

# Coloniality of Student Support Services: Young People’s Lived Experiences at the Intersection of Race, Disability and Mental Distress

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the lived experiences of young people who receive student support services through the lenses of coloniality and intersectionality. Our focus is on student support services within the Finnish education system, encompassing support for schoolwork and learning, and mental health and well-being. Drawing on two research projects – a multi-sited ethnographic study and an ethnography-based life-historical study – we shed light on the lived experiences of four young people as they navigate school and its support system. We apply the theoretical concepts of coloniality and intersectionality to empirically analyse the racialising, disabling and mentally distressing practices encountered by young people in their interactions with student support services. Implicit in the lived experiences of all four individuals is the absence of intersectional understanding of the complexities of young people’s lives, leading to feelings of perplexity and neglect in support. However, these experiences also give rise to subtle yet powerful forms of resistance that envision a decolonised future, also within student support services.

**Keywords:** *student support services; racism; ableism; mental distress; intersectionality; coloniality*

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## Introduction

Throughout history, individuals and groups designated as “Other” (Bhabha, 1983) in relation to the established societal norm have experienced systematic marginalisation, stigmatisation and oppression. The historical beliefs surrounding race, disability and madness also reveal complex intersections that have evolved over decades. These beliefs have reflected colonialist and eugenic perspectives aiming to categorise,

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hierarchise and dehumanise people based on perceived racial, physical and mental differences (see Annamma et al., 2013; Mills, 2013; Mills & LeFrançois, 2018). As a result, certain groups of people have faced policies and practices intended to exert control, implement segregation and, through medicalisation and institutionalisation, lead to exclusion, for example in asylums, residential schools and other segregated facilities (e.g., Connor et al., 2015; Donaldson, 2018; Jäntti et al., 2019; Kauppila, 2022; Washington, 2008).

In Finland, policies rooted in settler colonialism, aimed at assimilation, correction and exclusion, have impacted the education of various groups, including the national minorities of the Roma and Sámi peoples, as well as disabled and mad people. The segregation of disabled children in education, for instance, can be traced back to the mid-19th century, marked by the founding of boarding school-style institutions grounded in principles of social care and philanthropy (Kauppila, 2022). However, the segregated special education institutions enrolled not only disabled students but also students from non-dominant racial and ethnic groups (Helakorpi et al., 2019). During Finland's early post-independence era in the 1910s and 1920s, the education system actively implemented initiatives of othering and exclusion. These included, for instance, developing psychological and learning tests that perpetuated racist assumptions about the presumed lower intelligence of the Roma and Sámi peoples (Helakorpi, 2020; Ranta & Kanninen, 2019). Moreover, a significant number of Roma and Sámi children were forcibly separated from their families and relocated to orphanages, foster homes and boarding schools to sever their familial and cultural ties, and facilitate assimilation into the paradigm of white Finnishness. Disguised as protectionism with ostensibly benevolent motives to educate the poor, these actions concealed the aim of eradicating native languages and cultures (Kuokkanen, 2007; Pulma, 2006).

To explore the lived experiences of young people navigating the intersections of race, disability and mental distress today, it is crucial to recognise the enduring impact of coloniality in education, even in so-called postcolonial and post-racial times (e.g., Hoegaerts et al., 2022). This recognition is essential also within educational and school support services, allowing us to explore how coloniality may still shape educational structures and support mechanisms, including diagnostic procedures (e.g., Abay & Soldatic, 2024).

While most students identified as having special educational needs now participate in mainstream education in Finland, the historical segregation inherent in special needs education continues to wield significant influence. For example, segregated special schools and special education classes persist, with only marginal changes in the proportion of students studying full-time in segregated settings (Niemi & Mietola, 2023). Research also indicates that students of Roma background are more likely to be placed in segregated school settings, such as special education classes, than the majority white Finnish students (e.g., Stenroos & Helakorpi, 2021). Furthermore, students from migrant families are often placed in segregated educational settings

without transparent justification, attributed to cultural reasons or assumptions about their perceived deficiency in Finnish language skills (e.g., Laaksonen, 2007; Niemi et al., 2010).

There is also evidence indicating the unequal provision of student support services for mental health and well-being. For Sámi children, these services are reported to overlook the social and educational challenges stemming from intergenerational mistreatment of the Sámi people (Ranta & Kanninen, 2019; Ruotanen, 2021). Similarly, young people of colour, including those with one or both parents born outside Finland, report facing obstacles, prejudice, discrimination and racism when seeking access to and help from student welfare services. As a result, they often feel unsupported by student welfare professionals (e.g., Berg & Myllyniemi, 2020; Eid & Castaneda, 2023; Kääriälä et al., 2020; Kurki, 2024). Moreover, previous research suggests a lack of awareness among professionals in student welfare services regarding racism as a factor contributing to mental distress, leading to the neglect of this issue in student interactions (Järvensivu, 2023; Needelman, 2021).

In this article, we focus on four young people and their lived experiences of student support services throughout their compulsory education. Our analysis draws on two research projects: a multi-sited ethnographic study on racism, mental health and young people of colour, and an ethnography-based life-historical study on the educational and career paths of young adults. We delve into their experiences and reflections on the support received or lacking, both within one-to-one meetings with professionals and the broader school environment, while confronting racialising and disabling practices. By employing the theoretical frameworks of coloniality and intersectionality, we investigate whether and how coloniality operates in student support services and what kinds of consequences this may have for young people navigating at the intersection of race, disability and mental distress.

### **Coloniality and intersectionality**

As outlined by Anibal Quijano (2000), the concept of coloniality refers to the enduring presence of colonial structures and ideologies within Western societies, even after the end of colonial rule. In Finland, where colonialism takes the form of settler colonialism in confrontation with the Sámi people rather than overseas colonies, coloniality is evident in various socio-political and cultural mechanisms that persist (e.g. Keskinen, 2019). For instance, Finnish society is strongly shaped by Eurocentric norms and values, perpetuating a cultural hegemony that marginalises non-Western ways of knowing and being. This hegemony influences various institutions, including education and its support services, where Eurocentric curricula and pedagogical and support practices often dominate, marginalising alternative perspectives and knowledge systems (e.g. Kohvakka, 2022; Mikander, 2023). Furthermore, as highlighted in numerous studies (e.g., Ahmad, 2020; Eid & Castaneda, 2023; Helakorpi et al., 2023; KC et al., 2023; Kurki & Brunila, 2023; Rask et al., 2018; Rosengren et al.,

2023), racism persists within Finnish society, impacting on the lives of individuals and communities of colour across various sectors, such as employment, housing, health and education. These persistent issues reflect historical ideologies of racial superiority among white populations and the inherited belief in the inferiority of people of colour from colonial eras. In this article, we employ the concept of coloniality to analyse the lived experiences of four young people regarding the support received in school. We examine the potential influence of coloniality on both the practices of and encounters with student support services and explore its consequences.

As the four young people we focus on live at the intersection of multiple identity categories, we utilise the concept of intersectionality alongside coloniality to understand their complex experiences. The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and inspired by the work of earlier Black feminist scholars such as Angela Davis, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, was originally aimed at highlighting the experiences of Black women. Its aim was to underscore the simultaneous impacts of race and gender, stressing the necessity of recognising how intersecting systems of oppression operate (Crenshaw, 1991; see also Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Hill Collins, 2000). In recent studies, the focus has expanded beyond the intersections of race and gender to include social class and sexuality, for instance, while some studies have even broadened the spectrum to encompass up to twenty different categories (Pellander, 2016).

In this article, our focus is on the intersection of race/disability and race/mental distress, with some attention also given to gender. We analyse how mechanisms of student support services that racialise, disable and cause mental distress, shape the experiences of young people living at the intersection of multiple identity categories. Utilising the concepts of intersectionality and coloniality together provides us with new insights into understanding the historical and intersecting dynamics of racism, ableism and sanism within the Finnish educational context. Moreover, they prompt us to question the prevailing narrative depicting the Finnish education system, including its support services, as universally equitable and benevolent for all students, regardless of their backgrounds.

### **Lived experiences as an analytical approach**

The central figures of this article are four young people referred to here under the pseudonyms Aaliyah, Alicia, Oliver, and Thao, whom we, the authors, met within the context of our research projects: *Racism, Mental Health and Young People of Colour* (RaMePOC) and *Diverse Paths to Adulthood* (DILE). Tuuli Kurki met and interviewed Aaliyah (16) and Alicia (18), both of whom self-identified as young Black women, during a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork encompassing two educational institutions, two youth centres and three mental health associations in the Helsinki metropolitan area from 2021 to 2023. Both were enrolled in general upper secondary school and had been recipients of student welfare services for mental health and

well-being since their primary school years, maintaining ongoing and regular meetings with school social workers and school psychologists, as well as engaging with additional support services external to the school environment. Oliver and Thao, in turn, were participants in a series of interviews conducted by Anna-Maija Niemi as part of a longitudinal ethnographically grounded study. The study evolved from a previous research project involving ethnographic fieldwork in a vocational education and training institution (VET) and a general upper secondary school in the Helsinki metropolitan area from 2016 to 2017. Throughout the longitudinal study, Oliver and Thao were interviewed four and five times respectively. During the first interview in 2017, Oliver (of mixed-race with parents of white and Black descent) was 17 years old and enrolled in a general upper secondary school, while Thao (Finnish-born with parents of East Asian descent) was 18 and enrolled in a VET institution. During the nine-year basic education, both have been recipients of student support services for schoolwork and learning, and enrolled in a special education class designated for students with diagnoses associated with learning and/or behavioural difficulties.

In addition to the interviews conducted with these four young people, we have interviewed other young people in similar life situations and professionals working in education and support services, as well as producing fieldnotes on mental health services, youth centres and youth peer support groups in addition to educational institutions. These data have helped us to contextualise the analysis of the lived experiences of the focal four within a broader framework of support services. While we recognise the inherent limitation of presenting the perspectives and experiences of only four young people, we also acknowledge that lived experiences, despite their initial individual and subjective nature, gain validity through the act of retelling (Solórzano, 1997). The significance of lived experiences has been emphasised in several disciplines, including Critical Race Theory (CRT), Mad Studies and Critical Disability Studies. The utilisation of experiential knowledge and life-historical narratives aligns with the political goal of recognising the agency of historically marginalised groups and shedding light on the structural and cultural barriers in individuals' lives (e.g., Niemi & Mietola, 2017; Shah & Priestley, 2011; Sinclair & Mahboub, 2024). The experiences of Aaliyah, Alicia, Oliver, and Thao thus extend beyond personal narratives as they serve as reflections embedded within a broader sociopolitical critique (Kurki & Rask, forthcoming). Their experiences and articulation of racialising, disabling and mentally distressing incidents in school may demonstrate to others facing similar challenges that they are not alone in their struggles (cf. Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27). Experiential knowledge, derived from first-hand experiences, thus forms a foundational element in our research methodology (see also Faulkner, 2017; Solórzano, 1997; Taggart, 2022). While we value experiential knowledge, we also aim to avoid oversimplifying it into conventional 'from tragedy to recovery' stories that align with mainstream depictions of experiences involving racism, ableism and mental distress (Voronka, 2016).

In the following analytical sections, we delve into the experiences shared by Aaliyah, Alicia, Thao, and Oliver concerning student support services. We start by

examining Oliver and Thao's experiences with student support services as students with special educational needs. Their experiences illuminate the perplexity surrounding the reasons for placement in a special education group and understanding the given diagnosis. We illustrate how racialising and disabling practices can impact self-perception, leading to internalised blame for being 'special.' However, we also show how embracing specialness at the intersection of race, disability and gender can contribute to much-needed representation in educational settings.

We then explore the experiences of Aaliyah and Alicia, and illustrate how adults at school use the concept of 'culture' and how this operates in student support services to dismiss the need for support on the one hand and normalise problematic behaviour, such as violence, as cultural on the other. We show how Aaliyah and Alicia utilise affective self-exclusion and silence as a resistance strategy amid mistrust of support services. The concluding section summarises the empirical findings and advocates for change in student support services in the direction of a deeply needed decolonised future.

### **Lived experiences of coloniality and resistance through representation**

During colonialism, ignorance and disregard were intrinsic elements in the colonisation of people of colour, manifesting across various dimensions. In education, colonisation was enacted through propagation of the values, history and language of the colonisers, often sidelining the knowledge systems of the colonised people (e.g., Mills, 2017). Similar patterns have been documented in contemporary studies (e.g., Annamma et al., 2013; Connelly, 2021). These underscore, for instance, the vulnerability and disregard of the knowledge and experiences of students of colour and their families during multi-professional meetings and discussions related to special education. Categorised as having special educational needs due to their racial and cultural backgrounds, their insights are often dismissed as irrelevant and incompatible with the prevailing normative framework of whiteness in schools. Meanwhile, the perspectives of professionals receive heightened acknowledgment and consideration, positioned as people who 'know better' (Hakala, 2007; see also Honkasilta & Vehkakoski, 2019; Niemi & Mietola, 2017).

As we delve into the experiences of Oliver and Thao, two young men of colour with backgrounds in special education, through the lens of coloniality, we interpret their narratives as reflections of perplexity and disregard. Throughout the interviews with Thao, he repeatedly expressed his perplexity regarding the rationale behind his initial placement in a special education group at the beginning of his schooling journey. Furthermore, he articulated in the interviews the dismissal of his and his family's knowledge and perspectives in their pursuit of obtaining support. In the following excerpt, Thao describes how his Finnish language skills and the given diagnosis of visual-perceptual difficulty, the meaning of which remains unclear to him, were, in his eyes, mistakenly interconnected in the decision regarding his placement in a special class.

- Anna-Maija:  
(researcher) So, the reason for your placement [in the special education group] was...? You were told that it was because you can't speak Finnish well enough?
- Thao: Yes. I was told that my Finnish is very weak, very poor, I was told this in lower secondary education [...] It was a small group [...] At first, I wondered why my exercises were that easy [...] But in my opinion, my Finnish wasn't that bad [...] Some people asked why I was studying in a small group. I've always said that I have a visual-perceptual difficulty [...] I know what perception means but "visual-perceptual difficulty," I haven't understood that completely, like, how does it relate to me?

By stating, 'I've always said that I have a visual-perceptual difficulty [... but] I haven't understood ... how does it relate to me,' it appears to us that Thao indicates that while he accepts 'having' a visual-perceptual difficulty, he lacks clarity about the diagnosis, leading to confusion in understanding his presumed learning difficulty (see also Niemi, 2022). While Thao has expressed gratitude to his teachers in various interviews and has mentioned that he would not change anything about his educational journey, he does still convey a sense of disappointment in relation to the disregard evident in the decision to place him in a special education class.

In more recent interviews, when asked by Anna-Maija to reflect on his earlier statements indicating an incomplete understanding of why he was placed in such a group, Thao seems to question whether he should blame himself rather than the teachers for his placement.

- Thao: Very many teachers have said that I would have done well [in a normal class]. I've talked, at least in lower secondary school, I talked there with many [special education] teachers with whom I did maths exercises or Finnish language exercises or such like, and many of these teachers said to me that I would have done well in a normal class. Our class assistant asked me what I was doing in a special class. She said that I didn't even need help, but then some teachers don't trust young people or maybe I wasn't mature enough [to cope in a normal class] at that time. I don't know if I blame myself or the teacher, but it was just like that, that I couldn't attend a normal class.

As we analyse Thao's uncertainty about 'who to blame' for his placement in a special education class through the lens of coloniality, the concept of colonial mentality (Fanon, 2001) becomes crucial. Colonial mentality refers to the psychic effects of colonisation, including the internalisation of dependency and self-doubt due to the systematic devaluation of one's culture, language and identity (e.g., Heleta & Phiri, 2024; Kurki, 2024). As Thao points out, throughout his educational pathway, many teachers told him that he would have excelled in a normal class, yet no steps were

taken to move him out of the special education group. This discrepancy, coupled with his confusion over his diagnosis, led Thao to reflect on his status in relation to the ideal student norm, which he perceives as unattainable for him (cf. Niemi & Kurki, 2014; Youdell, 2006). Another example we interpret as showcasing how colonial mentality works is Thao's remark during one interview where he stated, 'Finnish is my first language now.' We interpret this statement as implying internalisation of the idea that in order to attain success in education and life in general, students of colour – whether or not they have special educational needs – should assimilate into the dominant Finnish culture, even at the expense of weakening their knowledge of their mother tongue (see also Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Like Thao, Oliver also expressed perplexity in the interviews regarding the reasons for his placement in a special education class, with the decision's rationale remaining unclear to him. In the following interview excerpt, conducted years after he attended the special education class, Oliver continues to contemplate whether he was placed in this class due to his concentration difficulties or other special needs.

Oliver:                    You can't perhaps [know] it in a way, when you think about it afterwards. Was it [being placed in an SE class] a good solution? I don't know. Isn't it so that one should go to a special class for a particular reason? Usually, one ends up there because of, kind of... your focus slips very easily. I also had a real problem with that once.

As we analyse the narratives of both Oliver and Thao, it seems that they perceive being placed in a special education group as somewhat stigmatising. Oliver even questions whether it was a 'good solution,' implying uncertainty about its relevance to him. In one interview, he also described how being in a special education class could lead one down the 'wrong track,' emphasising the predetermined life course often attributed to students with special education needs. From an intersectional perspective, it is noteworthy how Oliver views being diagnosed with learning difficulties and studying in the special education group as more stigmatising and othering, contributing to his sense of being different and influencing his life trajectory, compared to his migrant background.

Oliver:                    The only thing that I think could have prevented me [from moving forward in life] is just those, not perhaps migration or migrant background, but more related to my concentration and things related to all that, that I was in the special education group. It was the only thing that made me wonder, in a way, why I thought I was different.

However, when Oliver speaks about his current work as a substitute teacher in schools, he highlights the importance of his intersectional positionality (e.g., Baz, 2023). He emphasises that his previous history in special education and migrant



background informs his approach to supporting students from similar backgrounds. In the following excerpt, Oliver highlights the importance of his experiential knowledge regarding how being diagnosed with learning difficulties and placed in a special education class can evoke feelings of being stupid. He also acknowledges how voicing his lived experiences to the students can provide peer support and be an important role model for students like himself. He suggests that seeing someone ‘who looks like them,’ both in terms of race and special needs, can be a potent motivator and, as such, act as a tool for dismantling discriminatory perceptions.

Oliver: I think about it every time I go to [work in] a special education group. I can, in a way, understand the feeling these kids have, because I have been in that same situation myself. Sometimes I’ve said to them that I’ve been in the same situation too, that sometimes one faces these kinds of moments. And if they feel it themselves a bit, they may sometimes feel that they are stupid or such like, then I say that I also had that feeling when I was your age. And then they get peer support in a way. It helps them a lot [...]. I feel every now and then that when I’m working in schools, all migrant youth, they get motivated because they see that a person who looks like them, is their kind, is in that position and they realise that they too have a possibility and they don’t feel discriminated against. It pushes them a lot [...]. It helps [them] to get that feeling that they can succeed in whatever they are doing, and they gain more self-confidence.

Similar to Oliver, the importance of representation also influenced Thao’s educational choices, leading him to pursue studies and employment in social work and engage with young people with similar backgrounds to his own. Hence, they both share a strong commitment to challenging racial and ableist expectations, recognising the lack of representation of men of colour with special education backgrounds as professionals in education and social work.

Although current global and national legislation promotes inclusive support practices, traces of segregation persist within education systems (Niemi & Mietola, 2023). As evidenced by the lived experiences of Thao and Oliver, being placed in a special education class and being racialised as non-white can lead to a sense of inferiority. We argue that these experiences are linked to the historically constructed stigma and segregation associated with race and disability. As argued by Annamma et al. (2013), racism and ableism ‘inform and rely upon each other in interdependent ways’ (p. 5). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the intersectional subjectivity of being both a person of colour and being identified with special educational needs creates a qualitative difference in experiences compared to students who do not share this intersection of identity categories.

### Cultural incompetence and resistance within accommodation

Over the past decade, discussions about the intersection of gendered violence with culture, ethnicity and race have been prominent in the Nordic countries, exploring the colonial legacies that influence contemporary perceptions of migrant communities. In public discourse and in the perceptions of the authorities and practitioners, domestic violence within migrant families has been portrayed as culturally based and accepted (e.g., Keskinen, 2009, 2011). In these discussions, culture is perceived as a static element originating from the country of origin and regarded as a simplistic explanation for violence (Honkatukia & Keskinen, 2017).

A key theme in Alicia's interview, as a young Black woman, was her dissatisfaction with both student support services and the adults at school in their response to her need for support amid domestic violence. Throughout the interview, Alicia articulated her experience of the profound and continuous neglect and apathy she encountered from adults concerning her need for support and help. Instead of receiving support to manage the mental distress caused by various factors in her life, her attempts to communicate with adults at school were met with racial stereotypes about domestic violence, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

- Alicia: I was a good student, social and extroverted [...] so nobody thought that something was going on. But anyway, there *were* small actions, some patterns of behaviour that should have shown them [adults at school] that I'm not ok...
- Tuuli (researcher): You mean they should've understood?
- Alicia: Yes, because I was always talking about violence. It was always on my mind, I always talked about it. And I'm like, doesn't a 10–11-year-old talk about other things too? [...] And I just talked about violence all the time, the violence I faced. I've also said directly in front of a teacher that my mother slaps me and stuff like that, but they've been like 'oh, that's a cultural thing.' [...] They've been like 'in many cultures' [...] like they connect it with culture. And I'm like... I laugh because I've been taught to accept it. But I know now that when people use these, that immigrants, that immigrants do this and that, I'm like your background doesn't excuse the abuse at all. [...] So, I think about it often, that everything I experienced and said, but no one ever... that something is going on... and no one ever did anything.

As highlighted in previous research, portraying domestic violence as a cultural phenomenon vividly illustrates coloniality (e.g. Mohamed Shaburidin et al., 2022; Mojškerc, 2023) and underscores entrenched negative stereotypes about the 'Other' (Ikemoto, 1997), while also normalising violence as a racialising practice (Mirza, 2018). As we analyse Alicia's experience through the lens of coloniality, we discern how the notion of culture is used by her teacher to downplay Alicia's need for

support. Moreover, by labelling domestic violence as ‘a cultural thing,’ the teacher confines the problem to the family domain, absolving the school of any responsibility, resulting in the neglect of Alicia’s need for support. Consequently, we analyse Alicia’s experience that ‘no one ever did anything’ as a manifestation of the racialised misrecognition of the ‘Black other’ (Fanon, 2021), illustrating how the needs of a Black child can be deliberately disregarded (see also Stephens, 2022).

However, Alicia expressed disappointment not only on a personal level but also at the systemic level regarding the assertion that violence is ‘a cultural thing.’ In the following interview excerpt, she describes how, in her view, instead of offering support, adults at school were (un)intentionally perpetuating various forms of violence within the school environment.

Alicia: Because it was a predominantly Black school and most students were people of colour and with foreign backgrounds there, the violence, sexual harassment was so normalised [...]. No one, nothing, no report of any kind was made, of any kind, nothing. There were always fights and the teachers did nothing. [...] There was also homophobia, of course, and it was accepted, it was justified with most students being Muslims. I was like, first, Islam never said be homophobic. And there was lots of Islamophobia there too. But the adults at school, they assumed that Muslims are violent. So, it was accepted. [...] The teachers enabled the Islamophobia as they assumed [Muslims] are more violent. So, the violence was overlooked.

Viewing violence, sexual harassment and homophobia as cultural echoes colonial narratives by suggesting that these behaviours are inherent to specific cultures and religions. This perspective was historically used to justify the domination and control of the colonised peoples by classifying them as inherently inferior, irrational and underdeveloped (e.g., Mills & LeFrançois, 2018). In Alicia’s school, these historical, colonial perceptions led adults not only to show apathy towards addressing violence but also to enabling it within the school environment.

In Aaliyah’s case too, we can interpret the concept of culture hindering her from receiving skilled support, but in a different manner. In the following excerpt, Aaliyah discusses how the school social worker’s lack of cultural competence hindered her from understanding the cultural, traditional and religious significance of the headscarf, both within Aaliyah’s family and the broader context of Islam. This deficiency also hindered her understanding of why Aaliyah might find it difficult, or even impossible, to discuss the matter with her parents.

Aaliyah: If I say something related to my family and then it’s a bit more a cultural thing, they don’t understand it. [...] they just don’t understand that cultural aspect. [...] For example, like, well, my family is Muslim, so I had a really hard time, how can I say,

I had a really hard time about religion and all that stuff. And I used to wear a head scarf and then I was like I don't want to wear it anymore and I talked about it a little bit and the school social worker was like what if we just talk to my parents and I was like, well, no, that's not so easy. [...] So, I just don't talk about things because of that.

Previous social work studies from Finland suggest a prevalent attitude of disinterest directed towards people of colour, even when social workers are explicitly assigned to support them (Clarke et al., 2024). In Aaliyah's case, rather than encountering disinterest, she described the school social worker's attitude as dismissive, evidenced by both their lack of cultural competence and breach of confidentiality. The sense of dismissiveness was heightened when Aaliyah discovered that the school social worker had disclosed information from their private discussions which Aaliyah had believed to be confidential to both other professionals and her parents. Consequently, Aaliyah experienced a deep sense of mistrust, ultimately leading her to opt for silence rather than seeking further support.

- Aaliyah: Well, after that I was like, okay, I came up with this plan, that I'll continue seeing the school social worker, but I won't open up about anything anymore. I will just... [pretend that] I'm fine, I'm getting better every day, so that I can get out of it. [...] So, I lied myself out of there, [pretending] that yes, I'm doing better already, everything is going well.
- Tuuli (researcher): Was it because you didn't trust them?
- Aaliyah: Yes [...] [and] the trust issue is still there. I don't know if I want to be open about anything anymore because what if they even accidentally share something? It's on my mind.

Rather than analysing Aaliyah's silence as submission, we view it as an example of 'resistance within accommodation,' as described by Martín Mac an Ghail (1989). It refers to the phenomenon observed in educational settings, particularly among marginalised and oppressed students, describing the ways in which students may outwardly conform to the dominant norms and structures of the education system, yet internally resist and challenge those norms in subtle or covert ways. From this perspective, we analyse Aaliyah's adaptation to a system that has betrayed her trust (i.e., she continues to meet with professionals at student support services) but finds a way to resist within the confines of those structures (i.e., falsely claiming to feel better). The strategy of remaining silent echoes historical strategies used by Black, Indigenous and other people of colour within colonial contexts to shield themselves from oppressive forces (e.g., Basaran, 2022; Gibson & Beneduce, 2017). We also analyse Aaliyah's silence as 'affective self-exclusion,' as described by Reay et al. (2005), as she strategically distances herself from the services that have already excluded her as a means of self-protection.

Like Aaliyah, Alicia also turned to silence, albeit differently. When her efforts to express her need for support verbally were disregarded at school, she resorted to self-harm. She described this action as seeking ‘physical pain to numb the emotional pain’, while also hoping that the more visible expression of her pain would serve as a clearer signal to the adults around her, highlighting her distress and need for help. Despite this, ‘no one intervened.’

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have delved into the lives of four young people to analyse their lived experiences of student support services. By examining their lived experiences of institutional practices and everyday encounters at school, the narratives of Aaliyah, Alicia, Oliver, and Thao reveal what we term as everyday flashpoints (Mirza, 2018). These flashpoints illuminate various forms of racialising, disabling and mentally distressing practices within student support services, shedding light on their impact on young people.

By employing the concepts of coloniality and intersectionality, we acquired a theoretical framework to understand the experiences that occur at the intersection of race/disability and race/mental distress. Oliver and Thao’s lived experiences at the intersection of race and disability underscored their feelings of perplexity throughout their educational journeys in special education classes. Conversely, in the case of Aaliyah and Alicia, whose experiences were examined at the intersection of race and mental distress, the analysis illuminated how the absence of cultural competence among professionals can result in insufficient and even neglectful support. Implicit in the lived experiences of all four individuals is the recurring theme that adults at school inadequately address the needs and desires of young people.

However, the experiences shared by Aaliyah, Alicia, Oliver, and Thao also reveal a ‘thirst for a new way of thinking to feed and free their minds’ (Mirza, 2018, p. 15), suggesting a desire to change the system from within. The small actions carried out by Aaliyah, Alicia, Oliver, and Thao to change the system can be viewed as a ‘quiet riot’ (Mirza, 2015), representing a subtle yet powerful form of resistance. Aaliyah manifested her quiet riot through affective self-exclusion, Alicia through subtle expressions of dissent, and Oliver and Thao by becoming the representation they lacked during their schooling. Through these actions, they all advocated for change from within (Gopal, 2019), disrupting the existing discriminatory structures.

In this article, we have highlighted the enduring impact of coloniality, also in student support services, revealing the tangible consequences of labelling students based on race, disability and mental distress. Our analysis demonstrates how these labels, intertwined with colonial legacies, persist as concrete material consequences in the lives of young people. To envision how diverse practices might move us towards deeply needed decolonised futures (Clarke et al., 2024), student support services should prioritise centring the voices, experiences and knowledge of young people

of colour, their families and their communities. They should also actively engage these communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of the services. Furthermore, offering culturally competent, antiracist support can foster trust-based relationships between the services, young people and their families.

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