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How Do Somali Parents Define Their Children's Success in Minnesota Schools?

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Introduction

Early 1993, the Somali community started to come to Minnesota to flee the civil war in their homeland (Schaid and Grossman 2003). Minnesota has the largest Somali Diaspora in the United States with the 2010 census reporting 32,000 based on American community survey, but the community estimates over 50,000. American community survey also reported that large segment of Somali Community are young people with a median age of about 25 years, which half of the Somali population is 24 years old or younger. The number of Somali American students in Minnesota k-12 school system and higher education in Minnesota institutions is unknown—Somali students are counted and come under general black or African American students. Reliable data to quantify how many Somali students are in the k-12 school system or higher education institutions is not yet available.

Hence, it is imperative for educators to know the perspectives of Somali parents in regards to their student's success in school. In this qualitative research paper, I want to explore if Somali parents think their children who are going to K-12 Minnesota school system, especially in the Twin Cities metro area are successful in school, what makes them successful and are there some barriers that prevent their children to be successful in school. What improvement can be made to the school system to help their children succeed, and finally what are they doing as parents to help their children succeed in school.

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Literature Review

Rosenzweig (2001) examined the correlation between parenting practices and students' success in school. The article did a meta-analysis of 34 primary studies and found that there were 20 parenting practices that contribute to the students' achievement and success in school. The article identified specifically, three main parenting practices that fundamentally contributing factors in students' achievement, fundamental parenting practices, academic-orienting parenting practices, and school- participation parenting practices. The article detailed the roles and descriptions of each of the main parenting practices. In the fundamental parenting practice, parents provide for the children's general welfare (e.g., health, nutrition, home, social and psychological growth, and general development). In the academic –oriented parenting practice, parents provide for the children's intellectual growth, educational support and development both at home or outside home. In the school- participation parenting practice, parents provide for the children's growth and development through parental participation in school activities and interactions with school staff (Rosenzweig p. 3 (2001). While these main parenting practice are well related to school success, family dynamics, socioeconomics, ethnicity, parental academic attainment all play a role and have an impact on parenting practices in regards to children's success (Rosenzweig (2001). The article concluded that in addition to parenting practices, teachers practices, school environment, community environment and students' attitude are also factors to consider in regards to the students' success in school ((Rosenzweig (2001).

Williams and Williams (2013) emphasized that motivation is the number one factor that educators target in order to improve students leaning. They talked in the study what they

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called the five key ingredient impacting students motivation; student, teaching content, method/process, and environment (Williams and Williams p. 2, 2013). It indicated that teachers should know about the students' personality in order teachers to know what students are good at as well as their need—teachers and school should match resources and teaching with the students' needs by involving students on their education not only students' being consumers or recipient of information (Williams and Williams p. 7, 2013). Teachers should have the skills and resources to meet the needs of their students. As of third ingredient, the article talked about the content, must be accurate, timely, relevant and useful to students and their lives. It also talked about the method/process and environment; students must be part of the process, develop a sense of ownership, feel safe and have access. Finally, it talked about the signs to look for in order to know whether students are motivated or not. When students are motivated they tend to pay attention, work tasks immediately, ask questions, volunteer answers and appear to be happy (Williams and Williams 2013).

Loeb, Soland, & Fox, (2014) discussed teacher quality, and whether that quality be felt across student groups. For example, whether a teacher who is good for non-English learner students can also be good to English learner students and vice versa (Loeb, Soland, & Fox, p.1, 2014). The article talked about EL students are a being large students group who inter school with low proficiency in math and English language who faces specific challenges throughout their schooling. The article used data from Miami-Dade County Public Schools which has a large Hispanic student population with a large group of English learner students. The main conclusion for their research question was that, teacher, who is effective and good with one group (EL) is also effective and good of the other group (non EL) (Loeb, Soland, & Fox, p.3,

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2014). In addition, bilingual teachers who are proficient in the students' first language and teachers who have bilingual certification tend to be more effective with English Learner students than teachers who are not proficient in the students' first language or do not have bilingual certification (Loeb, Soland, & Fox, p.3, 2014).

Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff (2013) explained that overall teacher turnover is high and is even higher in low income student schools. The article indicated that 30% of new teachers leave the teaching profession in 5 years and turnover rate is above 50% in low income schools than more affluent schools (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, p. 5, 2013). Thus, the turnover effects students' achievement in math and English language art. The article indicated that even though the negative effects are greater than positive effect, but it depends on the reasons that teachers are leaving. If the replacing ones are better than the leaving ones the effect on students' achievement is positive and vice-versa. It continued on to say that more effective teachers are more likely to stay comparing to less effective counterparts (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, p. 6, 2013). Nevertheless, the turnover is disruptive to the school community, the staying teachers, administration, human resources, and students to some extent as staff cohesion related to students' engagement (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, p. 7, 2013).

Portilla, Ballard, Adler, Boyce, & Obradović (2014) examined teacher- child relationship quality, and children's behaviors throughout kindergarten and first grade to forecast the academic competence in 1st grade. The article indicated that close and positive quality relationship between the teacher and students can help latter to develop positive social development, increase school engagement, academic performance, and good work habit. The article concluded that self-

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regulation plays a huge role in children early education and schooling (Portilla, Ballard, Adler, Boyce, & Obradović, p. 4, 2014). In gender, the article says that boys tend to have school avoidance while girls tend to be more engaged in school activities and tend to be on tasks than boys (Portilla, Ballard, Adler, Boyce, & Obradović, p. 10, 2014).

McCarthy (1997) explained in her study the importance for students to match between school and home. However, the article indicated that connections between home and school are not same for all students. There is a huge gap between students' home life and school practice for students of color, where school and home are like extensions of one another for middle class white students (McCarthy 1997). Thus, white middle class students home and school were tightly connected they feel comfortable bringing and sharing items from home, the story they read at home is very similar to that at the school. The background life of their parents matches with their teachers' background life. On the other hand, students of color did not feel comfortable sharing their items from home. For students of color, there is a gap between life at home and school, so they feel hesitant to share their story from home (McCarthy 1997). Reading for example, for white students the literature at home and the character of the books they read at home are similar to the literature they see at school and the character of the books they read at school (McCarthy 1997). *“Even though the teachers said they valued students making personal connections, they did not ask students to talk or write about their own experiences that were similar to or different from the characters', for example. If a student spontaneously connected the book with his or her experience, the teachers acknowledged this, but did not often extend the conversation”* (McCarthy p. 169, 1997).

Kruizenga (2010) examined the overall challenges that immigrant children and especially

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Somali immigrant children are facing at school, and in particular, experience of Somali students in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. The article explained that part of the daily challenges that Somali students are facing is that their teachers do not know them. In the school culture, immigrant students are looked at what they lack at the school, the deficit end (Kruizenga p. 4, 2010). While Somali students are similar with other immigrant students, who are not also known in the school culture by their teachers, the mismatch between their home and school is very huge and Somali children have other challenges in school. The article mentioned about their value and Islamic faith makes them different with their day-to-day school activities—the social pressure (dating, premarital sex and alcohol) are complicated and contradictor to their faith (Kruizenga, 2010). The article concluded that communication between home and school with bilingual staff is needed. In addition to teaching students English, teaching parents about school system and school navigation is also necessary in order to serve Somali students well (Kruizenga 2010).

Moore (2009) explained the weekend schools knowns as *Dugsi* or Quranic schools that Somali immigrant children go on weekends. The article indicated that how these schools are important and are contributing to the development of children (Moore, p. 289, 2009). In the Quranic schools, the emphasis is writing and reading fluently in Arabic in order to recite the Quran properly ((Moore, p. 289, 2009). The article indicated that Somali immigrant children Speak Somali at home, study Arabic text at Quranic Schools and learn English at school. The article concluded that in order to work effectively with Somali children and their families, one has to know the literacy background of the children and their families (Moore, 2009).

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Gratz (2006) examined the impact of parents' background on children's education. The education of children starts of what they learn from their homes in the first few years of their lives (Gartz 2006). The home background, in which children learn from is complex and consist of economic, social, cultural, and personal factors (Gratz 2006). The article indicted that the most important of these complex factors are personal backgrounds and the economic backgrounds of parents (Gratz p. 2, 2006). Parents' education and economic background is really important for both children's early and later education (Gratz 2006). The article in further said, teacher's impression to some extent depends on parents' background and homes that children are coming from (Gratz p. 3, 2006). The article concluded that as parents' education and economic background effects children's development and education, it also impacts parents' ability to involve the school activities. Parents who have a less education would least likely involve in their education (Gratz p. 4, 2006).

Method

I interviewed a total of 10 parents, three females and 7 males. They range from 24-50 years old. They are all Somali immigrant parents—they all have more than one child in school. They all live in the metro areas; five in Minneapolis, one in Saint Paul, one in Brooklyn Park, one in Richfield, one in Hopkins and one in Maplewood. All of their children go to the public schools in respect to the city they live in, except one parent whose children go to a charter school in Saint Paul and Minneapolis public schools.

I interviewed each parent individually; I prepared the questions in English and conducted the interview both in English and Somali depending on parent's preference. I have asked a total

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of five questions; one at scale of one to five—one being the worst or not successful at all and five being the best or 100 percent successful, and four open ended questions. I focused more on the open ended questions.

The preparation of the questions, appointments of the parents, actual interviews and writing the findings took place from October to December of 2014. I conducted the actual interviews the two weekends of November 19th and 30th. The interviews took place in different locations, at parent's home, coffee shop and a mosque. I asked the questions, and I took the notes at the same time as they were responding to each question. Even though the locations were public, at the same time, there was no third party involved or participated in our discussion. There was no time limit to any of the questions.

Coding

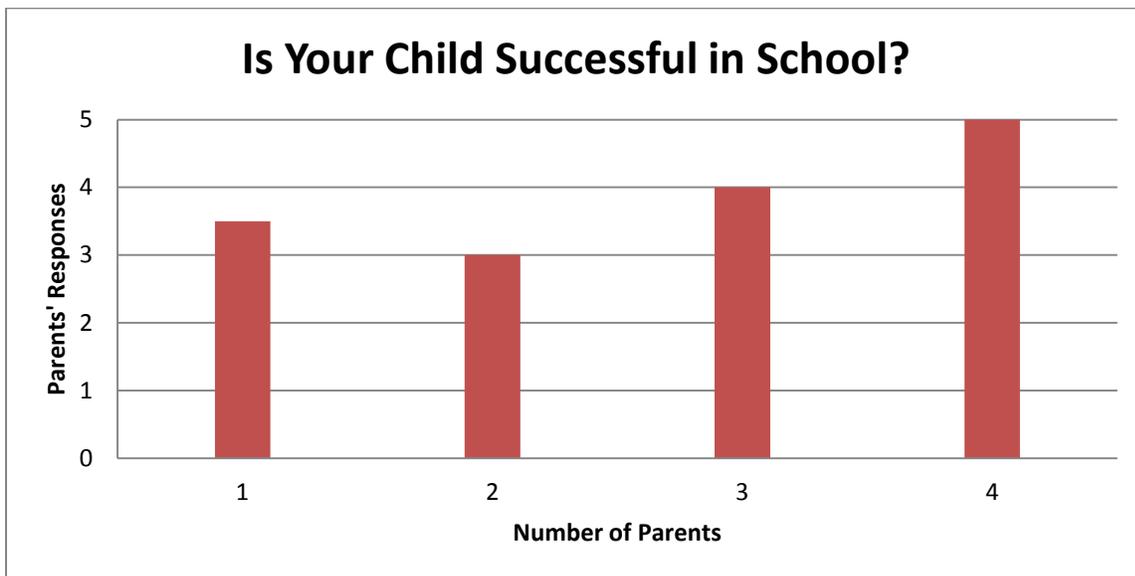
I compared all the answers, and looked at the patterns and trends that show up on each parent's answer. I coded and grouped them together. For example, if parent's involvement comes up in each parent's answer that would be one of the most common comments, and it gets the highest ratings.

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Results

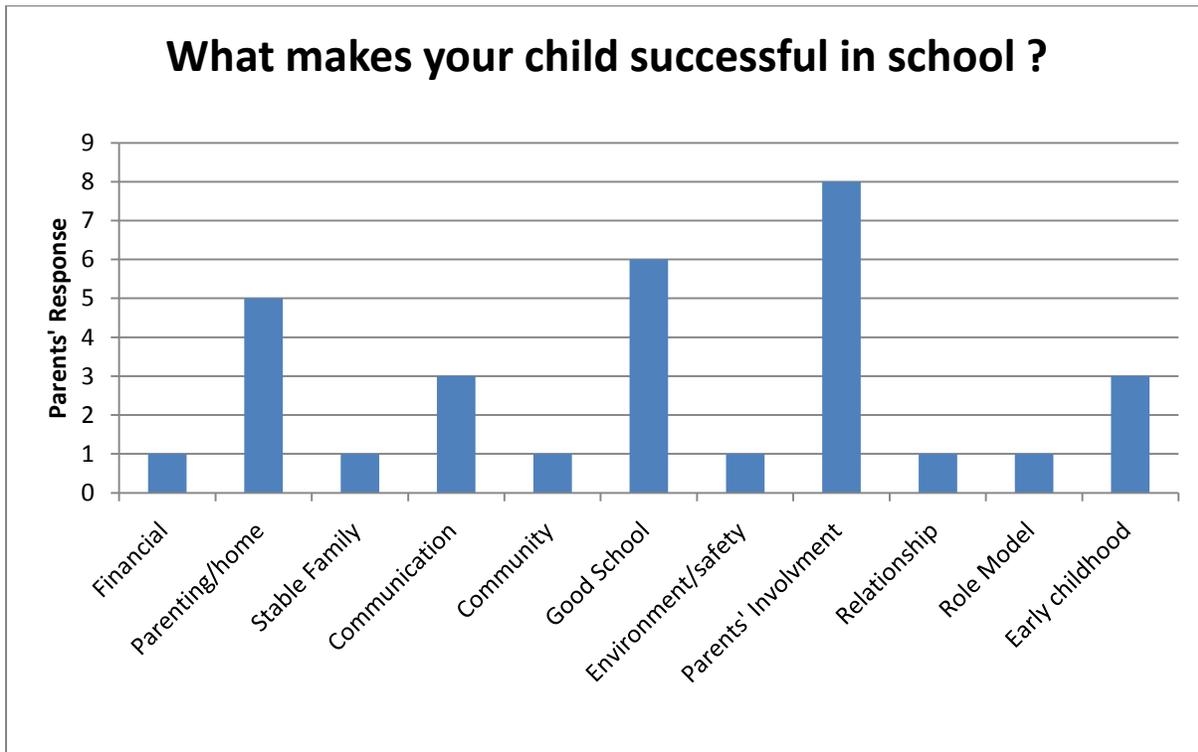
Interview Questions

- What makes your child successful in school?
- What are some barriers to your child's success in school?
- What improvements can be made to the school system to help your child succeed?
- What are you as a parent doing to help your child succeed in school?
- In the scale 1-5, one being the worst and five being the best, Is your child successful in school?



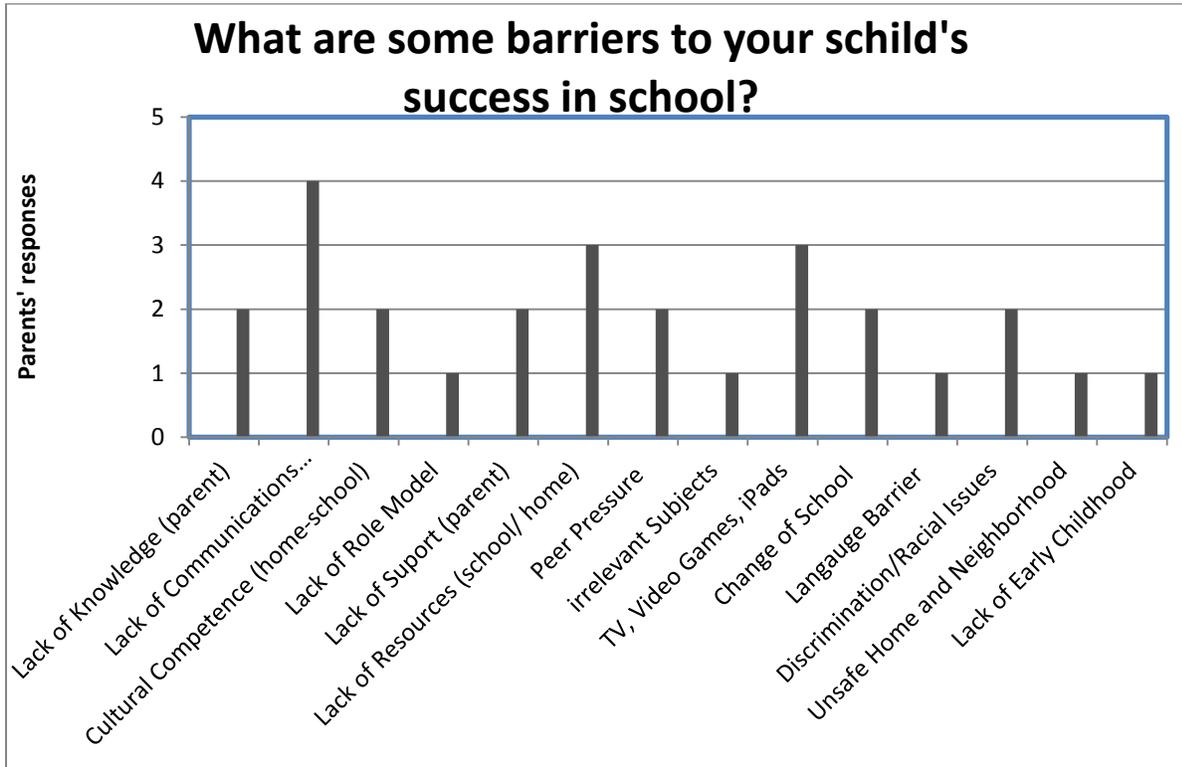
In this chart, parents answered to the scale question as follows: one parent 3.5, two parents 3, three parents 4 and four parents 5. The result showed that each parent believes that her or his child is successful in school and majority of them have high hopes in regards to their children's success.

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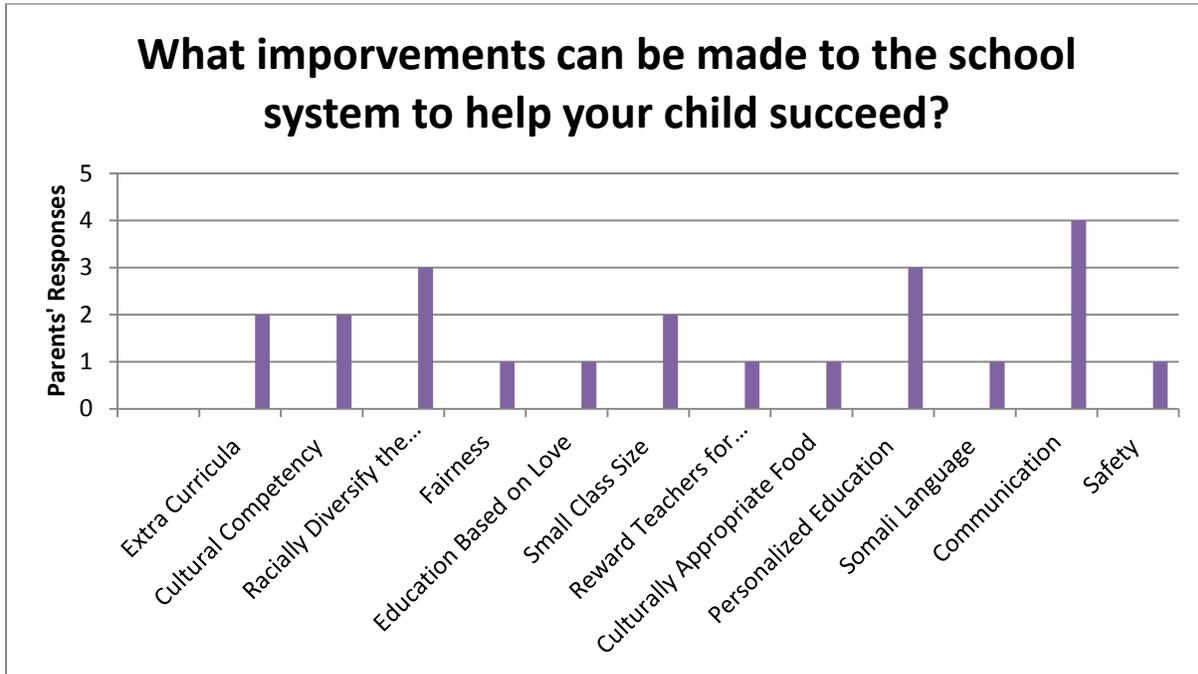
In this chart, parents gave various answers to what makes their child successful in school. As shows in the graph, parents' involvement appeared in most parents' comments followed by having good school and parenting or home respectively. The chart displays the response of parents on the left side, coded comments on the bottom with their respective correspondents in the graph.

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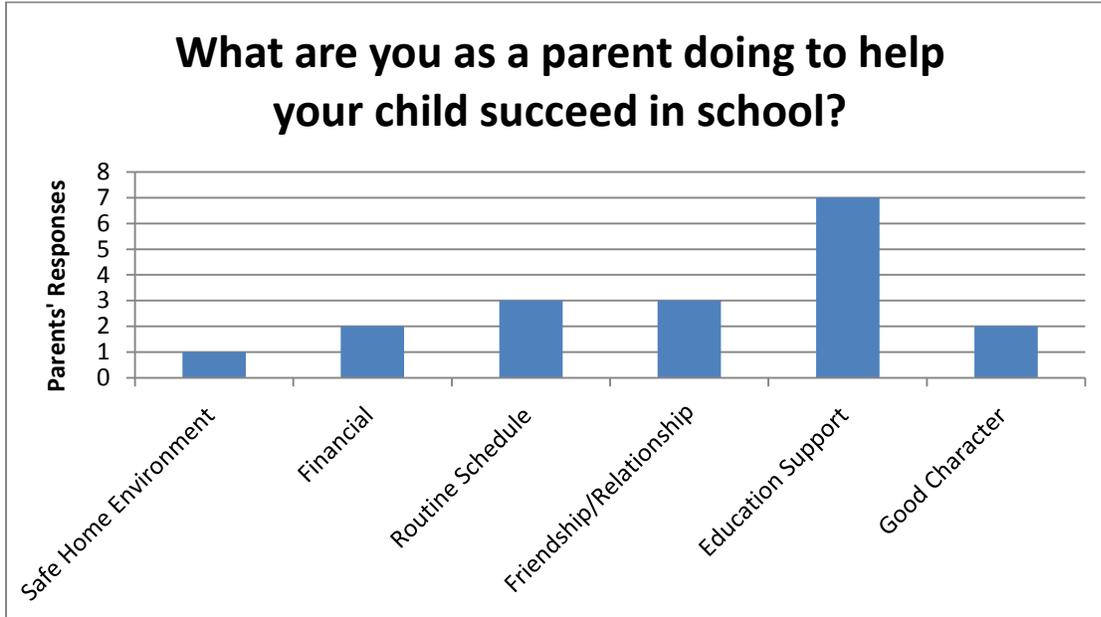
In this chart, parents' response to the question was very much opposite to the previous question's answers. Thus, lack of communications between the teacher and parent appears from most parents' comments equally followed by lack of resources both at home and school and TV, video games and iPads. The chart shows parents' response in the left side and coded comments in the bottom with its correspondents in the graph.

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In the improvement prompt, parents listed a wide range of areas that can be improved. As shown in the chart, parents rated communication between school and parents top in regards to school improvement, equally followed by personalized education and racially diverse staff. The chart displays parents' response on the left side and coded comments at the bottom with its correspondents in the graph.

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This particular question, parents shared what they do to help their children succeed in school. As shown in the chart, education support appears most of the parents' comments equally followed by maintaining regular schedule in the home, good relationship between the child and parents. The chart displays parents' response on the left side and coded comments at the bottom with its correspondents in the graph.

Coding Result:

I took the top three comments of each of the four open ended questions. As the following table shows, the highest of the **success prompt** were parents' knowledge in the school system and involvement of the school activities, followed by good school and parenting/home. The most repeated comments on **barriers prompt** were lack of communication between the parent and the teacher, equally followed by lack of resources both at home and at school, and screen time. Similarly the most common comments on **improvement prompt** were communication, followed by racially diverse school staff and personalized education respectively. Finally, the most repeated responses on **parenting prompt** were education, routine schedule and relationship between parents and their students.

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Cross-Prompt Comparison of Most Frequently Assigned Codes to each Question

Code Categories	Success prompt	Barriers prompt	Improvements prompt	Parenting prompt
<i>Parenting/Home</i>	5			
<i>Good School</i>	6			
<i>Parents’ Knowledge & Involvement</i>	8			
<i>Lack of Communication (parent- teacher)</i>		4		
<i>Lack of Resources both school & home</i>		3		
<i>Screen Time</i>		3		
<i>Communications</i>			4	
<i>Diversity in the school staff</i>			3	
<i>Personalized Education</i>			3	
<i>Education support</i>				7
<i>Routine Schedule</i>				4
<i>Relationship</i>				3

Discussion

Success prompt

In the success prompt, parents identified parents’ involvement as a key to the students’ success. Based on their comments, parents’ knowledge means knowledge in the school system and involvement in the school activities—this means that parents would help their students with homework, take them to the libraries, or even hire a private tutor if needed and able. It is very pleasing that parents understood that their involvement matters though, to some extent, it was surprising to me. In the Somali culture, which these parents grew up, parents’ involvement was not rated at the top or big part of the students’ education—the parents, the extended family members and the society in general share the responsibilities of raising children. For instance, a strange man on the street stops a child as he sees him misbehaving. Due to that collective communal responsibility of raising children, parent’s involvement in schools was not parents’ top priority. Traditionally, teachers are regarded high to the point that they are viewed to be the

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second parents of the child, which means that parents focus more on physical development. Parents provide food, home, medication and tuition fees, while teachers develop the brain of the child through education. This is a cultural shift; parents recognize the difference between where they grew up and where their children are growing up. In Somalia, children spend more time outside and parents do not fear anyone to harm their children. But it is different in here, for many reasons, parents have to be aware of where their children are, who do they hang out with and what are they learning and that include the school and how are they doing in school academically.

The second most common comment was the importance of having a good school. Some of the parents named different types of school such Magnet and Montessori tracks. This shows how informed some parents are as well as their level of knowledge about the schools and school system. Good school also means to have enough and well trained teachers and staff.

The third most important factor that parents indicated was parenting and life at home. Parents talked about broad prospects such nutrition, system and order in the house, stable family, ability to provide students the necessary support they need in all the aspects as well as the importance for the child to have both parents. When talking about students' success, studies show that the match, connection, and collaboration of the following areas are the key, school, home and community. Parents talked about the importance of having safe community and health neighborhood when answering this question as well as other questions.

Barriers Prompt

In this prompt, parents identify lack of communications between the teacher and the parent as a barrier to their children's success. Parents emphasized that a constant communication

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between the teacher and the parent is needed in order to avoid some of the barriers. Some of the parents indicated that communication is not hard these days if people utilize technology.

Stressing on the importance of communication, this is how one parent puts it.

“We know that teachers are working on shift and time is limited, if they do not get enough time to communicate with parents. We would like the school to find a way to reward or pay teachers extra time to communicate with parents.”

Here is how another parent puts it.

“Even though my son is very smart, sometimes he does not like homework, so he does not tell me that he has homework. After first couple of weeks of the school, when I found out he is not bringing any homework, I decided to check it out. One day, I went to the school and asked the teacher about his homework, the teacher told me that my son gets homework but he does not return them, she showed me his record and his missing homework. The teacher and I agreed to have a folder with a note about the assignments with their due dates to sign for each other, when she gives homework to my son she writes to me ,and I sign it back to confirm that I received it and he will bring the assignment on time.”

Other barriers that parents identify were lack of resource for both home and school and how much students spend on screen, TV, iPhones and video games. Educators are well aware that having enough and good resources is important for any school or any home and equally important for students' success. It was very compelling that parents aware that schools are under resourced, and they are concerned about their schools not only their lack of resources as parents. Home resources include, students have a good condition homes, enough health food, and

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educational support. In other words, parents have stable jobs and educational means to support their families. In the school, resources include, enough teachers and support staff, smaller class size, extra-curricular and sports.

As an educator, this is what I hope for our schools and parents both to have, as parents indicated, lack of resource is barrier to students' success. Several parents mentioned TV, video games and misusing iPhones as part of barriers to students' success. Educators debate about what kind of technology, how, and amount of time students spend on screen are appropriate as well as what role a teacher can play in the use of technology. Most students in Minnesota Public schools will use or already are using iPads at the school; older students take the iPads to home. I personally support students' use of technology, but how and amount of time they spent on screen needs to be balanced.

Here is how one parent puts it,

"I bought iPhones for my two sons who are in high school for them to communicate with us while they are at school or gone for other activities. But their use has gone too far, to the point they stay up late as 3.A.M. Thus, they were noticed by their teacher how tired and unengaged they were at school. She called me and asked me what was wrong with the boys—they are sleepy and tired. I told her I am not aware of anything wrong, but I assured her that I will check more into what is going on with them. So next night, I waited to see what they will do when they went to their room. It turns out that each one of them started watching movies through his iPhone under the blanket up until late. In the morning I asked them why they were awake for that long. They did not lie, and they said, we were just watching movies and games from our iPhones. From that day, I take their

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phones when they go to bed and give them in the morning when they go to school. If there were no communications that was built prior between the teacher and me, my sons will have a huge problem at school and in return school may easily label us of not being supportive to our children's education and wellbeing."

Improvement Prompt

In addition to improve communications, parents identified racially diverse school staff and personalized education as two important improvements that schools could make. With changing demographics in our cities, the mismatch between school personnel and students' population could trigger and feed more on already rising students' achievement gap. Educators know how important it is for anybody to have a role model and especially to students, when students feel they do not belong or share common similarity with their teachers and mentors—it can create a problem, and it can have a negative impact on how students view education and school. With all these issues of achievement gap and racial sensitivity that exist in our society in general and in our schools in particular—schools should encourage inclusion and be intentional about making school personnel racially diverse.

When parents talk about diversity in school and relate it to a race issue, we know how serious it is. Thus, schools need to take the issue of race and equity very seriously. Sometimes, even if some honest mistake or true story happens between a student and a teacher, some parents may take it to another level.

Here is what one parent said

"My son got a C in math. I went to his math teacher to find out more about his math scores and ask how I can help my son to improve his grade. Within the conversation, she

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said if he gets a C that is okay for him. He said, I got upset and asked her do you mean he is black and C is fine for him.” I asked the parent what made you thought this way, he said “She is not motivating my son, and she puts a low expectations for him, and that is how she wants him to see himself. What else I could have thought she meant. I came to her, seeking help to support my son. She should be proud of me, but instead she chose to convince me that C was okay for my son.”

Personalized education was equally mentioned as needed improvement by schools.

Parents say they want the schools to meet every student at his or her base. Currently, personalized education is being debated in the schools. Many schools are giving iPads to the students, and they make their reasoning of giving the iPad to personalize students' education.

Parenting Prompt

Parents also emphasized the importance of having a good relationship with their students. Having healthy relationship helps everyone, and it is even more helpful within the family. Parents indicated that having routine schedule and system at home help students to organize their studies. Parents also said that relationship among family especially parents and children are very important for healthy and stable family, which in return is key for students' success—indeed, it is a positive sign for a health family.

How Do Somali Parents Define Their Children's Success in Minnesota Schools?

Parents define their children's success in school for two main factors which each consist of several components. First one pertains with parent and home that the children are coming from. Parents involve in their children's education; participate in the school activities; communicate with teachers; provide educational and financial support such as nutrition, safe and

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healthy environment, school material and good livable home; create routine schedule at home, and establish good relationship with their children. All these of course depend on parents' educational and economic background. My literature review supports that parents' education and income level dictates their ability to do and establish the above activities. Second one pertains having good school. Parents imply good school as one that has a welcoming environment in which students and parents feel belong— school that respects all cultures which has a racially diverse staff, in which students can relate to and see as their role models. Schools that provide quality of education which include having enough resources, teachers, personalized education that fits each student's needs. The community and neighborhood can impact what school can offer.

Recommendations

This research is helpful both to the community and to the school system. Parents provide very important answers to all the four questions. These four questions are some of the key indicators of what educators and parents want to know about students' success. Parents pointed out two important elements that are prerequisites to students' success, parents' involvement in their children's education and ability to provide economically for their children and school's ability to nurture and provide quality of education for their students.

In order to ensure good schools for our children, we have to advocate for economic opportunities that leads to have a safe environment and prosperous neighborhood where many low income communities reside. After reading many reports on achievement gap, our schools are in need for system change especially for racially diverse staff. There are many factors that contribute to students' achievement gap, but the main two over-arching that the research

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indicated are poverty and lack of role models in the schools, especially for students of color.

Research indicated that teachers teach by their experience and for many students that experience is not matched here in the schools. Many students of color, Somalis include, and school staffs do not share a common denominator which is life experience. I continue to advocate for more professionals of color in the school system.

Conclusion

This research is helpful to our community and to the school system. I believe parents gave very important answers to all the four questions. These four questions are keys to what educators and parents want to know about students' success. Parents shared with me what they see as success for their students' education, barriers to that success, improvements that school could make to reach that success, and finally what are they, as parents, doing in their part to ensure the success of their students.

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