural frames of references, and personal and professional experiences dictate the identification of language and cultural minorities. In addition to financial resources and lower-levels of parental education, as indicated by Erwin and Worrell (2012), Ford (1998) contends problems with the recruitment and retention of minorities in gifted education has been prevalent for years due to many variables, including: (a) instruments and measures; (b) the quality of student's education; and (c) personnel issues, which include training in gifted education and the referral process. While studying underrepresentation in gifted education was not directly related to this investigation, Nikki did discuss her experiences with gifted schooling in the School Board at which she was previously employed:

> … I have worked at a school with a gifted program in an [affluent area]. And in that classroom make up, it was a high Jewish area. There was— it was all White and one Black student (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

She noted that there was a significant discrepancy between the proportion of Black students in the school and the proportion of Black students in the gifted program.

5.1.1 "Why are 'bad boys' always Black?": Understanding the interaction between gender and race

The above title was derived from a journal article titled *Why are 'bad boys' always Black?: Causes of disproportionality in school discipline and recommendations for change*. In the article, Monroe (2005) argues that Black boys are more likely to be targeted and disciplined, compared to their peers. Educators who were interviewed as part of the current investigation were asked to reflect on their class rosters not only in terms of the racial make-up, but also the gender of those placed into learning disability categories. The gender imbalance was clear for those placed in special education, but it was not always clear what accounted for the imbalance.

Researchers in Canada and the United States have illustrated the gaps in the learning of boys and girls for many years. In recent years, there have been calls for "boys-only schools" in Toronto to address issues of engagement (Kuitenbrouwer, 2012). Boys in particular have been identified as requiring special education more so than girls. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (2001) suggest three underlying reasons as to why boys are more likely to be placed into special education, including: (1) behaviours linked to referral; (2) biological differences; and (3) gender and referral bias (which has not been discussed as readily in the literature) (p. 28). The authors' findings suggest that females are underrepresented in special education due to gender bias (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

Jocelyn noted that she believes that racism and the lack of diversity within the teaching population accounts for the inappropriate identification of new immigrants and racialized bodies for special education. She pointed to reports from her School Board that indicates Muslim boys are faring poorly. She believes that educators are not familiar with linguistic and cultural minority groups, and have negative stereotypes of these particular groups, which has resulted in a large gap in understanding particular backgrounds. In a parallel argument, Alicya discussed the need to re-examine the role of educators, gender related placement decisions, and a need to question teaching methods. She discussed wanting to understand the research behind why more boys, versus girls, were in learning disability categories:

> I think sometimes gender is a factor. Because, if you look at special ed children are boys. And I would love to somehow do some research to figure out, is this a coincidence? … More boys that have LDs and communication. I am not solely convinced that it should be that way. So, that could be a factor. It could also be that our teaching methods, what we expect in the classroom… Because there are some kids that are naturally hyper. And there are some communities where having a lot of energy is just part of it (Alicya, 14/9/2010).

Alicya commented on educators' inability to take into account cultural nuances of gender which may understand males as being naturally active. As Shinn, Tindal, and Spira's (1987) study indicates, while many students may have reading difficulties, those students who are referred to special education are usually associated with characteristics such as hyperactivity, aggression, or educator biases (as cited in Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Similar to Alicya's understanding, Kulvir argued that boys are overrepresented in special education, contained classes or settings that are severely restricted, as educators have not been able to find appropriate ways to engage boys in the curriculum. Accordingly, educators believe that males are disproportionately identified based on inherent and cultural nuances of appropriate gendered behaviour, and because educators have provided few solutions or approaches to remedy why boys are more likely to be disengaged in the curriculum.

Alicya further speculated that since education and learning is geared towards girls, males are failing in the school system:

> There is a lot of work that still needs to be done in terms of the testing, even when you look at literacy scores between boys and girls. Boys are failing because education is still female dominated. And as females we are still choosing reading material that we [educators] like (Alicya, 14/9/2010).

It is interesting to note that Alicya believes that there is a prevalence of female educators in the education system and that they are more interested in the learning of girls. However, historically in North America, males have dominated the field of education and there are still considerable gender gaps in the fields of math and sciences. Due to high drop-out rates prevalently amongst males in Toronto, the TDSB has been considering options of single-sex classrooms. As mentioned above, the TDSB has reviewed the existing data and literature on single-sex schools,

with a focus on all-boys schools and will begin to open single-sex schools starting in September 2012 (Erling & O'Reilly, 2009; Kuitenbrouwer, 2012).

Alicya further noted that particular learning disabilities have to be linked to "behaviour" categories in order to get support from the School Board. In particular, she noted that the designation of ADHD is not sufficient for a child to be given support. Specifically, it appears that two interrelated designations, for example, ADHD and a learning disability, must be attached to the student in order for them to receive support. Nikki has also seen firsthand how males are overrepresented in learning disability categories and believes that it is a pervasive issue. Similarly, Jocelyn noted that in the class she was teaching, 80 percent of the class are males.

Unlike the other minoritized educators in this investigation, Stacey, a White educator, believes that the gender imbalance is related to how girls are perceived and that they tend to fall under the radar. She believes that female students are typically invisible, since they are quieter, while boys are more boisterous. Stacey argued that girls may be just as likely to have learning disabilities, but the behaviour of boys as "trouble-makers" calls the attention of educators. Stacey noted the following comment regarding how behaviours are typically understood by educators: "We as teachers, tend to identify the kids that are problems, not the kids who are not problems." Stacey was asked if she feels that problems get constructed as disabilities. She clarified that boys who may be "obnoxious" and "loud" are more likely to be identified as having behaviour difficulties than students who are quiet and falling behind. As Cruz (2001) rightly suggests, girls who behave more like boys are labelled and disciplined as deviant when they destabilize the "order" of the classroom; "the punishments are thorough and swift for girls who stray outside of the roles relegated for female bodies" (p. 665). Accordingly, one can reasonably assume that students, and particularly boys, who exhibit outward "problematic" behavioural issues and

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disruptive behaviours, are more likely to be identified. Ferguson's (2000) study on 20 grade five and six Black boys in the United States illustrates that educators rank, classify, and group boys by their behaviour, as early as age 10. Consequently, these labels are used to justify misidentifications and punishments that further push Black boys out of school (Ferguson, 2000). Both the literature and the participant observations suggest then that there is a correlation between those who exhibit problematic behaviours that have been normalized and the identification of special education. Further some level of social control must be maintained and projected by educators, administrators, and professionals.

Students were also asked to recall which students they believed were visible in their classes and whether they noticed any particular reasons why some students were placed into special education. Aziza noted that she saw more boys than girls in her classes. James also stated that it was "mostly boys" and "mostly minorities" in his special education classes. Ronell revealed that of the 20 students in his class, 15 of them were boys. In general, the students in this investigation revealed that boys, and predominantly Black boys, were overrepresented in their special education classrooms.

5.1.2 *Placed, misplaced, displaced*

Within this understanding of disproportionality, many of the parents interviewed believed that their child's assessments were incorrect and that their child was inappropriately identified as requiring special education. They expressed sadness and tears, frustration, anger, and helplessness as their apprehensions and concerns were ignored by school officials. Parents discussed toxic relationships with school officials and administrators who constantly put-up barriers that parents felt hindered their child's progress and that because of the lack of

cooperation, they felt limited in their choices. Parents and educators discussed specific cases where the "system" had failed students.

As an educator and administrator, Kulvir spoke of cases, or "horror stories" as she aptly puts it, where some children were consistently placed into an inappropriate program. Through her community work, she has seen firsthand instances where a child was left in special education, year after year. In some cases, students were not tested and were mislabelled by an educator who made an abrupt decision without understanding all the factors, including the home environment, how long the child/family had been in Canada, and any other factors that would account for gaps in the student's learning. She goes on further to discuss how she has informally been an advocate for several families whose child may have been incorrectly placed in special education. She spoke of the need for advocates to speak on behalf of a parent:

> …They had to fight. They were automatically put towards a special education model. You know, we had to build a lot of plans for the child to fight for that, wanting their child out of the program that he was totally unsuitable for. But, there was never enough assessments done on it, there was never a follow up every year. He was just put into a program one year and that continued on for many, many years. And that was the saddest case I have gone through….So, he spent four years in that program. And in the four years, not one teacher in the four years, realized that child was in the wrong program. Until he ended up in another school and in the same program and right away the teacher realized he is in the wrong program (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

The specific cases that Kulvir discussed highlight the significant impact of inconsistent policies and practices on a child's educational potential. If the processes and steps are not followed in a consistent manner or protocols are not implemented in a manner that the educator feels is best suited to the parents and students, it is likely that where inappropriate placements will occurr. As a teacher, Jocelyn also discussed a system that has streamed particular students into lower levels, and discussed a hierarchical, authoritative process at play:

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> … I think that the school system feels like it knows better…I just went to a workshop where they start placing those kids in kindergarten in special ed which just boggles my mind. And then they stream them…and by the time they hit high school they've been disabled because if you have been stuck in a special ed class for your whole school life you're not learning the skills you need to learn because it is assumed that you can't. Not by everyone, but I would say by a fair amount of people (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

Jocelyn noted a system that has created a learned helplessness in particular ethnic communities and a system that has continuously streamed students in ways that has marginalized them. As a result, some ethnic communities have internalized and accepted the message; they have "been disabled".

Haweeya described her daughter, Aziza as acting and being different from other students in the contained special education classes. However, the educators provided little assistance in removing Aziza from the situation:

> All the teachers are telling me, "she's not like the other kids that we have. She's way calmer and she's way respectful" – because she's with others have no total control of what they are doing there. And still, nobody helping me to take her out of there. And nobody said that she could be with other one-on-one- Nobody. [Crying] (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

Haweeya, like other mothers and students, described wanting some normalcy for their child, but instead that there was no assistance and no "exit strategy" until they felt that it was too late. The search for normalcy is not uncommon. Michalko (2008) contends that disability is presented as a problem inside and outside of the classroom, through the implicit and explicit messages and conceptions of "normalcy" (p. 401). These thoughts are echoed through a desire on behalf of both parents and students of being part of an environment that is inclusive and recognizes all students as belonging. As Haweeya discussed, there is a sense of hopelessness and lack of appropriate channels to find assistance. Throughout the interview, Haweeya described the desperation that she tried to convey to educators, but she felt she was not being heard. She

repeatedly tried to stress her ideals of having her daughter as part of the mainstream program, yet

issues of behaviour were repeatedly brought-up by educators. On the other hand, Dominique

believes that her son was identified with his current designation because he would argue issues

of equity and fairness in class and inform educators when he believed that something was not

equitable:

> But I think that was mainly for his behavioural—Well, he's not a bad kid. I hate
> to use that— because to me, behavioural means like, not normal or something's
> wrong when there is nothing wrong with [Andre]… I think they make it a learning
> disability because he shuts down and then won't work with whoever is the
> authority person is. So, because they can't get or find the angle to reach
> [Andre]… (Dominique, 15/9/2010).

Normalcy was something many parents described as wanting for their children. Kiranjeet also

felt that her son was marked as being different. She felt that this demarcation had followed him

throughout his schooling and its lingering effects continued to be felt, since school officials have

access to his student records:

> And they identified him, they said he doesn't have social skills, right from
> kindergarten…it was put in his books that he's got social skill problems.
> So, from there, I feel that he was branded and partially our fault because we never
> felt that he needed to get him out, we need to get him in a Montessori
> school/nursery where he could be with other kids his age. He had his sisters in the
> house and we never really thought that why is that, you know, he would have
> these issues? That's how my challenges started and from there on end, it never
> really stopped….It was kindergarten and then senior kindergarten he was again,
> looked at and branded that way. Umm, teachers kind of had to have—wanted me
> to go for testing for special ed classes and all that and they always had to have an
> extra person, he needed more one-on-one for everything. Because [they said he]
> wasn't listening, wasn't sitting, wasn't listening to the words of the teacher
> (Kiranjeet, 26/9/2010).

As Kiranjeet indicated, the norms associated with how students should be acting in class

led school officials to decide that her son required this segregation. From her recollection, she

believes her son's behaviour was connected to his gender and what was seen by educators as

inappropriate gender norms. His behaviour was seen as deviant and thus he was "branded" (mentioned a total of six times in the interview with Kiranjeet) from the start of his school career, a marker that followed him with negative, lingering effects. Parents in this study felt that educators attributed one or more characteristics as "abnormal" to their child and accordingly made the identification for special education.

Kiranjeet felt shame and guilt because both she and her husband did not think it was appropriate to question school officials and they believed that the educators must have had the child's best interests in mind. While she did not describe feelings of being passive, as many educators are led to believe, she felt helpless since she did not know the inner workings of the system. Parental participation has been reduced by principals in Ontario to a point where parents are unable to help their children because they lack the cultural capital and are subject to discourses that label parents of colour as deficient (Kugler & Flessa, 2007). Families have been described as a "problem" that officials need to work around (Kugler & Flessa, 2007), rather than describing the insights and cultural capital they can bring to the school. Kiranjeet cried when she discussed how her son was discriminated against and how she was ignored by school officials for several years. Similar to Kiranjeet, Sukhjeet discussed feelings of being ignored, year after year, when her son Jasmeet was placed into an English as a Second Language class.

The issue of normalcy was brought up by parents and students alike. Not all mothers explicitly used the words "normalcy," but they described to some extent not wanting a stigma and feeling as though their child was an outsider. Students described a desire to fit in within the school environment and felt that the exposure to special education left them particularly vulnerable. Aziza, like Balvir, described wanting normalcy and being "like everyone else." As a

student who has been placed into special education since senior kindergarten, both she and her mother have experienced the implications of the placement:

> I just don't like the marks I am getting. I just want to be like everybody else. The same level as everybody else. I don't like being behind. So, I just don't like it (Aziza, 26/3/2011).

Throughout our conversation, Aziza discussed issues of inclusion and integration and that she wanted to be surrounded by peers she was familiar with rather than being isolated in a separate setting. She expressed great sadness and disappointment with her identification and repeatedly commented that she did not believe her placement was helpful.

It is important to note that the students in their own ways, are intelligent pupils, with a source of knowledge that is being realized or yet to be realized. Through the deficit lens that has been applied to these students throughout their schooling, they have internalized many of the messages they are receiving. Moreover, families have come to understand their child(ren) though the negative messages they have been given. Next, I will turn the discussion toward the use of medication to address learning disabilities.

5.1.3 Medicating minorities: Drugging the deficits

The use of Foucault's (1973) interpretation and understanding of the medical gaze is useful in this investigation. As Allan (1996) writes, "medicine, madness, and discipline and punishment" are related to special education, whereby "the patient, the madman and the criminal" are comprehended through disciplinary techniques (p. 220). Just as a doctor examines a patient for disease, special education has functioned in a way that measures and describes students in relation to the norm (Allan, 1996). Accordingly a student either fits within the given frame of reference or is charted or ranked along a continuum of deviance.

Academics and researchers have long discussed the practice of medicating children who have difficulty focusing and adhering to classroom routines. Prescribing medication and diagnosing disability has been a concern particularly in relation to racialized bodies. Despite the side-effects of drug dependence, headaches, and insomnia (Diller, 1998), Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) suggest that Ritalin is an attractive solution for addressing behaviours of large and diverse student groups. As Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) report, the use of Ritalin to control children and youth who are deemed unable to work within an integrated setting, increased 4.6 times in Canada between 1990 and 1996 (as cited in Chisholm, 1996). It has been suggested that ADHD has become another mechanism to classify difference (Slee, 1994).

Two of the parents interviewed in the study described how their children were referred to a physician, based on preliminary recommendations from educators. Haweeya was in tears when she recounted her daughter's experiences with the school system. When I asked Haweeya if she believed that the assessments were accurate, she only recalled the Ritalin that was prescribed to her daughter. She states that she believes the decision to medicate was made too hastily and that it was based on particular information provided by educators to the doctors. She believes that the Ritalin was "too much" as kids are "always hyper" when they are young:

> They did the trial [Ritalin] on her. They find that, umm, that she does need it to focus more in the class and to calm down. And so they told her she had to sit in the front, all the time. And they said "It's only going to be one year or two year[s]." And every year when I go, maybe by third year she go out and be well. And after third grade, I myself, find out that she is calm...I stopped the Ritalin by myself. I didn't ask anybody because I see my daughter—she doesn't need. And these study things are not working, so why would I give her more medication? (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

Based on her writing and drawing activities in class, she was perceived as abnormal in kindergarten. An educator perceived Aziza as being "hyper" and was subsequently referred to a

hospital where the physician recommended Ritalin on a temporary basis. Her mother recounted that Aziza was told that she could not thrive in a regular setting and a special education setting was needed. From her work with Canadian and British mothers, Malacrida (2004) reports that medicalization to address difference or "problems" is commonly exercised as a tool for social control in Canada. Haweeya decided against the intervention after two years, as she did not think it was a long term solution. She believed that her daughter exhibited characteristics of a "normal" child. Despite having more interactions with their children than educators, parents' observations and narratives are often discounted.

Similar to Haweeya, Clairice recounted that based on the physician's recommendation, she was asked to medicate her son. She actively resisted the interpretation of her son being "hyper" and having to medicate him "just to satisfy teacher's needs." Kulvir also described how medicating a deficit will not address the underlying issues:

> …if you [educators] are thinking that by diagnosing the child you have solved the problem, it's not going to help. If you think by giving a child Ritalin at a very young age, the problem will not be solved. I think you have to look into what are you doing as a school, at a teacher level, at a resource teacher level, with the parents, how are you bringing the parents on board, you know, what structures are you putting in so that the parent can be more knowledgeable [informed] about if the child is having attention problems (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

Kulvir persistently cautioned against "diagnosing" a student in order to remedy a situation before offering an alternative solution. This speaks to educator expectations and responsibilities, rather than shifting the responsibility to the learner. Slee (1994) describes a system in education whereby the deviance is located with the student and the solution lays in "therapeutic interventions of expert professionals" (pp. 147-48). School administrators tend to rely on one piece of information to determine that a student is deviant and medical interventions seem to be simplistic way to resolve difference. Along with the concerns related to the use of medication to

remedy a problem, participants also noted issues with language proficiency and over-

identification.

5.2   English as a Second Language: Language as a disability

In Canada, there is very little research on, or discussion of English Language Learners

(ELL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) and their graduation rates (Cummins, 2001). As

One Ontario study found that teacher assessments are not accurate predictors to assess ESL

learners for reading disabilities (Limbos & Geva, 2001). Meyers (2003), an educator and ESL

teacher, writes in her report "Myths and Delusions: The State of ESL in Large Canadian School

Boards" that in 2002 only 37 percent of ESL students passed mandatory language assessments.

Accordingly, she contends that the remaining 63 percent do not go on to post-secondary

education (Meyers, 2003). Compounding the issue of ESL is the number of students who may be

incorrectly identified as requiring ESL. Educators automatically assume that since the parents

speak a second language at home, the student's first language is not English (Toohey, 2005).

Toohey (2005) argues that the increasing number of students identified as requiring ESL

programming is reflective of the increased funding that is linked to the ESL designation

(Toohey, 2005).

Cummins (1994) argues that historically, students were reprimanded for speaking a

language other than English in schools, inevitably creating what Fanon (1967) argues as a dual

consciousness, a non-synchronous state. The culture and language of schools creates an

opposition: a way of being and doing in schools that differ from the home environment.

Accordingly, these messages may have a profound impact not only on their the student's

experiences but also their identification in special education. Since students are not assessed in

their first language, it is difficult to ascertain whether there are gaps in their learning or whether

they are unable to articulate their knowledge in English. Meyers (2003) maintains that the

standardized assessments in Ontario are not appropriate for the diverse languages, cultures, and

religions of the student population. She goes on further to assert that:

> At least in the Greater Toronto Area, standardized testing is an expensive charade,
> racist in effect and marginalizes ESL students further in schools. The lack of
> language provision in many elementary and secondary schools parallels neglect,
> and ESL children become scapegoats for the failures of our educational systems
> (Meyers, 2003, p. 3).

Meyers (2003) contextualizes many arguments by academics in the United States that suggest

the psychological assessments used to determine identification set students up for failure.

Klingner and Harry's (2006) study of 19 meetings and placement conferences of ELL students

reveals that personnel did not know when a child was ready to be assessed in English; further,

there was "confusion about when to refer an ELL, misinterpreting a child's lack of full

proficiency as low IQ or learning disabilities, and an overreliance on test scores with little

consideration given to other factors that might affect a student's performance" (p. 2262). In the

assessment process, the psychologist is very often removed from students and families and there

are huge gaps in understanding the needs of ELL students.

As an educator for over 20 years, Kulvir believes that the urgency around placements is a

systemic issue linked with a student's gender, ethnicity, and language that precipitates the

identification. Indeed, she mentioned a few times throughout her interview, that her greatest

concern as an administrator is to understand why particular groups are being pervasively

streamed into ESL programs:

> … we are not understanding ESL enough. We are heading a lot of our kids to
> special ed…60-70 percent of our kids could be considered ESL. So, how do we
> change our program to meet the needs of those children right from the day that
> they went into kindergarten? So, we are not going to say "you know, so many
> kids are having difficulties because of their cognitive?" It could be that they just

haven't picked up the language yet, at the level they should. So, how are we teaching, 70-80-90 percent walking in kindergarten who are having ESL, how is our teaching practices different?...So, they are must different than those ESL kids who are coming from different countries, who are coming with one solid base, which can be transferable (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

It is important to note that Kulvir pointed to a larger problem within particular ethnic and linguistic groups and predominantly in South Asian communities. She believes that there is a shift towards identifying immigrant and ELL students too readily as requiring special education because their conversational skills are not effectively evaluated. In other words, the conversational skills are not something that can be evaluated, resulting in uniformed decisions. Cummins (1984) seminal research identifies that ELL students take five to seven years before they become proficient in their L2 language (the language that differs from the one they learned as a child and is still spoken). To gain academic proficiency in their second language, an ELL student must be given a minimum of five years to become fluent. As Ortiz (1997) suggests, the field has not yet developed adequate instruments to measure proficiency and determine when a student is prepared to be tested in English.

Two of the five educators, Nikki and Kulvir, recognized that it takes five to seven years for an immigrant child to acquire the appropriate academic language and that the lack of English language skills affects placement in special education categories. Accordingly, they believe that immigrant students are mislabelled as special education when they have not been given sufficient opportunity to acquire the language needed to catch-up to their peers.

This shift of readily identifying "problematic" linguistic and ethnic groups into special education programs reveals what a number of researchers and academics are referring to as a re-segregation in schools (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Zion & Blanchett, 2011) or legalized segregation

(Beratan, 2008). Similar to Kulvir, Alicya discussed how language and cultural barriers have

been constructed as a disability:

> Sometimes people don't take into consideration certain communities don't always have the resources. It seems as though parents are disinterested, but their work schedule does not allow them to come in and have that interview with you. Or complete the forms that are sent with, because after work they go to their part-time job. Or, maybe in their country, just going to use this as an example, West Indian parents, may have a philosophy that teachers are the ones who are responsible for their students' education. So, maybe when they grew up, this was the way it was and you don't interfere with the education…Not that they don't care about their children, but that they figure that it is the teacher's job."That's how it was when I was a kid." So, those things can definitely be a hindrance and continue to be (Alicya, 14/9/2010).

Through a functionalist framework, Skrtic (1991) contends that special education is orderly,

whereas social problems are pathological. The failures and difficulties students experience shift

the onus of learning on families and parents, rather than structural and institutional practices that

are geared towards a specific frame of learning. Alicya articulated that when parents are

pathologized as being lazy and disinterested in the schooling of their children, they may simply

lack the cultural capital or they may possess an alternative understanding of the education

system.

Parents also discussed the problem of language being read as a disability. One parent

discussed her years of struggle as school administrators and educators denied the assessments

were incorrect. Indeed, the educators in her case adamantly believed that the child's weaknesses

were a result of an ascribed immigrant status, when in fact the child was born and raised in

Canada:

> All those years, the teachers insisted he was an ESL student and I questioned it year after year, he was in fact, NOT an ESL student! … it was easier to clump him up with all the other ESL students and then make the parents feel like they have no clue what they are talking about! (Sukhjeet, 04/12/2010).

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Sukhjeet's case highlights feelings of being ignored by school officials. Her son, Jasmeet, was placed in ESL for six years before being tested and having this designation removed. Sukhjeet attributed this error by school officials to judgements made about the language spoken at home and attributed the gap in his learning to his perceived language acquisition. Sukhjeet suggested that the incorrect designation was linked to the documentation she was required to fill out at the beginning of the school year on which she indicated that Jasmeet spoke Punjabi at home:

> I was told over and over again that he was an ESL student because he spoke Punjabi at home! Then they advised me that he would be put into the IEP so he could receive the support that he needed. For me, it was already too late. … [Jasmeet] had fallen through the cracks in the system, even when I was on top of everything and went to countless meetings with his teachers and vice principals and principals (Sukhjeet, 04/12/2010).

While it is not clear how widespread such cases are, Jasmeet's case highlights that the issue may be prevalent in particular communities where parents are unable to remove a designation they know is inaccurate. In this instance, placement into ESL was based on a single piece of information, that Punjabi was spoken at home.

The barriers immigrant families face in the school system became evident to Jocelyn during interactions between a parent and principal in which the principal made generalizations about immigrants. In this particular case, a mother who was a lawyer and had a relatively high socioeconomic background, attempted to advocate for her child, but the principal responded with: "all you immigrant mothers are the same." Jocelyn indicated that while this mother was Canadian, the principal focused on the mother's skin colour. This anecdote demonstrates some of the difficulties immigrant and racialized/minoritized families experience in approaching educators. The educators interviewed in this study echoed sentiments that language and cultural barriers may intimidate parents. Parents discussed how their child was placed into special

education because they were "branded" or stigmatized early on by educators and that this particular label followed the child throughout their schooling. Parents particularly named race, ethnicity, and culture as sites of difference while some parents felt that their child was stigmatized for characteristics that did not warrant exclusion from the regular school setting. Based on a stereotypical piece of information that school personnel had, there were assumptions regarding proficiency in language and academic abilities that led to unjustified exclusion and placement. Next, I will focus on issues of socioeconomics and special education, as noted by educators and administrators.

5.3   Socioeconomics and special education

Evans (1995) reported that the label of "at-risk" has further stigmatized immigrants and minorities through various other social conditions, including "ethnic minority status; community or family characteristics such as single parent status, parents' education, inadequate housing, child abuse, home-school breakdown, inadequate knowledge of official languages, and type and geographic location of schools" (as cited in Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 48). The label of "at-risk" places the onus on families based on their differences; but it also begs the question "at-risk" of what or whom? The education system and educational institutions have constructed the label as something that is beyond their control. It appears that indicators, such as "at-risk" are synonymous with individual failure and what appear to be inherent deficits. Educators who were interviewed in this investigation also pointed to the overwhelming evidence that special education classrooms are dominated by students from impoverished neighbourhoods, or low socioeconomic class. However, it is not significant whether there is a clear link between income levels and special education or if the stigma of low socioeconomic status is implicated in the identification for special education. When Kulvir was questioned about what factors affect

placement into special education, she revealed that low socioeconomic status and special

education are not clearly divided:

> It depends a lot on socioeconomic factors, definitely affect it. Cultural aspects definitely…there is a fine line between what is considered special ed or what might be considered socioeconomic factors, that might be causing a child to be at a different level. It could be the cultural or linguistic factors that are affecting the child to be at a different level. So, when we try to head all those factors, and put them all into special ed., then we are doing a disservice to those children because we are not looking at the factors that are affecting them, just saying automatically saying that that the child can't do it, because they don't have the ability…if we are fighting anything, that's what we are fighting in that paradigm shift that I was talking about earlier. We have to make sure that we are looking at all the variables or all the factors that might be affecting that child's learning and how can we help in reducing those factors…so we actually get through to that child's cognitive ability (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

Kulvir discussed how markers of difference, including language, culture, race, low

socioeconomic status, have been attributed to learning disparities and the educators' perceptions

of what fits within a particular mould. Similar to Kulvir, Nikki indicated that not only are parents

voiceless and lack the appropriate cultural capital, but socioeconomic status puts particular

communities further at-risk:

> So, they don't have a strong voice. A community where they go to work, a lot of them are doing two-three jobs to keep their homes and they don't have time to sit with their child and do the extra work. They don't know about—they don't put them in Kumon. You have some areas where they put their kids in Kumon, they do the extra math. This community that I am in, the parents don't do that with their kids. So, the kids are really struggling. And what we are doing now is trying to get parental involvement. Get them to try to understand that they have to try and get involved with their child (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

Cultural capital appears to be a significant factor for those who are unable to excel in the

curriculum. Families who are considered unsuccessful are those who are unaware of the tools

that will help them fill in the gaps in their child's learning, or are financially unable to access

these programs. Often times it is affluent parents who can afford the additional tutoring that is

available to reinforce some of the skills their child may be struggling with in the curriculum.

Nikki also indicated that socioeconomic status is the "be all and end all" of what determines

special education through a story of one student who did not get the support and resources he

required:

> I had a student last year, who wouldn't come to school. He was identified a
> language disability and wouldn't come to school. And his parents worked in a
> restaurant and just worked all different hours. The mother came—got up at 4 in
> the morning—just, they were really, really struggling. Like, very often he didn't
> have a lunch, his clothes were dirty...One day…I said to the VP, I'm going to the
> home because he's never here. He's missing so much school. From a regular
> school week, he would be away 2 or 3 times a week. Okay? So, I went to the
> home and I got him out then, he just started to cry and said that kids laughed at
> him about his clothes, and what he wears, his food. His parents could only
> basically afford rice... He's not able to have the McDonald's, all the other stuff
> that other kids have. And because of that, he's not coming to school and because
> of his parents were not aware of what they could access, he's falling further and
> further behind. Socioeconomics affects special education- the number one factor.
> This child has ended up leaving our school because parents have lost their jobs
> and had to sell their home and now move away (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

As this case highlights, parents may not be financially equipped to provide their children with

what is considered normal resources; consequently, the messages children are receiving are that

they require certain material things to be integrated within the school system. The lack of cultural

capital and low socioeconomic status further marginalized this particular student in the school

system, while his parents' employment affected how often the student went to school. The

dialogue that needed to occur with school administrators regarding feelings of marginalization

and isolation was not occurring, thus leading to tremendous gaps in his education.

Stacey also recognized how socioeconomic status was connected to how involved parents

were in their child's education. She contended that in her catchment area, many Asian parents

are living in basement apartments and working two or more jobs to make ends meet, rather than

living in the stereotypical grand house associated with this ethnic group. She argued that these

parents are not as involved with their child's schooling. She further explains:

> I have one student, who is actually an Asian student, whose mother works three
> jobs because [his] father passed away and it's the only way mother can make
> ends-meet. So, we never see mother at school...And she's supporting aging
> parents as well (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

At other points of in dialogue, Nikki stated that she believed some parents lacked the cultural

capital and did not recognize that their children were entitled to privileges such as laptops to

assist with daily tasks and assignments that were only possible through the identification of an

exceptionality. As Dei et al. (2000) illustrate through Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory,

"mainstream education operates under the faulty premise that if educational resources are made

available to *all*, that *all* will then be able to access them equally" (p. 102). Indeed, while

educators assume that all parents must be aware of the policies and resources available to them,

many parents have not been given the opportunity to learn about or access these resources.

Stacey stated that "affluent" and two parent families are more involved in the school and

the parents on council are mainly White bodies. Affluent parents, it appears, are better able to

argue for decisions that align with what they believe to be accurate and in the best interest of

their child as opposed to minoritized/racialized families who feel ignored by the system and do

not have the cultural capital to function within normative parameters of advocacy and

parent/school interaction.

In addition to educators, parents also spoke about socioeconomic status as an indicator of

differential treatment. Dominique does not believe that her child's assessment was an accurate

measure of his abilities and she believes that the conditions at home contributed to his

identification. When asked to elaborate Dominique replied:

…living with [Andre] every day and seeing what he's capable of, I think it's funny. Knowing that you were coming here and on your way, I'm thinking about my own experiences and about seeing my children and I think it has a lot—their experience has a lot to do with self-esteem and your economic situation…. I think it's more of what's happening in the home. And their self-esteem, then economic things (Dominique, 15/9/2010).

Dominique believes that educators based their assessment on a single piece of information and that the School Board has its interpretation of what should be occurring. She further stated that Andre's abilities are connected to "home" conditions that are too complex for the educators to assess. She connected her own experiences and self-esteem to what she believed was occurring with her son at school. Monica, who also identifies herself as Black, connected differential treatment with socioeconomics, race, and culture. When she was asked whether parents have different expectations for certain groups, she indicated the following:

Umm, there are reasons in terms of socioeconomic status, the reasons in terms of race, even family status. So, I think all those pieces play a part in terms of how teachers perceive students, perceive groups of students, based on race, cultures and all those pieces. So, although as I said that School Board and teachers often have the mantra that they believe that all students can learn, umm it's reflective in terms of the student outcomes, in terms of the fact that you have patterns, based on race, based on culture, based on socioeconomic status that are not doing well. So, that pattern speaks to itself (Monica, 12/11/2010).

I asked Monica whether she believed that any of the factors she listed, including race, culture, family status, contributed to how her son was being treated during a particularly difficult time in Ronell's schooling. She stated:

Yeah I do. The teacher didn't get him and I'm sure that the teacher felt that "he's just another dumb Black boy." And I think that because we challenged him, that that made it even worse. Because, here are two Black parents that are challenging this White man. So, he didn't like that (Monica, 12/11/2010).

This narrative speaks a great deal to how this Black family understands the educator's tone, body language, and cues. Since Monica was an administrator in another school, she frequently

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questioned practices that she knew to be inappropriate. However, she believes in some cases, she may have caused friction with the educators in her child's school, which did not necessarily benefit Ronell. Based on a single piece of information, Melisenda also recalled that educators made some generalizations about how her daughter Gracia was reacting in the classroom. She illustrates how she constantly felt defensive and had to react to what the educators had said about her daughter:

> They had make comments and all that, but I specified to them, what's going on...But they just jumped to conclusions, "oh, she's not getting enough sleep. Or she's always hungry or she's always sleepy." "Okay, this is why she's always sleepy. This is why she was hungry yesterday." That's the only thing I don't like (Melisenda, 26/3/2011).

It is not clear whether the comments school personnel were making were connected with her Latina background. However, Melisenda felt that school personnel were unnecessarily concentrating their concerns on her daughter's behaviours. She further stated that she was frustrated with having to disclose everything, including her iron deficiency, as educators made comments on her report card that included "feeling sleepy" and "always being hungry."

5.4 "Disabling" of students

Educators also discussed how deficits are interpreted as something internal to the child and the family, as opposed to discussing larger systemic issues that contribute to deficits and failures. Many educators commented on a system that Jocelyn referred to as one that has "disabled" students or acted as a glass ceiling. She refers to this "disabling" as a system that has created a learned helplessness by continuously limiting opportunities and thereby creating a cyclical process and conditioning of lower student and teacher expectations. Donovan and Cross (2002) describe a similar paradox in the United States: a student must be identified with a

designation in order to receive services, but with this identification come lower expectations for student and the educators.

Jocelyn argued that during her seven years in the system, she has seen that special education has been set up in a way that Foucault (1973) describes as ranking of students. She also describes a system that is based on professionals who feel that they know best:

> I think the kids are segregated and they are disabled by being in those programs. Because I think the underlying assumption is that they can't learn like the mainstream kids, they're in special education classes because they can't achieve. That's my belief for the kids that are totally stuck in special ed There are other kids that aren't stuck in special ed, they just get extra support, that's a different matter. I think these kids end up getting more help but I think that those kids that get more help, that aren't stuck in special ed, are the White middle-class kids (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

Jocelyn described a two-tier system, one for racialized students and another for White, middle-class students. White students who are placed into special education receive additional consideration, benefits, and privileges, while minoritized groups face lower expectations and can only learn through segregation. She described how in the first week of school "richer White families" advocate on behalf of their child to get extra support and programming that will allow their child to excel. She believes there is a disconnect between the theoretical approach to special education and the actual practices of special education. In other words, it is set up to meet the "weaknesses" or "needs" of a student, but has essentially not functioned in this way.

Three of the five educators discussed the need for examining practices, the educator's position, and institutions taking greater responsibility. These ideas are not new, yet they are not beliefs commonly held by administrative bodies. On the other hand, some educators interviewed discussed a desire to remove or push-out particular students from the classroom through special education if they were not comfortable dealing with the student's needs.

Nikki spoke of some internal pressure she faces from other educators who have attempted to force a designation or removal of a student:

> Jagjeet: Why do you think some people respond [to special education and placement] one way and others respond differently?

> Nikki: Media, what they hear in the pipeline— you know, being identified is not a good thing. It's look upon negatively. You hear that, you know a lot of students of colour identified quicker than others. And it just comes to a negative connotation and it happens. If the student is not doing well, the first thing is, "oh, there must be something wrong, there must be an LD." You know, it's just easier to have them identified and put them in a special classes. So, it's easy for the teacher to get rid of. Very often I hear teachers say, "Can't you just take that student?" *'Can't you just take that student?'* [emphasis by participant]

> Jagjeet: Really?

> Nikki: Oh yeah, absolutely! Absolutely! It's very hurtful (16/9/2010).

It was interesting to note the shift in how Nikki responded to issues in special education, from the perspective of parents to other educators. Learning disabilities at her school are problems that educators do not want to address in the classroom. Yet, these findings do not appear to be new in the field of education. Ysseldyke et al. (1983) found that students who are a "bother" are more likely to be referred for special education. One must consider then how families are receiving these messages. Nikki discussed the stigma attached to labelling and using labels as a means to "deal" with students who do not fit within the prescribed norms. Thus, special education resource teachers are left to advocate on behalf of the students who are being pressured into testing and placement.

As an administrator, Kulvir has also seen much of what Nikki discussed. Kulvir argues that because of cultural gaps, a lack of understanding, and stereotypical beliefs about particular groups, much of her role is to raise questions and to debunk educators' misunderstandings:

…but sometimes we say "the child isn't performing because this isn't happening at home." You know, we will hear those comments. So, our conversation is, whenever those children are brought up to [a committee meeting] they are conversations that say "what do you know about the family?" How much do you know about the family? Have you had those conversations with parents and say "this is how I can help you?" How we can help your child move forward, but how can you be a big part of your child's life (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

Educators are profoundly aware of the power they possess. Foucault (2004) stipulates that power is linked to a number of events: "Knowledge appears to be profoundly linked to a whole series of power effects" (p. 128). Power in schools takes many different forms. Jocelyn argued that parents internalize the messages and information from educators; parents believe that their child is "disabled" and they are reacting to these deficits in a negative manner:

I've dealt with a lot of parents who truly believe that their kids are disabled. And when I talk to the kids, the kids are devastated that they are being categorized as disabled…But, it's like this split that the parents somehow see it as a, I don't know, an explanation for something? But I don't know, some of the parents don't believe in it. Umm, I am always interested to see that some parents really and truly do buy into it (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

On the one hand, some parents in this investigation discussed years of resisting labels, yet Jocelyn has seen that some parents truly believe that identifications handed down by school officials mean that their child cannot learn. According to Jocelyn, some parents' only understand the identification through a deficit lens because a number of paraprofessionals and instruments must provide an accurate measure. Only one side of the picture is presented by psychologists, school administrators, and "the experts:"

And the psychologists are the experts. Both groups of people are there, advocating that their child should go under special education and get more help (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

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Jocelyn points out that educators and professionals present the 'overwhelming evidence' and documentation to support their decision, while parents are not asked to prepare or contribute to the evaluations.

As Nikki and other educators noted, they believe their role is to address practices which they felt disadvantaged the teaching profession, but also worked as a glass ceiling to limit the abilities of particular bodies. As Nikki repeatedly indicated, teachers who are getting into teaching through special education are determinately affecting the students they interact with and students internalize the educators' intentions, biases, perceptions, and feelings towards particular groups. Educators who are gaining their initial teaching experience through special education do not necessarily have a strong understanding of what the function of special education is, nor do they understand how cultural nuances may result in a placement and stigmatization:

> Teachers, I think we impact students so much. We impact them, and we change them, their whole life and there needs to be more accountability. You know, I have only been teaching for 7 years, it's a second career change, and I have gone in there and seen shocks. And I'm not happy with what I see as well. There are teachers there just for the sake of being there, and I think it's wrong (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

As Jocelyn, Kulvir, and Alicya suggested, there are indications that educators lack the racial awareness to understand that labelling is detrimental and should not be used as a tool for exclusion. Educators pointed to the need for effective practices, particularly for those teachers caring for in the care of vulnerable students, such as those with an identification. Many advocated for the need to have every administrator, who ultimately regulates and controls the final decisions surrounding placement and identification, to have the proper training and experience in special education.

5.5 Special education as stigmatizing

Particular communities distrust educators and the role of testing which leads families to resist interventions. There has been a perception in some communities that special education will cause a further stigma and a perception that a student identified for special education is inferior. Nikki compared the resistance and negative perceptions of testing in the Vietnamese and Black communities: she noted that in these communities parents felt as if they are being targeted based on particular characteristics that Nikki believes leads to the identification.

Haweeya's family echoed much of the resistance felt amongst the Somali community regarding issues of special education. The Somali community has been reported as having the highest dropout rates in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). On March 25th 2011, members of the Somali community coordinated a meeting with Dr. Chris Spence, Director of Education of the TDSB and Jim Spyropolos, Co-ordinating Superintendent of Inclusive Schools: Student, Parents and Community at West Humber Collegiate. Attendees included representatives from Pathways to Education, Somali Youth Association of Toronto, as well as elders, educators, community workers, and community activists, who pointed out that Somali students were being unduly disciplined and suspended. Participants in the meeting also noted that Somali students were spending a lot of classroom instruction time in the hallways or bathrooms to avoid the classroom and educators. A common thread amongst the conversations was that Somali students were disengaged and there was sense of distrust and lack of faith in the TDSB in serving the needs of the Somali community. Many parents, elders, and community members commented that, not only are school personnel ill-equipped to deal with the needs of student, but there has been very little to address the ongoing concerns of high dropout rates and the lack of administrators and educators that represent the Somali community. Accordingly, this lack of

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diversity poses language, cultural, religious, and ethnic barriers, and causes parents to feel as though they have no one with whom to discuss their concerns.

Equality, the notion of not being treated the same, having to prove their self-worth, and not being challenged were some of the themes that emerged amongst the student participants. Students often revealed that attending the resource room was "voluntary" and many times they only made use of the resource room, when they were encouraged to by an educator or parent. When prompted to reveal why they attended the resource room on a volunteer basis, they revealed that there was a shame and stigma attached to leaving the classroom to ask for assistance in the resource centre or to ask for assistance from a resource teacher. The stigma associated with using the resource room also affected how students felt about special education. Students stated that they felt the work was "easier" in special education and their work was intentionally limited so that they were not challenged. Both Melisenda and Annette felt that their children were not being challenged, nor given any homework. In other words, it appears that there are predetermined notions about the student's abilities and these ideas linger throughout the student's schooling.

The stigma identified by students was also related to educators who made demeaning and inappropriate remarks, which perhaps filtered down to students who internalized and reflected the same perceptions. Throughout the interview, James, a Black high school student, discussed the stigma or embarrassment he associates with the resource centre or special education and the designation he has been given. His mother also discussed how James was not using special education services as much as he could, perhaps indicating his embarrassment was restricting him from taking advantage of the services available to him. James mentioned that he found special education was related to a visible marker of difference and inferiority:

James: 'Cause…like…it's sort of embarrassing I think...like if you go there other people will think things of you, they'll think you're not that smart and...why are you doing this when you could be going somewhere else, and hanging out with your friends and stuff?

Jagjeet: How does that make you feel?

James: It's kind of embarrassing (20/9/2010).

Aziza made similar arguments to James. She suggested that special education is for "troubled kids" and "people that cannot learn at the same pace as other people" when she was asked to distinguish regular classrooms with special education classrooms. It is not clear how and from where these ideas were generated, but it is evident that administrators and educators have not countered the myths surrounding special education, nor have they incorporated different ways of learning.

Haweeya further recognized that because of the stigma of special education, her family has expressed a great deal of resistance to her daughter's identification:

Well, I put her in and then all my family reject it. They don't want me to put her there. Whether to see to make any try for a couple of years or long time. They didn't want it. Every time they were saying that "why would you agree whatever they say this?" And for me, I said "no, maybe my daughter, she does need that. I don't know because God does not create everybody equal", you know? (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

The shame of special education was evident in the issues discussed with parents and students, but it is unclear how students have normalized their understanding of who is an insider and who is an outsider in terms of diversity and different learning styles. In other words, how or why they have conceptualized special education as something to be shamed and stigmatizing was not readily discussed, but an issue that educators clearly need to address in classrooms.

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Nikki also pointed out the embarrassment students expressed to her. She noted that students typically do not want to be pulled out for testing, as peers often recognize when a student is being tested for a learning disability.

> There are students that don't want to be pulled out of class. They will take time off school—they really don't want to be tested. Because they understand, they are "dumb," right? They know that the [special education] teacher "oh you only go to the [special education] teacher because you are dumb." But, it totally depends on the school (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

Educators described that those administrators that were able to simplify the process and establish a rapport with the student were able to build trust. Similarly, some teachers took it upon themselves to build a relationship in order to reduce the pressure and negative connotations related to special education. In addition to the sigma experienced by students, Nikki also discussed many communities who were concerned about the stigma related to special education:

> Nikki: The Vietnamese community I am seeing, just has this, they have started to put up a wall against particular teachers. They don't want their child identified because it's a stigma. It definitely depends on the community we are talking about.

> Jagjeet: Okay. And why do you think there is a stigma?

> Nikki: (Pause) (Laughs)Well, who wants their child to be identified with a learning disability? Like, no one wants their child to be (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

Nikki further described that in high school, it is students who pressure their parents into removing the identification. She contends that often the ridicule students experience is too great for them to handle, and they will avoid this at all costs. At times, Nikki had positive comments about the usefulness of special education, but continued to describe a dual understanding about the "unavoidable usefulness" of special education. She argued that students voice not wanting to be associated with the stigma, but in particular cases, the placement is needed.

On one hand, parents and students suggested that special education was stigmatizing, but in some cases, they also identified the one-on-one support as a good thing, since their child was not able to receive individualized support in regular classes. Clairice described the support her son Terrance received, with the caveat that it was not necessarily a positive reinforcement:

> For the first years of it, they just wanted to assess to see where the problem was. But, at the same time, instead of giving him the opportunity to be in regular class, they tend to pull him out and put him into the special education class. I know it's a positive, in a sense that he gets the one-on-one help. But, at the same time, they didn't give him a chance to prove that he could be himself (Clairice, 27/3/2011).

In Clairice's case, there were instances where she felt that it was a great opportunity for Terrance to get assistance, but she questioned the long-term implications of receiving short-term assistance.

5.6   Self-esteem of students

In relation to the stigma, students expressed lowered self-esteem, anger, exclusion, inferiority, and lower expectations. Students were visibly upset and embarrassed, and they described how they did not feel as smart as their peers. They described a lack of hope and described feelings of being confined to an identification. As noted in the exchange above, James recounted how he does not feel as smart as his peers and believes that being in a resource room is extremely stigmatizing. James described how he does not want to be the object of gaze and how he was questioned by his peers if he decided to use the special education resource room. James further discussed that he knows that he needs the programming, because he believes that he is "not as smart." When further questioned, he indicated that his thinking about special education has changed and that it does not necessarily mean that he is "stupid," but that he thinks differently. James indicated he did not always think this way; his elementary teacher referred to special education students as "speds," a derogatory and demeaning way to refer to special

education students. Consequently, his perception of special education, as understood by his educator, made him feel as though all special education students were unintelligent and unable to learn.

As Balvir recalled his experiences, his anger and frustration was apparent to me and his mother. I could not help but notice his body language, his tone of disappointment, and perhaps embarrassment and uneasiness. He shifted a few times during the interview, clenched his fists, and his tone conveyed anger. Yet, he felt compassion for the peers he had left behind. He described his special education experience as feeling as though he was under surveillance:

> It makes me upset to see kids getting treated that way. Because, we are in Canada and it's about—we should be equal as a school to let those kids do what they want and be in an environment that's not choking them and making them feel like they are under a microscope, 24/7 for the rest of their life. … I felt like that. I felt like I was put into a closed spot and just watched. And I got sick of it! (Balvir, 26/9/2010).

As a second generation immigrant, he equated Canada to ideals of justice and fairness, yet his experiences were anything but equitable. Balvir further described the disparities between the program he is in now and the program he was placed into for a number of years before a community advocate encouraged his re-testing and current placement:

> I got to hang out with friends more like me. Kids that I could feel like I could relate to. I was challenged more, I was—I felt more willing and excited to go to school. When I was in a life skills program, I didn't feel like going to school 'cause I felt like I was in prison. I felt like I was an animal in a zoo being watched, being caged off from the world (Balvir, 26/9/2010).

Balvir's isolation had turned into what he described as being an object to be gazed at. He equated special education programs, in particular the program that he was in, with being dehumanized. Indeed, he felt him more like an inanimate object rather than a person who should be recognized

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as a fully functioning. He discussed a turning point when he was removed from a segregated setting and put into an integrated school where he felt like there was what he called "hope:"

> There was no hope [in life skills]. [University or college] would never happen. Now that I am in this program I feel that I actually have somewhere to go. And I feel that these kids need this too. They need to [be] given this opportunity to prove that they can better themselves in the new world, rather than just being cut off and isolated (Balvir, 26/9/2010).

As recalled from his experiences, special education was associated with isolation and a lack of opportunity. Jasmeet also discussed feeling "unwanted" and feeling as though "no one paid a lot of attention" to him. Jasmeet's mother, Sukhjeet recalled instances where her son would breakdown, cry and tell his parents that he just did not understand the material "I don't know what I'm doing" and "I'm stupid." An on-going theme emerged that students in special education are not challenged to excel in school and they feel there is little hope of going beyond their prescribed status. Ronell appeared to internalize why students, such as himself, get placed into special education, indicating that "kids with lower grades get placed in" special education. It appears that lower grades necessitates an identification and is a reflection of abilities.

Dominique also discussed the idea of her son being under constant surveillance by school personnel looking for opportunities for Andre to get in trouble or only focusing on negative incidents involving her son. She further argued that she only really heard from the school when it was "bad news" or when the school focused on particular "deviant" behaviours:

> I complained that sometimes I only hear from them when it's bad news. ... He's not the one always in trouble, but he's around the trouble. So, they are always telling me that. "Oh, Andre isn't the one who did it, but…." That's how the conversation goes. So, they are watching him. They are like, always like, just waiting for him to go the wrong way. That's how I feel. So, even [with you] coming here today, I was like, "okay, what can I do to get my son out of this situation?" (Dominique, 15/9/2010).

Dominique believes that the administrators and educators are targeting him because of his racial background and she is unsure how to persuade educators that her son is not affiliated with the students who are causing problems. In other words, she wants her son to be recognized as an individual, with distinct characteristics and abilities. She further commented that she feels as if she had little choices related to Andre's placement and identification. Rather she described feeling trapped by the decisions.

In Aziza's interview, she was hearing about the experiences her mother went through for the first time. She was asked to recall her experiences with the hospital or any other academic tests, and she had no recollection of the tests or placement:

Aziza: This is the first time I am hearing it from my mom. I never knew.

Jagjeet: You never knew?

Aziza: No.

Jagjeet: How is that to hear?

Aziza: Very sad (26/3/2011).

Listening to the experiences her mother had gone through and trying to understand the various assessments conducted at the hospital, while watching her mother become very emotional at various points throughout the interview, were difficult for Aziza. Her younger sister (in grade one), who interrupted the interview at various times, also stopped to hug her mother when she saw that she was emotional. In Terrance's situation, he believed that he was identified because he was not finishing his "work on time" and he had "trouble doing it." In contrast, it was interesting to note that Melisenda, a Latina mother, was led to believe that the learning disability designation was beneficial. She felt that after hearing a guest lecturer at her college, she got the impression that there were more opportunities for "labelled" people. "It's good if you are

labelled, you are able to get more opportunities later. They give you chances" (Melisenda, 26/3/2011).Whatever their perceptions of why they were identified, students do not have positive images of schooling and only expressed their deficiencies.

5.7   Not being challenged

Aziza discussed special education as differing from regular classrooms because there were "less students" and "less homework." She further made the distinction that students in regular classes were challenged more and that "they have more homework," had "harder classes," but that she receives "extra attention." Aziza had a strong opposition to her marginalization/exclusion by stating that "I don't like it at all" as she described wanting to be integrated into regular classes. Her mother, Haweeya, also echoed the same concerns, over the lack of homework that her daughter had been given, but little has been done to remedy the situation:

> …they don't give them a lot of homework because they say that they cannot handle it. All the time, they say they can't handle it, that's why we don't give them a lot of homework. Not even one hour. When I ask, I want her to have homework, even one hour, at least, don't leave them without work. If the others cannot do it, I want my daughter to be able to do it and try it. And they-they-they did send a couple of times, after that, they not send it (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

Aziza was identified for special education in senior kindergarten and the designation followed her until the last year of high school. Haweeya contended that her daughter was never really given a chance to prove her academic abilities. Andre also identified feeling as though the work was "too easy" and it did not make him feel good. He stated that he wanted challenging work: "I'd rather do the harder work and at least try and succeed or fail rather than not try at all, than do easy work." Yet, he attributed being given an IEP to his "laziness" and not wanting to do the work.

Many parents also echoed feelings that their child was not being challenged by the curriculum or educators, as much as their peers would have been, as the result of a glass ceiling or preconceived perceptions of their child's abilities. In Aziza's case, Haweeya was not only silenced, but she felt that school officials did only minor things to appease to her. She felt pressured to accept a decision early on in her daughter's schooling and was not given another alternative. Haweeya also felt that she was being rendered voiceless or that her concerns were of little or no importance to school officials. She further maintained that educators often appeal to parent's by appearing to be supportive in an effort to ensure good relations, but that this is a façade:

> But, when I go for the meeting and stuff, they treat of course better. And they speak to us is better. They don't show us, even if they have something in their mind or heart, they don't show it because they don't want us to take the kids and have lower numbers (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

Haweeya suggested a number of times in the interview that there are quotas in special education and that educators will say or do things in order to retain the numbers rather than addressing any legitimate concerns a parent may have. When I asked Haweeya about her feelings about special education, she stated that she found it problematic and was not sure about the usefulness of this particular programming:

> Well, I don't know if the kids need it to be there. And the thing they are promising to work on this area to have opportunity like the other …And I don't know how they are marking these things but, that's what they want always. Like, the School Trustee who retired, sat in a meeting with, my [other] daughter, she go to French Immersion, he was telling me, all this—what they did from back then until now is waste. Because, they label the children and they put them in one place that loses their identity, their dignity, loses everything because this thing is like a stigma. That's why a lot of parents, they don't agree to go into right away. Because they just put them in one room and they cannot support themselves outside. But, if you let—give them a chance to be with others, and to have one on one help, whatever extra they need, it's okay then they will focus on and they will function like the others. But they not giving that chance (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

Based on a conversation she had with a School Board trustee, Haweeya believes that her daughter was not given the opportunity to integrate within a regular setting and that it has affected her morale, dignity, and identity. She believes that integration and inclusion was the best option; however, her daughter was never given that opportunity. Assessments and identifications appear to be largely based on the educator's perceptions of programming and how the parents are constructed by school officials. Majhanovich and Majhanovich (1993) note that assessments are used to justify placements, yet they are established without an understanding of the cultural and linguistic barriers that exist.

In a parallel argument, Kulvir believes that parents should be involved in the identification and placement process in a meaningful way. She argues that the response parents and students have to assessments depends largely on the perceptions educators have of the identification process and what they believe should occur. She consistently suggested that the purpose of the identification process is not to remedy a "deficit", but to assess what other tools can be used to address gaps in a student's learning:

> If we approach the student where at the end of it…we want to give you a label, students have a different reaction to it. But if children are given some self-advocacy in it, saying why we are doing the assessment, their part of the process, you know, where we are heading with this assessment, and what happens, and what are your strengths and what are your weaknesses, children tend to be much more receptive to it (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

Kulvir further argued that students need to be aware of their strengths and not just their weaknesses through a deficit lens. During the assessment process, a student's self-worth is overtly and covertly discussed by the educator who addresses both the learner's strengths and weaknesses. Accordingly, she believes both parents and students should play a role in the assessment in order to understand the purpose and process. Educators who are motivated to do

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more than just diagnose a failure or "deficit" arguably build better rapport with parents and students. However, not all educators and administrators interviewed in this study argued for self-advocacy.

Kiranjeet also discussed how not being challenged in the environment has left a mark on Balvir's identity and self-esteem. She described him as not being open in conversations. She further felt that she does not know what he must have experienced, year after year, in a school where he was not challenged and surrounded by students with basic life skills:

> …Year to year, seeing my son go through a class full of wheelchairs, people with you know—I don't know how he spent school years. It was supposed to be fun learning, laughing, joking—it was not that kind of experience for [Balvir]…grade one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, that many years in life skills class and that's where he picked up on talking back to teachers. He was not interested in doing the same thing every day in the class (Kiranjeet, 26/9/2010).

Knowing that her son was not learning much in his current school, she stated that her husband would often spend time working with him on math skills at home. As mothers and students recalled, there was little opportunity to prove that students could succeed with the normal curriculum.

This chapter examines the various themes identified by educators, parents, and students through the lens of counter-storytelling. The themes that emerged from the discussions included overrepresentation based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status, the incorrect identification of students in special education, and how ESL students have become synonymous with disability. Participants also discussed medication to address learning disabilities, and the issues of stigma and self-esteem students were dealing with as a result of their placement in special education.

Chapter Six will focus on the nature of the language used for identifications and the process of placing a student in special education. In interviews, both families and educators noted that parents are a voiceless minority in the face of the policies and practices that affect them. The issues of consent, testing, the appeal process, and the "privileges" or rewards associated with particular learning disabilities are discussed. Finally, parental involvement in the assessment process is analyzed.

CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH FINDINGS II - UNDERSTANDING SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

While *Chapter Five* examined the patterns families and educators noticed in the process of identifying exceptionalities. *Chapter Six* analyses problems and perceptions families and educators have with the policies and practices of special education assessments and identification. This chapter highlights the ways in which some families expressed being voiceless in the process. Participants noted that the language used by educators, formal documents given to families, policies, and the consent and appeal process are not always transparent and clear. The use of academic tests and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO assessments) were also recognized as problematic. Furthermore, the privileges and rewards associated with particular learning disabilities were discussed. Finally, parental involvement in the identification process is highlighted and framed in relation to their children's schooling.

6.1   Parents a voiceless minority?: Feelings of guilt, shame, and being muted

The last chapter examined issues of over-identification and inappropriate labelling in special education. This section explores what it means to be silenced, as discussed by mothers, students, and educators. While it was not the original intent to focus on the discrimination and demarcation of religious articles, this was a theme that emerged from discussions with two of the families, as something they had struggled with throughout the special education process. Many families described what appears to be a culture within schools of silencing parents who question the status quo or the special education procedures in place. Parents were made to feel as if they were brushed aside and their concerns were not legitimate. Some parents contended that, for a number of years, they simply were not heard until someone advocated on their behalf or until a drastic decision was made. In most cases, however, parents are still waiting to find an

administrator who would listen and take their concerns seriously. Some educators also believe that parents have no say in the identification process and that School Boards pass along a decision that had been made prior to parental consultation.

Kiranjeet was silenced for seven years before her son was finally re-tested; the testing only came about because of a community member advocating on the family's behalf. Through the years of being rendered voiceless, Kiranjeet's family made the painful decision to cut Balvir's hair and remove the *patka* (as discussed in *Chapter Five*) because they did not want their child to be further stigmatized. She stated that her son would arrive home from school with his hair re-done or the *patka* would be removed altogether. School officials said that Balvir was removing his own *patka* (behaviour that the family had not seen at home) instead of indicating that another child may have been responsible. Kiranjeet stated the following:

> … [my husband] was bothered a great deal by it. We all wanted him to be like that [with *patka*] and my husband was crying, crying, and very emotional. But, I was stronger because I knew what challenges he would face so…we had to give up what we believed in because of what he was going through. He had no choice. I wanted it to be as easy as possible for him (Kiranjeet, 26/9/2010).

This particular case reveals the implicit messages parents are given about their religious articles and the ascribed norms and values in the classroom. Many Sikhs face issues of assimilation within North American culture and many choose not to retain their turbans in order to assimilate into Western society. In fact, many Sikhs who first immigrated to British Columbia removed their turbans and cut their hair to mitigate against the ongoing discrimination and harassment they faced. Many Sikhs believed and continue to believe that they must accommodate Western norms and values in order to "fit in" (Bains & Johnston, 1995, see also Gill, 2007). Previous research on Sikh youth in the Greater Toronto Area showed that many youth still struggle with what religious articles they can use as they attempt to negotiate and fit

into Western norms (Gill, 2007). While Kiranjeet described how the religious symbol was removed to prevent any further harassment at school by his peers and educators, it was interesting to note that she did not explicitly name race or religion as contributing to her son's placement.

As a Somali student with clearly visible religious dress, the Hijab, Aziza also noted her attempts to negotiate school culture. When asked to describe her feelings around special education, Aziza described how she felt discriminated against through her Hijab and longing for integration:

> Because sometimes I don't like being the only Somali in class. And people always talk about this [points to Hijab]. Some teachers just like it, some kids, I feel like I am being picked on more (Aziza, 26/3/2011).

Aziza describes how the Hijab has made her feel excluded and has resulted in discrimination. James (2004) contends despite the numerous discussions and actions for integration in Canadian schools, religious markers of difference such as *kirpans* (Sikh dagger) and the Hijab are highly contested religious symbols that contravene with normative discourses. Pointing to cases where the Hijab was seen as a violation of the dress code in Québec and the suspension of a student, James (2004) further suggests that anti-racism education policy in Ontario is more of a multicultural policy. Haweeya also described how educators perceive the Hijab and how she felt about how her daughter was being treated:

> Umm, every school, at the beginning, she have hard time to adjust. And making fun of and making this thing and her Hijab was all time, making fun of… this school I find the teacher was discriminating. The others, it was the students, not the teachers (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

In both accounts from parent and student, it appears that religious symbols were attributed to discrimination and differential treatment. It is not clear whether race and ethnicity further added to their marginalization.

Haweeya expressed a number of times feeling silenced. She was given very few options in Aziza's education. It is not entirely clear whether there is a link between the identification for special education and her religious articles, but there was an indication from Aziza that she felt different because of her Hijab. The administrators and educators decided in senior kindergarten that they knew what was best in terms of placement of her daughter:

> They send me to a lot of tests in [local hospital]. She said, I am seeing this—it was senior- yeah, senior kindergarten. She say, it's up to you. It could involve a lot of psychological tests, doctors and those things. I said "No, why you see this right away?" She said "No, the way she's drawing, the way she is writing, the way, this and that." …She said, "otherwise, it would take you too long to get one later. If you leave this problem now, this class will fill, and you wouldn't be having space. You going to lose your spot. So, we are going to do it from now and then she will be in the right space and then she will come out of it right away, if we solve this problem at early age" (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

Despite her numerous objections to an early identification, Haweeya was told that the placement was temporary so that her daughter would be on the right track. I asked her what resources she received after the decision had been made and she recounted that she was not given any information or support. She emotionally relayed instances throughout her daughter's education where she was rendered voiceless and made to feel guilty. It appears that particular behaviours that were not considered the "norm" were relegated as requiring medical intervention.

Haweeya, like other parents such as Kiranjeet, reported feeling shame, guilt and were pressured into making decisions that they were not comfortable with. Parents were informed that "intervention is required now, or we will not be able to help your child later on." Haweeya

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repeatedly informed me that she was made to feel guilty, despite numerous attempts to remove

her child from special education:

> And she said "but I don't want you to lose your spot. I have to put you here
> because later on you going to regret it—there is a long waiting list for the special
> education class" (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

As a new immigrant to Canada, she was informed that this was the best course of action in order

to address/remedy the situation early on and to avoid "losing her space." Haweeya felt compelled

to make decisions on Aziza's placement or the school would not be able to offer any additional

support:

> They ask the parents "oh, you need support, the government closed down, that's
> not good for your kids, and your kids going to be lost, and your kids going to be
> dropout, your kids going to be destroyed, so you have to be support us, to be here
> for your children" (Haweeya, 26/3/2011).

In this particular part of our conversation, Haweeya expressed that what she felt was a one-way

street in terms of support; the school asked her to support their recommendation, but she did not

receive any reciprocal support from educators. She was assured that if her daughter's situation

was addressed promptly, her placement would be short-term or no more than two or three years

after which integration would be possible. It appears that, in cases of both Aziza and Balvir,

decisions were made in kindergarten and these choices dictated the remainder of their schooling.

Several families, including both Punjabi-Sikh families, conceded to the administrators

recommendations, yet they adamantly disagreed with the schools' decisions for many years,

Both South Asian parents noted that there was little access to recourses, support or advocacy, nor

was there any administrator or educator who had given them alternatives. Sukhjeet described a

culture of silencing parents who questioned the procedures in place. Parents were made to feel as

if their concerns were not legitimate and accordingly they felt brushed aside:

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> And they actually make you feel kind of stupid. That you really don't know what you are talking about. I was honestly made to feel guilty…I advised the team I met with, that my child was in the current situation because *they* [emphasis the participants] let him fall through the cracks. There was no one to blame but his educators and the school system. After all my persistence, they finally agreed to have him assessed in grade seven. Why did it take so long to get to this point? The board rep. advised me it was due to "under funding"…I said the only reason they had him assessed was because I harassed them on a weekly basis! What about all the other poor parents, who don't speak English, or don't have the time or resources to come in to the school or call the school to find out about their children's education? (Sukhjeet, 04/12/2010).

As Sukhjeet's story highlights, there is a clear hierarchy of authority as it concerns the development and progress of students. Families are often explicitly and implicitly told that their views and opinions do not have the same validity or authority as the opinions expressed by educators and professionals.

The guilt and shame parents feel may be attributed to the ongoing messages administrators and educators send to parents. Stacey, an administrator of 13 years, revealed that at her school, parents whose children are identified with a learning disability are often told by administrators and educators to avoid going to the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) meetings and that there attendance at subsequent placement meetings is not needed. According to Stacey, the messages parents receive in high school are in fact overwhelmingly negative. I asked her what role parents have in their child's assessment. She informed me that compared to elementary schools parents become complacent about the decisions by the time their child reaches high school:

> And in a lot of cases we say to the parents "don't bother coming the IPRC," this is what we are saying, "if you want to come, you are welcome to come. However, this is all that is going to be said." And they don't do it because the decisions have already been made prior to getting there. Whereas in the elementary school, they don't understand the process, they don't understand the decisions and they actually foolishly believe that they have a say in the matter (Stacey, 16/9/2010).

In this narrative, it is not clear whether racialized/minoritized parents are doubly marginalized or rendered voiceless yet it is noteworthy that as an administrator, Stacey believes that parents are "foolish" if they think that their views, beliefs, and accounts would be recognized by the school. Stacey's 13 years of experience give her a great deal of insight into the consultation phases with school officials. Stacey pointed out that once administrators and educators have made a decision, they will do everything in their power to convince the parents that the decision is in the student's best interests. Recalling her experiences, she argued that families are often convinced that they will dictate how and what should occur, but it is the school who decides. As noted above, Stacey further stipulated that by the time the child enters high school parental involvement in decisions dramatically decreases. This account is troubling and clearly outlines how parents are perceived by the school, and in many cases how decisions are already made prior to parents' fully informed consent. The complacency families may be feeling may be the result of years of being silenced.

Kulvir indicated that in many cases, parents have been left "in the dark," and on account of her experiences with the disproportionate numbers of racialized bodies in special education, she believes that she needs to re-assure parents that their child is not being "targeted":

> I can honestly say that I have had a few situations where parents have been left in the dark on situations. And the only time they really found out what was really happening, was when the child ended up in a contained class. So, then trying to backtrack and help them through that, it takes a long time. And a lot of trust has been lost in those situations as well. I think teachers and administrators are realizing that the parents need to be more involved. And just labelling them is not going to solve the problem (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

In this narrative, it is important to note that the use of labels to remedy a situation is a common trend discussed by educators. In particular situations, they felt that some families have a complete lack of trust with the system, as there is a disconnect between the information

communicated to parents and what is occurring in schools. Kulvir places the onus on principals

for setting the culture and tone of what is communicated to families by the school.

Acknowledging the lack of agency, Nikki also identified that while parents are given an

opportunity to sit in at placement meetings at her school, not all parents are informed of their

rights. She elaborated by noting the tone is set long before a parent enters the meeting:

> Parents are intimidated. And the language that they use, they don't know what's
> going on and umm, they just say, they will have the sharing of the psy [test]. And
> they will say "it's just a formality, you don't have to be there." I have heard and I
> have seen it (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

Nikki, Stacey, and Kulvir confirmed what parents have suggested in this investigation: families

are often uninformed or "left in the dark" about decisions related to the placement and

identification of their children and they are discouraged from being active members in the

process. Educators may not be filling in all the gaps which greatly impact the information that is

received.

Stacey further cautioned that if a parent outright rejects an identification, they are

ultimately made to feel culpable and responsible for the consequences. Stacy was not reluctant to

share her views on placing the responsibility on parents:

> If they won't allow them to be special ed., what we say to them is "that's fine, you
> are not special ed, don't come crying to us when the kid has problems, because
> you will have to go through the whole process again and it will take a year for the
> child to be identified again."   We are not going to be able to provide support, if
> the child is not identified (Stacey, 16/9/2010).

Since parents are given messages that make them feel as if they will be isolated and responsible

for their child's failure, it is understandable to see why parents are compelled to make decisions

with which they are uncomfortable. It is interesting to note Stacey's tone in the interview; as a

White administrator, I believe she was aware of the influence she had over the decisions, which

she often believed were in the best interests of families. Parental participation, while a critical part of many School Board's mandates, is often relegated to scheduled parent-teacher interviews. As the TDSB Parent Census Survey reveals, the questions posed to parents regarding their participation in the school asked if they: "Attend parent-teacher interviews"; "Speak with child's teachers"; "Attend meetings and events at this school"; and "Volunteer at this school" (O'Reilly & Yau, 2009, p. 42). The results indicate that from junior kindergarten to the Secondary level, participation drops more than 50 percent for each of the categories above (O'Reilly & Yau, 2009).

Parents repeatedly indicated that they are not given options that they are comfortable with. Haweeya, expressed the helplessness and lack of options she was given. She felt pressured to accept the identification and muddled through her daughter's schooling feeling at a loss to determine how to move forward. She was repeatedly told that her daughter could not handle the workload of the regular curriculum, but Haweeya believes that her daughter was never given the opportunity to prove herself:

> And the homework was overwhelming and then she liked all the time to go to the bathroom because she don't want to do work. And I said I still want to try. And the fourth one, they went to the [school]. They have big classes, and they would be in regular classes... She was attending those and then after that they said we recommend you go to [this school], that's your next step. And that all have smaller classes, and she would be focus more and there are two teachers all the time. And not more than 13 students in class, so they could handle it. And when I went to [another school], the principal, the first meeting I went to and I asked "how are my daughters going to be here because I have a tax-free savings account for the children, I want my daughter to attend university, I don't want her like this. If it's not college, if it's not university." [starts crying]. And he said "yeah, yeah, she could. I have not seen anyone in university but they go to college" and she could attend both ways. But the time she finishes here, her reading was at level six. Grade six level…But, I find that everything is the same. [Crying more]. That's what made me so angry.
> (PAUSE).

Jagjeet: You look very upset.

Haweeya: Umm, hmm. All this time, nothing I accomplished. And I label my daughter this way because I see some other refuses and I was afraid she is going to be dropout if I keep her in a larger group. And for keeping her here too, she's not with the others. And I don't know if I be able ever to have further education. So, that's what makes me so upset [crying] (26/3/2011).

The frustration in Haweeya's words and the occasional crying during the interview is indicative of the constant push and pull she was feeling as Aziza was referred to various school and from school to school. It is not clear whether her Hijab further demarcated her, yet there is evidence to suggest that school officials did not clearly present all the information to her. Rather than addressing Haweeya's concerns, her daughter was ultimately limited in her opportunities throughout her schooling. It appears that none of the educators recognized how to remedy the situation.

The narratives of parents indicating that they feel voiceless is similar to Jocelyn's understanding that only middle and upper-class families appear to be able to voice their concerns. She states, "maybe [it's] because they've learned over time that it's not very helpful to go into the schools." That is to say, the experience of minoritized families dictates that their voices will not be heard since their ethnicities and identities are not represented among school educators and officials.

When asked whether they felt that they were being heard by educators, parents overwhelmingly responded in the negative. Annette felt that her daughter Gabriella was in an environment where the residual effects of the label has made indifferent to her schooling. Annette expressed that her daughter that never receives homework and remains unchallenged. Haweeya, a Somali parent, initially hesitated to tell me that teachers were listening to what she had to say, but in the next sentence, indicated that educators usually have their own views and

conceptions that differ from her views as a parent. Sukhjeet, argued for advocacy on behalf of

the parents to counter what appears to be misinformation about services and special education

programming. Both Sukhjeet and Haweeya expressed that they had lost faith in the public school

system. Sukhjeet discussed her desire to inform administrators that the experiences that her son

went through may in fact be a systemic issue and a problem that requires the attention of

politicians and other administrators in order for change to occur:

> I contemplated going to higher levels in the [Region] Board and the School
> Trustee and my MP with [Jasmeet's] story… I hope your research opens up the
> closed eyes of the School Boards and that many families are provided with the
> information they need to get their children back on track (Sukhjeet, 04/12/2010).

When parents decided to withdraw their child from special education programming,

many parents were advised that it was in their child's best interests to reconsider their decision

for withdrawal or they would be culpable for their child's lack of progress. Sukhjeet described

her son Jasmeet as being stressed-out. She stated that her goal was to make him comfortable and

confident in this abilities, as opposed to "coming home crying every day because he's

struggling." Under the mantra of extra help, Sukhjeet was also informed of the "consequences"

of a removal:

> I was also made to feel guilty if I wanted him removed from the ESL program. I
> was told that he was getting "extra one-on-one help" with a special teacher that he
> would no longer be eligible for if I removed him (Sukhjeet, 04/12/2010).

Both Sukhjeet and Haweeya had discussed feeling limited in the options they were given by the

School Boards. In Sukhjeet and Kiranjeet's cases, both mothers had to fight for a number of

years before finally having their sons tested and the designation removed.

Haweeya confided that she was frustrated with the special education process; she was

told to sign various documents every year, and her daughter was excluded from the standardized

tests. Haweeya now believes that her daughter will not go onto to post-secondary education

because the latest news from the school is that her daughter is not at an appropriate grade level:

> Jagjeet: What do you think your child might do when s/he finishes school?
>
> Haweeya: She want to do medical secretary. She want to work in a bank or anything, those easy jobs, she like. She love to talk on the phone, so.
>
> Jagjeet: Did you think the same thing when she was younger?
>
> Haweeya: No, I want her to do better than that. I want her to do more things than that. You know, that would bring more income for her.
>
> Jagjeet: So, why have your expectations changed?
>
> Haweeya: Because they didn't teach her enough now. They didn't prepare her for that. [Crying and emotional] So, what can we do? (26/3/2011).

Haweeya was one of the few mothers whose expectations had changed for her daughter because

she believes that the school system failed. She had come to the realization that post-secondary

education was not possible despite what she was led to believe by school personnel that her

daughter would be integrated into regular schooling and that college or university was possible.

From what this family understands, Aziza was never tested further and was streamed into a lower

level where her opportunities were limited. Early in the interview, Haweeya stated that "So, they

always want the child to stay in that level and to be there." Many parents also discussed a lack of

faith and trust of educators and administrators who they believed had "failed" their child.

While the parents discussed their feelings of being disconnected from the process,

educators discussed the responsibilities of administrators. Kulvir believes that her role as an

administrator is to prevent any "surprises" from occurring, and ensuring that families are not

caught unaware. She believes these gaps cause distrust, leaving families vulnerable,

uncomfortable, unsure, and unclear as to the best placement for their child:

> If all the meetings before hand had occurred, there are not going to be any surprises. If a lot of things have had holes in it, then the information—and I have been in situations where the information given at an IPRC is occurring when it should have occurred way before the placement committee met. You know, that's at the Board level, as well as at the school. So, a parent should not be coming into a surprise (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

As a South Asian educator and administrator, Kulvir understands how parents often become defensive and apprehensive when it feels as if the decisions are made prior and/or without their full and informed consent. However, she notes the amount of information relayed to parents has increased over the last five years. Throughout my interview with Kulvir, she discussed step-by-step what typical processes are in place at the school level. While standard procedures are in place, there is some evidence that full and informed consent is not occurring and that there are gaps in the communication to parents. I further questioned whether the process always occurs as she outlined, and she stated that there appeared to be many variables that affect the procedure, including language and whether or not the parents were informed citizens.

Stacey argued that parents can only become strong advocates if they conduct their own research on practices and policies in order to learn how to argue on behalf of their child. She has seen cases where parents are not given the right information or have been complacent in accepting decisions since they did not know the other options available. She also reported being aware of very few cases in which parents were able to advocate on their own. She emphasised that parents were being "bullied by the School Board" in order to accept "predetermined" decisions. She noted that affluent parents have more pull. On the other hand, she has seen cases where parents have "misguided advocacy" and have pushed their child into advanced programming that they cannot handle. It is important to note that Stacey mentioned a single case of "misguidance" where a parent was able to push away from a decision made by the school.

None of the other educators noted situations where they felt families had incorrectly removed a student from a placement that the educators believed was accurate.

Bullying, complacency, and being unable to advocate are indicative of the experiences of parents, as recalled by both educators and parents. Being rendered unheard or voiceless may be related to language, inexperience with the education system, and the lack of advocates and resources allocated to parents who are facing such difficult situations.

6.2 The barriers of jargon and specialized language

Next, I will turn to the academic jargon and the language prevalent within the Ontario Ministry guidelines and practices which were raised as concerns by both parents and educators. Language used to describe programming is problematic for families and students when it is not clear what or how the program may affect post-secondary opportunities. Immigrant families may be doubly marginalized by the academic language and documentations due to the use of jargon that is not easily translatable. One educator described that the academic language, terms, and implications are not adequately described by the school interpreter, who is typically not trained in education.

At a Somali Education Conference held on December 2nd, 2010 at York University's Student Centre, a group of youth performed a skit to demonstrate some of the barriers in place by school administrators and educators. The performance presented a situation where a racialized youth was placed into an applied program by his guidance counselor because of the work load and perceived abilities of the student. The student later finds out that he is required to take academic courses in order to be considered for university. The student then exhibits problematic behaviour at home with his mother. The performers then asked for audience participation in

order to approach the guidance counselor. The subsequent discussions focused on how the student could recover his credits in order to be considered for post-secondary education.

The scenario above highlights how practices may marginalize particular groups who are unaware of the systemic barriers that can inhibit students in particular ways. In other words, language has been used in everyday academic practices and policies to further subjugate marginalized bodies.

Parents who took part in the study identified how language was used to deter them from making decisions. For example, with special education programming framed as "essential," parents feel like they were doing a disservice to their child if they removed the child from this designation. Clairice described that her circumstance, school officials had presented the services as "extra support." Clairice felt compelled to accept this decision because, as she put it, why would she turn down extra help?:

> So, they mentioned it. I think at times I feel overwhelmed and they just can't be bothered. But then they insist, he needs help. And help meaning another teacher will be there. Help him one-on-one basis. So, you tend to sign these papers and so, you say "fine." I would say, that's the only main reason, if I sign anything, that would be why I would sign it. Because they are like, "okay, you will get an individual teacher to help him (Clairice, 27/3/2011).

It is concerning that many parents indicated that special education services were presented as "extra help" or assistance that would not be available in the regular class. Indirectly, this type of information suggests to parents that only those students who receive special education services will be able to finish school.

Sukhjeet expressed her concerns that the language used to convey special education is unclear which is particularly problematic for the highly racialized South Asian area in which she

resides. She suggests many Punjabi-Sikhs may be stigmatized, since they have little

understanding of the long term consequences of special education:

> My heart breaks for those parents who have no clue what the IEP means. It's a
> terrible situation. They have no idea that these kids will struggle in high school.
> Look at the current situation with high schools in [region] — so many kids don't
> even complete high school — forget go on to college or uni. Whenever I meet
> someone whose child is in ESL or IEP, I tell them to question this and push the
> teachers to figure out if the kids are really ESL/IEP or have other learning
> challenges. Don't just take the schools' word for it! (Sukhjeet, 04/12/2010).

Sukhjeet's mistrust and cautionary tale may stem from her years of dealing with systemic

barriers and a lack of cooperation from School Board officials in understanding her own

struggles with her son Jasmeet. After years of struggling with school officials, she believes that

her role as a parent is to advocate on behalf of other parents who are misinformed.

Jocelyn, who had taken on an increasingly progressive leadership position in special

education, believes that terminologies such as "extra help" have been used to disguise the actual

processes and that the long-term benefits and consequences of special education are often

misunderstood:

> Well I think they know that they are getting extra help but I don't think they
> understand that their kid is being offered extra help in kindergarten and grade one
> that that's going to stick with them for their whole school career (Jocelyn,
> 28/9/2010).

Jocelyn believes that the stigma, tracking, and labels stay with a student their entire school career

and that parents do not understand the implications of these labels. She also suggested that

parents should not just accept the designation as a way to receive additional support. In a similar

vein, Kulvir discussed that some educators and administrators are of the mindset that the only

way to assist a student is through an identification. She has seen firsthand how schools hastily go

through the procedures and assessments, even though the process requires a great deal of time

and commitment in order to make an accurate evaluation. She further believes that special education should go beyond identifying for the sake of applying a label; it should be about creating a program that is appropriate for the child.

Jocelyn, who works within a highly racialized area, indicated that parents are often blind-sided by the process and they do not clearly understand the implications of placing their child in special education. I questioned her about how special education and regular classes are different and she responded by telling me that instruction varies in an attempt to teach students different ways of learning, but it can consequently limit opportunities for students:

> Jocelyn: Hmm, well it depends, it depends who's teaching, I mean instruction can differ in the fact that it can be better… the way things are presented and that the way that they are taught, but it can also be worse. Because all special ed classes are applied or essential level classes. So, when those kids are put in special ed., it means that they don't go into university. It means that they are streamed into college, or workplace.
>
> Jagjeet: Do you think that the students and the parents are aware of that?
>
> Jocelyn: No I don't think they are. I don't think a lot of them are, because, I'm right now in a different type of school…a lot of the parents are working class, new immigrants, um, people who live in poverty that aren't very engaged in the school system. And now I am dealing with parents who are like upper middle class, White privileged parents, who aren't quite sure what's happening to their kids. And these are people who have grown up in the system and are very involved in the system and they still aren't clear. So I don't think parents are clear on that, no (28/9/2010).

Jocelyn's first hand experiences indicate that both racialized and White families are unclear about the special education process and its' consequences. While there is a long history of streaming working class and non-White students in Ontario into lower-level classes, she illustrated how special education has streamed students into the workplace as opposed to going on to post-secondary education. Perhaps most revealing in Jocelyn's narrative, is that even educators who are familiar with the school system or who have firsthand experience with the

Ontario public school system, are unfamiliar with the procedures and practices and the long-term implications of special education. The decisions being made at the elementary and secondary level have life-long implications. I probed Jocelyn further and asked her why she believed that parents were unclear. She responded by discussing her concerns of how early placements are occurring:

> You know why, because I think that the school system feels like it knows better, and I think that those kids are, start placing those kids, like I just went to a workshop where they start placing those kids in kindergarten in special ed which just boggles my mind (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

She further suggests that parents who may be familiar with the system and may have been educated within the Greater Toronto Area are not necessarily aware of the intricacies of the educational system, nor do they necessarily have an understanding of the implications of school practices and policies.

In addition to policies that are inaccessible, Alicya also spoke of the language as not being accessible since it is not translated into all languages spoken by the students and parents:

> Even the IEP, we want to change it, we noticed that, there are things on there we don't like, or we want to add things to it. The unfortunate part is this document should be in many different languages—and that's all I am going to say! (Alicya, 14/9/2010).

As Alicya reveals, there are significant barriers in relation to the language of the pamphlets given to parents. Accordingly, since the information is only translated into those languages mostly spoken by parents, not all families will have all the necessary information. Moreover, there may be additional language barriers in the reading of Ontario Ministry of Education documents, since academic jargon can be difficult to translate. Similarly, Jocelyn indicated that the language and documentation is typically only translated into what she refers to as the "big five" or the five

priority languages within her Board thus, further demonstrating the inaccessibility of the documentation.

It is important to note that the issue of language is central and key to understanding the mechanisms of how special education is being implemented at the Board and school level. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of the implementation of the policies and practices and the implications of inconsistent policies on students and parents.

6.3   Policies, practices, and posturing

In some capacity, many of the educators, in some capacity, discussed an inconsistency in terms of how policies were filtered down into practice at the Board level and how administrative practices varied across different schools. Educators indicated that policies and practices are subject to arbitrary protocols and mandates which differ from administrator to administrator, school to school, and principal to principal, despite being mandated within the same provisions of the Ministry of Education. Kulvir and Nikki repeatedly stated that the practices at their schools differ considerably from what they have seen and experienced at other schools and that the decisions to make administrative changes are simply political. Best practices vary widely and include anything from meetings with families prior to placement, to families being adequately consulted by the administration and school officials. Many parents such as Sukhjeet expressed a lack of understanding of one of the core aspects of the special education system, the IEP, as well as not understanding all the information the school provided.

Like other educators, Kulvir discussed how particular protocols are put in place, as mandated through the Provincial Education Act, yet she felt the process varied considerably, depending completely on the ethics and politics of the school administrator. When discussing the

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consent and assessment protocol, I asked Kulvir whether the procedures are "always" followed

through:

> I think due to many variables, it always happens. How effectively it [parents are informed] happens, varies. Depending on, the variables that may be affecting it…By the Education Act, we have to follow certain protocols and those protocols, we have to make sure that the parent consent goes home and the parents are contacted and given that information. How much we bring the parents along in the process, varies from school to school (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

While there are procedures in place to ensure that parents have agency in the process, the

procedures are not always followed according to the regulations. Kulvir further commented that

when protocols to ensure the best practices for the child are not adequately followed, there are

issues of overrepresentation of particular bodies in special education. She explicitly stated that

one of the goals of special education was to ensure integration. However, as other educators have

pointed out, personal agendas usually dictate what policies are applicable.

In a similar vein, Nikki described that the way policies in schools are implemented is

dependent largely on how administrators and principals understand the role of resource teachers

and how their preparation time should be used. She informed me that "the principal sets the

tone" and administrative time is utilized according to what the principal mandates. Thus, if the

principal believes that the educator should spend the extra time doing other administrative work,

administrators will amend the teachers' duties to reflect the priorities of the school.

Consequently, this may affect the delivery of special education services from one school to the

next, based on how the special education teachers spend their preparation time, including reading

new policies related to special education. In understanding policies and practices in special

education, the issue of consent and testing needs to be examined.

6.4   Consent and testing: Parents as unequal and uninformed citizens

Educators and consultants play a critical role in the identification process and the daily application of policies and procedures. However, there appears to be a culture of silence in which educators cannot express their concerns or they feel unable to criticize or communicate their points of contention. Indeed, some personal contacts referred me to educators who could "speak candidly" about their experiences with special education, while two educators stated that they were "agents of the Board" and were not allowed to talk to me. This sort of "protectionism," sensitivity, or fear, spoke volumes about some of the politics, apprehensions, and overall concerns surrounding discussion of race in relation to special education.

One of the most contentious issues that parents and educators spoke of was parents having little or no say in the process and the parental consent was almost an afterthought. Kulvir, however, discussed the importance of a collaborative approach with parents, whereby parents are fully informed and aware that the final decision is theirs to make:

> I think it's very important for parents to know before the end of the assessment
> the choices they want to do with that assessment. It is not ours to make a decision.
> But it is, in collaboration with them. And I think, once we put that out to them,
> parents are a lot more receptive to having— trying to understand— and there are
> parents who will say "no, we don't want the assessment." And that has to do with
> the previous experiences with special ed or maybe they have been in a group of
> people that have been maybe, marginalized, have been put out there more than
> other people (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

While the role of parents was often decided ahead of time, Kulvir advocated for and spoke to the need to move away from the mentality that often stigmatizes and marginalizes particular groups, causing further resistance. As Alicya indicated, while academic testing does not require consent, psychological assessments do require parents to be involved. Accordingly, educators can decide

not to inform parents of what is occurring until much later in the process. While Alicya informs

parents each step of the way, she stipulated that this was not the norm:

> So, a special education resource can just decide that they just want to test a
> student. It's always—at this school, we always make sure we have parent consent,
> even though it is not something that is mandatory. It is just better to have a better
> working relationship with parents when they know what is going on (Alicya,
> 14/9/2010).

Jocelyn, much like Alicya, was concerned about testing and consent, and whether parents were

adequately consulted. She was still trying to understand how a psychologist is able to make a

determination as early as kindergarten:

> …teachers refer them to the school psychologist, and the school team and they
> give a whole list of behaviours that they are seeing in the classroom so it can
> happen quite young...when they see something that seems odd in kindergarten,
> they'll refer them to special ed, and so they would be tested by a psychologist. Or
> even not tested by a psychologist! This is one of those things that I'm trying to get
> my head around because now ... I'm the [admin] of special ed in the school that I
> am. And so I'm trying to get a grasp of the kids that are being sent and half of
> them had been seen by a school psychologist. So they're in special ed because of
> that. But the other half, teachers have just decided that they need extra help, so
> they've been put into special ed. So they don't even need to be tested (Jocelyn,
> 28/9/2010).

In her increasingly demanding administrative role, Jocelyn discussed how she was puzzled by

the fact that many of the students are incorrectly placed in special education and many have not

been properly tested. I asked her if that was legally allowed and she stated that it appeared to be

standard practice at her school. I further questioned if parents were informed of these practices

and she stated that terms are vague and couched in jargon so that parents do not understand them

and consequently accept them as beneficial to their child's schooling. Jocelyn further argued that

the problematic nature of testing is such that all students could be labelled with a learning

disability:

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[Scoffs!] [Pause] My thoughts on that is that nobody should be tested anymore! [Laughs] I mean there are some kids that definitely, genuinely have difficulty, but I think for the majority of kids, the kids that are labelled learning disabled, that their difficulty is like an average difficulty that anyone would have. For example I have parents that are phoning me saying that "my kid is disabled because they can't spell very well", or "they can't do math". I mean there's this assumption that everyone should be able to do everything, and if you have a weakness now in one area, you're disabled. So my feeling is that nobody should be tested, unless they're having severe issues. I mean a kid who is bored in class or a kid who can't relate to what's being taught or who's been stuck in a special ed class for the last ten years, those are not disabled kids to me, they don't need to be tested. And kids who are distracted by their friends and stuff, I have people referring them to special ed (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

Jocelyn believes the excessive use of labelling has led to detrimental consequences in how boredom, a lack of engagement, and non-interest are being packaged as "disabled." As mentioned above, Jocelyn uses "disabled" to note that it is the system that has created the conditions and deficits, rather than all the weaknesses residing within the student. She further argued that she does not put a lot of faith in standardized tests since "half the kids give up, half the kids are pissed off by it and don't do it." Testing used to measure special education, in Jocelyn's as well as Stacey's opinions, are related to boredom or lack of language norms. It is interesting to note that as White educators and administrators, both Stacey and Jocelyn noted similar issues.

Stacey, who is not only an administrator but also a parent, indicated that she often uses her knowledge of the system to identify when she is being given a "snow job" (whereby an individual may be deceived or given incorrect information to persuade another person) by a school official who cites a policy or practice. Stacey admitted that she reminds the school officials that she holds a high-level position in a particular Board. She uses her position to ask educators and administrators to rephrase their response and reminds them that they report to the

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same administrator. This type of behaviour suggests that advocating on behalf of a child is often only possible when there is intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the system:

> Obviously, I am going to get a very different response than a parent who is getting a snow job and doesn't realize that it is snowing. Whereas in this particular situation, I realize I was being fed a snow job and I said "lady, we are not going to lie any longer, this is my background, this is my knowledge, now, let's do this properly." Most parents wouldn't know that is happening and therefore they wouldn't know to advocate (Stacey, 16/9/2010).

School personnel may try to convince parents that they are more familiar with best practices and policies and in the majority of cases, the parent will not have an understanding of how to use policies in their favour.

6.5   The appeal process

In this section, I discuss how both parents and educators understand the appeal process and what protocols and mechanisms are in place to ensure that parents have complete knowledge and access information about their child. Challenging the decisions or identifications was described by parents as a difficult process to manoeuvre, through language, policies, and practices that are not easily understood. When questioned about the mechanisms in place to reverse decisions, educators spoke of some of the bureaucratic processes that are often alienating to parents or decisions that are made without the consent of families.

Dominique discussed her uneasiness with the assessment process and the decisions made without a full understanding of the context of her son Andre's interactions at home. I asked her whether she questioned the school about the assessment and if she felt uncomfortable. She responded with the following:

> Again, back to finances and about time and then the family dynamics at that time. I myself was sick and going through a lot…I didn't invest that time to even think that I could go back and disagree. I just think it was their opinion. And not mine.

So, they are entitled to their opinion. So, I kind of left it that that's their opinion.
But, it doesn't mean that I agree with it (Dominique, 15/9/2010).

Feeling helpless, Dominique made the decision not to challenge the assessment because of her own social location and various circumstances around the family that made it difficult for her to approach the school. When I asked her again if she was informed about the appeal process, she told me that she did not know that there was a process to challenge the decisions: "No, I don't remember that at all. No. Appeal?! (Laughs). No. No. Definitely not." (Dominique, 15/9/2010). Parents spoke of not being fully informed and equal citizens; they felt as if their agency had been stripped from them. They were often unsure about the choices they had or what services they could access. If there was a process to appeal, they were unclear about the documentation that was required and the timelines in which to submit. Accordingly, many parents may not know or have known their rights in relation to the appeal process.

Lack of support and advocacy was an ongoing thread in the narratives of parents. The documentation and evidence given to them were framed in such a way to suggest that there were no other options. It was the schools' and administrators' informed decision, and parents felt like bystanders. In Haweeya's case, she was again made to feel guilty if she challenged the administrators' decisions:

Jagjeet: Were you informed of an appeal process? That you could say "no" to the IEP or no to the IPRC and that you had that choice?

Haweeya: Yeah, but they were making me scared if I do otherwise. It's going to hard for her. Hard to come back. Hard for her to find a spot. That's why, all the meetings, I was attending, they said, this is what we see. If you have a choice, but if you come out of it, she not going to handle it (26/3/2011).

In Haweeya's case, she understood her rights, but she felt that tactics were being used to scare

her and enforce a decision that had already been made. School officials were arguing for the best

interests of the child without considering the legitimacy of the parent's position.

Educators also discussed inconsistencies when administrators applied policies. There

appears to be a contradiction of what is occurring from Board to Board. As Kulvir and Alicya

indicated, the goal of special education is inclusion and administrators need to question what is

actually occurring and examine their own practices as to why a student is failing. Stacey candidly

discussed whether or not families are knowledgeable about their rights:

> Stacey: Do I think they are informed adequately? No I don't. Are they informed?
> Absolutely. They are given a piece of paper, this huge document, flyer, that is
> pages and pages and they are sent back home, that this is the IPRC process. I have
> *never been* [emphasis the researcher's] in an IPRC meeting where they have been
> told that "here is the form, sign it, and if you don't like it, here is the appeals
> process." What I have seen is, "here is the form sign it and if you need more time,
> take it home and think about it, then sign it." But, I never, ever seen, "by the way,
> you have the right to appeal this if you don't like our decision." I have never
> actually seen that in any IPRC meeting and I have been to thousands of them.
>
> Jagjeet: Thousands of them?
>
> Stacey: Oh, let's see. We have 500 students identified in special ed. I have been in
> a [leadership] position for 6 years, 500 kids x 6, would be what? 3000? And those
> are the ones I was in as a head. And then I have always been in my own [children]
> for the last 12 years. So, I have been to thousands of IPRCs.
>
> Jagjeet: And of that, you have never seen anyone say—
>
> Stacey: This is the appeal process? No (16/9/2010).

Perhaps most troubling is the revelation from the educator, who has been in various leadership

positions, that parents are in fact not adequately informed of the process, despite documentation.

Jordan (2001) found that Ontario's regulations render parents powerless in several ways,

allowing students to have an IEP without a formal identification or "exceptionality" designation.

In other words, a student may be given an IEP based on the recommendations of educators and administrators, but even though the student may not have a formal learning disability. Parents in Williams (2007) study titled "Unnecessary and unjustified: African-American parental perceptions of special education" expressed that placement practices were not consistent with the law and were a "misuse and abuse of protocol" (p. 255). The Auditor General of Ontario (2008) indicates that one of the schools audited performed fewer than the required assessments, to offset costs associated with the identification. Consequently, evidence suggests that there are methods in which educators and administrators can provide special education programming through informal channels. These findings concur with Jordan (2001) who argues that parents in Ontario are an "unvoiced minority" in relation to special education (p. 363). The literature, much like these findings, reports that parents find themselves accepting their child's precarious state in school, and often reluctantly accept the authoritative decision of a panel of "experts." Harry's (1992a) ethnographic study on Puerto Rican-American parents revealed a mistrust of the system, usually expressed with deference. Stacey, in fact, spoke openly and candidly throughout the interview about the lack of authority parents had in decision making. Similar to Stacey, Jocelyn believes that once a designation or identification has occurred, parents have little recourse once their child enters high school. She further noted that she has never been in a situation when the designation has been removed altogether. However, she did identify some exceptions in which parents have felt strongly enough and been sufficiently vocal in stating that they did not want their child in special education and were successfully in withdrawing them from special education support. Further, Stacey noted that she has only been in one situation where an appeal has been taken to the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Therefore, systemic barriers exist throughout the process, including the IPRC process.

Nikki stated that the language contained within an IPRC is difficult to understand, and only those with knowledge of the system are able to comprehend the contents:

> I think the language…and the IPRC, when the student is IPRC, is very difficult to understand. VERY difficult. The psy, it's extremely difficult. Even if it's somebody born here, it's somebody that has gone through that process, it's very difficult. All the work that they use, the student is identified in these four different areas, that they are look at. The working memory, the cognitive, visual—you understand this? Unless you have some kind of training, you can't understand what anyone is talking about (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

Nikki believes that IPRCs are inherently problematic in the information they contain and how it is understood by parents. Only when a parent has some formal training in assessments, are they able to understand how the information pertains to their child. She stated that parents are unaware that they can remove documents or access the Ontario Student Record at any time. This information is particularly crucial as parents are often not aware of some of the value laden assumptions that are following their child, from educator to educator and school to school because of the school in their school record. Families are also unaware of how this consequently affects their child's outcome and success.

6.6   The high stakes: Testing bias and other assessments

Academic testing and psychological testing are complex processes that a number of researchers and academics argue do not accurately measure a student's ability. The inability to accurately measure a minoritized student's ability through testing has long been recognized as problematic (Ogbu, 1994). As Ogbu (1994) illustrates testing is organized to privilege one group or culture at the expense of other groups. As Cummins (1989b) notes history has shown that psychological assessments have served to "legitimize the educational disabling of minority students by locating the academic 'problem' within the student herself" (p. 65). Educators who participated in this study informed me that consent was only required for psychological tests.

Stacey discussed how educators determine how much they would like to involve parents in the process as there is no formal obligation to inform parents that academic tests are being conducted. However, she notes that at her school, as part of good practice, they try to inform parents. Educators stated that the lack of consent from parents was common practice; however, building trust could only be established if there was a rapport and consent was obtained throughout various testing stages. Educators discussed the resistance that commonly occurs with testing:

> …there could be a lot of parents saying 'no' because to be brought into a school to have been told that "you need to have a psychological test done on your student" a lot of parents would say "no" (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

Kulvir suggested that tests are only an accurate measure if they are giving information that relates to the child, providing a holistic picture, and improving on strengths and needs as opposed to being a "numbers game." Indeed, she suggested that assessments need to occur throughout a child's schooling and at different stages in the school year, in order to present an accurate picture. However, she described testing as being an "anxious time" for students.

Many parents also noted that they were unclear and/or uninformed of any testing or assessments that were conducted with their child. Outside of the medical tests done at a hospital, Haweeya stated that she was not told of any additional psychological assessments or educational tests. When she was asked whether there were any additional tests at the school, she did not recall any. This is not to suggest that assessments were being conducted without proper consent, but it does not suggest the entire process was not clearly outlined to.

Educators and administrators also recognized that some students questioned why they were being tested. They recognized an active resistance to how these tests would be used

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throughout their schooling. I asked educators how students tend to respond to assessments.

Stacey has faced particular questions as a high school administrator:

> …I deal with high school students and not elementary school students. I can imagine in the elementary schools. There would be a lot more resistance to "what are you doing and why are you doing this?" What I get in the high school is a lot of questions. "Why am I doing this?" "Why is this testing happening?" "Who asked for this testing to be done?" And I am getting a lot of reservations. Such as, "Does this mean my university, when I apply, is going to find out?" That is the kind of resistance that I get. Not that "I won't do it" but "please ensure me that this is not going to screw up my chances in post-secondary" (Stacey, 16/9/2010).

Students are conscious of how the stigma attached to testing can impact their chances of moving onto post-secondary education and as they actively attempt to resist the labels. Other educators noted that the response depends on how the educator approaches the student with the testing and how comfortable the student is made to feel. During the interviews with mothers and students, there were some visible signs of resistance from both.

Another point brought forward about testing is how tests tend to focus solely on the deficits of the child. Jocelyn felt strongly about the use of tests to determine the "weaknesses" of a child and repeatedly stated that she felt tests were "meaningless:"

> I just don't know what they're testing—I don't think they're testing anything quite frankly. Like it's my belief now that if anyone was tested they would come out as being special ed. I mean if you look at what learning disabled is, learning disabled means you're average, above average intelligence with a weakness in an area. Like, tell me who doesn't have a weakness in one area? Like it could be math, it could be spelling, like I mean—it's ridiculous. So, I think if you pick those kids that are disinterested or who don't have the cultural background or the language background and you decide you're going to test them, you're bound to find something, right? (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

Jocelyn argued that any given individual, including an educator, can do poorly on an educational assessment revealing some kind of deficit. She stated that the practice of identifying students

with a learning disability based on this process is completely without merit as it disadvantages

students who lack a particular type of cultural knowledge or understanding.

Educators agreed that tests used to "diagnose" students with a learning disability, are

based on a particular type of cultural capital:

> I speak [British] English. There are words that are different. So, if I haven't had
> that exposure to the words and customs, I cannot just sit and do a test. Because I
> am not accustomed to that environment. So, the academic testing is for students
> who are born in Canada, who have had a middle class upbringing, who have gone
> to plays, who have gone to ballets, who have read certain books, who have
> travelled…(Nikki, 16/9/2010).

In order to successfully do well in these assessments, Nikki suggested that students need to have

a cultural understanding that many people including herself are not accustomed to. Similarly,

Kulvir described that many gifted students are unable to answer some questions related to

standardized tests as they do not have the experience to understand the context of the question.

Educators candidly discussed their concerns, what they believed to be the function of

special education, and how testing played a significant role in determining the success of

students. Educators were asked their views of accountability measures and testing, such as the

EQAO and if they felt there was a connection between these measures and special education. In

particular, Jocelyn felt strongly about the use of EQAO tests as a measure or catchall to explain

why students are failing:

> I think special ed, has been growing because of that [accountability and EQAO]
> because they need to have an explanation why some kids are not doing well on a
> standardized test. So it's sort of an exempt status that you can dump all of those
> kids that aren't doing well and that just sort of explains why your scores are low,
> or you can keep them out of the score all together (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

She further described how there is increased pressure from administrators to do well on EQAO

tests and how "low achieving" students were excluded from writing standardized tests. The

perception is that ELL, essential level, and students in special education will bring the school averages down. Accordingly, this group of students are excluded from writing standardized tests. Jocelyn described how she has advocated for these students to write the tests, but has been told "no they can't write them." She emphasized that that there is a lot of pressure to increase test scores, with teams dedicated to examining ways to build high scores. While Jocelyn discussed her concerns on how testing was being mobilized to fragment a particular population, Nikki discussed the need for scores to ensure the accountability of educators and the need to recognize why some students continue to do poorly:

> I think a lot of teachers are not happy with EQAO…we need to have numbers. We need to show, these students are not doing well. I mean, that is the only way you can see that these students are falling further and further behind. And even though money is being put into that, why aren't they doing well? So, I think it is a wakeup call to see when they get these results—because, that's what we look at, on P.A. days. That's what we look at…when they do the math assessment, why aren't these students doing well? I mean, they say the standard predictor of how well a student does, is the EQAO grade three. So, if that's true, then that means that teachers don't have to do anything! We already know, how well that student is going to do. So, I think it is a good thing, although a lot of teachers would say "it's not a good thing." But, there needs to be accountability (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

As a Black educator, Nikki believes that without a standardized mechanism, teachers would not be responsible for those students who continuously fail to make the grade. While many educators are not content with EQAO, Nikki argued that it is nonetheless a measure to hold educators accountable. Accordingly, standardized tests may enable teachers to question their own teaching practices and limitations that are representative of systemic failures rather than the failure of the student. She argues that it is a "wakeup call" to see the results and place the onus on educators as a means to assess how an educator may have failed a student. In other words, tests and EQAO may be used to measure educators, not students.

Many educators expressed their anger and frustration related to the EQAO. Stacey gave me her frank "opinion of EQAO" by stipulating that the EQAO was an inequitable assessment and, in particular, it treated students with a learning disability unfairly. She further suggested that these assessments are meant to test the educator:

> It absolutely makes no sense. It seems very arbitrary. And I think the EQAO is extremely unfair to special education students!... And now again, you are talking about EQAO in general. I am talking [about] the OSSLT because that's what we have in the high school. That is a high stakes literacy test. They don't pass it, they don't graduate. So, for the special education students, that is just SO [emphasis] much to put on them. …EQAO is the same way [an arbitrary test with arbitrary time]…My own personal thing about EQAO is that the politicians have the test written easy when they want the teachers to look good, and written more difficult for the teachers to look bad. Which, I don't think is benefiting any student, let alone any special education student (Stacey, 16/9/2010).

In this particular dialogue, Stacey noted that students, in general, are placed in a precarious position with the use of high-stakes testing and the odds are stacked against special education students who are required to take the mandatory tests. Subsequently, these students are further marginalized from a system that places considerable pressure on students to do well. She argued that these assessments are meant to test and/or embarrass the educators, which further questions their legitimacy. Many educators discussed their concerns about what the EQAO actually measured and whether it was beneficial making students go through testing of this sort. As mentioned, Stacey reported that such tests send messages to the students such as "if you don't pass this, you don't graduate." Accordingly, she argued that these messages impede a student's ability to function and perform.

Educators also spoke of students being asked to stay home during high stakes testing, as it would adversely affect the scores of the entire school. Principals and educators are under tremendous pressure for schools to do well as test scores have an impact on the community as

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well as real estate prices. As such, it appears that schools are forced to make decisions that may have a significant impact on the school's test average. Real-estate agents have been using test scores to rank neighbourhoods for several years. A recent article by the *Toronto Star* confirms what educators have argued; high test scores are linked to affluent areas (Yang, 2012). Consequently, low scores have been a factor in driving the real-estate markets as families with more income, typically White families, are moving away from certain school districts to more "affluent" or high-test-score school areas. Jocelyn, who works in what could be considered an inner-city school, spoke of the pressures to have a high average at her school:

> …if they [students] were in the essentials level, they wouldn't write the standardized test. Although I was just talking to someone about that and their school was the opposite and that everyone wrote it, but in my last school they didn't because there is a lot of pressure on administrators to have their schools do well on those tests (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

It is not clear how such demands on educators and students translate into teaching practices and the amount of instructional time devoted to improving test scores. Furthermore, interviewees did not discuss what these tests really measure, their importance, or how much time assessments take away from learning other material.

6.7   Monetary rewards

It appears that a culture of have and have-nots has been created within particular School Boards, in which some students have been given "rewards" for their learning disability designation. Indeed, this brings to light some serious concerns about those who are aware of the "privileges" associated with a label and educators promoting the diagnosis based on the facilities available to a child.

Jocelyn commented that some families are privileged through the support they receive and that issues of race and class are at play. She has seen firsthand how students who are not

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streamed into lower-level classes not only get extra support in regular schooling, but also get

support and extra assistance at the university level. She refers to these students as "doubly

privileged:"

> Well the kids that aren't streamed into the low, or into the special ed, classes they
> get extra support, so they're all in academic subjects and are headed off to
> university and they get extra time on exams, and they can get computer supports
> and they get all sort of extra supports so that actually doubly privileging them
> (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

When further asked about who these children are, Jocelyn commented that they are White,

middle or upper-class students. Some students have access to a computer or extra time to

complete assignments and tests which helps them to get access to post-secondary education. On

the other hand, racialized students who are placed into special education are often excluded from

college and university, as they are streamed into technical or non-academic programming.

Many educators also discussed how funding plays a role in placement and identification

and some of the problematic concerns they have. When I questioned Kulvir about whether

identification in special education was a fair measure, she stated that placements are equitable

when they are not driven by monetary rewards or an attempt to derive more funds from the

Ministry. As some educators noted, there are growing concerns that some schools are receiving

funding and financial incentives under the guise of special education funding.

Nikki described that at her Board, she found, quite by accident, that particular students

were entitled to laptops. She also discussed a two-tier system in which she advocated on behalf

of some students to receive funding to ensure they received laptops. She believes that the system

is inequitable:

> There is a lot of money being spent on these students with this laptop. A lot of
> money. It's not in special ed. It's not equal because there are parents that don't
> know to speak up. ..If there child is identified with an MD, MID [Mild Intellectual

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Disability], they don't get the funding. But LD [learning disability] students, LD community they have—it's very much like autism. There are a lot of people speaking up on autism and the LD community are speaking up for these students…And a lot of money is being put into these students. Whereas with the MID students, no one is speaking up for these students. And they don't get the funding and the money that they should be getting (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

Nikki believes that different designations of "learning disability" entitle students to different rewards and privileges. She also believes that the exceptionality is profitable in terms of the services students receive. Laptops and commercial software are considered incentives for students, as these items are prized commodities. She believes that the funds are being used for material rewards and not necessarily better instruction. Further in our interview, she expressed her frustration with this inequitable system:

Nikki: It's—It's a very unfair system. That's what I have to say.

Jagjeet : In terms of funding and who gets—

Nikki: Yes. Yes. Because that child is only going to get what they are entitled to if the SERT [Special Education Resource Teacher] speaks up for them, or the parent becomes very active and understands the system (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

In this exchange, Nikki not only underscored the importance of advocacy on behalf of parents, but also that those parents and students who benefit the most from the "rewards" of special education are those who understand the intricacies of programming and what resources the school can provide. Nikki further explained that some parents are forcing identification on their children in order to receive laptops. As seen with Stacey, who described how she used her knowledge of the system to advocate on behalf of her daughters, and Monica who advocated for her son, it is clear that only those who have knowledge of the system can advocate for their child. However, as noted above, Nikki argued that sometimes the advocacy is "misguided" and ultimately the school knows what is best:

Nikki: You have to understand that there are certain communities, within the [this] School Board whose parents, push to have their child identified.

Jagjeet: Really?

Nikki: Yes. I tell you why, because [my] School Board, has now put so much money into identification. A student who is identified with an LD can have their own laptop. They get a laptop with the most amazing software, thousands of dollars of software, $5000.00 worth of software, where they have software where you can speak into computer and it writes for you... And with an LD, universities now have to accept a certain amount of students who have LDs. So, there is a certain umm, certain communities, I don't want to mention any names, who have now realized that it can be an advantage for their child to have an LD. We actually have this with one of the parents who absolutely push, and pushed and pushed for their child to be identified with what we now call an "executive functioning" a new word— we had to identify that student. And executive functioning is now LD where they are very, very disorganized. They are not organized and they don't have organization skills and of course they are going to need a laptop, so that a teacher then—puts all their assignments, puts everything on the laptop. And essentially, they do everything on the laptop. This is the latest thing that has happened. And there are certain communities that have picked up on this and it certainly helps their child (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

In this case, the educator discussed how she views particular communities capitalizing on the identification process. Access to software and a laptop appears to be standard practice at this School Board, yet it is a hidden incentive that not all parents, or for that matter, educators are aware of. As a racialized educator, it's not clear whether Nikki was aware that she was pathologizing and painting the entire ethnic community with the same brush as communities that abuse the system of special education. I felt discomfort and uneasiness with the comments that Nikki made in regards to particular groups and communities. From her tone, I noted that she also expressed some hesitation in describing particular ethno-cultural communities in her school. However, she continued to note the privileges and benefits associated with learning disabilities, and the considerable amount of money that was tied to the identification and placement processes.

At times, it felt as though Nikki was conflicted about the laptops and other resources. She

mentioned at one point in the interview, that one parent, who was clearly resistant to the special

education label, was compelled to continue the placement process through the use of "rewards."

However, in other parts of my conversation with her, she stated that parents were abusing the

system by pushing an identification that was not required:

> …An LD [learning disability], there is so much money available, and parents will
> find the kind of "entitlement" that their child is entitled to. So, it depends on the
> community…I mean, last year, for the last 3 years, I had a father who was very
> adamant that his son—didn't want to have an identification. And I sat down with
> him and I said "you know something," I was very honest with him, I said "this is
> what [child's name] can have with his identification." I got him a laptop, I kept
> him in the smaller class. I worked with him, so I could get him up to a certain
> standard. I mean, that doesn't happen. I mean, the father wants him out of that
> designation because he thought it was a bad thing. But, I tried to explain to him
> that, having an LD, can give him this, this and this. So, you need to access it, and
> you need to know to speak up. Because very often parents feel as though—they
> don't feel comfortable coming into the school for one. And they don't have the
> language to be able to—and they feel very intimidated, right? (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

In this particular conversation with Nikki, it was disconcerting for me to hear that a placement or

identification was pushed on to a student by enticing a parent through the external benefits

associated with the designation. It appears that monetary rewards are a powerful enticement in

order to press for an exceptionality. Earlier in the interview, Nikki mentioned that she asked the

school psychologist to change the designation assigned to a student because she felt it was best

that he too had access to a laptop which was only available through a particular exceptionality:

> …I mean, in high school now, there is a placement where an LD class and they
> have 8 students and each student has a laptop. So, I will make sure that is where
> our students go and actually make the psychologist change the identification one
> of my students, an MID [mild intellectual disability] to LD so that he can be in
> that class. Because you imagine you have a class of 8 students, basically, they are
> guaranteed their credits for grade nine and ten. So I push to get them into that
> class (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

Educational practices appear to adapt to what the educator deems acceptable and appropriate from student to student. It is also important to note the amount of control and leverage educators and administrators have in changing the designation and the value and importance attached to laptops as a tool for teaching students who have a learning disability. At other points in the interview, Nikki mentioned that students are not entitled to laptops without an identification, but further added that it is very difficult and gray area. Only Monica, who herself is an educator, noted having a school issued laptop for her son. None of the other mothers and educators noted having access to a computer.

6.8 Valuing parental involvement

Parental involvement is critical in how successful a student is in school. The families in this investigation were associated with schools from across Toronto, all of which have a well-defined mandate stating the importance of parental involvement. However, how involvement is enacted and encouraged by schools and families differs considerably. As Alicya indicated, families can only be understood if educators, administrators, and policy makers take the time to consider their cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, she indicated that families have the most insight into how their children learn and what they are capable of:

> But, it's always best because parents know their children. They're the ones that see them when they are in a different setting, they know how they learn. So, for some parents— you have some parents that are in denial, but that doesn't matter because they do have valuable information about their children, you're not necessarily going to get as a teacher (Alicya, 14/9/2010).

As indicated, parents should be co-producers in the reports that are written, but they are often ignored as a rich source of data. Alicya noted that while it is not mandated, her own views are to send ongoing messages/reports home to families to document the strengths of the child, something she recognizes is "not always the norm." She further stated that if she cannot speak

the language of the families, it is not an excuse to ignore the information they may have. The analysis provided herein demonstrates that many parents do not have the appropriate cultural capital and/or are intimidated by administrators who do not create a welcoming environment for parents, particularly minoritized/racialized parents. While many educators and administrators, such as Jocelyn, believe that parents should have the final say in how their child is identified and the type of interventions/programming required, it generally it does not occur in this manner. Parents do not always have all the necessary information to make meaningful determinations or they may not be aware of the consequences of their decisions. Dominique believes that the school officials had their interpretation of what her son was like, while her views were discounted and minimized: "I just remember that they were focusing on that, you know, my interpretation is not necessarily their interpretation." Parental views/interpretations were often discounted and negated and Dominique believes that her understanding of how her son learns differs considerably from what educators believe. Throughout her interview, she often stated that "I just think that was their opinion."

Nikki mentioned that, there is no parental involvement in the Parental Advisory Council at her school, as it is limited to a total of three White parents. I inquired as to why she believed this was occurring:

> Because parents just don't feel comfortable. It's like—They feel as they go into the school and they just don't feel welcome. Right? So, if they walk into that school, and they do not feel welcome, they do not feel as though they have a voice. They send their students on a prayer, I guess (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

She believes that an inclusive environment is only created by the administrators who must ensure that parents feel welcome. However, she noted that the educators and administrators have not fostered an environment that allows parents to feel as though their voices/concerns are regarded

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as valid. Williams (2007) suggests that an environment where the agenda is set and parents are not expected to disrupt the mandate is not a partnership; "The families are given overt and covert messages that their input, opinion, or experience is inconsequential to the school and, therefore, to their children's education" (Williams, 2007, p. 260). Messages are conveyed to families early on about the particular activities that they can participate in at schools and in many cases, schools have not found a way to accommodate families whose schedules fall outside standard working hours.

Jocelyn contended that schools have fostered a particular type of climate where White bodies are more welcome, as White bodies represent the majority of school officials. That is, if minoritized backgrounds and interests were represented within the school and the School Board, parents may believe they have more clout. Nikki further believes that situations in which educators and administrators do not reflect linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity of the school, hinders any inclusion efforts

Kulvir discussed how parental involvement has changed over the years. She also noted the difficulty of involving immigrant parents in a meaningful way:

> I think the idea of telling a parent that your child is not doing well, is not really parent involvement. Telling a parent that, you know, your child needs more tutoring, is not parent involvement. Parent involvement really, I think involves, looking at the skills of the child, and giving some of those strategies, that they can follow at home. Or they can have somebody at home who is capable of helping them. …We are looking at more individualizing those report card comments to help the parents understand. If we look at our parents as we look at our kids and saying "our kids can't do it, because the parents won't do it," then we are going to get those kind of results. We are going to get the results that say our kids are don't have the abilities to do that. But, if we look at our kids, we look at our parents, who want to do the best for their children, and how can we help move the parents forward, like we want to move the children forward, then we are looking at a whole different type of approach to helping parents be a part of that (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

As Kulvir mentioned, parental involvement goes beyond tutoring and beyond discussing a child's deficits. Moreover, she discussed the importance of report cards being customized, rather than recycling impersonal information for each child, so that parents can assist their child in meaningful ways. She reiterated a number of times that many educators and administrators make assumptions that parents do not want to be involved in the identification and placement process. She further argues that it is difficult to debunk commonly held beliefs amongst the South Asian community that teaching students is limited to the domains of school officials:

> …we are still looking at education is for teachers and parenting is for the parents. And so, the two [ideas] may not meet, as much as they need to. So, we are still working on. Towards that: "you are a big part in helping your child succeed." And, that doesn't necessarily mean that you pay a tutor to come do that, we want you to be a part of it. And that requires a lot of parental involvement. And I think that has been our biggest hurdle, is to have more parental involvement. The parents who are more involved, are the parents who are in the school. Who will come and visit, who will be there for every parent-teacher meeting. Who will be there for the parent council. They are the ones who are involved in…They might be coming from a culture where, the teachers do all the teaching, and they take care of the kids, and parents aren't involved in the schools (Kulvir, 05/12/2010).

It is significant to note that as an insider to the South Asian community, Kulvir believes the notion of education and parenting must be understood differently to address cultural gaps. Due to cultural nuances, on the one hand, many immigrant families believe that education should be solely entrusted to the educator, and in other cases, families believe that they should have equal footing. However, Kulvir further believes that parents must be part of the process, at each step as parental exclusion will result in distrust. Nikki noticed that White parents are more likely to be involved than minoritized/racialized parents. She believes that this correlation is linked not only to the racial make-up of administrators but also the socioeconomics of parents, as working-class parents are often minoritized:

> But, it's very difficult to get parents into the school because as I said, many of them are at work. They are working to put food on the table, right? It's not like they don't care, they are surviving…(Nikki, 16/9/2010).

Nikki countered the tendency that many educators have to pathologize parents as apathetic or lazy; she attributes the lack of participation of working-class parents to their working schedules and their lack of voice. She further noted that parents do not realize the power or voice they have in their child's schooling. When I asked her what role parents play in the assessment process, she noted "they don't" and further elaborated that they have been conditioned to accept the decisions made by administration:

> Because they don't realize that they can! The people on the panel, the principals, the SERT. There would be two principals, there would be a SERT, a classroom teacher, and the parent would be there. They can speak up, but I have never seen a parent or heard a parent speak up. Anytime I have heard that they want their child to have a diagnosis, the LD, and I then spoke to the parent and I said to her "as long as I am the SERT, have the identification, have the placement, I will work with your child, to see what I can do and when he goes to high school, you can always ask for the placement—you can always ask for him to be demitted." ...But, I have to speak up for parents or I will pull that parent for a meeting and then letting them know what they can do. Or, I tell them also, bring someone along with them. That's what I do; I say "bring somebody along that knows the system." There are certain things that I cannot say at a meeting (Nikki, 16/9/2010).

As Nikki pointed out, a knowledgeable advocate should be brought into meetings, as some families are fearful of expressing themselves to a group dominated by professionals. Some educators quietly suggest the use of an advocate but do so at the risk of backlash from their administrators. Such advocacy is needed because parents' voices are lost amongst a large group of administrators. In a similar vein, Kulvir suggested that parents with the most influence over decisions surrounding their child's education are those who are able to advocate of behalf of their child; those parents who grew up in the system know how to advocate the most. Moreover, parents who are new immigrants are hesitant to be involved. The idea that immigrant parents are

relatively reserved and unfamiliar with the system is a concept that was repeatedly noted by educators. However, Stacey argued that the parents' lack of involvement is a result of years of being voiceless. She stated that by high school, parents do not contribute much towards the assessments and parents often have a great deal of difficulty with decisions and the concept of placement and identification. In other words, parents may be constructed as uninvolved and unconcerned, yet these identifications may be the result of years of being rendered voiceless and being unable to contribute to the decisions concerning their child.

This chapter focuses on ways in which some families expressed their lack of agency in the face of the policies and procedures that govern special education assessments. The language used by educators, formal documents given to families, policies, and the consent and appeal process was not always transparent to families and they noted issues related to fully informed consent. The use of academic tests and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments were recognized by educators as being problematic. The privileges and rewards associated with particular learning disabilities were also discussed along with the importance of parental involvement. *Chapter Seven* focuses on the significant findings that were uncovered in this investigation, including (a) hidden racism (which incorporates systemic and institutional responsibilities); (b) the erasure of difference; (c) the inconsistent application of special education policies; (d) the impact of assessments and evaluations; (e) the responsibility of educators; and (f) notions of agency, being voiceless, and power relations.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In *Chapter Five* and *Six*, the issue of overrepresentation, placement, assessments, how information was conveyed to families, and information about English Language Learners were outlined in relation to the identification process and the implementation of policies and practices. In this chapter, I will discuss six significant findings that were uncovered in this investigation, including (a) hidden racism (which incorporates systemic and institutional responsibilities); (b) the erasure of difference; (c) the inconsistent application of special education policies; (d) the impact of assessments and evaluations; (e) the responsibility of educators; and (f) notions of agency, being voiceless, and power relations.

Slee (1998) establishes five critiques of special education: (1) essentialist perspectives that understand difference and deficit within the child; (2) social construction perspectives in which a socially constructed model is deployed against minorities to create marginalization; (3) materialist perspectives which create exclusion in order to maintain economic conditions; (4) post-modern perspectives which reject theoretical explanations; and (5) disability movement perspectives (as cited in Thomas & Loxley, 2007, p. 3). The purpose of my investigation was to understand the phenomenon through an essentialist perspective (the child brings the deficiencies and inadequacies to the school environment, as a product of their home environment), a social construction perspective (a condition developed to construct and position minorities into lower positions), and a materialist perspective (whereby economics create and maintain the positions that minorities hold) as retold through the lens of educators, mothers, and students.

In order to understand multiple theories and perspectives, Thomas and Loxley (2007) caution that theories in special education have a binary effect: "consequences of both omission and commission" (p. 15). Expanding on this, they state that "on the commission side, any theory,

legitimatizes some potty ideas and practices; on the omission side, if we are too busy theorizing, we may neglect to act" (p. 15). In this context "potty" in the British sense, may assume crazy. With an understanding of the necessity of being action oriented from an anti-racist perspective, there are some areas that require some further investigation.

7.1 Hidden racism: The overrepresentation of racialized bodies

In this investigation, hidden racism through the overrepresentation or disproportionate number of racialized students in special education classrooms is an on-going issue identified by educators and administrators who were interviewed from across the Toronto Board of Education, York Board of Education, Halton Board, and Peel Board of Education. Particular and multiple oppressions tend to doubly marginalize families, including their socioeconomic class, their culture, religion, being a lone parent, and/or being an immigrant. Specifically, not being familiar with the political and social climate of schools and administrative policies has impacted families' understanding of and experience in special education. Educators contend that special education has served as a way to become a "catch-all" for those who do not fit into the regular curriculum. A pattern that many educators reported was a mechanism through which minoritized boys were being disproportionality placed in special education. Educators further noted clear overrepresentations of specific genders and races in special education classes. Covert racist practices including assumptions about the racial, linguistic, and cultural make-up of children were recognized as influencing the identification of an exceptionality. The assessments, pressure to take medication, and the process of informing families also suggested a process of selective information being provided to families which could indicate either an intentional or inadvertent restriction of parents' agency.

However, it was not only school officials that recognized the patterns of who was being identified into particular categories, but students as well. Students suggested that they noticed that special education was for "troubled kids" who get "easier work" as it was determined that "these kids" cannot handle the workload or the regular curriculum. Only Ronell was able to recognize by learning through his mother, who is an educator, that he had different learning needs that could not be accommodated by the regular teacher. Stanovich, Jordan, and Perot's (1998) study on 2,011 in second to eighth grade demonstrates that students identified as at risk of failure, "had low perceptions of their own academic abilities" (p. 120). If students have negative experiences in school, they are not likely to succeed or have faith in a system that has given them little hope about their education. In many cases, students in this investigation had negative perceptions of schooling and what it meant to be in special education. Mothers, such as Haweeya, also noted that special education has functioned as a means of sorting and ranking particular bodies. She noted that numbers are increasing, not decreasing in special education and educators rally for support in order to avoid school closures due to low enrolment. Haweeya's experiences demonstrate that scare tactics and fear mongering are used in order to maintain enrolment numbers within particular programs, citing instances where she was told that her daughter would be "a dropout" or "destroyed" if she did not stay in special education. In this particular case, as discussed above, Haweeya was informed that her support and her daughter's continued enrolment were required or her daughter would be another statistic of the Somali community – a dropout – and that no one would be available to support her learning in an integrated program.

The narratives from families, educators, and administrators suggest there are clear inequities in programming and how policies are interpreted by administrators and educators.

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Connecting the patterns, my investigation suggests what Revilla, Wells, and Holme (2004) contend, that racism is "covert and apparently race neutral or color blind, thus, making it evermore difficult to challenge from a racial justice" (p. 289). For this project, the collective narratives may indicate a growing problem within these School Boards in how practices are applied to certain students as they appear to be colour-coded and affect non-White groups disproportionately. The observations of educators, which are based on years of experience, may be factual or perceived. However, whether they are perceived or real, there is a need to understand why race impacts decisions related to identification and placement. Educators and special education administrators described noticing how it is not only race, class, and gender that contribute to placement, but also immigration status and language proficiency. Families also suggested how their religious articles, language, and race may have affected or resulted in their child's identification for special education.

More specifically, educators believe that the disproportionality of particular minorities into learning disabilities or "judgment categories" was occurring in their respective schools. As discussed in *Chapter Two*, judgment categories of learning disabilities refer to categories that cannot be explained through medical testing and instead are subject to value laden psychological testing (Harry & Klingner, 2007). As reported by the National Research Council (2002), categories that are based on clinical judgment, such as Educable Mental Retardation, Emotional/Behavioral Disorders, and Learning Disabilities, "have the highest disproportionate minority group" (Harry & Klingner, 2007, p. 17). Categories of identification, such as deafness or visual impairment, have not shown an overrepresentation of race and ethnicity (National Research Council, 2002). Accordingly, there is no indication that disabilities are directly related to biology. Fine, Weis, Pruitt, and Burns (2004) indicate that special education and "measures of

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'merit' and competence … have camouflaged the ever-raced biases for ordering the world" (p. viii). Through the counter-storytelling narratives discussed in this project, there seems to be a particular stratification based on race, language, culture, religion, ethnicity, or other markers that were ascribed as "difference." While there are no clear race, ethnicity, or gender based statistics of those in special education in Ontario, this investigation points to unique areas in which special education has been understood in the Greater Toronto Area and the inequities in the types of students who receive an IEP and identification for special education.

7.2   Erasure of identity

Through the data collection and data analysis, I recognized that as a researcher, I was affected by the "experiences with the respondents" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 85). Listening to the narratives of the participants, I began to understand power, religion, race, language, and the interlocking oppressions differently from when I began fieldwork. For instance, two of the nine student participants wore religious symbols at the time of their identification. Their religious headdresses (the *patka* and Hijab) point a need to consider whether exclusion is based on these identifiers. I have come to realize how religion may play out in different degrees. In my own experience I had no real visible markers of my religious identity at school, but perhaps my mother's occasional non-Western clothes and my father's turban were predictors of placement. While this study is too small to interpret what impact religion affects placement and identification in special education and the agency parents have, the interlocking oppressions and the degree to which parents and students expressed marked difference was evident in the dialogues. For instance, in Balvir's and Aziza's cases, their mothers made explicit references to feeling that their child was not adjusting and accommodated in the classrooms. In Balvir's case,

the family made the painful decision to cut his hair and remove the *patka* altogether to avoid further discrimination and alienation by school personnel and students.

Marginalization based on ethnicity was a barrier recognized by families. Mothers in this investigation stipulated that educators and administrators had different expectations for different ethnic groups. All nine mothers expressed that in some form or another, there were different expectations for particular families. In Gracia's case, a mother of Hispanic descent, she felt Italians and "Asians" were more valued at her school than Latino/as such as herself. She not only determined that discrimination affected her daughter who has an exceptionality, but she was also in the process of relocating her son because of perceptions and comments suggesting that her son was "hugging" and doing other inappropriate activities. Based on ongoing conversations with school administrators, she indicated she was "testing" the climate in the school for a while, before deciding on whether she would need to relocate her son. Similarly, Sukhjeet expressed that the Punjabi community in the Peel Region face lower expectations. She noted that in her ongoing conversations with other families, parents have expressed that they feel there are lower expectations for South Asians, and educators suggest to parents that they should be content with "B's." In a similar vein, Clairice suggested that these different expectations translated into who was being identified as needing special education: mostly Black and Somali students. Similarly, Monica recounts how race, class, and ethnicity accounts for student outcomes, not hesitating to indicate that some groups are treated inequitably. Contending that there are patterns seen in her child's class, Annette indicated that she was told that there are too many students in the class for the educator to address her child's problems directly. The messages she constantly receives is that her daughter's educational needs are secondary. Kiranjeet reported that when she wanted to change courses for her son, she had to call the school a number of times and take time off from

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work to go into the office. While she was in the office, she saw a White mother with "three good looking children" get changes to courses instantly, while she continued to have a number of problems being heard by school personnel. She felt that she had to make several trips to advocate on her son's behalf. In this case, she felt that it was a mundane task that did not warrant her ongoing appointments at the school. Donna suggested that because her son James has various factors working against him, such as his size, being taller and bigger, educators appear to be intimidated by him. Families clearly expressed that they experienced differential treatment based on their identities. As a result, they did not have the most amicable relationships with the schools. In one of the most extreme cases, Balvir's mother was still emotional conveying her regrets that her family made the decision to cut his religious hair in order to integrate into the school. As it stands, the interviewees identified ways in which race, culture, religion, ethnicity, and language led to the demarcation and placement into special education programs.

7.3   The inconsistent application of special education policies

Fitzgerald and Watkins's (2006) study in the United States found that only 4 to 8 percent of Parents' Rights documents were written at an appropriate reading level. The researchers found these documents inaccessible to the average parent, since they are written at a college reading level. The readability of the Ministry of Education guidelines on special education was indeed a concern that was brought up by some of the educators interviewed in this project. Educators such as Nikki noted that many parents are confused by the language used in the assessment process, despite attempts by school officials to make them coherent and understandable. Moreover, mothers indicated they were not clear on guidelines to appeal or that the information in their child's Ontario Student Record could be viewed and/or removed on request.

While I did not directly investigate the readability of the Ministry Guidelines on special education or any of the information that is presently given to parents, the parents revealed that the language of these types of documents proved to be problematic. Terms such as "applied" and "academic" (previously referred to as "advanced," "general," and "basic" courses) which are used to describe high school streams in Ontario school systems have become increasingly vague. Furthermore, there are many ambiguous terms that are used to describe special education. For instance, a student can be identified by the IPRC as an "exceptional pupil." This "designation" in particular is problematic when it is not clear what "exceptional" is, that such a designation carries a stigma and it is placed into a student's school record. Exceptionalities are also referred to as being gifted as well as having learning disabilities. It begs the question of what "exceptional" or "gifted" suggests: "Exceptional or gifted in what?" Language and terms used in special education, inherently creates confusion, especially among families who are unfamiliar with the Ontario school system.

Issues with communication and transparency in the language were evident to me throughout the recruiting of participants for this investigation. One mother of Latina/o descent, in particular, was certain that her child was receiving special education services while her daughter was adamant that she was not. I asked the parent if she was comfortable bringing along her child's report card for the purposes of the interview, as there appeared to be a misunderstanding of the language. The information on the report card indicated the student did not have an IEP. In this case, it appeared that the family was not provided all the information, nor did they necessarily understand what special education entails. The aforementioned case in particular highlights some of the issues I came across with the interviewees who were informed by school officials that their child would receive "additional support" or individualized "help" that was not

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possible in the regular classroom. Many parents are unfamiliar with what special education is and are not clear that their child is receiving specialized services. Moreover, differentiated services such as a laptop, one-on-one support for the entire day or part of the day, were not familiar to them. During this investigation, I was contacted by two separate immigration and settlement agencies who asked for assistance on behalf of parents who were new to the country. In both cases, they were searching for an organization or group to speak to the school on their behalf since they felt like they did not understand what was occurring.

The inequities and problems with incorrect identifications were noted by many of the educators and parents interviewed. Many parents expressed feeling silenced by school officials and feeling that their perceptions were discounted and minimized if they asked for clarification or questioned why something was occurring. Moreover, the interviews indicate that there were gaps in how information was conveyed to parents. Families reported receiving a number of documents, but it is not clear if these documents explicitly outline their rights. This investigation suggests that procedures are unclear, while policies are interpreted and implemented differently by school personnel and are dependent on school politics. As mentioned above, parents and educators noted the difficulties in interpreting and applying Ministry of Education policies. Parents are often not familiar with academic jargon and psychological assessments used in the process are difficult to understand.

Educators also discussed how the appeal process is not easily understood by parents and, consequently, parents were not equal and informed citizens in the IEP, the IPRC, challenging decisions, or the appeal process. The students interviewed also noted that they were not clear about why they were being tested, nor did they receive adequate information about the process. In these cases, issues of transparency and accessibility are problematic. No representatives from

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the school board or educators had taken the time to explain to students why they were being removed from the regular classroom for an assessment, why a psychologist was asking them questions, or even the implications of special education. In two of the nine cases, students discovered for the first time the circumstances and decisions that had been made when they were younger, and the processes their mothers experienced. In some cases the mothers expressed their grief and despair and yet the students revealed that there were no indications by schools or families that their parents were so strongly opposed to the placement in special education. This questions whether administrators should make an effort to inform students, in an accessible and student friendly environment, and include them in the decision making process, so that they understand and can make informed decisions about their own education.

As mentioned by participants, information on the rights families have is provided to them in the form of a booklet that has been translated into languages recognized by School Boards as being important. However, the languages most visible by the Board, or "priority languages," are not necessarily the languages spoken by the school population. More importantly, it is not clear whether all language groups have an equivalent understanding of special education or whether, as mentioned by the participants, it is framed as "extra help" or "extra support" for their children. Translators that work for the various boards of education may not have a background in psychological assessments or may not fully understand the implications of an exceptionality and how this information is placed into a student's record. Consequently, families may be led to believe that placements are in fact, beneficial for their child. No other research in this area has indicated that special education is contextualized and couched in hidden terms as extra help or extra support that cannot be found in a regular classroom.

Parents reported being made to feel guilty if they requested a change of services. Families interviewed revealed that administrators often framed the issue of their child being unable to cope with the regular curriculum or "lost in a class of 25 plus students." Consequently, families were advised that it was in the child's best interest to accept the special education identification and placement. In two cases, educators suggested to parents that in taking the option to remove their child from the program or "not wanting support" they would be culpable for the consequences. Nikki, similar to other educators interviewed, often referred to special education as "extra support" that is not available to students in an integrated setting, thus suggesting that students can only get extra support when they are removed from an integrated setting and given an identification. Presenting the issue as if "you don't have the identification, I cannot work with your child" is problematic, as it infers that students and parents must accept an intervention, sometimes reluctantly, if they are to be considered for services not available in a regular setting. Nikki may or may not be aware of the implicit message and information she was relaying to parents that ultimately makes parents feel at fault for not agreeing to school personnel's decisions. Persuading and convincing parents to receive "extra support" not available in an integrated setting was a familiar theme amongst the parents interviewed. Consistent with the academic literature in the United States, this analysis highlights the inconsistency of implementing policies and practices in labeling. It appears that educators are taking short-cuts to remedy situations they believe can only be addressed through an identification. Exceptionalities appear to be serving certain objectives in schooling, where by schooling is reserved for particular groups. Throughout my interview with Kulvir, she cautioned repeatedly against the "disservice" educators and administrators are doing to children through early assessments. She felt that by essentially pushing a label onto a student, they have in effect written off the child as being unable

to do well academically. As Nikki contended, parents are often unclear what criteria their child is being graded on, how the assessments are evaluated, and further, which criteria are being used by school personnel in assessing them for special education. Particularly concerning is whether parents are adequately informed about special education services and programs and what the designation means to their child's learning. She believes that parents should be involved, but are given little opportunity to advocate and participate. Families' participation in school is limited to a number of activities, including parent-teacher interviews or Parent Advisor Councils, that serve the goals and objectives of school personnel, yet these activities should not overreach the mandate set out by schools. As indicated above, it appears that the only way to ensure familiarity with the school and administrator's policies and obligations is to be an "insider." As Stacey and Monica's experiences as both educators and mothers who have children in special education indicate, they are often the ones who question educators about their interpretations of the policies. Moreover, they have the knowledge and understanding of the inner workings of school policies to ask school personnel to reconsider and revise their decisions.

Teachers and administrators revealed how special education policies and practices are altered based on what appears to be arbitrary factors and different interpretations of policies. In other words, policies surrounding placement and identification appear to change from school to school based on how the administrator understands how to implement these policies. While there is a mandate from the Ministry of Education and funding that is to be allocated accordingly, the funding and allocation of resources are overshadowed by political mandates and not necessarily the best options for children involved in special education.

An investigation into the resources available to families indicates there are two booklets/resources for families, which can be accessed online. One such resource, published in

2007 by the Ministry of Education, is a guideline for parents titled *Shared Solutions: A guide to preventing and resolving conflicts regarding programs and services for students with special needs.* This 55 page document demonstrates further issues in equitable access as there was no evidence that it has been translated into other languages or whether all schools in Ontario provide families with this guide upon identification. Consequently, there is evidence that there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding the language used in the identification and placement process.

7.4 Difficulties of assessment, testing, and accountability

Educators recognized that parents were not comfortable approaching administrators for several reasons, including their past history with school officials and the lack of visible representation in the school. Similarly, families reported the obstacles in being unable to have agency or being able to voice their concerns. In some cases, parents reported years of voicing their concerns without being heard or the situation remedied. Moreover, not all the families interviewed agreed that the assessments were an accurate measure of their child's abilities. As Kulvir aptly illustrated, the resistance parents may have towards an identification are based on the stigma racialized bodies experience. The stigma of special education amongst non-White communities may compound their already existing distrust leading to the belief that they are being targeted or pushed towards an identification and placement.

One educator noted that that teachers and administrations are compelled to ensure that an IEP is completed within a particular timeframe. As Alicya noted, the pressure to identify is mandated through protocols that are not always in the best interests of students or educators, as they must complete an IEP within 30 days of identifying a student. As such, administrators and teachers are limited in what safeguards they can put in place in order to ensure the student's

success. The timelines, as Kulvir indicated, coupled with politics and ethics has caused some troubling assessments. She further underscored how labels do not solve problems and emphasized that she saw her role as an administrator to contest an educator's mindset if he/she believed that assessment was a necessary path.

Educators point to their own difficulties relating to assessments, testing, and accountability thereby marginalizing students further. One particularly troubling theme that emerged from discussions with parents and educators is that decisions to conduct testing appear to be made without parental input since administrators are not legally required to notify families until the psychological assessments are conducted. Furthermore, it was revealed that educators have generally already made the decisions well ahead of time, and racialized/minoritized families are discredited if their views are in conflict with what educators have decided. Jocelyn further noted that as parents understand it, special education will result in a stigma. However, she believes that for the most part, students who are identified are already stigmatized. Educators revealed that they saw discrepancies in the application of policies in the schools they had worked. They believe that the onus should be placed on the administrator to understand why particular groups are being streamed. Educators and administrators also did not always believe that the assessment procedures were neither fair nor an accurate measure of a student's abilities.

7.5   Educators taking the onus for failure and success

Many parents and educators described what appears to be a cultural gap and disparities in the knowledge and understanding of how educators understand the lived experiences of parents. Many families also discussed how there was little evidence of educators taking onus and responsibility for students. Not only did the mothers recognize that school personnel lack empathy, but educators noted that many of their colleagues should simply not be in the

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profession. Alicya acknowledged that educators often unknowingly misunderstand the complexities and cultural nuances among particular communities but she stipulated that administrators have a responsibility to make an effort to understand the communities they are serving. Educators acknowledged their role in determining the success of students, while seldom acknowledging that they should take responsibility for those who fall through the cracks. Early on in my interview with Nikki, she openly acknowledged that many educators who apply to be a teacher reluctantly accept special education classes as means to build their curriculum vitae rather than having an authentic desire to educate students with learning disabilities. Nikki indicated that these educators rarely want to be teaching students with exceptionalities mainly because of the paperwork related to the IEPs and IPRCs. Rather than taking an interest in helping their students, Nikki believes that certain teachers see it is a job with benefits and perhaps a stepping stone to seniority.

Based on her personal experience, Sukhjeet also felt that many teachers are simply not suited for the field of education, in general. In one particular case, she described how her son's school only focused on the negative and did not make any positive comments about her son. Sukhjeet recalled this specific experience with her son's teachers, and finally interjected after hearing that the only thing the teacher had to say was "does he do anything right?" Sukhjeet went as far as informing the teacher that she was in the wrong field since her attitude had a significant impact on how her son felt about school. Rather than providing constructive feedback, the interactions were limited to negative comments from the deficit mentality.

Educators such as Kulvir, Alicya, and Jocelyn, described going beyond their prescribed roles to further understand cultural nuances, language, and the communities they served before making assessments. It is important to note that both Jocelyn and Kulvir believe the

responsibility lies in the school system to ensure success, rather than believing that students have inherent deficits that cannot be addressed. Kulvir discussed with me the importance that many educators still believe that some students cannot succeed. She understands that educators, particularly in her School Board, are striving to change the essentialist mentality that students are mere products of social constructs, and instead focus on the belief that every child can move forward. Understanding students beyond socioeconomics, culture, race, and other so called "deficits" and examining the educator and educational system is a mandate at Kulvir's school and something she insists on in her role as an administrator. I probed Kulvir further to ask her whether this was a new phenomenon; she responded by informing me that she believes practices should be more collaborative and holistic. She believes that her role as an administrator and active community member is to debunk some of the deep rooted beliefs in the inadequacy of families and shift the onus back on the educator and examining systemic barriers. She is heavily invested in understanding community nuances through her years as a special educational consultant. Moreover, she believes that her role is to educate teachers on the role of special education as being something beyond a band-aid approach to learning.

In a similar vein, Nikki described that the benefits of special education depend entirely on the role of the educator and whether the educator believes that some students can genuinely learn and succeed, regardless of markers of identity that may stigmatize a particular student. She is aware of her presence and how students detect whether an educator is truly emphatic. Perhaps reflective of the communities they serve, it was curious to note the language some educators used to describe the students. As a Black educator, Nikki, for example, used a language and tone I often felt pathalogized particular bodies. She used phrases, such as "those students" and "dealing with," which describe a troubling mindset as it suggests a hesitation to teach particular students

and implies that being in special education is inherently an ascribed, essentialized, quality rather than framing special education as something linked with shortfalls in the curriculum or school practices. In another case, Stacey recognized that she was being "stereotypical" in describing that South East Asians are focused on "being perfect." Moreover, she discussed that South East Asians see it as a "personal failure" if they are identified as requiring special education. There is a reluctance to understand that special education involves ways of learning differently and how educators can reinvent and reconsider their roles as advocates, rather than adversaries. The issues of cultural deficiencies and pathologizing parents as the source of problems are issues that are readily discussed in the academic literature. Next, I will focus on agency, voicelessness, and the effects of power relations on parents and students.

7.6 Understanding agency, feelings of voicelessness, and power relations

Upon entering the field I understood from my own experiences that, in general, parents are voiceless in the school system. Through this investigation and understanding narratives of both parents and educators, it is my interpretation that the lack of agency is not because parents do not have a "voice" but rather that the system is equipped in such a way that values particular norms. The involvement of families in school is limited to the criteria, agenda, and tone set by school officials. Unfortunately, minoritized bodies become marginalized voices as they lack the cultural capital that the system values. Kulvir spoke to the need for parents to be involved, but they are given little opportunity to advocate for their child and participate in decision making. Kulvir also spoke of the need for advocates to speak on behalf of a parent, yet there was little evidence that families had this kind of formal support.

Mothers interviewed in this study discussed issues of not been given enough information about special education, the appeal process, or the rights that would safeguard them against the

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effects of the decisions regarding their child's schooling. Power relations were dictated by the school personnel, specifically the principals and vice principals who retained control over how policies and practices should be presented and applied. The agenda, priorities, and tone are mandated early on in the school year and educators have very little room to disagree with or negotiate how the policies should be implemented. As Stacey explained, she has sat in thousands of IPRC meetings and not once has anyone at the table informed parents that there is an appeal process available to them. Instead, what mothers indicated was that if they did not agree with the school personnel's decisions, they were made to feel responsible for the supposed inevitability of their child's failure. The message they heard repeatedly, was that educators had more information and authority than families to make the assessments and evaluations.

The silencing that is occurring is the result of educators' beliefs that they have more insights and information about a student than a family does. In the most extreme case outlined in this project, Balvir and Kiranjeet experienced how this misunderstanding reproduced itself and followed Balvir from school to school and influenced the perceptions of school personnel and educators. Such a situation led to significant damage and challenges for the family as they attempted to integrate into a mainstream classroom. Balvir simply equated special education to being an animal in a "zoo", to being observed, monitored, and under constant surveillance.

The findings of this analysis suggest a connection between policies and practices related to parents' rights and race, language, immigration and socioeconomic status, religion, culture, and ethnicity. In particular, policies are inconsistently applied and interpreted by educators and influenced by administrative agendas concerning parental involvement and how much information should be released to families. Special education, in some cases, has been

constructed as a tool to provide "extra help" for some families, a service of assistance not available within an integrated setting.

Chapter Eight, the final chapter, will discuss contributions to knowledge, implications of this research for teacher education programs, gaps in parental advocacy, notions of parental participation within schools, and re-examining special education assessments, practices, and policies.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this project is to improve our understanding of the special education system in the Greater Toronto Area as it affects minoritized/racialized families through the experiences of five educators, nine minoritized/racialized parents and students. I also wanted to further investigate the identification and placement process, the consultation process, and the role of parents as they navigate the process. As outlined in the data analysis chapters, there are various influences affecting the process and practices that shape special education and how it is implemented in schools. This study points to broad implications for parents/families, teacher education, and policy makers, and raises new questions about how special education is conceptualized in the Greater Toronto Area. This chapter will focus on the implications of this study on future research on special education, the legitimacy of special education, and exit strategies. I will discuss and clarify the broader conceptual, philosophical, and practical considerations and implications of this investigation for families, educators, and policy makers. This analysis also presents some new questions and new insights into the field of special education.

While the findings do not address whether some of the students in this investigation should or should not be in a learning disability program, there are some issues that need to be considered. As noted above, the purpose of this study was not to determine whether special education programs are legitimate for some students who have physical disabilities or require specific accommodations that are impossible in an integrated setting. Moreover, the objective of my study was not to measure the usefulness of special education or deny that some families and students do require a great deal of support. Rather, as I have argued, special education is problematic when the services are used to marginalize particular groups who have been deemed

by the system as "unable to educate" within in a regular setting. The research findings suggest several areas where policies, teacher education programs, and parent advocacy programs needs to be examined and improved. The research also presents clear indications that there are significant barriers regarding the integration and inclusion of particular marginalized students into the education system. Policies and practices must be examined in order to understand how the self-esteem and exit rates of those who are placed into special education affects their lifelong perceptions of belonging, schooling, relationships, and whether they are eventually successful in society, and go on to post-secondary education. The areas that require further investigation include better understanding special education programming, the implementation of parent advocacy assistance, improvements to teacher education programs, and re-examining inclusion/integration efforts.

8.1 The making of model minorities: Brown bodies in special education

The academic literature and reports available on special education are generally connected to the overrepresentation of Latino/a, Hispanic, and Black students in special education in the United States. Special education has mainly been understood as a "Black" issue or one that mainly affects Black and Hispanic students. There is a considerable gap in the literature related to special education and other racial groups in both the United States and in Canada. For example, very little is known about the experiences of Asians Canadians and specifically South Asians in special education. This investigation therefore, provides new insights into how educators and policy makers can understand the educational needs of South Asian students and their families. I was unable to find any studies related to how South Asian families, and in particular Punjabi-Sikh families, experience special education. Nor was I able to

find any particular studies examining the schooling experiences of Punjabi-Sikhs. There is a clear lack of the literature in terms of what it means to be a South Asian in Ontario schools.

Consequently, Asian students are often framed through a fixed understanding of Asians students as highly successful "model minorities" who excel in school and work as discussed in *Chapter Three.* The discourse on Asian Canadians students suggests that they are an academically successful "model" group who consequently do not need educational support and resources. I argue that these discourses which assume a "successful and problem free" model minority negate that there are systemic barriers and various levels of oppression that South Asian students and parents experience within schools. As this study highlights, race, religion, ethnicity, culture, immigration status, and language further marginalizes South Asians. Both Kiranjeet and Sukhjeet faced years of discrimination from school officials and educators that had formed opinions about their respective sons based on their assumed language abilities or their markers of difference. In Sukhjeet's case, it appears they used one piece of information that followed her son into grade eight: the fact that he spoke Punjabi at home. In Kiranjeet's case, she believes that it was Balvir's behaviour of a boy just being a boy that led to his identification. However, she also discussed the family decision to cut his religious hair in order to avoid further exclusion in school. The two Punjabi-Sikh mothers and sons who participated in this study openly discussed the ways in which they were discriminated against because of language and religion and further how their concerns were negated by the school system.

8.2   The disabling of bilingual language learners

Within the inconsistent application of policies and identifications, educators also discussed how English as a Second Language is being read as a disability and how this leads to problematic diagnoses. There are indicators that immigrant students are disproportionately

placed into learning disability categories because of apparent "disparities" among immigrant communities or ethnic groups who are perceived as unable to understand the curriculum. Issue of language as a disability, along with race, class, and gender were apparent throughout the dialogues with mothers and educators.

Historically in Canada, Cummins (1984) has discussed the overrepresentation of bilingual learners or ESL students placed into special education before they have acquired the appropriate academic language proficiency. There are indications that ESL students were inappropriately identified as requiring special education under the assumption that basic fluency in English must mean that these students are able to perform as well as their peers on tests. However, they are usually tested before being given five to seven years to acquire adequate skills in English (Cummins, 1984). Literature from the United States also indicates that cultural and linguistic minorities are disproportionately placed into special education. As Duffy (2004) found, teacher education programs do not require that all teacher candidates take ESL courses. In fact, in 2004, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, only 60 of the 1,300 graduate students took an ESL elective (Duffy, 2004).

This investigation leads to new insights on the precarious state that ESL students face and the extent to which educators are identifying ELL students as requiring special education. The lack of adequate teacher training is compounding the problem and improved training in relation to ESL and ELL would help to ameliorate the situation, in light of the increasing numbers of racially, ethnically, religiously, linguistically, and culturally diverse students in Ontario schools. Courses on bilingual learners and the use of academics tests as a pedagogical tool to measure proficiency and ability are simply not enough. Teachers need to have a greater understanding of the implications of these assessments and how to adapt their own teaching practices to recognize

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low language acquisition does not equate a learning disability. The notion of disability needs to be re-conceptualized and re-considered in light of language acquisition.

8.3   Special education programming: On anti-racism and change

Villenas, Deyhle, and Parker (1999) discuss the use of cultural differences as being constructed for the purposes of maintaining the status quo. Cultural differences have been "used by Anglos to maintain racial inequities within educational, political, economic, and social institutions. Culture had become the explanation for school failure, masking the fact that racism was the true cause of the failure" (pp. 45-46). Indeed, these insights are reflective of the narratives I heard from mothers, students, and even educators. Race, culture, ethnicity, language, religion, and low socioeconomic and immigration status have been used to explain why minoritized bodies are placed into special education. As Ladson-Billings (1999) contends, terms such as "'school achievement,' 'middle classlessness,' 'maleness,' 'beauty,' 'intelligence,' 'science' become normative categories of Whiteness, whereas 'gangs,' 'welfare recipients,' 'basketball players,' 'the underclass' become the marginalized and delegitimatized categories of Blackness" (p. 9).

The problems with special education programming require a great deal more consideration. The data to support whether overrepresentation is occurring, and assessing the safeguards to ensure parents are fully informed participants in the decisions that affect their children, require further investigation. Race based statistics which indicate the numbers of students being placed into special education in the Greater Toronto Area are also required. If disproportionality is occurring and minorities are being overrepresented in special education and ESL programs, these programs need to be examined in order to understand how teacher bias, curriculum, and teacher training can be changed to address inequities.

On the issues of anti-racism and change, there is a need to understand how to bring a critical awareness and anti-racist lens to the pursuit of special education and what this means for the educator, School Board personnel, and policy makers. This requires questioning whether special education is privileging some groups, while marginalizing others. As two of the educators in this project suggested, special education privileges some students through the use of computers or provides "extra support" for White students who are allowed to remain in regular academic streams. On the other hand, some students are essentially "disabled" because of their designation and segregation and are led to believe that opportunities for success are limited. The labeling process has streamed some racialized and minoritized students into lower streams, while it has "doubly-privileged" those who have learned how to use the system to their advantage. In this investigation it was not clear whether a designation is static and a permanent part of a student's identity or whether there are ongoing assessments and evaluations. As two educators mentioned several times, the goal of special education is inclusion and interrogation. However, it appears that identifications always influenced the students' identity and how they learned.

8.4 Parent advocacy

Despite the numerous policies in place to ensure parental involvement and the information available to parents, it was clear throughout this investigation that parents are not sufficiently informed about their rights and agency in the process of special education identification and placement. Mothers are not made to understand that the final decision about their child's placement rests with them. Instead, parents recalled feeling guilt and shame when they attempted to challenge a decision made by educators and officials. The fact that when recalling the process some mothers were moved to tears, or that some have sought legal action, suggests that the emotional toll of being unable to affect decisions or have any agency as it concerned their child's

needs, is significant. School practices have left parents feeling as though they are not members of the school community, feeling vulnerable, and unable to contribute to their child's schooling in a way in which they can exercise any authority. Not only are parents not included in academic assessments, as this is not a requirement of the Ministry of Education, but families and administrators feel that there is little room for this level of involvement. As noted above, parental consent is only required when the psychological assessments are being conducted. Educators and administrators may want to include families in the decision making process to develop a trust and rapport, so that they are not "blind-sided" by the process, but administrative pressures, such as unrealistic timelines, may have rendered these steps as unfeasible.

The mothers who were interviewed indicated that there was no indication that there was any other alternative for their child than the one being proposed. Parents need a stronger role in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) in order to understand the learning outcomes and to consult on the child's development and individual needs. In British Columbia, the IEP is completed in consultation with the student, when applicable (Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 2009). In fact, the Ontario Ministry of Education also recognizes that students over the age of 16 should be involved as part of the IEP process, but there was little evidence in this analysis suggesting that on-going consultation with students is occurring. Instead, how the Ministry of Education guidelines were interpreted by principals and educators, varied considerably. In order to ensure that students are cognizant and fully engaged in their learning, students should be involved as much as possible in the IEP process so that they can share in the success and contribute to their own learning in meaningful ways. This is not to state that the Province of British Columbia is without its shortfalls, but there are particular mandates and evidence that suggest individual learners are recognized. For instance, the British Columbia

recognizes that *"No two students with the same disability will experience its impact the same way"* (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 2011). Accordingly, assessing, accommodating, and reviewing adaptations, IEPs, and the students' learning outcomes, should be constantly evolving as the child progresses, rather as a static model that follows the child throughout their education. It appears that this type of involvement would allow for students to have responsibility and accountability for their education.

There is also a need to examine the language contained in the documents provided to parents. Clearly, accurate translations in all of the student populations' languages are needed. In this study it is not clear whether the academic language used in the translations is being appropriately conveyed. For instance, the Spanish word for delayed and impaired is "retardo" (Willbur & Landeros, 2004), a word which has certain implications and perceptions among Spanish speakers. As indicated by the educators in this investigation, translators that are hired by the Boards of Education, do not necessarily have a background in educational policies. Again, this disconnect can lead to critical information being left out of the documentation families receive.

Minoritized and racialized families clearly require support from community organizations and translators who are knowledgeable about education policies. Parents require information on the long-term and short-term implications of an identification and the real effects of placement, as opposed to the misinformation which leads to feelings of guilt and shame as expressed by parents in this investigation. If integration is something that families want, alternatives to classroom structures should be discussed.

Advocacy for families is also needed in the form of community supports, programs, and workshops that bridge not only the language barriers but also provide emotional support. In one

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of the cases highlighted in this study, an educator had informally advocated for a family to have their child tested again in order to remedy an incorrect identification after several years. In this case, since an educator has the adequate information as an insider, she is knowledgeable about the appropriate measures school personnel are required to take. Educators spoke of quietly informing families that they should bring someone with them into the meetings, not only so that they do not feel pressured into accepting a decision, but also so that they have someone to help them to fully understand their rights.

Special education is only an appropriate tool of intervention when parents are fully informed and active participants and feel as though their concerns are legitimate. Parents must learn to be advocates and they must have the appropriate resources and tools to understand the process, deadlines, and documents such as the IEP, in plain language. More so, families need to understand, as some of the mothers in this investigation indicated, that the IEP is a legally binding agreement to hold educators accountable for the success and progress of their child in a meaningful way. Solutions are also needed to articulate why special education is beneficial and who benefits from the programming. An advocate on behalf of families can clearly outline what special education entails, what modifications can be made to the curriculum, what the accommodations are for each subject area, what material will be different for the student, how long a student will need additional accommodations, what is the exit strategy, and further, what are the implications of the identification and placement. These are all areas that need to be distinctly outlined before a parent can make an informed decision.

Accommodating and advocating for families will help to rebuild the trust and rapport that racialized families desperately seek from the schools. Within the Somali and Black communities, there has and continues to be a great deal of distrust and doubt that educators and school

administrators are not necessarily working in the best interests of the ethno-racial communities that they are serving. Community consultations and dialogues are required to understand the services and needs required. As mentioned above, throughout the course of my recruitment, I was contacted by settlement agencies and parents who were not aware of their options, parents who wanted an advocate to come with them to the school during a meeting, or parents who simply wanted to express their outrage at the educators, school, and administrators who were ignoring their concerns. Understanding the process as heavy handed from a professional stance, parents need to be informed of their rights in a more equitable manner that considers the voices and views of families who have a great deal of insight about their children's abilities.

8.5   Becoming an educator: Rethinking teacher education programs

Throughout my doctoral program, I presented my research to a range of audiences both in the field of education and in other fields. Consistently, the question was raised as to how well teacher education programs were working, or not working, in addressing the issues. Each time, unfortunately, I relayed the gaps and concerns with current teacher education programs in the Greater Toronto Area. Lee (2006) suggests that the word "anti-racism" is often too severe for audiences, but we must draw people in and teach them about "closing the gaps" in any way that brings them to the table. The same can be said regarding teacher education programs in Ontario. As noted above, courses to teach ELL students are not mandatory and very few universities offer courses to teach diverse learners (Duffy, 2004). Some anti-racism courses are inserted subtly, in an effort to avoid resistance from the students whom have long formed their own opinions about race, equity, and justice. In other cases, professors and instructors may be forced to teach from a politically neutral perspective. In this section, I suggest that teacher education programs need to be re-examined as discussions of race are often piecemeal at best. Lupart (1998) argues that to

move forward from such piecemeal work, faculties of education and academics are in a key position to encourage educators towards understandings of inclusion and integration. Indeed, teacher education preparation must encompass the relevant teaching practices and pedagogy in teaching excellence for all. Understanding issues of equity, excellence, inclusion, and social justice has been, in Ontario, fragmented at best.

"There is in essence, no shortage of research in teacher education, but there is a paucity of research explicitly connecting how teachers are prepared and whether such preparation is making a difference in student learning" (Lasley, Siedentop & Yinger, 2006, p. 15). Researchers and scholars have identified inadequate teacher preparation as one of the key factors in how disability and special education is understood. Lombard, Miller, and Hazelkorn's (1998) study of 169 educators across 45 U.S. states, found that the majority of educators are ill equipped to address the needs of students with disabilities, to address inclusive practices, and/or they have had little to no training in developing IEPs. Furthermore, on account of a lack of training, most teachers are inadequately equipped to understand various cultural expectations in relation to the curriculum. As Hilliard (2002) argues, the education of Black bodies must take into consideration the language, history, and oppression of Black children, as these concepts are interrelated.

The nature of assessments and clinical evaluations conducted by professionals, who have very little interaction and understanding of the student's abilities, is practiced under the guise of assisting students with their intrinsic deficiencies. Problematic constructs of "intelligence" are further detrimental to minoritized students. Notions of "difference" based on the constructs of psychology (which focuses on the individual) justify and legitimatize separation and segregation. As Underwood's (2006) work found, teachers use assessments to confirm beliefs that the student

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has a deficit. With these issues in mind, there are several gaps in current teacher training, including whether teacher candidates who lack the essential requirements should pass and whether their training entails a key understanding of equity, diversity, special education, and how students of diverse language, culture, ethnic and racial backgrounds may learn differently.

The teaching profession is highly romanticized; students have images, beliefs, and ideas before entering the program that are often at odds with their actual experiences in practicums (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Knowles, Cole, & Presswood, 1994; Schmidt & Knowles, 1995). Cole and Knowles (1993) argue that a problem surrounding those entering the field is the "disillusionment" often related to long-standing beliefs about the role of teachers before they enter the profession. There appears to be highly idealized perceptions, images, and expectations based on prior experiences as students or based on a specific teacher, that are "frozen in time" (Cole & Knowles, 1993, p. 459). As Offut (1995) has found, many enter the field because they were lured by the prospects of having the summers free. Consequently, they realize that there is more to education than they had originally assumed, making them unsuitable educators.

An area that I have personally found that lacks adequate attention is failure in teacher education programs. Brown's (2006) unpublished Ph.D. dissertation on data from 347 Bachelor of Education students at OISE, from the 2002-2003 academic year, revealed that coordinators identified 29 students or 8 percent of teacher candidates as unsuitable for teaching (p. 83). Yet, as Brown (2006) is quick to note, it is a "remarkable discrepancy" that none of these students actually failed the program. Raths and Lyman (2003) suggest that the problem in establishing failure, in the United States, lies with the "teacher education faculty [who] are not taking sufficient care in preventing weak, incompetent student teachers from attaining state licenses" (p.

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206). Similarly, Knowles and Sudzina (1992) argue that teacher educators rarely discuss "failure" in programs. Indeed, I found it highly problematic that in the book, *Becoming a teacher*, that is meant to highlight "practices and issues and helps readers discover all that is involved in becoming a professional teacher," not once was failure mentioned. Rather, the book appeared to romanticize the practice of teaching, presenting an idealized image that perhaps students and educators alike, do not fail. Accordingly, these grand ideals are not in-line with actual practices, resulting in educators who are in the field for the wrong reason. Consequently, these teachers may not know how to adapt teaching practices to meet the diverse learning styles of all learners.

Harry and Klingner (2006) report that many school personnel believe that they are helping students who struggle by placing them into special education. However, this understanding ignores the implications of placements. In the United States, only half of those with an Emotional Disturbance label graduate (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Moreover, the referral process ignores the psychological impact that assessments have on students. Gergen (1994) argues that to be "labelled by mental deficit terminology is…to face a potential lifetime of self-doubt" (p. 151). Researchers note that the teachers who submitted the highest number of referrals were "White, Hispanic [educators] or both, while Black teachers tended to refer less often" (Harry & Klingner, 2006, p. 97). Adding to this, Harry and Klinger (2006) believe that Black educators were least likely to refer students for assessment because they did not believe special education was beneficial and because they were more attuned to the situational and contextual environments in which the children lived.

Furthermore, in Harry and Klingner's (2006) study on principals and educators, principals indicated that teachers who were having difficulties were often placed in

"problematic" schools, in order to make them "suffer." As school personnel admit to being malicious, these findings are indeed troublesome. Structural inequities are compounded by a lack of training on equity and addressing different forms of learning.

The solution, it would appear, would be then to have courses within teacher preparation programs to address the gaps in understanding and educate professionals on how racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups are read as being inherently disabled. The problem, and my firsthand experiences with "race" and "equity" courses, is that these courses are met with a great deal of resistance. Students entering BEd programs have already established ideas, norms and perceptions about race and ethnicity, and instructors of such courses are often met with hostility.

Freire (2006) discusses the need to understand learning coming from the lived experience of the student and bridging the gap between teachers, learners, home, schools, and communities. As Solomon (1997) has pointed out, racialized/minoritized educators are largely invisible within the teaching force in Canada. Similarly, Ryan, Pollock, and Antonelli (2009) found that in 2006 in Ontario there were 71,165 educators, only 18.6 percent of which were visible minority educators. Another more recent finding by *The Toronto Star* reported in the article, *Changing face of Peel Region a challenge for schools and police*, that only two of the 37 principals in the Peel Region are visible minorities, while 90 percent of the community belongs to diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities that are not reflected in the teaching force (Grewal, 2011). The aforementioned data illustrates that administrators and educators continue to embody a great deal of privilege, yet as equitable as their practices may be, there continues to be a gap in the educational labour force. Accordingly, some educators and administrators may be disconnected from the populations they are serving.

Another implication of teacher education programs is the use of assessments, evaluations, and tools used to measure the "exceptionality of students." I did not originally set out to examine the pitfalls of those assessments, yet as the educators revealed there are problems in the process of identifying a learning disability as it is value laden and highly biased against ethnic, racial, and cultural groups, especially for minorities whose first language is not English. There is clearly a need to re-evaluate the instruments used to determine their effectiveness. Both the assessment tools and how they are implemented and used by school personnel need to be re-assessed in order to determine whether these measures are being used to inappropriately rank, measure, and classify students. There is a need to go beyond formal training, workshops, and seminars for teachers to a system that questions power, knowledge, and how difference is taken up by educators.

8.6   Education and anti-racism

Educators must recognize their own privilege, power, biases, and identities, and many educators are uncomfortable or unable to recognize how this in fact may lead to practices that are less than favourable for minoritized students. Attempting to penetrate large educational systems, such as that in Ontario, is also a difficulty. Policy makers must first recognize that the growing racial, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic make-up of the student population is mismatched with the educators who teach. Policies are required that formally recognize and require school officials to implement an anti-racism practices as well as criteria for how special education is implemented. Policies in regards to the curriculum, textbooks, instruction, representation of bodies in the classroom, and school culture must challenge the notions that all learners learn in the same way. There are currently fixed notions of how students should comprehend the material and those who fall outside of these notions are set along a particular continuum of learning. Uniformity and

universal notions of schooling does not work for all students. We continue to see how these issues are playing out in the lack of learner engagement in Toronto and how other models of learning can work. Educators continue to embody a history and identity that is at odds with the students they serve. Moreover, while teacher candidates may take courses on race, diversity, and equity these courses may be disconnected or removed from how students learn language and literacy, math, sciences, history, and geography. If extra assistance is needed for particular students who have unique learning styles then these students should be accommodated through inclusive settings (not segregated classrooms). We need to further examine what the understanding of inclusivity is in Ontario classrooms and how we can ensure that inclusivity is actually occurring in integrated classrooms.

8.7   Inclusion and integration

As the number of students in special education increases in Ontario, it appears that the mantra of inclusion has become fashionable and a way to suggest integration is occurring. However, inclusion is not about adding to what currently exists; what exists is problematic. Inclusion is concerned with all students having a space in the school environment, culture, and structure (Dei et al., 2000). Inclusion entails prompting the success, equity, and outcomes of all students, especially students from marginalized communities. Wilson (1989) argues that referral to special education should be the last step after all other resources have been exhausted. Indeed, in Lupart's (1998) article *Setting right the delusion of inclusion: Implications for Canadian schools,* the researcher argues that for "inclusive education to work, all educators must be prepared to assume responsibility for all students in the school community" (p. 254). As the Centre for Research and Education in Human Resources (CREHR, 1985) argues, funds in Ontario schools should be allocated towards building an integrated system that fosters inclusion,

not a segregated or two-tier system of have and have-nots. As Artiles (2003) notes, the education system is comprised of winners and losers and schools reproduce economic and cultural models of individualism and competition. Daniel (2005) goes on further to suggest that special education placement is about winning and losing and which schools can obtain the most of amount of money through placing students into special education. The Ministry of Education (2011) in Ontario provides clear guidelines that educators and administrators must first consider placement in regular classrooms when placing students with exceptionalities. However, there may be evidence that many educators see inclusion in the regular classroom as a burden. The CREHR (1985) argues that legislation does little to encourage integration and inclusion. Indeed, as discussed in *Chapter Two,* Bill 82 functions to maintain the status-quo.

8.8   Future of special education: Considering Indigenous education and schooling

The use of Indigenous education has remained relatively unexplored in the Greater Toronto Area. Understanding and tapping into the student's spiritual, cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic identities are not commonly integrated into everyday curriculum practices. Instead, the curriculum is removed and segregated from the realities of minoritized students. As Roithmayr (1999) notes, "schools teach students of color that what they learn in their homes is primitive, mythical, and backward but what they learn in their classrooms is objective, historically accurate, and universal" (p. 4). How and what is taught in classrooms in the Greater Toronto Area is no different. The messages families and students are receiving is that their language, culture, religion, spirituality, race, and ethnicity should be kept at home, while the rules and routines of the classroom must become paramount. Looking at a classroom, an outsider notes that students who conform to the tone and "behave" how the educator wants them to,

receives the educators assistance and "excels." The students who are having difficulty adjusting are told they need to and conform to the unwritten rules of what is expected.

Cultural competence, as defined by Delpit and Dowdy (2002), is the "ability of students to grow in understanding and respect for their culture of origin" (p. 134). Indeed, education should be rooted in a student's culture, rather than marginalizing and removing their language and cultural differences. However, the knowledge that non-White students in elementary and secondary levels learn is imposed, foreign, removed and disconnected from their lived reality. Culturally relevant teaching avoids blaming the victim and examines "the structural and symbolic foundations of inequity and injustice" (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002, p. 134). Similarly, Dei (2003) argues that inclusive communities are communities in which all students have a sense of belonging and identification, and where the relevance and importance of Indigenous knowledges, histories, experiences, and culture are integrated throughout the curriculum. The current Ontario curriculum provides a multiculturalism approach to education, whereby the experiences of non-mainstream cultures are reduced to artifacts, food, and celebratory months. Indeed, current inclusion models are celebratory models of difference that negate power structures and systemic inequities that continue to erode the ideals of equity. All religious, racial, and ethnic minorities should be able to see themselves not only in the curriculum, but in the school personnel.

Since education is understood in such narrow confines, clearly the knowledge, educational assessments, and psychological assessments to determine identification for special education are not contextualized within students' lived realities. Alicya recognized the limitations of the assessments, such as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), expressing that she does not believe that all measures are necessarily fair and accurate. In particular, she noted that some items in these

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assessments are culturally loaded and not even clear to some educators. In the PPVT, she pointed out that students are required to recognize pictures and name them, without completing being able to view. However, the pictures are in black and white as not all schools have the assessments in colour. Accordingly, if a student is unable to recognize particular items, due how the test items are laid out, a student is at a further disadvantage. She further noted that there are outdated items such as "camcorder" which assumes a particular economic, cultural, and historical background, since the test has been used since the 1990s. Looking further to examine the cultural significance of certain items, Alicya noted that the EQAO assessment had a question that asked about whether it was appropriate for a boy to be bouncing a ball in the backyard. However, in West Indian culture, "backyard" refers to the home and it is considered disrespectful to play inside the house. While the interviewees noted only a few examples of the culturally loaded instruments used to assess students, there is an indication that the instruments used to assess students for special education disadvantage particular groups.

8.9　The legitimacy of special education

Hilliard's (1992) article *Pitfalls and promises of special education practice* draws parallels between the oath that doctors must take and the state of special education, suggesting special education should be contextualized under the mantra of "first do no harm." Given the historical and current data on students being streamed into special education, Hilliard (1992) suggests a more drastic approach of questioning the validity of the assessments or the tools used to identify students and to reconsider special education under four criteria: (a) teachers cannot make assumptions about the limits of a child's learning; (b) the mindset must be changed, rather than using special education as a means to sort and classify students; (c) the system needs to be reexamined to create change in the learner's cognitive and academic functioning; (d) a successful

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system requires a valid theoretical justification (p. 170). Accordingly, there is a need to question the very legitimacy of special education.

Parents and educators have both noted that they have grave concerns about the ultimate usefulness of special education and questioned whether it functions to reproduce the status quo of the labour force. Moreover, educators questioned the advantages of special education programming. At times, educators were in fact conflicted about whether it was beneficial, since they had seen firsthand how particular students were placed into inappropriate designations. As Andrews et al. (2000) aptly suggest there is a need to revise, re-conceptualize, and reconsider how special education is approached:

> Re-conceptualists believe that, given fundamental problems with the general education system special education is often ineffective, wasteful, and for some students, damaging. The re-conceptualist position incorporates a focus on racism, on systems, on researchers as change agents and on the need to redefine moral and ethical behavior. Furthermore if special education is to fulfill its promise of enhancing individual lives, it first must address the racism and cultural stigmas that devalue differences (pp. 259-260).

I question whether special education has become a proverbial pipeline to high dropout rates and whether special education results in alienating and pushing students out of schools. There appears to be underlying and complex contradictions with designations and identifications. On the one hand, if a student is identified, it provides them with supports that they would not normally receive in a regular classroom. On the other hand, the "exceptional label" forces a placement in special education that could be completely inappropriate. As Harry and Klingner (2007) illustrate in their article *Discarding the deficit model*:

> the real problem is the arbitrariness and stigmatizing effects of the entire process. Students shouldn't need a false disability label to receive appropriate support. They also shouldn't acquire that label because they had inappropriate or inadequate opportunities to learn (p. 18).

When Jocelyn was asked if special education results in beneficial outcomes, she provided the resoundingly negative response of "absolutely not" suggesting that educators have used the programming to assume that some students cannot learn and achieve like other students. Similar to the educators interviewed, students related that being in special education means that teachers assume that they cannot learn like their peers and therefore must be segregated. In many cases, limitations were placed on their learning at an early age and as such their education was confined by their identification. I further asked Jocelyn if educators believed that particular students cannot learn. She responded in stating: "I would say a good 90% and that's probably a fairly conservative estimate" (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

Nikki had competing and conflicting notions of special education and questioned the legitimacy of special education. If she were ever in a position to put her own children in this programming, she stated that she did not know how she would proceed. At other points in our interview, she reiterated that there is a gap in the information given to parents and this lack of communication results in her questioning her faith in the system. She was conflicted about whether identification is beneficial for the student and she struggles with the process all the time. Nikki, like many other educators, believes that placements are inherently problematic and questions whether there is a true measure in assessing students to be placed into these programs. Indeed, educators continue to question whether it is beneficial.

Parents and students discussed the self-esteem and stigma that special education designations cause. In general, students discussed stigma and shame, ridicule and anger they had felt over the years. Students, including Aziza, Annette, and James, noted they were simply not challenged or pushed to excel to their capacity. Limits had been imposed on them and they simply did not feel their educators were doing enough to assist them. These students have been

led to believe they cannot be successful. The labels "dumb," "stupid," and "speds" were messages they had heard and internalized. Student participants repeatedly suggested that those who are not integrated within a regular setting are assigned problematic characteristics. Accordingly, students define themselves through a negative self-concept. It appeared that Aziza also had learned and internalized a helplessness due to the number of years in special education. Aziza, like others, noted a lack confidence in her abilities and relied on other students and educators to reassure her of her capabilities. Her mother also recalled that her daughter's confidence has been greatly affected by the placement in special education and feels that her confidence is "lower than others" through the "disabling." For years, Aziza has not been given the opportunity to be in an integrated setting, implying to both the student and the family that she is unable to function within the prescribed "norms."

On the one hand, educators questioned the "unavoidable usefulness" of providing individualized attention that was not available in large group settings. On the other, however they questioned whether the stigma and identification would lead to beneficial outcomes in the future. Students in special education are receiving in some cases laptops and/or more time to complete assessments, programs based on their individual needs, and in special education they are not necessarily lost in a class of 25-28 students. As Jocelyn aptly pointed out, in some cases the identification limits a student's abilities, while others have used the system to gain services and accommodations: "I think for some children it does disables them and it streams them into lower streams and it limits their potential. And for others, I think it gives them extra privilege" (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010). In specific cases, Jocelyn noted that it was White parents who were able to negotiate privileges for their children. Yet, there were concerns of how tracking and streaming was used for students who were never fully integrated. As one of the mothers aptly put it, if there

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is a continuous cycle of underestimating the child's abilities in school and what they are capable of achieving, special education is merely a "job" for someone, since their role is just to "label."

Educators also pointed out that students and parents are essentially unaware of the process, policies, and systems that may hinder their child's continuance in postsecondary education. Repeatedly stating the need for more evidence of systemic barriers, Nikki believes that more cases and evidence of accountability are needed to uncover the usefulness of special education. Haweeya also discussed that special education is a necessity if the child is actually in need of that kind of support. However, she did not believe that her daughter needed to be in that type of programming for 12 years. She repeatedly but unsuccessfully voiced her concerns about the proper use of special education. Some parents want the extra-support for their child, but not at the risk of "suffering." These sentiments were echoed by Annette who also suggested that her daughter was limited in her abilities and her possibilities of accessing postsecondary education were also reduced. Rather than functioning as a stepping stone to a regular integrated programming, as Kulvir pointed out special education should be, Haweeya and Aziza have had to live with special education throughout their schooling as a consequence of not being properly tested. At the time of the interview, Annette suggested that she was considering removing her daughter from her current environment, as she believed it was harmful to her success and self-esteem. Overall, the legitimacy of special education is a concern, as it inherently suggests that learners can only receive support and assistance through a set of criteria and through the use of a label.

8.10 Understanding the exit strategy of special education

Jocelyn pointed out that a great number of students in special education typically dropout of high school, rather than continuing on to postsecondary education. She believes that those

who continue on to postsecondary education are typically White bodies, while those who dropout tend to be racialized. "And I'm sure they have higher drop out levels because like I said by the time they get to high school they I think they've been disabled a lot of those kids and it's hard to reverse the damage that they've faced in elementary school" (Jocelyn, 28/9/2010).

The "exit strategy" from special education was a concern noted by Kulvir who believed that the identification should not be a lifelong designation. She illustrated that educators should be ensuring that academic gains and that a student is growing and further ensuring that the programs are appropriate. Emphasizing how detrimental policies and practices can be, the proper protocols must be in place to ensure that students are not left in programs for life. Kulvir further indicated that labels and stigmas should not be carried throughout a student's academic career.

In three of the cases discussed in this project, however, parents believed that they were able to use the designation to ensure that their child would succeed throughout their schooling and into postsecondary education. The "exceptionality" was something that they could use to ensure success and accommodations they felt were necessary. As Monica and Sukhjeet suggested, accommodations should be just good teaching practices, rather than mandated through the written document of an IEP. Teachers also noted that the support in high school for students with a special education designation tends to decrease significantly and parents tend to be passive in decisions as their child enters high school. Perhaps not surprisingly, similar sentiments of being unheard were echoed by parents. Safe guards and procedural guidelines are required to ensure that students are essentially not "disabled" for life. Indeed, students should not be limited in their educational and employment opportunities because of a designation that presumes impaired cognitive abilities throughout the student's entire life.

Yet, some unanswered questions about special education remain. When we examine the stigma and demarcation noted by students, the question becomes whether this demarcation has a long term impact. In other words, are students affected to the extent that their lifelong opportunities have been limited through the ongoing messages that they have heard from school officials? Do we know how many students with a "judgment category" are going on to graduate school? Should special education placement be encouraged given the history of streaming in the Greater Toronto Area and the practices in the United States that have impacts for racialized students?

Through this investigation, I was contacted by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, as the organization has dealt with cases of inaccurate and inappropriate identification. This provides some insight into the damage that these labels are causing. The process of IEPs and IPRCs appear to require some demystifying, as it is not clear what safeguards are in place to ensure that parents and students are protected. If extra assistance is needed for particular students who have unique learning styles, these students should be assisted through inclusive settings, rather than segregated settings. A critical examination is required as to whether the benefits of labeling outweigh the consequences and lifelong stigma and opportunities. For instance, we know that many who are placed in special education are not encouraged to attend postsecondary education. We should be looking for alternative means to address the disparities/gaps in students' learning, rather than suggesting that the only way to assist them is by putting them in a box.

8.11 Implications for further study

There remain some issues in the area of special education as it affects non-White families that require further analysis. This investigation attempted to give an understanding the diverse experiences of families and how they understand special education policies, practices,

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procedures, and processes of identification and placement. However, there remain many unanswered questions regarding the structural processes and how policies are implemented. An investigation of this size cannot give a complete understanding of what is occurring in all schools in the Greater Toronto Area; instead I have presented a nuanced understanding of how Somali, Trinidadian, Jamaican, and Punjabi-Sikh families negotiate their children's learning, communication with school personnel, understanding official documentation, as well as the barriers these families face.

This investigation organized and substantiated how educators, administrators, mothers, and students have conceptualized race, structural factors, and communication between homes and schools. This investigation outlines complex and often contradictory ways in which administrators implement policies that are assigned to multifaceted special education identifications. As I interviewed different families and analyzed the data, some questions came forward that should be addressed through further investigation. As mentioned earlier, only mothers participated in this study. It is not clear whether fathers have the same understanding of special education and whether they would have faced the same resistance from school personnel if they disagreed with decisions. Further studies are needed to understand the perspective of non-White fathers and how they are perceived by school personnel and whether they may have more authority or encounter similar structural barriers.

Another issue that came to light in this study is the need to better understand the complex issue of the "exit rates" of those identified and placed. Since there is no mechanism to track students in special education, we do not have a complete picture of how students with an IEP and formal special education identification are integrated into an inclusive setting, or whether they graduate from high school. More information and statistics are required to understand whether

these students are attending postsecondary education, dropping out, or whether inclusion is a possibility. It is conceivable that these students are limited in their lifelong opportunities and are never fully given an opportunity to pursue higher education.

Another area that requires further study is understanding how special education may be resulting in the streaming of non-White students. The parent surveys collected by the TDSB only give us a partial picture of the ethnic identity of the students in these programs. As this investigation reveals, there is evidence that special education is highly racialized, based on observations by students and educators, yet we still do not have a complete breakdown of which students may be more likely to be identified through judgment categories. Secondly, the use of Indigenous knowledge and alternative education in place of special education is not part of the academic literature. The current thinking assumes that there is only one way to assist students with "exceptionalities": assess them, label them, and in some cases, remove them from a regular classroom. The medical model is applied and continues to have implications on how students are categorized according to the standards set out by curriculum writers.

Educators have a great deal of authority and remain the gatekeepers of what types of knowledges are taught, what is taught, and how it is impressed on students. Part of the problem, it appears, is that students who do not fit within the predefined "norms" are stigmatized, marginalized, and alienated throughout their schooling. If schooling is meant for all students, regardless of their ethnicity, culture, religion, language, race, and spirituality, why are these types of programming seen as the only way some students can learn? Why do some students require modifications, and not all learners? Should the curriculum be adapted for some students, and not others? Perhaps we should consider why there is a need to track the modifications and

accommodations for some learners, when education for all, should be just that: education and

success for all learners.

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APPENDIX I- INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 'A'

Sample Interview Questions for Students
Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this study that looks at the experiences of minorities in special education.

1. Tell me about your school.

2. Can you describe or tell me about a typical day and week at school?
    What does first period look like?

3. What is different from a resource class or special education class and a regular class?
    How are special education classrooms different from other classrooms?

4. When did you get placed into special education programming?
    How did this happen? Do you know about the process involved?

5. How do you think you were labelled/identified as needing special education?

6. Without naming names, think of the other students in special education programs.
    Who do you think they are?

7. What kind of students do you think are placed into special education?
    Do you notice any patterns of particular kinds of students in special education?

8. Who is in your class?
    Do they all belong to one ethnic group? (one racial group?) Are they all boys?

9. What have you seen that is different from those students in special education?
    Do you think that students in regular classrooms are different? How so?

10. How do you feel being in special education?

11. How common do you think your experiences with special education are to other students who look like you?

12. Can you describe if the teacher, books, and materials are different?

13. What does it mean to you to be in special education?

14. Is there anything I forgot to ask about special education?

Thank you for your participation

APPENDIX II- INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 'B'

Sample Interview Questions for Parents

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this very important study to discuss your experiences with schools and the special education process.

<u>**Background and Experience with Special Education**</u>

1. Can you tell me how many children you have in your family?

2. How many of your children have been identified/labelled as requiring special education?

3. Can you briefly describe the relationship you have with your child's teachers?

<u>*Identification process*</u>

4. When was your child first identified as having special educational needs?

5. What type of instruction/services does your child currently receive?

6. Tell me about the assessment process.

7. Do you believe your child's assessment was an accurate one? Why or why not?

8. What are you feelings/thoughts surrounding this type of learning?

9. How do you feel that your child is being treated at school? Please explain.

10. Generally, do you believe that expectations are different for certain children and parents? What do you feel is the underlying reason for this?

<u>*Parent-teacher Relations*</u>

11. Have you met many of your child's teachers? How were these meetings arranged?

12. (teacher or parent initiated)

13. Can you tell me about a specific interaction you have had with your child's teacher?

14. Do you feel comfortable approaching the teacher if you have a concern with your child's lack of progress?

15. Can you briefly describe the relationship you have with your child's teachers?

16. Do you believe that your "voice" or choices regarding your child were/are being heard? Please explain.

17. Have you spoken to other parents at the school? Does the principal, teacher, and/or resource teacher listen to some people more than others? Please tell me about that.

18. When and how often do you interact with school officials?

Resource/Support

19. What did you do after your child was labelled/placed in his/her current designation?

20. What types of resources and information did the school provide you with, after the decision was made?

21. Did you look for any resources on your own?

22. How did you and your family members react to the placement decision?

23. Were you informed of an appeal process?

24. What do you think your child might do when s/he finishes school? Did you think the same thing when s/he was younger?

Thank you for your participation.

APPENDIX III- INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 'C'

Sample Interview Questions for Educators/School administrators

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this very important study to understand the special education process. The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of school administrators' perspectives regarding the special education referral process.

1. How long have you been in your current role as a special education administrator?

2. Can you walk me through a typical year, typical week, typical day in special education?

3. How does instruction in special education differ from that of regular classrooms?

4. Can you explain what the objective(s) of special education are, and how it differs from regular classrooms?

Role of testing
5. When do assessments occur?

6. Run me through the typical process of an assessment.

7. How do students tend to respond to assessments? How about parents?

8. What is the range of responses? Why do you think some people respond this way and others respond differently?

9. As schools move into models of "accountability" and the increasing use of testing such as the EQAO, do you think this model has impacted special education services?

10. To the best of your knowledge, what assessments or tests are conducted before a student is placed?

11. How does a student received the "exceptional" designation?
12. What factors do you believe impact the decisions surrounding special education?

13. Are there any other factors, such as socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, ethnicity that may impact decisions related to special education?

14. Reflecting on your class roster, describe the demographic, racial, ethnic, linguistic groups that are currently represented in your class?

15. Does placement in special education result in beneficial outcomes for students? Please explain.

Parent -teacher Relationships

16. Describe the range of parental involvement in your school.

17. What type of parent tends to be more involved?

18. Why do you think that's the case?

19. What do you believe the roles of parents are in their child's assessment?

20. What role do parents/guardians play in the placement process of the child?

21. Are parents/guardians given the opportunity to sit in placement meetings or assessments?

22. How does the information provided by at placement meetings differ from information/insights provided by parents/guardians?

23. Do you believe that parents are adequately consulted prior to the placement decision?

24. What are the protocols put in place for parents to reverse the decision?

25. Do you believe that some parents have successful reversed a decision to pull their child out of special education?

Perceptions

26. What role does special education play in children's schooling?

27. From your class composition and the school that you work with, do you think that race impacts placement decisions into special education?

28. Do you believe that the assessments conducted for special education placements are a fair and accurate measure of a student's ability? Please explain.

29. There is literature and studies conducted in the United States that suggests that students of colour are overrepresented, or disproportionately affected placed in special education.

30. Do you believe a similar phenomenon is occurring in Toronto, Ontario and Canada? Explain.

31. What do you believe the "exit strategy" or graduation rates of those placed into special education are?

Thank you for your participation.

APPENDIX IV- INFORMED PARENTAL LETTER OF CONSENT

Minding the gap: Understanding the experiences of racialized students and parents in Toronto's special education programs

Informed Parental Consent Form

I _____ (please print name) have read the letter describing what the research project intends to investigate, and I agree to allow my child to be a participant in the study.

I understand the interview with me will take place at a mutually convenient location for a period of about thirty minutes. I also understand that our conversation will be audio-recorded with my consent, and that my child may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any time during the interview until my child indicates that it may be turned on again. I understand that my contributions will remain **confidential,** that my participation is voluntary, **that my identity and my child's identity will remain anonymous,** and neither me nor my child will be required to share any information that he or she is not comfortable with. I will receive a $10 gift card at the end of the interview. **Lastly, I understand that while this study has been approved by the University of Toronto, this research is not being conducted through or approved by any particular school board.**

By signing your name here, you acknowledge that you have read and understand the information provided in this form, and give your informed consent for your child's participation in this study. A copy of this consent form will be returned to you for your records. Any personally identifiable information that I will collect from you in the recruitment process (such as your name, address, etc.) will simply be used to keep the data organized and to stay in touch with you. This kind of information will not be used in any publicly disseminated materials.

Parent/Guardian

Name: (print) _____

Signature: _____

Date _____

Name of child _____

Researcher _____   Date _____

APPENDIX V - PARENT AND EDUCATOR CONSENT FORM

Parent and Educator Consent Form

By signing your name here, you acknowledge that you have read and understand the information provided in the Request Letter of Participation, and give your informed consent to participate in this study. The top half of this consent form will be returned to you for your records.

Participant   Print Full Name

_____

                        Signature   _____

                        Date   _____

Researcher   _____   Date   _____

Please note: Any personally identifiable information that I will collect from you in the recruitment process (such as your name, address, etc.) will simply be used to keep the data organized and to stay in touch with you. This kind of information will not be used in any publicly disseminated materials. This is done to ensure that the information you provide remains anonymous. Should you wish to withdraw from the study, you can contact the researcher by email or phone, and simply say, "I no longer wish to participate in this study."

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By signing your name here, you acknowledge that you have read and understand the information provided in the Request Letter of Participation, and give your informed consent to participate in this study. The top half of this consent form will be returned to you for your records.

Participant   Print Full Name

_____

                        Signature   _____

                        Date   _____

Researcher   _____   Date   _____

Please note: Any personally identifiable information that I will collect from you in the recruitment process (such as your name, address, etc.) will simply be used to keep the data organized and to stay in touch with you. This kind of information will not be used in any publicly disseminated materials. This is done to ensure that the information you provide remains anonymous. Should you wish to withdraw from the study, you can contact the researcher by email or phone, and simply say, "I no longer wish to participate in this study."

APPENDIX VI - PARENTAL INFORMATION SHEET

Minding the gap: Understanding the experiences of racialized (minority) students and parents in Toronto's special education programs
Parental Information Sheet/Request Letter of Participation for Students

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I am a researcher from the University of Toronto conducting a study currently named "Minding the gap: Understanding the experiences of racialized students and parents in Toronto's special education programs." I am a racialized student and PhD Candidate in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. The research is supervised by Professor George J. Sefa Dei of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies (SESE) at OISE. I am sending this letter to explain why I would like for you to participate in my project. The organization has agreed to pass on this letter/request for participation and I do not have access to you or your child's personal information.

The purpose of this study is to try to better understand the experiences of minority parents and students in special education (specifically, students in learning disabilities programs identified with a behavioural problem or classified under a judgement category) and to share your stories and perspectives anonymously.

I am interested in examining how minority students and their parents understand what it means to be labelled and placed into special education and what consultations and procedures are put in place to ensure that parents are informed and equal participants in the decision making process. By understanding the processes, I hope to raise awareness about the different kinds of experiences, thoughts, and perceptions of minorities who are placed into special education. Such information may be helpful for educating people such as helping professionals, teachers, researchers and other families.

If you and your child agree, your child will be asked to participate in an interview that will take approximately 30 minutes, at a date, time and location that is convenient for both of you. The interview will include questions about their experiences and perceptions of the special education classroom. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, and you will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript for your feedback, clarification, and corrections. The information your child provides me with will be combined with information from other minority students, parents, and educators in the form of a research thesis. **At no time will identifying information about your child or your family be used in this report and any subsequent presentations, conferences, journal articles, and or books and all information collected from this study will be stored in a secure location.** The results from this study may be published in print and electronically. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and your participation is not dependent on your child's involvement, nor is your child's participation required for you to participate.

Potential benefits of participation in this study include a chance for your child to openly share his or her experiences, thoughts and feelings about being placed into special education. In

volunteering to be a part of the study, your child will make an important contribution to a growing body of research in special education.

Since I want your honest viewpoints about being minorities in special education, I am taking the following steps to address concerns about your privacy and to protect your anonymity:

(1) All the names of people and places that you may identify you or your family will be replaced with pseudonyms. You can modify these pseudonyms until you are satisfied about the degree of you and your child's anonymity in the interview transcript.

(2) Only I will have access to the interview data (recordings and transcripts). I will keep the data safe in a password-protected area of restricted-access computers and locked filing cabinets. Demographic information will be collected and stored separately.

(3) Any information that will personally identify you and your child will only be used to organize the research data and to contact you. This information will not be used in any public presentation or written report.

Most importantly, **participation in this research project is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.** To withdraw from the study, simply contact me by email or phone regarding your wish to discontinue your involvement, and any information that you shared with me will be destroyed. There will be no negative consequences attached to either declining to participate or withdrawing from participation in the study.

Participating in this study may give your child the benefit of voicing feelings and thoughts that s/he may not have the opportunity to at school. This may have a liberating and empowering effect. Conversely, sharing his or her past, present, and personal experiences may also bring up complex emotions that may be difficult to manage. To assist with any unpleasant feelings, I will have a list of free services and referrals to appropriate professionals. Your child has the right to refrain from answering certain questions, to stop the interview at any time, and to delete confidential details from the interview transcript. Should your child become considerably upset and I cannot assist, I will have a list of appropriate and free resources will be available.

I encourage you and your child to ask any questions at any time about this study or any part of it, as your concerns are important to me. Please do not hesitate to contact me at the email address or phone number below. You and your child also invited to contact the Ethics Review Office (ethics.review@utoronto.ca / 416-946-3273) should you have any questions about your rights as research participants. While this study has been approved by the University of Toronto, this research is not being conducted through or approved by any particular school board.

Again, thank you for helping me with my study- I really appreciate your support!

Sincerely,

Jagjeet Kaur Gill, PhD Candidate
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto
647-226-5524
j.gill@utoronto.ca

APPENDIX VII - REQUEST LETTER OF PARTICIPATION OF PARENTS

Minding the gap: Understanding the experiences of racialized (minority) students and parents in Toronto's special education programs

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a researcher from the University of Toronto conducting a study currently named "Minding the gap: Understanding the experiences of racialized students and parents in Toronto's special education programs." I am a minority student and PhD Candidate in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. The research is supervised by Professor George J. Sefa Dei of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies (SESE) at OISE. **I am sending this letter to explain why I would like for you to participate in my project. The organization has agreed to pass on this letter/request for participation and I do not have access to you or your child's personal information.**

The purpose of this study is to try to better understand the experiences of minority parents and students in special education (specifically, students in learning disabilities programs identified with a behavioural problem or classified under a judgement category). I am interested in examining how minority students and their parents understand what it means to be labelled and placed into special education and what consultations and procedures are put in place to ensure that parents are informed and equal participants in the decision making process. By understanding the processes, I hope to raise awareness about the different kinds of experiences, thoughts, and perceptions of minorities who are placed into special education and the experiences of minority parents. Such information may be helpful for educating people such as helping professionals, teachers, researchers and other families.

If you agree to participate, an interview will take approximately 60 minutes, at a date, time and location that is convenient for you. The interview will include questions about your experiences and observations on the assessment process and parent-teacher relationships. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, and you will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript for your feedback, clarification, and corrections. The information you provide me with will be combined with information from other parents, students and educators in the form of a research thesis. **At no time will identifying information about you be used in this report and any subsequent presentations, conferences, journal articles, and or books and all information collected from this study will be stored in a secure location.** The results from this study may be published in print and electronically.

There is minimal risk associated with participation in this research. If, however, you should find any portion of your participation in this study upsetting, you may end participation (at any time, for any reason), without question or negative consequence.

Potential benefits of participation in this study include a chance for you to openly share your experiences, thoughts and feelings about the special education process. In volunteering to be a

part of the study, you will make an important contribution to a growing body of research in special education.

Since I want your honest viewpoints about your experiences in special education, I am taking the following steps to address concerns about your privacy and to protect your anonymity:

All the names of people and places that you may identify you or your family will be replaced with pseudonyms. You can modify these pseudonyms until you are satisfied about the degree of you your anonymity in the interview transcript.

Only I will have access to the interview data (recordings and transcripts). I will keep the data safe in a password-protected area of restricted-access computers and locked filing cabinets.

Any information that will personally identify you and will only be used to organize the research data and to contact you. This information will not be used in any public presentation or written report.

Most importantly, **participation in this research project is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.** To withdraw from the study, simply contact me by email or phone regarding your wish to discontinue your involvement, and any information that you shared with me will be destroyed. There will be no negative consequences attached to either declining to participate or withdrawing from participation in the study.

Participating in this study may afford you the benefit of voicing feelings and thoughts that you may not have the opportunity to at your child's school. This may have a liberating and empowering effect. Conversely, sharing your personal experiences may also bring up complex emotions that may be difficult to manage. You have the right to refrain from answering certain questions, to stop the interview at any time, and to delete confidential details from the interview transcript. I have also complied a suitable list of appropriate, free resources in the Greater Toronto Area to assist with any unpleasant feelings that may arise during the interview.

I encourage you to ask any questions at any time about this study or any part of it, as your concerns are important to me. Please do not hesitate to contact me at the email address or phone number below. You are also invited to contact the Ethics Review Office (ethics.review@utoronto.ca / 416-946-3273) should you have any questions about your rights as a research participant. While this study has been approved by the University of Toronto, this research is not being conducted through or approved by any particular school board.

Again, thank you for helping me with my study- I really appreciate your support!

Sincerely,

Jagjeet Kaur Gill, PhD Candidate
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto
647-226-5524
j.gill@utoronto.ca

APPENDIX VIII - STUDENT LETTER OF ASSENT

Minding the gap: Understanding the experiences of racialized (minority) students and parents in Toronto's special education programs

Your parents have allowed me to talk to you about a project that I am working on. The project is on students in special education. I am going to spend a few minutes telling you about my project, and then I am going to ask you if you are interested in taking part in the project. If you agree, the project will take a total of 30 minutes. This letter of request is coming from me and not any organization, group or community centre or staff members you may belong to.

Who am I?

My name is Jagjeet Kaur Gill (JAG) and I am a Student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto. I work in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning.

Why am I meeting with you?

I want to tell you about a study that involves students like yourself in special education. I want to see if you would like to be in this study as well.

Why am I doing this study?

I want to find out about your experiences in your school and in special education.

What will happen to you if you are in the study?

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you 14-16 questions about your school, your experiences and what you think about special education. You can try your best to answer all the questions. It will take you about 25 to 30 minutes to answer all the questions.

Are there good things and bad things about the study?

What I find in this study may be used help teachers and principals to understand how others feel in special education and some of the problems there may be. As far as I know, being in this study will not hurt you and it will not make you feel bad. In the event that you feel uncomfortable or upset, we can stop the interview and discuss your feelings. If I cannot help you, I have a list professionals in your area that may be able to help you and discuss what you are feeling.

Will you have to answer all questions and do everything you are asked to do?

If I ask you questions that you do not want to answer, then tell me that you do not want to answers those questions.

Who will know that you are in the study?

The things you say and any information I write about you will not have your name with it, so no one will know they are your answers or the things that you did.
I will not let anyone see your answers or say any other information about you. Your teachers, principal, and parents will never see the answers you gave or the information I wrote about you.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in the study. No one will get angry or upset with you if you don't want to do this. Just tell me if you don't want to be in the study. And remember, if you decide to be in the study but later you change your mind, then you can tell me you do not want to be in the study anymore.

Do you have any questions?

You can ask questions at any time. You can ask now or you can ask later. You can talk to me or you can talk to someone else at any time during the study. Here are the telephone number and email address to reach me.

Jagjeet Kaur Gill   Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
647-226-5524   j.gill@utoronto.ca

IF YOU WANT TO BE IN THE STUDY, SIGN YOUR NAME ON THE LINE BELOW:

Child's name, printed: _____
Date: _____
Signature of the Student: _____
Date: _____

APPENDIX IX- REQUEST LETTER OF PARTICIPATION FOR EDUCATORS/ SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

<u>Minding the gap: Understanding the experiences of racialized students and parents in Toronto's special education programs</u>
Request Letter of Participation for Educators/ School Administrators

Dear Educator:

I am a researcher from the University of Toronto conducting a study currently named "Minding the gap: Understanding the experiences of racialized students and parents in Toronto's special education programs." I am a racialized student and PhD Candidate in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. The research is supervised by Professor George J. Sefa Dei of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies (SESE) at OISE. This letter outlines the objectives of my study and how you will be involved should you agree to participate.

The purpose of this study is to try to better understand the experiences of minority parents and students in special education (specifically, students in learning disabilities programs identified with a behavioural problem or classified under a judgement category) and to understand the role that educators play in the placement process and their observations anonymously. I am interested in examining your perceptions as an educator on the assessment process and parent-teacher relationships within special education. By understanding the processes involved, I hope to raise awareness about the different kinds of experiences, thoughts, and perceptions of minorities who are placed into special education. Such information may be helpful for educating people such as helping professionals, teachers, researchers and other families.

If you agree to participate, an interview will take approximately 60 minutes, at a date, time and location that is convenient for you. The interview will include questions about your experiences and observations on the assessment process and your own classroom. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, and you will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript for your feedback, clarification, and corrections. The information you provide me with will be combined with information from other educators, parents and students in the form of a research thesis. **At no time will identifying information about you be used in this report and any subsequent presentations, conferences, journal articles, and or books, and all information collected from this study will be stored in a secure location.** The results from this study may be published in print and electronically.

There is minimal risk associated with participation in this research. If, however, you should find any portion of your participation in this study upsetting, you may end participation (at any time, for any reason), without question or negative consequence.

Potential benefits of participation in this study include a chance for you to openly share your experiences, thoughts and feelings about the special education process. In volunteering to be a

part of the study, you will make an important contribution to a growing body of research in special education.

Since I want your honest viewpoints about your observations and experiences in special education, I am taking the following steps to address concerns about your privacy and to protect your anonymity:

(1) All the names of people and places that you may identify you or your family will be replaced with pseudonyms. You can modify these pseudonyms until you are satisfied about the degree of you your anonymity in the interview transcript.

(2) Only I will have access to the interview data (recordings and transcripts). I will keep the data safe in a password-protected area of restricted-access computers and locked filing cabinets.

(3) Any information that will personally identify you and will only be used to organize the research data and to contact you. This information will not be used in any public presentation or written report.

Most importantly, **participation in this research project is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.** To withdraw from the study, simply contact me by email or phone regarding your wish to discontinue your involvement, and any information that you shared with me will be destroyed. There will be no negative consequences attached to either declining to participate or withdrawing from participation in the study.

Participating in this study may afford you the benefit of voicing feelings and thoughts that you may not have the opportunity to at school. This may have a liberating and empowering effect. Conversely, sharing your personal experiences may also bring up complex emotions that may be difficult to manage. You have the right to refrain from answering certain questions, to stop the interview at any time, and to delete confidential details from the interview transcript.

I encourage you to ask any questions at any time about this study or any part of it, as your concerns are important to me. Please do not hesitate to contact me at the email address or phone number below. You are also invited to contact the Ethics Review Office (ethics.review@utoronto.ca / 416-946-3273) should you have any questions about your rights as a research participant. While this study has been approved by the University of Toronto, this research is not being conducted through or approved by any particular School Board.

Again, thank you for helping me with my study- I really appreciate your support!

Sincerely,

Jagjeet Kaur Gill
 PhD Candidate
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto
647-226-5524
j.gill@utoronto.ca

APPENDIX X - DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SURVEY FOR EDUCATORS/ ADMINISTRATORS

Please note: Although all participating educators/school administrators will be asked to complete this survey, the details in this survey will be aggregated into a composite profile, thereby avoiding the identification of specific participants. No participant will be identified in any presentation or publication.

Name:

Address:

Telephone number:

Email address:

Age range: ☐   18-25   ☐   26-35   ☐   36-45   ☐   46-55   ☐   55+

How would you identify your ethnic heritage?

_____

How would you identify your religious background?

_____

How would you identify your racial background?

_____

How would you identify your language background?

_____

Are there any other characteristics/identifiers that you identify with (i.e. sexual orientation, class, socioeconomic background?)

_____

APPENDIX XI - DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SURVEY FOR PARENTS PARTICIPANTS

Please note: Although all participating parents will be asked to complete this survey, the details in this survey will be gathered to form a composite profile, thereby avoiding the identification of specific participants. No participant will be identified in any presentation or publication.

Name:

Address:

Telephone number:

Email address:

Age range: ☐ 18-25 ☐ 26-35 ☐ 36-45 ☐ 46-55 ☐ 55+

Sex: _____ Male _____ Female

How many children do you have? _____

How many have been identified or labelled as requiring special education?
_____

When did you immigrate to Canada? _____

How would you identify your ethnic heritage?

_____

How would you identify your religious background?

_____

How would you identify your racial background?

_____

How would you identify your language background?

_____

Are there any other characteristics/identifiers that you identify with (i.e. sexual orientation, class, socioeconomic background?)

_____

**APPENDIX XII - DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SURVEY FOR STUDENT
PARTICIPANTS**

Please note: Although all participating students will be asked to complete this survey, the details in this survey will be aggregated into a composite profile, thereby avoiding the identification of specific participants. No participant will be identified in any presentation or publication.

Name:

Address:

Telephone number:

Email address:

How old are you? _____

Gender: _____ Male   _____ Female

How do you define your ethnicity?

_____

How would you define your religious background?

_____

How would you define your racial background?

_____

What is your mother-tongue?

_____

Are there any other characteristics/identifiers that you identify with (i.e. sexual orientation, class, socioeconomic background?)

_____

What year were you placed into special education and under what category?

_____