

Critical racial consciousness among diverse youth: global perspectives and educational possibilities

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Critical racial consciousness among diverse youth: global perspectives and educational possibilities

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Editorial: Critical racial consciousness among diverse youth: global perspectives and educational possibilities

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KEYWORDS

antiracism, education, racial advocacy, racial consciousness, youth and adolescence

Editorial on the Research Topic

Critical racial consciousness among diverse youth: global perspectives and educational possibilities

Scholar Gloria Yamato gave voice to a fundamental contradiction around the complicated nature of race and racism in her paper entitled “*Something About the Subject Makes it Hard to Name*.” As the articles in this Research Topic attest in a variety of ways, what is often hard to name about the pervasive impact of race is the presence of hegemonic Whiteness. Whiteness exists as a social construct, historically derived from the (racialized) organization of society, and can be defined as a sort of collective consciousness and way of interacting in the world that privileges whiteness, allowing white supremacy to thrive. Since the manifestations of whiteness will look different in different ecological contexts, it is no wonder that “naming” the dynamics of racial oppression is so hard.

Yet, as co-editors, we were struck by the incisive and compelling way the articles in this Research Topic *did* name the politics and practice of race and whiteness across different contexts. Importantly, how we name a thing is highly influenced by the socio-historio-geo-political factors of the people who do the naming. This is a paradoxical situation, as many in the majority world—including those in settler colonies—have had no right to name a problem, but rather have been subjects of being named as problems. Featuring the ways that youth grapple with and name the manifestations of whiteness through the development of a critical racial consciousness—in and outside of formal educational settings—was tantamount to the goals of this Research Topic.

Using collaborative ethnography, [Mapaling and Shabalala](#) reflect critically on being young Black academics, who are also committed to decolonization, in spaces that remain tethered to whiteness. The article not only reflects on the authors’ experiences in academia, but surfaces something more perverse—the silencing of Blackness that is engrained within the higher education system—and by implication basic education. The authors illustrate the ways that conversations on race and racialization often bring about a level of discomfort as individuals within institutions are confronted with their unearned privilege and exclusionary practices. Hesitancy around race-based conversation is also addressed by [Faye](#) in their article based on research with youth in Norway, who argues that discomfort is often regarded as something to be avoided. However, as Faye illustrates, in critical racial conscientization, discomfort is a major part of teaching on and about racism. It is this

liminal space of discomfort or employing a “pedagogy of discomfort” within the classroom, that leads to change conversations, and better educational and psychological outcomes. This is illustrated in work by [Masinga](#), who uses critical racial consciousness as lens toward understanding the role of self-concept in the academic achievement of youth in South Africa. Self-concept itself is both multi-faceted and racialized, inclusive of class, gender, and sexuality. [Masinga's](#) article extends the way in which we see the role of these social identities in the development of self-concept and urges us to contextualize the latter as part of youths' academic trajectories.

The psychological impact of the racialization of youth, and by extension, the silences that follow when things are not named, have far reaching implications toward epidemics such as suicide. [Rodríguez et al.](#) highlight how the erasure of Emberá Indigenous populations in Colombia has fueled an increase in suicide among youth. Through collective case study, they illustrate how institutionalized racism, as well as continued violence on indigenous people, plays a significant role in how youth experience belonging, and its association with increased rates of youth suicide.

Indeed, Black bodies in conditions of oppression and repression are marked by violence which invariably shape educational outcomes. This circumstance is no truer than in South Africa, where [Spambo](#) illustrates how community violence linked to the socio-historio-political conditions of South Africa has disastrous effects on education of youth. It is not by coincidence that communities marked by violence are majority Black-poor-working-class, it is a condition of a world that devalues Blackness, and specific to this Research Topic, Black youth. Yet, violence within the educational space is not only in terms of physical violence, but often in the form of subtle misrecognitions and exclusions. [Head and Dlamini](#) highlight how microaggressions are pervasive within the education space, specifically focusing on name-based microaggressions. Name-based microaggressions are a form of symbolic violence that deny youth their full identity, through racialized renaming; nicknaming; and mispronunciations. In contrast, authentic and affirming representation of minoritized groups within the schooling environment can mediate experiences of discrimination, as [Saafir et al.](#) show in their study with 2,063 youth in the United States of America. The article demonstrates the importance of educators with critical racial consciousness that nurture inclusive classroom environments.

[Gast et al.](#) draw us closer toward thinking about how we may do the work of “ending” racism, by responding to the silencing that happens in regard to minoritized youth. In their study with youth during and immediately post the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of centralizing youth voices in discussions on racism is noted as a significant factor in raising critical consciousness. Also legitimizing the criticality of voice, the article by [Pérez](#) speaks to a kind of liberatory potential that reclaiming the racial narrative

can have for historically marginalized communities. This article offers an important theoretical departure for understanding how we move beyond the paradox that is presented by race—that race itself does not exist in its biological sense but rather is a socially derived construct that determines the strata of belonging. [Pérez](#) offers transgressive-racialization as a refusal to the reproduction of racialized ontologies within educational institutions.

Together, the articles in this Research Topic engage with the processes by which individuals come to interrogate their lived experiences with racialized systems of dominance and inequality in global perspective. In so doing, they underscore the potential for change that exists when youth and adults stand alongside each other in racial solidarity, as they demand a more just world.

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Room for discomfort when teaching about racism

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Many show emotional ambivalence, and in many cases discomfort, when dealing with sensitive topics such as racism, and research has shown that teachers tend to avoid addressing racism in schools because they lack appropriate tools. This article describes a pedagogical method – *giving room for discomfort* – that was conducted in seminars with six groups of pre-service teachers at a Norwegian university in 2018 and 2019. The seminars focused on racism and prejudice and used virtual reality as a didactic tool. Theoretically based in the framework of the Pedagogy of discomfort, the method emphasizes that allowing room for discomfort when teaching about racism can be a valuable pedagogical strategy. By facilitating a classroom environment where both minority and majority students have space to share their perceptions of racism, including those that are uncomfortable, one can both increase understandings of racism and equip students with tools to handle situations related to racism that may arise in their future classrooms.

KEYWORDS

racism, pedagogy of discomfort, norm-critical pedagogy, virtual reality, VR didactics

Introduction

In the fall of 2019, on one of the most popular podcasts in Norway, "Radioresepsjonen", listeners could hear host Tore Sagen reading a note in which he, among other things, compared people with dark skin to monkeys. According to Sagen himself, the episode was intended as satirical comedy aimed toward those who hold racist views in Norway. In the following days and weeks, Sagen and the podcast host, the state-owned Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), faced massive criticism, and chose to withdraw the podcast. Sagen was criticized for reproducing racist attitudes¹ and for being insensitive toward those who have experienced racism². However, Sagen was also defended by some, based on the principle of freedom of speech³, while others highlighted the positive aspect

1 Op-ed by Nastaran Marie Kowkabi in the Norwegian newspaper VG, 31.10.2019: *Ut mot Radioresepsjonens Tore Sagen: – Rasisme er ikke humor!*: <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/kJxwx6/ut-mot-radioresepsjonens-tore-sagen-rasisme-er-ikke-humor>.

2 Op-ed by Zane Khan in the Norwegian newspaper VG, 02.11.2019: *Politisk ukorrekthet for enhver pris*: [https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/e8RdJO/politisk-ukorrekthet-for-ehver-pris?utm_source=inline-teaser-bottom&utm_content=K3~\\$times\\$~1n6](https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/e8RdJO/politisk-ukorrekthet-for-ehver-pris?utm_source=inline-teaser-bottom&utm_content=K3~$times$~1n6).

3 Op-ed by Erik Mjones Svendsen at www.nrk.no, 01.11.2019: *#JeSuisTore. Hva skjedde med å dø for ytringsfriheten?*: https://www.nrk.no/ytring/_jesuistore-1.14765475

of a white man drawing attention to racism as a societal problem through humour⁴. The heated debate following Sagen's attempt of generating humor of a sensitive topic exemplifies how racism is a topic that evokes strong emotions and often leads to discussions with polarized opinions. It has been noted that debates on racism often become heated because the topic challenges the boundaries between morality, experiences, politics, and science (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 32), making agreement difficult to reach.

A central feature of the debate following the Sagen incident was strong disagreement over how racism should be defined, and consequently whether Sagen's stunt was racist or not. Even within academic research, there are disagreements about what should be included in the definition of racism and where the line should be drawn on what can be called racism⁵. For example, Midtbøen and Rogstad (2010: 32–33) argue that in the Norwegian setting discussing the causes of systematic exclusion along ethnic lines at a structural level is problematic because the concept is emotionally charged and tends to increase conflict levels, as evident in the debate following the Sagen incident. They suggest that the term "systemic discrimination" is more suitable than the term racism to explain how structures in society can have inequality-creating consequences, and that the term "racism" should be reserved for "attitudes of a more extreme nature" (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 46). However, several researchers contemplate this and has argued that replacing the term "racism" with "discrimination" could contribute to denial, minimization, and naturalization of racism as social and political phenomena (Bangstad, 2017; Gillborn, 2006; Titley, 2020). Still, the lack of conceptual clarity in both scientific circles and public debate perpetuates confusion and disagreement about what racism "is".

Debates about racism often end up in entrenched positions where there is much to defend on both sides. Over the past decade, we have seen new voices in the debate in Norway, advocating personal stories about how everyday racism affects their lives. Many minorities feel excluded from mainstream society and contend that racism is not taken seriously by the majority population⁶. On the other hand, some in the majority population claim that accusations of racism are hard to defend oneself against. Midtbøen & Rogstad have pointed out that because the contemporary debate climate is dichotomized, the fear of being accused of racism may motivate the majority population to not act at all against racism (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 34). For example, Sagen stated after the debate that he had become so afraid of being perceived as racist that he is now "done with ethnicity"⁷.

In this article, I argue that the described entrenched positions in the public discourse on racism in Norway also creates a tough climate for teachers to address racism as a concept and as a

phenomenon in their classrooms. Many teachers show emotional ambivalence, and in many cases discomfort, when dealing with sensitive topics such as racism (Zembylas, 2010). Norwegian and international research also indicate that teachers often avoid situations related to racism, bullying, or other expressions of group-based prejudices among students, partly because they lack the tools to work on prevention of racism in both short and long term (Harbin et al., 2019; Harlap and Riese, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011).

The purpose of this article is not to evaluate whether Sagen was racist or not, or whether it was right or wrong to satirize racism in the way he did. The purpose of mentioning this case is to introduce aspects of the conversation about racism that are perceived as sensitive by both minority and majority populations, making racism difficult to discuss - and even controversial. Basing the discussions in Zembylas theoretical framework of "Pedagogy of discomfort" (2010), I argue in this article that instead of treating racism as something to be avoided in the classroom, in line with Sagen's statement about avoiding everything related to "ethnicity," there are pedagogical benefits in embracing racism as a topic in the classroom even when it becomes uncomfortable. I argue that by focusing on racism as a structural problem when teaching about racism, the discussion can be shifted from an emotionally charged debate about individual morality and into a framework that can be seen as fruitful from a learning perspective - for both minority and majority populations.

There is relatively little research on teacher educators and teacher student's understandings of racism in Norway. The Norwegian population consist of a white majority population (approximately 80% of the population), where public voices of the minority traditionally have been few. As noted by researchers, there has been a striking silence on concepts such as *race* and *racism* in Norwegian schools, resulting in teachers being deprived of important concepts for dealing with issues of racism and structural inequalities (Osler and Lindquist, 2018). Osler and Lindquist (2018) point out that teacher students seem to lack a shared language to discuss inequality in general and racism and racial injustice in particular. If racism is to be challenged, it must be named. Not naming racism ultimately means that teachers will lack appropriate educational tools to address structural inequalities and racism (Osler and Lindquist, 2018). Røthing (2017) has pointed out that teachers feel uncomfortable when confronted with racism, and that teachers may have simplified views of racism, which can affect their teaching. A study by Rangnes and Ravneberg (2019) finds that Norwegian teacher students seem to have ambivalent feelings toward addressing racism as a topic in the classroom, which emphasize the need for increased focus on racism in teacher education.

In this article, I describe a pedagogical method that I have called *room for discomfort*. The method was conducted in six seminars with pre-service teachers at a Norwegian university in 2018 and 2019, which focused on racism and prejudice. The article describes the method and presents an analysis of students' experience with it. The aim is to give teacher educators and others an practical example of how discomfort when discussing racism in the classroom may be addressed. Situations in which a sensitive topic triggers emotions strong enough to potentially disrupt the learning process are referred to in the educational literature as "hot moments" (Harlap, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011). The article presents two such hot moments: one example in which I was able to create

4 Op-ed by Shabana Rehman at www.nrk.no, 01.11.2019: *Takk til Tore Sagen*: <https://www.nrk.no/ytring/takk-til-tore-sagen-1.14765971>.

5 A comprehensive discussion of the concept of racism is too extensive for this article (for a glimpse into parts of the academic debate in the Norwegian setting, see e.g., Bangstad, 2017, 2018; Rasmussen, 2018).

6 See for example this op-ed by Salma Ahmed the Norwegian newspaper VG, 06.11.2019: *Rasimedebatten: -Derfor er jeg lei*: <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/P9XEW6/rasisme-debatten-derfor-er-jeg-lei>

7 Newspaper article in the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten, 05.11.2019: *Tore Sagen: Skal ikke bruke "N-ordet" igjen*: <https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/i/50eo1X/tore-sagen-skal-ikke-bruke-n-ordet-igjen>

room for discomfort in addressing racism as a topic, and another where I was unable to do so. These episodes provide insights into different aspects of discomfort when engaging with racism as a topic in the classroom. Finally, I reflect on the role the topic of racism can have in Norwegian teacher education.

Experiences from seminars on racism and prejudice

In 2018 and 2019, I conducted seminars on the topic of racism and prejudice with a total of six groups of pre-service teachers at a Norwegian university⁸. The group size varied from 10 to 25 people, and the students were in their first year in a 5-year teacher training. Participation in the seminar was voluntary.

The seminar lasted for 3 h and was designed as a reflection on how to be norm-critical in practice in the classroom. The focus of the seminar was to raise awareness about racism among students by focusing on how ideas of "us" and "the other" are constructed, the various forms of racism that exist and how structural racism is embedded in contemporary society. It addressed the responsibility future teachers have in combating racism and how they can address racism in their future classrooms. A central aspect of the seminar was to focus on racism as a systemic issue and on how structural racist beliefs are maintained in everyday actions. It was central to make students aware of how they position themselves in majority or minority groups when confronted with racism, and how this may affect their conceptualization of racism and prejudice. It is important to note that the seminar was revised several times during the six times I conducted it, as I encountered discomfort in teaching about racism – which I will return to later.

The seminars consisted of a theoretical overview, a film, group discussions and plenary discussions. To address aspects of racism that may be uncomfortable, I wanted to challenge the students to personally engage with the topic of racism and actively put them in a position that challenged the uncomfortable aspects of discussing racism. I chose to use virtual reality (VR) as a didactic method to immerse students and to make the situation as personal as possible⁹. In VR, the viewer, through special glasses, is incorporated into a three-dimensional artificial world, while maintaining a sense of presence in the real world. I used 360-degree film, which is filmed with a camera capable of capturing a full 360-degree view. This creates a three-dimensional storytelling experience that differs from "regular" two-dimensional film, as viewers can turn 360 degrees and choose their own perspective of the story. VR has the potential to create involvement to a greater extent than other media because it combines emotions and bodily sensibility with knowledge (Doyle et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2015), making it a suitable starting point for critical reflection on sensitive topics.

The students watched the film "Is Australia racist?" - a 360-degree VR film produced by the Australian TV station SBS. The film was made in 2017 following a documentary about the

prevalence of racism in Australian society. According to the producer, the film aims to demonstrate the significant impact of racist attacks on individuals using "immersive, dramatic, and empathy-building storytelling techniques" that are "uncomfortably personal" (SBS, 2017). The film revolves around a specific incident on a bus where a person is subjected to severe harassment, primarily based on his skin-color, religious belonging and being a wheelchair user. A key point of the film is that viewers see the incident twice, from two different perspectives: first as a spectator, and later as the person being targeted.

The film can be viewed as a "digital excursion" where the viewer is taken to a place that they would not otherwise have access to. In this case, the film aimed to give viewers who have no experience with racism insight into how racism and hate speech is experienced by those who are exposed to it (SBS, 2017). However, the aim of the seminar was not to present the students with a digital excursion of racism, but rather to use the film as a starting point for reflections on perspective-taking, othering, prejudice and racism, by addressing the oversimplified way the film displays racism. Showing a film that portrait direct racism, where the students is expected to look at it from the perspective of the victim, must be carried out with the outmost care and require strong ethical awareness. The students were introduced to the content of the film beforehand and could decide for themselves whether they wanted to watch or stop during the film. I chose to use VR because the possibility of perspective-taking to reinforce the discomfort of watching a racist event. I took advantage of this discomfort to create a space for reflection on what racism looks like in contemporary Norway.

Theoretical framework

In the planning the content of the seminars, I found theoretical inspiration from various frameworks, which will be presented below. The theoretical framework are also used when analyzing the students' experiences from the method.

Different understandings of the concept racism

In the seminars I aimed to educate the students in racism as a concept, teaching them about the history of racism and how different definitions has varied throughout different times and places, and that being aware of how one defines the concept racism has profound influence on how one understands racism as a phenomenon. Historically, racism has been defined as an ideology postulating that there are human races characterized by persistent physical differences – with a direct link between such physical characteristics and aspects like morality and intelligence – and that these 'races' form a hierarchy where the 'white race' is superior (Gullestad, 2002: 148). This form of *classical racism* can be seen in ideologies such as Nazism, Apartheid in South Africa, racial segregation in the Southern states of the USA, and was supported by attempts to scientifically validate such value-based differences. Post-World War II, science turned its back on racial biology, which subsequently influenced understandings of racism. What has been termed *new racism* does not emphasize biological explanations but maintains the idea of a hierarchical value system where some hold greater value than others. In this understanding of racism, culture is

⁸ The seminar was developed as part of my post.doc project, which focused on racism and group-based prejudice in Norwegian schools. The project was funded by the Norwegian Research Council (NFR).

⁹ See (Faye, 2020) for more detailed information on the pedagogical method and how I used VR didactics in teaching about racism.

emphasized over "race" as the meaningful element for hierarchical categorization. This type of racism has been revitalized in the European context primarily through encounters with immigration from non-Western countries (Gullestad, 2002: 149). Both classical and new racism definitions presuppose that one should be able to identify *who* is racist, thus focusing on racism as an individualized phenomenon (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 37). For example, most of the opinions following the Sagen case presented at the beginning of this article, focused on discussing whether Sagen was a racist or not, thereby assigning blame and responsibility at individual level. Sagen also attempted to shed light on racism by creating satire in which he portrayed a person with individualized racist attitudes.

Other definitions point out that racism is embedded in social practices, focusing on structural forms of racism rather than individualized expressions. Rooted in postcolonial theoretical traditions, perspectives that define racism as *racialization* argues that the historical hegemony of the Western world continues to shape relations between the majority population and ethnic minorities. Here, "race" is defined as something that is anchored in fundamental perceptions of reality and serves as a confirmation of the majority population's self-image at a structural or societal level (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 37). Central to this theoretical direction is that the majority has the power to define social groups based on how different they are from the majority. Thus, the majority becomes the center from which *the Others* are defined. Processes of racialization are thus less visible than classical and new racism because it tends to be implicit and appears as a natural categorization of society's members (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 37–38). The notion that racism is a phenomenon embedded in social practice differs from previous definitions by not focusing on the individual attitudes or ideologies behind racist practices. Instead, it enhances that everyday practices and linguistic categories that are perceived as natural by the majority, create overwhelming barriers to the inclusion and participation of minority populations in society (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 38). Within a perspective that defines racism as structural, one is thus concerned with uncovering mechanisms that can explain systematic and systemic differences between majority and minority groups. This means that a person can engage in social practices that are racist even if the person is not *a* racist. Several of the op-eds following the Sagen case presented earlier, for example, argued from such a perspective.

In research on racism, the concepts of the Other and othering are often used to clarify social, psychological, and symbolic differences in positions and power. The concepts originate in feminist literature (De Beauvoir, 2000) and postcolonial studies (Said, 2003; Spivak, 1985). In an othering process, a group, usually a majority, is portrayed as the norm from which others are defined. Here, agency is not recognized as an aspect of the identity of others, thus making them passive objects instead of active subjects (Jensen, 2011: 65). Othering thus refers to the consequence of racism, sexism, or other forms of oppression, manifesting as the symbolic degradation of a group (the Other).

Perspectives on anti-racist work in schools

The pedagogical approach that is described in this article is based in an active anti-racism educational approach. Racism, hate speech, or other expressions of group-based prejudice are topics which to a little degree are discussed in Norwegian schools (Borhaug, 2012; Harlap and Riese, 2014; Osler and Lindquist,

2018; Røthing, 2015). Much of the teaching that has addressed racism or other forms of discrimination in Norway has traditionally focused on uncovering discriminatory conditions and facilitating help and support for groups experiencing various forms of discrimination. This includes working to prevent prejudices and counteract stereotypical perceptions of certain groups, based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or skin color. For many schools, the solution to such discriminatory practices is to focus on diversity as a resource and emphasize the school as a safe space for everyone (Kumashiro, 2002: 34). Often, the focus is on teaching in "culturally sensitive ways" and establishing channels to report unwanted incidents (*ibid.*). In this perspective, one assumes that not all students fit into a standard, but rather being attentive to the many different social, economic, ethnic, and gendered backgrounds of the students have and how this affects the student and their identity and actions (*ibid.*). This kind of anti-racist teaching is what Kumashiro (2002) calls teaching *for* the Other.

Another common way to conduct anti-discrimination education in schools, according to Kumashiro (2002), is to teach *about* the Other. This approach focuses on knowledge about the Other as a strategy to erase differences and work against discrimination. A key aspect here is that a one-sided focus on knowledge about a group often builds sympathy for the marginalized group. However, having sympathy for the others is not enough to combat racism and othering. A perspective where the teacher should help students by focusing on their group membership involves categorizing the others based on the teacher's (perhaps limited) knowledge of that group, which risks reinforcing the othering of the student rather than reducing it.

Teaching *for* and *about* the Other has been criticized from numerous perspectives within critical pedagogy for not leading to structural and systemic changes, redefining what is considered "normal" or challenging processes where minorities are othered in encounters with the majority (Arneback and Jämte, 2017; Gorski, 2008; Harlap and Riese, 2014; Jones, 1999; Kumashiro, 2002; Portera, 2014; Røthing, 2015, 2016; Westheim and Tolo, 2014). There is broad agreement within what is called *norm-critical pedagogy* that these forms of teaching alone are not enough to create anti-discriminatory practices in schools. By focusing one-sidedly on the individual's experience of prejudice or discrimination or other negative experiences, the focus is locked on the others as a group that is problematic (Kumashiro, 2002). Discrimination is not only the marginalization of a group, but also the normalization of the rest, maintains Kumashiro (2002: 37). Norm-critical pedagogy emerged in Sweden in the 2000s, as a direct criticism of what is often referred to as "tolerance pedagogy" (Røthing, 2019: 46). A norm-critical perspective is about training awareness to challenge norms and prejudices that contribute to othering, exclusion and discrimination.

An understanding of racism and discrimination as a structural phenomenon means that the concepts must be elevated above moral criticism of individuals to be able to focus on invisible exclusion mechanisms that contribute to the subordination of ethnic minority groups in society (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 34). A focus on structural racism thus requires questioning the majority society's own norm structure and to identify rules and practices that most people take for granted and that are perceived as "natural" and normal (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 45). Leonardo

(2013) argues that authentic conversations about race, racism, and whiteness must go beyond superficial discussions of diversity and inclusion to directly confront white supremacy as part of structural racism. Matias (2016) argues that emotional responses in teachers may function to center whiteness as the “normal”, disrupt critical conversations, and maintain the racial *status quo*. She challenges teachers to critically examine their own racial identities and emotional investments in whiteness, pushing for what she calls “emotional work” that moves beyond comfort and toward genuine racial justice (Matias, 2016).

Room for discomfort when facing racism in the classroom

Taking an active anti-racist and norm-critical approach was central to the pedagogical method presented in this article. A norm-critical perspective can be challenging in the classroom because it places a significant responsibility on the teacher. Teaching about sensitive topics, such as racism, can create discomfort for the teacher, a discomfort that is natural to try to avoid (Røthing, 2019: 42). Zembylas proposes using what she calls a “pedagogy of discomfort” as an arena for potential change (Zembylas, 2010). This theoretical approach stems from anti-discrimination and anti-racist traditions, drawing primarily on postcolonial, queer, feminist and intersectional perspectives and critical race theory. “Discomfort” in this tradition refer to a broad spectrum of emotions, such as frustration, perplexity, irritation, and concern (Røthing, 2019: 45). Educators who take the risk of problematizing established norms and understandings, risk creating discomfort for both students and themselves. In this risk also lies the potential for the unforeseen, the unmanageable, and uncomfortable (Røthing, 2019: 42).

When planning the seminars presented in this article, I developed a method I have called *room for discomfort*. This method builds on the theoretical work of Zembylas and Røthing, and is intended as a practical method to implement a norm-critical perspective in the classroom. Giving *room for discomfort* in the classroom should not be seen as a method for finding facts or truths, but rather as a method for exploring how feelings of discomfort, and the natural urge to get away from discomfort, affect the teacher’s ways of thinking and acting and thus has consequences for students’ learning. Allowing *room for discomfort* is a strategy teachers may use in their classroom to manage sensitive issues which create emotional ambivalence for both the teacher and the students. Emotional ambivalence is linked to the fact that uncomfortable feelings are often seen as negative and “wrong” in the classroom. Embracing discomfort involves allowing space to articulate feelings that do not always “fit”, and exploring how emotions can be used constructively in the classroom – both for the teacher and the student, rather than trying to avoid them. In this work, Bonilla-Silva (2019) argues that emotions are not merely individual or psychological experiences but are socially constructed and play a crucial role in maintaining racial hierarchies. The goal of the method is not to reach agreement, but to challenge and be critical of structural racism by *making room* for what one or several people experiences as uncomfortable. By embracing discomfort, the discomfort itself can become a tool by disturbing taken-for-granted ideas about racism (Biesta, 2006; Dowling, 2017; MacLure, 2003). Finding the balance is, however, challenging, and may lead

to situations that triggers emotions strong enough to potentially disrupt the learning process, which in the educational literature are referred to as “hot moments” (Harlap, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011). This article analyzes two such hot moments, which occurred during seminars where I applied the method.

Kumashiro (2002) argues that one must create reactions and provocations in order to create change. But how much discomfort is it acceptable for students to be exposed to? As expected, critical studies have emerged that address the ethical implications of risk in the classroom. The focus of giving *room for discomfort* is on ensuring a safe classroom environment without this meaning the absence of all discomfort. It is the combination of discomfort and a safe classroom environment that can lead to change (Røthing, 2019). Challenging established norms is not without strain, and teaching that does not affirm and reproduce students’ familiar ideas, but rather challenges power relations, can generate engagement and curiosity, but also aggression and crises for students (Røthing, 2019: 42). Providing space to help students through hardship and crises in their encounter with norm-critical education is therefore crucial (Kumashiro, 2002: 62–63). In this way, uncomfortable topics and emotional ambivalence can be transformed into something constructive, by allowing students’ perceptions of how the world is structured to be critically challenged. By creating a safe classroom climate where discussing uncomfortable topics feels safe, discomfort has the potential to lead to constructive change in the learning situation. I base my understanding of learning as a relational process, where everyone involved in a learning situation – teachers and students/teacher educators and students – experience, develop and learn together. Teaching and learning are not processes with a sender and a receiver that can be separated, rather they are complex learning processes that are intertwined (Østern et al., 2019: 16).

Materials and methods

The pedagogical method *room for discomfort* was conducted in six seminars with pre-service teachers. To document the method the seminars were used as a platform for collecting empirical data, which forms the base for the discussions later in this article. The methodological design for this study is inspired by Critical didactic incidents method (CDIs), which bears similarities to Critical incident technique (Angelides, 2001). The CDIs method is based on qualitative accounts and analysis of critical moments in the teaching process when content is brought into play (Amade-Escot, 2005). In the educational context, critical incidents are not necessarily sensational, but its criticality is based on the justification, the significance, and the meaning given to them (Angelides, 2001: 431). Such critical events are useful as means to collect qualitative data because it stimulates to reflection (ibid.). The CDIs method focuses on teachers’ and students’ co-activities and their construction of the meaning of the critical situation in which they are immersed, and includes analysis of teacher activity, students’ activities, and content knowledge embedded in the process (Amade-Escot, 2005: 134).

To record student activities, structured focus group interviews was chosen as the main research method and data collection tool. As part of the seminars, the students engaged in group

discussions. These discussions were recorded and transcribed¹⁰, and quotes from the discussions is included in the analysis of the student's experiences from the seminars, including their reflections on, and reactions to, discomfort in the classroom. The student's conversations were organized in line with focus group interview technique as it is described by Bloor (2001), where the participants were given questions for discussion and freely engaged with each other. Group discussions is a well-known teaching method for students and worked effectively as a frame for focus groups. Since I was a teacher educator researching my own students, I was aware that my authority in the situation might lead them to moderate their statements when I was present (Jakobsen, 2012). I was present to ensure the recording equipment was functioning and listened sporadically to the discussions – but made sure that they were given time to speak with minimal interference. The transcribed conversations consistently show that when discussions were allowed to proceed undisturbed, students shared more personal experiences. When I was present they moderated themselves more and presented their answers more as "correct" responses to the questions they had been given.

To record teacher activities, I used an autobiographical method in line with Katz and Csordas (2003). After each seminar, I noted key events that had occurred and my own reflections about them, thus using my own pedagogical practice as an entry point to discuss discomfort when encountering racism as a topic in the classroom. The autobiographical data is central to the description of the second of the two hot moments that is presented in the analysis. Central in these accounts are reflections of my positionality. As a white female representative of the majority population, my background obviously influenced my actions, as will be discussed later. Additionally, I conducted an in-depth interview with the students who was central in this hot moment. Quotes from this interview is presented in the analysis, and the interviewed student has read and provided input on the article.

The analysis of the data consisted of identifying critical episodes in which the content intended to be taught and learned was evident, in line with the CDIs method. The CDIs method concerns analyzing a set of activities linked with the content intended to be taught and learned, in which students and teacher struggle to construe a common meaning and achieve their own but interrelated goals (Amade-Escot, 2005: 135).

To create room for discomfort in the classroom

In the seminar, I challenged the students by actively, but gentle, putting them in an uncomfortable situation by showing a 360 film about racism. Furthermore, I use this discomfort as a tool to shed light on racism by "disturbing" (Dowling, 2017; MacLure, 2003) taken for granted perceptions about racism. The goal was that this would create a room for discomfort in the classroom, which could contribute to increased reflection on racism and its many

ways of expression. In this exploration of discomfort, we took a closer look at what creates emotional ambivalence and how teachers can use emotional ambivalence as a resource in the classroom. In the following discussion, I present two "hot moments" (Harlap, 2014; Hughes et al., 2011) that illustrates different dimensions of accommodating discomfort in the classroom. In the first example, I discuss the discomfort the students experienced in their encounter with racism as a topic, and how facilitating discomfort led to learning processes for the students. In the second example, I discuss an episode where I failed making enough room for discomfort.

Hot moment 1: creating room for discomfort

After the students had watched the film *Is Australia Racist?* a very common response among white majority students was that an event such as in the film do not happen in Norway and that it could not have occurred in recent times. In one of the group discussions, the following typical conversation emerged:

Student 1: "I don't really feel like such brutal racism happens."
 Student 2: "Not so often, at least."
 Student 3: "Without someone intervening pretty quickly."
 Student 1: "I feel maybe in the States and such."
 Student 4: "Yeah, maybe."
 Student 1: "Not here, though. But like. If you go to – not the south coast, but the southern states [USA]."

These four students all agreed that it's unlikely that racism, in the way it was demonstrated in the film, happens very often, and that it happens in Norway. Creating distance from racism by referring to it as something that can only happen elsewhere or in another time was a typical response to the discussion of what racism is. This was stated in all the six seminar groups, and it was almost always one of the first comments majority students made when discussing in groups. In the film, racism is portrayed as *classical racism* – that is, defining racism as an individual and ideological action (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010). In the film, a man is harassed by a woman with clear racist attitudes. The problematic aspect of such a portrayal of racism is that it reinforces a perception of racism as something that is individually and ideologically motivated, and therefore easy to distance oneself from Gullestad (2002). Researchers have pointed out that extreme racist events contribute to reinforcing an understanding of racism as evil, where a Norwegian self-understanding is adorned in contrast with this as non-racist (Midtbøen and Rogstad, 2010: 40). Thus, the understanding of racism as a structural phenomenon is often neglected, which is also reflected in the example with how the majority students reacted to the film. Based on the students' lack of reflections about this I gradually changed my focus during the six seminars to problematizing more the one-sided way of conveying racism in the film – and to contrast this with structural forms of racism. I did this, by, among other things, including a discussion of me and my students' skin color and how this affect our positions in the classroom, to elaborate on what is meant by everyday racism, and not least to confront the students' own definitions of racism.

A key goal of the seminar was to focus on structural racism by questioning how categories of "us" and "the other" are created. The

¹⁰ Only the students who consented to participate in the research project were recorded – a total of 43 students. The remaining students participated in the seminar without being part of the research project. The research project has been approved by NSD.

360 film was produced as part of an anti-racism campaign, where it was primarily the white majority population that was to be given insight into how racism is experienced. In the film *Is Australia Racist*, it is a point that one takes the perspective of two different people; first as a spectator of a racist event, and then as the one who is exposed to racist harassment. Using means to build sympathy for the person who is subjected to harassment, the film aims to convey the story of the Other in such a way that one virtually takes the perspective of the Other. Among the white majority students who participated in the seminars, it became clear in the transcribed group discussions that the film was indeed perceived as an attempt to walk in someone else's shoes by creating an experience of how racism "feels". In the recordings of the group discussions, it was without doubt being in the position of the person sitting in a wheelchair and being harassed that was the strongest experience of the film, as this dialogue exemplifies:

Student 1: It was more horrible to see it from his perspective. To kind of be the one sitting there. For when you try to look up and around you, it's kind of, in addition to being pressed down he is already put in a lower level. Because she's standing over him and in a way mocking him with those movements and threats, right.

Student 2: Yes, I felt very small when I sat there, or in the video.

Student 3: You can't really defend yourself in the way a person who isn't in a wheelchair can.

A dilemma was how minority students, who potentially could identify with the person in the film that the majority students felt sympathy for, would experience this situation in the classroom. How would they experience being seen as "the other" by the majority group?

In the group discussions, one of the most prominent experiences among both majority and minority students was the experience of *sympathizing* with the person in the wheelchair – but clearly for different reasons. While minority students related to the film because they or "someone like me", as one girl said, may have been subjected to racism themselves, the majority students mostly felt sorry for the man in the wheelchair. Most of the majority students talked about feelings of injustice, powerlessness, or anger when they explained how they felt when they were supposed to take the perspective of the man in the wheelchair in the film. In other words, the majority students experienced the film as teaching *about* the Other (Kumashiro, 2002). In the seminars I confronted the students' reactions and emphasized that wearing VR glasses cannot lead the majority population to "learn" how racism is experienced. The majority can feel, become upset, and try to understand racism – but they do not experience it. It should also be added that neither the majority nor the minority students themselves raised that it could be problematic for a student group consisting mainly of white majority students to experience how racism feels by wearing VR glasses and watching a film. Feeling sympathy for someone highlights that there is a power dimension where the majority appears as "the normal" (Kumashiro, 2002). Allowing majority students to feel sympathy for others is therefore not problematic in itself; it only becomes problematic if sympathy alone becomes the meaningful aspect of racism education, as this can lead to othering.

In the seminars I aimed to let the students feel their own discomfort with the topic of racism and prejudice, and to allow them space to critically reflect on their own attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. The idea was that doing this in a classroom situation where everyone is "in the same boat" would lead the students to dare to articulate some of their own prejudices, and that this would be an opener for critical reflection on how the categorization of "us" and "the other" arises, how one's position, as privileged or non-privileged due to our skin color, affects how we conceptualize racism and prejudice. Are we all "blind slaves" to our prejudices (Gullestad, 2002: 165), or can we learn to reflect on them? Recordings from group discussions show that several students openly reflected on their own prejudice – including their negative prejudice. For example, one of the ethnic Norwegian girls explained that she had experienced a panic attack on a plane once, because she had seen that the pilot "looked like a Muslim". She expressed relief that she could retell this episode in front of the others, and that laughing at herself and her own prejudice felt good. Other students also reported that they felt humor had a relieving effect in this part of the seminar. Several students also said that since the seminar facilitated that they could "look inside oneself," as one student said, it felt safe to say aloud things one had not dared to say before. Several students also said that they had become aware that they had many more prejudices than they had thought of beforehand.

Gullestad defines prejudices as an attitude, and claims that when we become conscious of a prejudice, they cease to be prejudices, and become subject to reflection and discussion (Gullestad, 2002: 165). I do, however, not think it is quite that simple. And I do not think that raising awareness of students' prejudices is enough in teaching about racism. However, the reflections of the students suggest that talking about their own prejudices was enlightening in terms of reflecting on their own position in either the majority or minority population, and how this affects the prejudices they have. Several of the students with immigrant backgrounds shared their prejudices against ethnic Norwegians, for example by referring to the term "potatoes" as a description of white Norwegians. Several white majority students expressed great surprise about this, stating that they had not considered what prejudices against themselves might look like, while they had many examples of prejudices against minorities and non-white. This exemplifies how the students critically reflected on norms related to skin color and how they critically identified how the majority population is assumed to represent what is "normal," in contrast to "the others". An important focus of the seminars was to show students that becoming aware of the assumptions and prejudices they hold about "the other" can be a strategy for gaining better self-insight and for thinking critically about the *status quo*, something many of the students seemed to grasp.

Hot moment 2: when does it become too uncomfortable?

During the seminars, students engaged lively in discussions. However, there were some voices that were less prominent in these discussions, namely the experiences of those who had encountered racist incidents. In all the groups, there was a clear overrepresentation of white majority students, where four out of five were girls. Some of the students from minority groups shared their experiences, but the fact that many did not say anything in these discussions also suggests that there may have been students

present who were afraid to share their experiences. In one of the cases where minority students shared their experiences, an episode emerged that is relevant to retell here, which also opened up for useful reflections on how discomfort can arise in the classroom, and discussions of when it can become *too* uncomfortable.

To confront the responses from majority students who distanced themselves from racism when these came up in the discussion, as in the example above, I chose to retell an episode in the plenum discussions where I had experienced an incident that was nearly identical to the situation in the 360 film, on a bus in my hometown a few years ago. In the incident, there was an elderly man in a state of intoxication who grossly insulted a young girl with a hijab, using very abusive terms related to her head covering and assumed religion, country of origin, and language. The incident ended with the driver stopping the bus after a few minutes and calling the police, upon which the man left the bus, and the bus continued with the girl and the other passengers. I pointed out the fact that almost no one on the bus supported the girl, and that she stood alone in facing severe racist harassment. The students reflected on how they themselves would react in a similar situation. In one of the groups, a young female student raised her hand when I finished the story and said, *"I've also experienced this on a bus in the same town. There was an old man who really hated me. I had completely forgotten about that until you told this now"*.

In contrast to how I handled statements from other minority students who had shared their experiences of racism in the plenum, where I have sought to include their stories into the lecture, this time I was completely caught off guard, and I exclaimed, *"Oh my God, was it you on that bus?"*. I had not met the student before and knew her only from what I could see: a young woman wearing a hijab. Instead of reflecting together with this student and the other seminar participants on how this uncomfortable situation could be an entry point for discussing racism – which after all was the goal of the seminars, and what I had done in all other cases where someone had shared experiences of racism – I rushed to continue the teaching without delving further into the episode. Why did I do that?

In this incident, as a white teacher from the majority population, I was confronted with precisely the discomfort that [Røthing \(2019\)](#) describes as the possibility of the unforeseen, the unmanageable, and the uncomfortable in the classroom. In previous seminars, I had taught about racism from a distance, as part of the white majority population. This incident made me share a direct experience of racism with someone else. We had both experienced a similar episode, but with very different roles – she as object to racist harassment and me as a bystander and part of the majority population. Even though I had informed all students in advance about what the film would be about and that it might happen that some would relive painful experiences¹¹, I found it very uncomfortable that I, as a teacher, was at risk of making the classroom an unsafe arena for this student – in a situation where there was already discomfort associated with the topic of

the seminar. I chose not to delve further into the episode because I was concerned about the risk of re-traumatization and that I might cause her a *too* uncomfortable situation dwelling on her story of racism. In other words, it was my fear that she, as a minority, would feel othered by my teaching *about* the Other that triggered discomfort in me.

After this incident, I interviewed the student, where we talked about this episode and how she experienced the situation. She said that although she also experienced some discomfort in this situation, she did not feel discomfort in talking about racism as a topic. For her, the discomfort was primarily related to her experience of having been object to racism several times in her life and not being taken seriously. She explained in the interview that she found the film and the teaching relevant, both because it addressed a topic that she found important, but also personally relevant to her because she had experienced being insulted because of her ethnicity and religion. She also said that she felt safe sharing her experience because the way the topic was presented provided *"a safe ground"*. She experienced that the framework of the seminar (how future teachers can work against racism in the classroom) was so important to her personally that she wanted to share her experiences of racism. Thus, it was my own discomfort that prevented me from addressing the girl's statement, not hers. She had also noticed my discomfort: *"I noticed that you found this uncomfortable"*.

The irony of my attempt to avoid discomfort in a seminar that precisely dealt with the importance of exploring discomfort in the classroom is a good example of how inherent and profound educational practice can be linked to the teacher's role as the one who has control in the class. Tensions or conflicts in the classroom often come as a surprise to both teachers and students, and it can be challenging to handle the emotional aspects of the incident ([Gressgård and Harlap, 2014](#): 25). Although my intention with developing and teaching a method to deal with emotions connected to race and racism was good, this example shows that discussions about race, racism, and my own racial privilege ([Matias, 2016](#)) made me uncomfortable. If the teacher does not address the uncomfortable situation because of a desire to control the situation, it can, however, reinforce the mechanisms that triggered the situation ([Gressgård and Harlap, 2014](#)). By not addressing the student's experience of racism because I was uncomfortable and worried about othering her in this situation, I nevertheless contributed to othering her by allowing her story to end with her having experienced a humiliating situation. By not inviting her to tell more, I declined an invitation from her to engage in a dialogue about racism and ended the conversation with it being I (the white majority) who told her story of racism. Thus, I contributed to reinforcing majority hegemony rather than challenging it, as I had intended, because I found the situation *too* uncomfortable.

According to [Kumashiro \(2002\)](#), it is necessary for teachers to create space in their teaching practice to help students through crises to increase understanding. The opposite, when the teacher tries to limit the problem to the situation and restore harmony, it can close the possibility of problematizing mechanisms and markers of social hierarchies ([Gressgård and Harlap, 2014](#): 23). The example above illustrates that it is absolutely necessary for the teacher, both in higher education as well as in primary and secondary education, to confront their own prejudice and modes of understanding in their teaching and engage in a continuous process of making room for discomfort. By making room for discomfort,

¹¹ Before I showed the film, I retold the plot, and warned that the film included scenes of oral abuse. I warned that if anyone had been exposed to racism, hate speech or other types of violence, this could potentially lead to re-traumatization. I encouraged those who did not want to see the film to watch something else instead, if they did not want to stand out as the only ones who did not see the film. None of the students told me that they did not want to see the film, but a few said afterward that they had started watching the film but stopped before finishing.

one can approach hot moments and difficult feelings that arise in the classroom through a conceptualization of discomfort, rather than something to be avoided or eliminated. By risking that the situation could become more uncomfortable for the student and myself, I could have created a potentially better environment for learning than the one described. This episode of how I tried to avoid discomfort was therefore implemented in later seminars with teacher students as an approach to how discomfort can look like in a classroom situation and how, by not engaging in the discomfort, one can block for important dimensions in teaching about racism.

Closing reflections on teaching about racism in teacher education

In this article I have argued that giving *room for discomfort* when confronting racism in the classroom can be crucial for increased understanding and learning. By addressing racism as done in the seminars described, both majority and minority students can become aware of the discomfort racism creates for the other group – and the consequences this experienced discomfort may have for them as future teachers. The learning potential here is connected to that both minority and majority students are given sufficient room to present their subjective experience of the discomfort racism evoked after watching the film – a process that will naturally be very different for the two groups. It is by no means my intention to equate the discomfort minorities experience when subjected to racism with the discomfort majority students feel in their encounter with racism. Experiencing racism can never be compared to the majority's experience of discomfort. However, I argue that in teacher education, it can be fruitful to recognize that racism is indeed uncomfortable for different groups, for different reasons, and that this discomfort has consequences for how racism is addressed in the classroom. It is in this borderland that I believe the potential for learning through giving room for discomfort is greatest. By acknowledging why other people finds racism uncomfortable, one can move beyond individualized definitions of racism and more easily identify the structural factors that sustain it. Feeling one's own discomfort and allowing space for other people's discomfort is not about learning *about* the Other or *for* the Other, as described by Kumashiro (2002), but rather learning *with each other*.

Gorski argues that teachers must accept that they will not always be liked by students and that practicing intercultural education that challenges the established norms will be uncomfortable (Gorski, 2008: 523). I agree with Gorski and believe that we should dare to use unconventional methods as a gateway to discuss racism in education – even when it is uncomfortable. There is no definitive answer on how to address racism in the classroom. Throughout the seminars, the goal was to challenge both majority and minority students' perceptions and definitions of racism, and to demonstrate that these understandings are fluid and change depending on the context. As future teachers, these students will encounter numerous situations related to racism, and practicing how to handle the unexpected in the intercultural classroom is crucial.

Educators in teacher education programs have a special responsibility to structure their teaching in a way that does not perpetuate or reinforce stereotypes and hierarchies. Critically reflecting on one's own pedagogical practices is therefore necessary, and this article has aimed to contribute with critical reflections on how norm-critical pedagogy can look in practice in a Norwegian teacher education program, by focusing on how to address discomfort and make it a potentially constructive tool for learning.

Author's Note

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This article is translated directly from Norwegian to English by the author. I have made some minor adaptations in order to meet the requirements of *Frontiers in Education*:

- I have changed the word “chapter” to “article”.
- In order to meet the needs of an international audience, five references to English literature has been added. These are Gillborn, 2006, Titley, 2020, Bonilla-Silva, 2019, Leonardo, 2013, and Matias, 2016.
- Two references were added to elaborate the methodological design; Amade-Escot, 2005 and Angelides, 2001.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin because the research is based on interviews where none of the participants can be identified. The interviews do not contain sensitive information, nor information that can lead to identification of individuals. The ethics committee has concluded that informed oral consent was sufficient.

Author contributions

RF: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Context matters: how relative representation shapes Black and Latiné adolescents' perceptions of school ethnic climate and discrimination

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Introduction: The current study used path analysis to examine Black and Latiné students' experiences with discrimination at school as a function of relative representation and perceptions of the school ethnic climate.

Method: Participants included 2,063 United States eighth graders (51% female; $M = 13.33$ years) who self-identified as Black (24%) or Latiné (76%).

Results: Results indicated that relative representation significantly predicted perceptions of the school ethnic climate such that, overrepresentation in class compared to the broader school context was associated with less favorable perceptions of the school ethnic climate, as measured by teacher support norms around diversity ($b = -0.42, p < 0.001$). In turn, less positive perceptions of teacher support norms predicted greater perceived discrimination from both adults ($b = -0.78, p < 0.001$) and peers ($b = -0.35, p < 0.001$).

Discussion: These findings highlight the importance of considering relative representation and underscore the critical role of teachers in fostering classroom environments that support ethnic and racial diversity and reduce discriminatory experiences for Black and Latiné youth.

KEYWORDS

school ethnic climate, relative representation, discrimination, teachers, classroom representation

1 Introduction

Amid ongoing sociopolitical debates over race and equity in education, understanding the factors that shape students' experiences of discrimination in schools is more critical than ever. Students spend the majority of their waking days at school, yet the school environment can be a site where discrimination manifests itself through both systemic bias and negative interactions with peers or teachers. Racial and ethnic discrimination refers to events or situations where minoritized youth experience differential and negative treatment because of their racial and ethnic background (e.g., unfair treatment or bias) (Civitillo et al., 2024). Prior research on racial and ethnic discrimination shows a multitude of negative outcomes for youth across psychological, academic, and social domains (Benner et al., 2018). For Black and Latiné youth, experiences of discrimination may be compounded by systemic biases (e.g., biased curriculum and academic racialized tracking)

in educational settings (Benner, 2017; Bottiani et al., 2017; McWhirter et al., 2018), making it imperative to examine the ways both classroom and school contexts contribute to perceptions of racial and ethnic discrimination.

The racial and ethnic composition of schools and classrooms plays a pivotal role in shaping students' experiences of discrimination (Wright and Harper, 2020). Prior research suggests that elements of the school's racial and ethnic composition—such as overall diversity, the proportion of minoritized peers, and the availability of same-race and same-ethnic peers—also influence perceptions of racial and ethnic discrimination at school (e.g., Baysu et al., 2024; Benner and Graham, 2013; Seaton and Douglass, 2014). Similarly, perceptions of the school's racial and ethnic climate (i.e., students' perceptions of inclusion, fairness, and racial and ethnic dynamics) can influence how frequently students report experiencing racial discrimination (Baysu et al., 2024; Benner and Graham, 2013). Important, but less understood, is the way relative representation between the racial and ethnic composition of individual classrooms and the broader school context impacts perceptions of the school's ethnic climate and racial and ethnic discrimination. Given that systemic factors, such as academic tracking, can contribute to mismatches between these contexts (Graham, 2018), discrepancies between an adolescents' relative representation in their classrooms and schools have important implications for heightening the salience of racialized experiences in schools, and in turn, perceptions of discrimination.

To further unpack this phenomenon, we were specifically interested in how the relative representation at the school compared to the classroom level (i.e., degree of mismatch) might influence Black and Latiné students' perceived racial and ethnic climate and their subsequent perceptions of discrimination from teachers and peers. Understanding how the racial and ethnic composition of schools and classrooms affects experiences of discrimination is critical to creating school ethnic climates that support all students' wellbeing and success.

1.1 Literature review

Racial and ethnic discrimination remains a pervasive social issue that negatively affects youth of color academically (Benner et al., 2018; Brown and Tam, 2019; Civitillo et al., 2024; D'hondt et al., 2016; Huynh and Fuligni, 2010; Wong et al., 2003), psychologically (e.g., worse depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem), and even physically (e.g., somatic complaints and sleep disturbances) (Benner et al., 2018; Benner and Graham, 2013; Davis et al., 2016; Greene et al., 2006; Huynh and Fuligni, 2010; Schafer, 2023; Seaton and Douglass, 2014; Wang and Yip, 2020). This issue is especially urgent for Black and Latiné youth, who face disproportionate levels of racial and ethnic discrimination in U.S. schools. As a result, it is critical to prioritize efforts that address its harmful effects on their development.

1.1.1 Teacher discrimination

Teachers are often at the helm of the discrimination experienced by students at school (Bennett et al., 2020; English

et al., 2020). In fact, Black and Latiné adolescents, in particular, have been found to report higher levels of teacher and adult discrimination compared to other groups (Greene et al., 2006; Huynh and Fuligni, 2010; Schafer, 2023). These discriminatory experiences can look like teacher grading bias, unfair discipline practices, negative stereotypes, and discouragement from joining more advanced courses because of students' race and ethnicity (Bottiani et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2024; Rosenbloom and Way, 2004; Wong et al., 2003; Wegmann and Smith, 2019; Zanga and De Gioannis, 2023) and they are linked to negative school outcomes, such as less persistence, negative attitudes about school, weaker school bonding, and lower academic performance (Assari and Caldwell, 2018; Bryan et al., 2022; Stone and Han, 2005; McWhirter et al., 2018; Wayman, 2002). Taken together, the extant literature provides robust evidence of the ways teacher-based discrimination negatively affects Black and Latiné youth.

1.1.2 Peer discrimination

Peer discrimination also negatively impacts the academic and psychosocial outcomes of Black and Latiné adolescents. Peer discrimination appears in many forms, ranging from social exclusion, slurs, hitting, and teasing that are based on the victims' racial or ethnic group membership (Montoro et al., 2021). Unlike racial and ethnic teacher-based discrimination, which tends to affect the educational outcomes of youth, peer-based discrimination has a stronger link to the social-emotional wellbeing of youth (Benner and Graham, 2013; Benner and Wang, 2017; Benner et al., 2022; D'hondt et al., 2021; Greene et al., 2006). Peer discrimination is also associated with students' self-identities in relation to how they view their ethnic group (Rivas-Drake et al., 2009). Given the influence of both teacher and peer discrimination on academic and psychosocial wellbeing, it is important that we understand the role that school and classroom ethnic and racial composition may play in shaping these experiences for Black and Latiné youth.

1.1.3 School racial and ethnic composition

Ecological systems theory underscores the role of schools and their context in shaping youth development (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). One key aspect of the school environment is its racial and ethnic composition, which includes both diversity (i.e., the overall presence of different racial and ethnic groups and their relative representation) and racial and ethnic representation, or the extent to which specific groups are proportionally reflected in students' classrooms (Conway-Turner et al., 2023). Past research shows that discrimination varies as a function of the racial and ethnic diversity of schools. For example, higher racial and ethnic diversity in schools has been linked to greater perceptions of discrimination among adolescents in the numerical ethnic minority (Seaton and Yip, 2009), possibly due to increased cross-group interactions and heightened awareness of racialized experiences (Diehl and Fick, 2016; Seaton and Yip, 2009). Alternatively, other studies found that greater diversity is associated with lower perceptions of racial and ethnic discrimination, suggesting that a more heterogeneous environment may reduce overt bias and exclusion (Bellmore et al., 2012). Thus, the role of school

diversity on perceived discrimination remains mixed, as greater exposure to different outgroup peers can both foster intergroup contact that reduces bias and expose students to more negative racialized experiences.

Building on research about how racial and ethnic diversity shapes experiences of discrimination, it is important to consider the specific role of representation, especially in schools where one racial or ethnic group is in the clear majority. Some studies suggest that having more same-race peers is associated with perceiving more discrimination from teachers and peers (Juvonen et al., 2006; Seaton and Yip, 2009). One possible explanation is that due to school resegregation trends along racial and socioeconomic lines, Black and Latiné youth in majority-minority schools are more likely to attend under-resourced institutions where stereotypes about Black and Brown students may be more prevalent. However, more recent research points in the opposite direction: greater representation of minoritized peers at school is associated with consistently lower reports of discrimination over time (Baysu et al., 2024), while increases in the proportion of outgroup members at school is associated with more reported discrimination of students (D'hondt et al., 2021). Additionally, perceiving more same-race peers in school can actually buffer the negative impact of discrimination on ethnic-racial identity (ERI) (Saafir and Graham, 2024). This may be due to the protective role that same-race and same-ethnic peers play in reinforcing positive feelings about one's racial and ethnic group and offering a supportive environment to process racialized experiences (Tatum, 2017). Together, it is clear that there is indeed a relationship between school racial and ethnic composition and experiences with perceived discrimination for Black and Latiné youth, albeit complex.

1.1.4 Mismatch between school and classroom racial and ethnic composition

Mixed findings on the impact of school racial and ethnic context on racial and ethnic discrimination may be due to the differences in representation within adolescents' academic classes. When school-wide diversity is not equitably reflected in classroom settings, the protective benefits of diversity and representation may be undermined. For example, Black students who were overrepresented in their academic classes (compared to the school) had lower achievement over time (Kogachi and Graham, 2020). One reason for this finding may be that the overrepresentation of students of color in certain academic classes is, in part, a result of historically segregated academic tracking systems rooted in institutional racism and racial inequality (Benner, 2017). As a result, Black and Latiné students are often overrepresented in lower academic tracks compared to their White and Asian peers, while significantly underrepresented in higher-level courses such as honors classes (McCardle, 2020). Experiencing these disparate contexts not only impacts student achievement but also their perception of the overall school environment and their place within it.

While no studies to date have examined the relative representation between the school and classroom racial and ethnic contexts on perceived racial and ethnic discrimination, prior studies suggest that relative representation both supports

and hinders developmental outcomes. Students in the numerical minority who were overrepresented within their classrooms compared to the broader school context reported lower school belonging over time, while those in more integrated classrooms did not experience this decline (Kogachi and Graham, 2020). Research on middle school diversity further supports this idea: greater school-wide diversity was linked to increased feelings of safety, perceptions of teacher fairness, and lower levels of peer victimization, loneliness, and outgroup distance (Juvonen et al., 2018). However, these benefits were magnified when classroom diversity mirrored school-wide diversity. Collectively, these findings suggest that alignment between the school and classroom composition may be important for supporting psychosocial wellbeing for Black and Latiné youth.

1.1.5 The role of ethnic climate

In addition to the racial and ethnic school and classroom composition, the school's ethnic climate also plays a critical role in shaping the racialized and discriminatory events experienced in school. School ethnic climate is defined by the frequency of cross-group interactions among students (peer association) and the perceived fairness of teacher treatment across racial and ethnic groups (teacher supportive norms) (Green et al., 1988). Past research indicates that perceptions of the school ethnic climate, as measured by both peer association and teacher supportive norms, serve as a more proximal influence on students' perceptions of discrimination from adults and peers than structural characteristics like school composition. For example, Benner and Graham (2013) found that perceptions of the school ethnic climate, assessed through teacher supportive norms and peer association, directly predicted perceptions of both adult and peer discrimination based on race and ethnicity. Although it might be expected that teacher supportive norms would predict adult discrimination and peer association would primarily shape peer-related discrimination, these findings suggest that students' perceptions of the broader school ethnic climate can generalize across relational domains and that the behaviors and norms established by teachers and peers are mutually influential. This is consistent with the conceptualization of school ethnic climate, which emphasizes that a school's ethnic climate is shaped by both adult behaviors and peer interactions (Green et al., 1988). For example, if a student perceives that adults fail to uphold inclusive norms or that peers do not associate along racial and ethnic lines, this can lead to intergroup tensions, which may in turn affect behaviors and interactions that can lead to greater experiences of discrimination. A school's racial and ethnic composition can shape how adolescents perceive that climate. For example, it has been found that greater school diversity is associated with less favorable perceptions of school ethnic climate, whereas having a higher proportion of same-race or same-ethnic peers predicts more positive perceptions of the school's racial and ethnic climate (Benner and Graham, 2013; Parris et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to examine how both school ethnic climate and racial and ethnic composition predict perceptions of discrimination.

Perceptions of school ethnic climate are particularly important because they are closely tied to students' experiences of discrimination, and school racial and ethnic composition

plays a role in shaping both. Baysu et al. (2024) found that students attending schools with more minoritized peers and a climate that promoted diversity and equality were more likely to consistently report low discrimination; this suggests not only an association between school composition and climate, but also that a positive racial and ethnic climate can be protective. Similarly, Brown and Chu (2012) found that Latiné students reported less perceived racial and ethnic discrimination when attending predominantly Latiné schools that also valued a multicultural climate. Thus, these findings suggest that both school ethnic climate and its relationship with racial and ethnic composition are critical to understanding students' experiences of discrimination. However, no studies to date have examined how the classroom and school racial and ethnic context together shape the racial and ethnic climate, and in turn, perceptions of discrimination.

1.1.6 The current study

While past research has examined the effect of school composition on ethnic climate and experiences of discrimination, the role of relative representation in academic classes remains underexplored. The current study takes a novel approach to examining the role of school racial and ethnic contextual factors in shaping discriminatory experiences for Black and Latiné adolescents. Specifically, we were interested in the ways the relative racial and ethnic composition of the school and classroom work in tandem to influence perceptions of the school ethnic climate and, in turn, discrimination. In the current study, we examined how the effect of both school composition and relative representation in academic classes predicted perceived school ethnic climate (i.e., teacher supportive norms and peer association) and, in turn, predicted perceptions of discrimination from teachers and peers for Black and Latiné middle schoolers (see Figure 1 for a conceptual model). Based on previous empirical evidence, we hypothesized that when Black and Latiné students are overrepresented in their academic classes relative to school, they would perceive poorer school ethnic climate (i.e., less teacher supportive norms and less peer association), and in turn, greater perceived discrimination from peers and adults.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Participants

Participants were drawn from the UCLA Middle School Diversity project, an ongoing longitudinal study of 5,991 adolescents recruited in the fall of 6th grade from 26 urban middle schools in California and followed during the 3 years of middle school. The schools were selected to represent a variety of racial and ethnic compositions, where the size of each racial and ethnic group varied systematically across schools. Six schools were considered racially and ethnically diverse such that no single racial and ethnic group represented a numerical majority, and members of each of the four major groups (i.e., Black, Asian, Latiné, and White) were present; 9 were balanced schools, with two large and relatively equal-sized racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Black and Latiné) and very few members of other racial and ethnic groups;

and 11 were majority schools with a clear numerical majority racial/ethnic group (either Black, Asian, Latiné, or White) that was at least 50% of the population and twice as large as any other racial and ethnic groups. To avoid confounding race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES), the sample was restricted to lower-middle and lower-SES communities based on the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch and census data (e.g., median income, number of people in the workforce) for neighborhoods in which schools were located. Schools with average enrollments of 900–1,200 students and reading and math achievement (40th–60th percentile on standardized tests) were included. The final analytic sample consisted of 2,063 participants in 8th grade (51% females; $M_{\text{age}} = 13.33$ years). The racial and ethnic breakdown of the sample was 76% Latiné and 24% African American and Black.

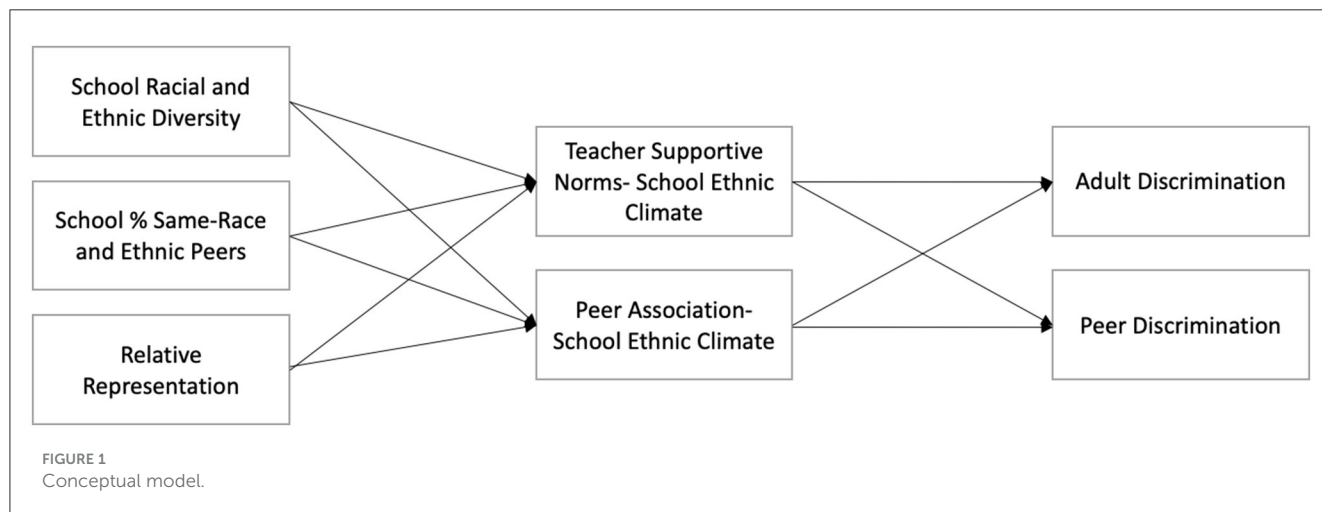
2.2 Procedure

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained for the UCLA Middle School Diversity study. Participants were recruited in three cohorts in the fall of 6th grade and were surveyed in the fall and spring of 6th grade, and in the spring of 7th and 8th grade. To increase the return rates of parental consent forms, two iPods were raffled in each school for students who returned the form. Across the 26 schools, 84% of the consent forms were returned with parents granting permission to participate and student assent at each wave. Surveys were group administered and read aloud by a trained graduate student researcher as a second research assistant circulated around the classroom to help individual students as needed. Students received honoraria of \$10 for participating in the survey during the 8th grade.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Classroom relative racial and ethnic representation

To calculate classroom relative representation in 8th grade, an index of individual students' racial and ethnic ingroup exposure in academic classes was computed. Using each student's class roster, first we computed the average proportion of same-race and same-ethnic classmates (I) in each academic course (English, math, science, social studies). Each student's index then consisted of the summed proportions across academic courses divided by the number of academic courses. Because there were high rates of participation within schools ($M = 84\%$), this is a good estimate of students' actual exposure to ingroup peers. Additionally, because there were few differences in the average proportion of same-race and same-ethnic classmates represented across the classes at any of the four waves in the larger longitudinal study, ingroup representation was averaged across the academic classes in 8th grade. Participants ($n = 168$) who were in more than one class that had <7 students in the sample (2 SDs below the mean of 21 students) were removed from the analyses. The proportion of same-race and same-ethnic peers in the school was calculated based on data from the California Department of Education



(CDE). To compute relative representation for each participant, the school proportion of same-race and same-ethnic peers was subtracted from the average classroom proportion of same-race and same-ethnic peers. Positive scores indicated more same-race and same-ethnic peers in academic classes relative to school (i.e., overrepresentation), while negative scores indicated fewer same-race and ethnic peers in one’s classes relative to school (i.e., underrepresentation), and a 0 indicated no differences between the two. Average scores for relative representation included a wide range of scores around the mean for both African American and Black youth ($M = -0.01, SD = 0.07, \text{range} = -0.24 \text{ to } 0.21$) and Latiné youth ($M = 0.01, SD = 0.08, \text{range} = -0.35 \text{ to } 0.38$).

2.3.2 School ethnic climate

Perceptions of school ethnic climate were measured using the teacher supportive norms and peer association subscales from the School Interracial Climate Scale (Green et al., 1988). Perceptions of teacher supportive norms were assessed using three items that captured the extent to which youth felt that the teachers in their school treated students of different ethnic groups equitably (e.g., “teachers are fair to students of all ethnic groups”). Peer ethnic climate was assessed using four items that captured the degree to which students of different ethnic groups associated with each other in school (e.g., “Students are able to make friends with kids from different ethnic groups”). Ratings ranged from 1 (no way) to 5 (for sure yes!), with higher scores denoting more positive perceptions of teacher and peer ethnic climate. Both teacher ethnic climate (Black: $\alpha = 0.82$; Latiné: $\alpha = 0.82$) and peer ethnic climate measures (Black: $\alpha = 0.70$; Latiné: $\alpha = 0.70$) had high internal consistency.

2.3.3 Perceived peer and teacher racial and ethnic discrimination

Adolescents’ perceptions of discrimination were assessed using two subscales of peer and adult discrimination adapted from the

Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index (ADDI; Fisher et al., 2000). A total of 4 items asked participants whether they had experienced exclusion, disrespectful treatment, threats, or name-calling by their peers because of their race and ethnicity (e.g., “How often did kids exclude you from their activities because of your race/ethnic group?”). Four additional items asked participants whether they had experienced unfair discipline, receiving a lower grade, being treated as though they were not smart, or disrespectful treatment by adults due to their race and ethnicity (e.g., “How often were you disciplined unfairly at school because of your ethnicity?”). Responses were rated on a 5-point scale (0 = never, 1 = once or twice, 2 = a few times, 3 = a lot, and 4 = a whole lot). Given the positively skewed distribution of ratings, with very few students reporting “A lot” and “A whole lot,” responses in both categories were collapsed with “A few times” to create a 3-point scale, consistent with previous studies (Benner and Graham, 2013). Both measures of peer discrimination (Black: $\alpha = 0.77$; Latiné: $\alpha = 0.82$) and adult discrimination (Black: $\alpha = 0.82$; Latiné: $\alpha = 0.84$) had high internal consistency.

2.3.4 Covariates

2.3.4.1 Race and ethnicity

Self-reported race and ethnicity was binary-coded, with Latiné youth as the reference group.

2.3.4.2 Gender

Self-reported gender was binary-coded, with boys as the reference group.

2.3.4.3 Parent education

The parent or guardian with whom the student lived was asked to complete a questionnaire about their highest level of education. This measure ranged from 0 to 5 (0 = elementary or junior high school to 5 = graduate degree), with higher values indicating higher educational attainment (African American and Black: $M = 3.23, SD = 1.10$; Latiné: $M = 1.87, SD = 1.51$).

2.3.4.4 Generational status

Generational status was determined by asking three questions about whether the student and his or her mother and father were born in the U.S. Students born abroad were considered first-generation (e.g., “Were you born in the United States?”). Second-generation (i.e., U.S. born students with one foreign-born parent) and third-generation students (i.e., U.S. born students with both U.S.-born parents) were dummy coded, with first-generation students (i.e., student was born abroad) as the reference group. Among African American and Black youth, 2.8% were first generation, 17.6% were second-generation, and 79.6% were third generation. Among Latiné youth, 12% were first-generation, 71.8% were second-generation, and 16.2% were third-generation.

2.3.4.5 Academic honors

To measure academic honors designation, each student’s 4 academic core courses based on school transcripts were coded such that honors courses were given a 1 and all other courses were given a 0. Students who took 3 or more honors courses were re-coded as 1 to indicate academic honors designation. Students in accelerated academic programs (e.g., magnet, gifted) were automatically coded as 1 to indicate academic honors. All other courses were coded as 0. Among African American and Black youth, 24.3% were designated in academic honors, and among Latiné youth, 22.3% were designated in academic honors.

2.3.4.6 Proportion same-race and same ethnic peers at school

The proportion of same-race and same-ethnic peers in school represented the percentage of same-race and same-ethnic students within a student’s grade at each school, relative to the total number of students in that grade. This value was computed separately for each school and racial and ethnic group using publicly available data from the California Department of Education (CDE). In this sample, Latiné youth on average attended schools with a higher proportion of same-race and same-ethnic peers in school ($M = 0.45$, $SD = 0.16$, range = 0.11–0.68) compared to African American and Black students ($M = 0.31$, $SD = 0.21$, range = 0.01–0.67).

2.3.4.7 School racial and ethnic diversity

Objective school racial and ethnic diversity was measured based on data collected from the CDE and using Simpson’s (1949) diversity index: where P is the proportion of students in the school who are in racial and ethnic group i . This proportion is squared (P_i^2), summed across g groups, and then subtracted from 1. D_s gives the probability that any two students randomly selected from a school will be from different racial and ethnic groups. Values can range from 0 to ~ 1 , where higher values indicate greater diversity (i.e., more groups that are relatively evenly represented). Schools in this sample for both groups ranged from 0.48 to 0.77 ($M = 0.64$, $SD = 0.08$) indicating moderate to high diversity.

2.3.4.8 Proportion Free or Reduced Priced Meals (FRPM)

The proportion of students receiving FRPMs was included as a school-level covariate. FRPM served as a proxy for school SES. Schools in this sample for both groups ranged from 18% to 86% of students receiving FRPMs ($M = 0.54$, $SD = 0.17$).

2.4 Analytic plan

The data were analyzed using a series of path models. All analyses were conducted using Mplus (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017, version 8.1). Given that students were nested within middle schools, the CLUSTER function was used to correctly adjust standard errors. Full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) was used to handle missing data, given that it allows the use of all available data and for the generalization of results (Enders, 2001). To evaluate overall model fit, the adjusted χ^2 test, comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990), and root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1998) were used (Hu and Bentler, 1998). A nonsignificant χ^2 , a CFI above 0.95 (Bentler, 1990), and the RMSEA below 0.05 with relatively small standard errors (MacCallum et al., 1997) indicate models adequately describe the relationships observed in the data. All c^2 model difference testing used the scaling correction factor.

3 Results

First, we examined descriptive statistics by race and ethnicity to assess any differences in study constructs (see Table 1). Independent samples t -tests revealed differences between Black and Latiné students on the proportion of same-race and same-ethnic peers in schools $t_{(1,893)} = 16.44$, $p < 0.001$, with Latiné students attending schools with a higher proportion of same-race and same-ethnic peers ($M = 0.45$, $SD = 0.16$) compared to Black students ($M = 0.31$, $SD = 0.21$). Latiné students were also more likely to be overrepresented in their academic classes ($M = 0.01$, $SD = 0.09$) compared to Black students ($M = -0.01$, $SD = 0.07$), $t_{(2,063)} = 3.42$, $p < 0.001$. No other racial and ethnic differences emerged for school structural, ethnic climate, or discrimination variables.

To test the full hypothesized model of the effects of school composition and relative representation in academic classes on school ethnic climate (teacher supportive norms and peer association) and subsequent perceptions of adult and peer discrimination (see Figure 1 for a conceptual model), a series of path models in a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework were estimated. The full model resulted in poor model fit $\chi^2_{(7, N=2)} = 190.04$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.83; RMSEA = 0.13. Classroom relative representation, specifically overrepresentation in academic classes compared to school, predicted more negative peer ethnic climate ($b = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$) and teacher ethnic climate ($b = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$). Teacher ethnic climate significantly predicted both perceived peer discrimination ($b = -0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and adult discrimination based on race and ethnicity ($b = -0.78$, $p < 0.001$). However, peer ethnic climate did not predict perceived peer discrimination ($b = -0.01$, $p = 0.91$) or adult discrimination based on race and ethnicity ($b = 0.01$, $p = 0.74$). Therefore, peer ethnic climate was removed.

The final path model with peer ethnic climate removed is depicted in Figure 2 and fit the data well $\chi^2_{(5, N=2,604)} = 30.45$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.05. Findings indicated that the effect of relative classroom representation significantly predicted teacher supportive norms. Specifically, overrepresentation in academic classes compared to school predicted fewer positive perceptions

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for study constructs for overall sample and by adolescent race and ethnicity.

Variable	Overall sample			Black		Latiné	
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Structural characteristics							
School diversity	2,063	0.62	0.09	0.62	0.09	0.62	0.09
Proportion same-race and ethnicity peers	2,063	0.42	0.18	0.31	0.21	0.45	0.16
Classroom relative representation	1,895	0.00	0.08	−0.01	0.07	0.01	0.09
Proportion free/reduced lunch	2,063	0.54	0.17	0.54	0.17	0.54	0.17
Ethnic climate							
Teacher supportive norms	2,036	3.91	0.87	3.90	0.88	3.92	0.87
Peer association	2,040	4.25	0.71	4.32	0.80	4.23	0.68
Racial and ethnic discrimination							
By peers	2,047	1.05	1.31	1.16	1.30	1.01	1.32
By adults	2,028	0.98	1.33	1.14	1.38	0.93	1.30

of school ethnic climate as measured by teacher supportive norms ($b = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Less positive perceptions of teacher supportive norms, in turn, predicted greater perceived discrimination based on race and ethnicity from both peers ($b = -0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and adults ($b = -0.78$, $p < 0.001$). School diversity ($b = 1.00$, $p = 0.06$) and the proportion same-ethnic peers in school ($b = 0.13$, $p = 0.26$) did not significantly predict school ethnic climate.

3.1 Alternative models

Although theory and past research guided the path model tested, the effects of the constructs could be bidirectional. Relative classroom representation could impact perceptions of discrimination based on race and ethnicity, which could in turn influence perceptions of the school's ethnic climate. We tested this alternative model, which resulted in poor model fit [$\chi^2_{(1, N = 2,604)} = 213.97$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.75; RMSEA = 0.36], thus providing additional support for the hypothesized path model (school and classroom representation to school ethnic climate to perceived discrimination).

3.2 Multigroup analyses

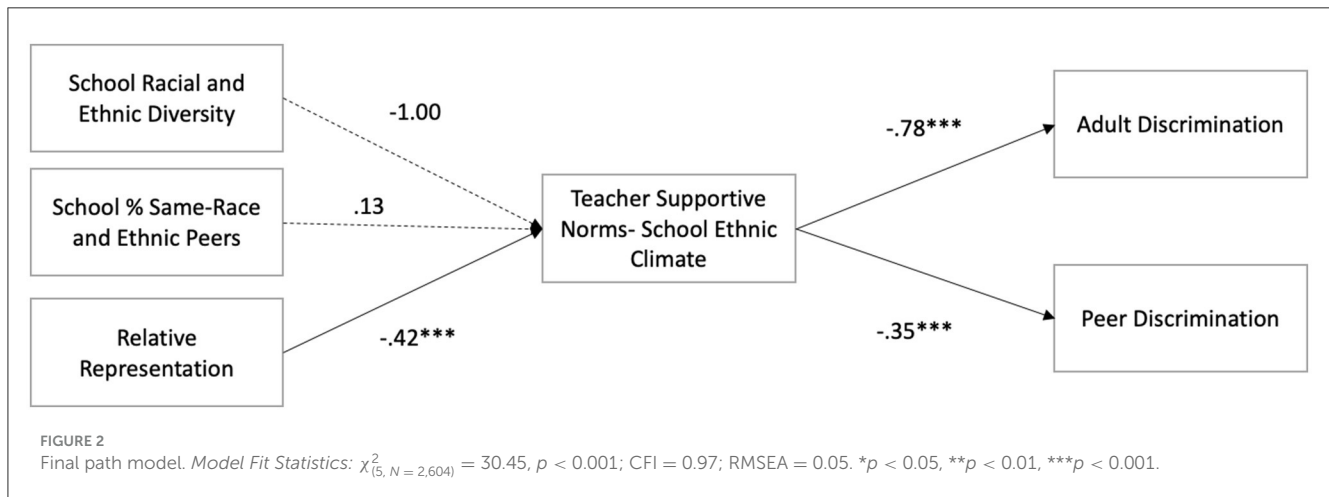
Finally, multigroup analyses were conducted to examine whether associations in the final path model varied by academic honors designation or by race and ethnicity using a series of Wald tests. The effect of classroom relative representation on teacher supportive norms did not vary by honors designation ($b = 0.33$, $p = 0.54$) or by race and ethnicity ($b = 0.54$, $p = 0.21$). The three-way interaction between classroom relative representation, honors, and race and ethnicity was also non-significant ($b = 0.90$, $p = 0.08$).

4 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how relative representation between the racial and ethnic composition of academic classes and the overall school impacts Black and Latiné adolescents' perceptions of school ethnic climate, and in turn, their perceptions of racial and ethnic discrimination from teachers and peers. We found that when there was a mismatch in relative representation, with more same-race and same-ethnic peers in their academic classes relative to the broader school context (over-representation) Black and Latiné youth reported more negative perceptions of the school ethnic climate as measured by lower teacher supportive norms. School racial and ethnic diversity and the proportion of same-race and same-ethnic peers in school did not significantly predict perceptions of teacher supportive norms. Furthermore, negative perceptions of teacher supportive norms were associated with higher reported discrimination from both teachers and peers. In contrast, measures of school ethnic climate based on perceptions of peers were not significantly related to perceptions of discrimination. These findings underscore the complex ways in which features of both the school and classroom racial and ethnic context intersect to impact students' experiences at school.

4.1 Relative representation and perceptions of the school environment

A key contribution of this study is its exploration of the mismatch between the relative representation between classroom and school environments. Findings suggest that a mismatch with greater representation of one's racial and ethnic group in academic classes than in their school may be a risk factor for Black and Latiné students. But how do we make sense of this, given prior studies highlighting the benefits of racial and ethnic representation for



these groups? An important distinction is that representation and overrepresentation are not the same.

Overrepresentation refers to being in classes with more peers from the same racial and ethnic group than would be expected based on school-wide racial and ethnic representation. This may be detrimental due to its connection with academic tracking, which often places Black and Latiné youth in lower-level courses and underrepresents them in advanced tracks (McCardle, 2020). Black and Latiné students who get higher grades tend to be in classes with fewer same-ethnic peers, while White and Asian youth who get high grades are in classes with more same-ethnic peers (Chen et al., 2020). As a result, overrepresentation in class is not simply an opportunity to engage with same-race and same-ethnic peers; it may also reinforce negative attitudes about the academic capabilities of Black and Latiné students, especially if teachers and peers hold such attitudes. Our findings provide some support for this interpretation: students who were overrepresented in class relative to their school reported weaker teacher supportive norms and peer associations. Weaker teacher supportive norms, in turn, were associated with higher levels of racial discrimination. However, course level did not moderate the link between relative representation and perceptions of school ethnic climate. This could mean that overrepresentation functions similarly regardless of honors designation, or that the mechanism connecting classroom composition to school ethnic climate extends beyond the rigor of the class itself. Gaining a deeper understanding of this association may require examining how classroom relative representation interacts with other aspects of the school's racial and ethnic context.

4.2 Complexities of the school racial and ethnic context

The literature on school racial and ethnic context reflects a wide range of ways to define context. Some studies focus on school racial and ethnic composition, such as diversity and representation, while others examine attitudes like school ethnic climate, and still others consider the roles of teachers and peers or explore experiences of discrimination and intergroup relationships. Student outcomes often vary depending on how the school racial and ethnic context is

conceptualized and measured. For instance, Conway-Turner et al. (2023) found that Black and Latiné students performed better in schools with a higher concentration of same-race peers, while overall diversity was associated with lower academic achievement. In the domain of psychosocial wellbeing, Saafir and Graham (2024) found that perceived representation of same-race peers buffered the negative effects of racial discrimination on ethnic-racial identity development, even after accounting for objective measures of diversity and representation.

The current study builds on prior work by highlighting relative representation between school and classroom as a key dimension of racial and ethnic composition, examining its relationship to perceptions of school ethnic climate and discrimination. Our findings suggest that relative representation shapes students' experiences by influencing how they perceive the school's ethnic climate, which in turn relates to reports of discrimination. These findings underscore the importance of considering not just individual components of the school context but also how different aspects (i.e., structural variables and perceived climate) may be connected in ways that shape student outcomes.

Prior research supports this conceptual link between school racial and ethnic composition and climate. For example, Graham and Morales-Chicas (2015) found that a positive school ethnic climate buffered the effects of low same-race and same-ethnic representation on students' academic confidence and belonging. Similarly, other studies have shown that a positive school ethnic climate can reduce the impact of discrimination, especially in schools where minoritized students are more represented (Baysu et al., 2024; Brown and Chu, 2012). These findings point to the need for a layered understanding of school racial and ethnic contexts, as no single indicator captures the complexity of students' experiences (Syed et al., 2018; Saafir and Graham, 2024).

Adding another layer, we also examined perceptions of school ethnic climate by source, distinguishing between peer and teacher dimensions. We found that overrepresentation was associated with a negative school ethnic climate (defined by peer association and teacher supportive norms), but only teacher supportive norms significantly predicted students' perceptions of racial and ethnic discrimination. This suggests that peer and teacher dimensions of school ethnic climate may serve different functions for Black and Latiné youth, such that teacher supportive norms (i.e.,

school ethnic climate) may play a particularly influential role in shaping how students interpret and navigate experiences of discrimination. [Coyle et al. \(2022\)](#) found similar results when examining perceptions of safety among a diverse group of 9th graders. For students who reported experiences of victimization, those with supportive teachers felt safer, even when peer support was low. In contrast, students who had supportive peers, but not supportive teachers, did not report the same sense of protection. These findings emphasize the protective role that teacher support can play, and the harm that can result when it is absent.

One reason teacher support may be so impactful is its connection to the institutional and structural dynamics that shape student's perceptions of discrimination. When teachers fail to affirm racial and ethnic diversity or engage in biased behaviors, it may not only shape how students experience discrimination from adults, as we found, but also set the tone for peer interactions. In contrast, the peer ethnic climate reflects more informal social dynamics between students of different racial and ethnic groups, such as whether they interact with one another. We found that overrepresentation in academic classes predicted fewer interactions among diverse peers (peer association), but unlike teacher supportive norms, this alone did not predict greater perceptions of discrimination. As such, studies aiming to identify the conditions that foster positive school environments for racially and ethnically minoritized students must consider the multiple layers of these experiences and how they may vary from student to student.

4.3 Implications for diversity efforts and teacher training

The current study highlights the need for alignment between the racial and ethnic composition of schools and classrooms. Focusing only on school-level diversity overlooks how students experience their daily academic environments. To foster a truly inclusive and affirming school ethnic climate, diversity must be reflected equitably at the classroom level ([Juvonen et al., 2018](#)). Our findings emphasize that this alignment shapes how students perceive the school's ethnic climate. As such, school diversity efforts must go beyond enrollment numbers to ensure representation is distributed in ways that all students meaningfully experience.

Attending to the complexities of school racial and ethnic environments also has important implications for how we approach diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools. At a time when racial tensions are heightened and diversity efforts are being actively rolled back, Black and Latiné students face increased vulnerability to the harms of discrimination. It is therefore critical to identify the features of school environments that promote wellbeing for these students.

Research on the school racial and ethnic environment offers promising guidance for creating conditions that reduce both the frequency and impact of discrimination. One key area in need of attention is school ethnic climate and, particularly, the role of teacher supportive norms. Findings from the current study suggest that when teachers create a supportive racial and ethnic climate, it may reduce not only their own discriminatory behaviors but also those of their students' peers. Given teachers' influence, it is essential that they are equipped to create environments that support students from diverse backgrounds. However, while diverse schools

are often associated with more positive attitudes toward racial and ethnic differences, these attitudes do not always translate into the skills or confidence needed to address issues of diversity effectively ([Sincer et al., 2021](#)). This gap points to the need for more intentional teacher training that not only fosters inclusive mindsets but also provides concrete strategies for translating those values into daily practice.

5 Limitations and future directions

Although our study offers novel contributions by examining the relative representation in academic classes compared to school in shaping perceptions of ethnic climate and perceived discrimination, it is not without its limitations. First, we do not have a good measure of academic tracking, which is a complex and multidimensional construct that unfolds over time. Given the connection between academic tracking and the racial and ethnic diversity landscape of schools and classrooms, fine-tuning the ways this construct is measured and examined is important for future research.

Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the current study limits our ability to draw causal conclusions about the associations between relative classroom representation, ethnic climate, and perceptions of discrimination. To address this limitation, we tested an alternative model specifying the reverse direction of effects. This model demonstrated poor fit, suggesting that school ethnic climate may be a more proximal predictor of discrimination experiences than relative classroom representation. Although we acknowledge that the associations between perceptions of the school ethnic climate and discrimination could be bidirectional over time, a longitudinal design would be necessary to establish directionality of these associations.

Additionally, the study relies on self-reported student measures, which are subject to biases and social desirability. As a result, it was no surprise that students tended to report few reports of racial and ethnic discrimination. This infrequency is common in similar research on adolescents' discriminatory experiences (e.g., [Benner and Graham, 2013](#); [Umaña-Taylor and Updegraff, 2007](#)). Furthermore, this self-reported measure relies on students' recollections of their lived experience, without considering the actual number of discriminatory incidents.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge limitations in the generalizability of this work. Our sample was drawn from California, where racial and ethnic diversity is more reflected than in other parts of the United States. This rich diversity allowed us to capture students in schools with a range of diversity compositions (e.g., diverse, a clear majority racial and ethnic group, and balanced racial and ethnic groups); however, we recognize that these contexts are still within a large, urban, and metropolitan environment that may not generalize to other states (e.g., more rural, less diverse, and more conservative socio-political spaces). With this in mind, future research should consider the ways our constructs of interest may differ as a function of the broader community context of the schools.

Even when incorporating more nationally representative samples and settings, our findings cannot generalize to the large global context, capturing the Majority World where 85 percent

of the world's population resides. We acknowledge that the phenomena we study—racial and ethnic group representation and social adaptation—are rooted in theories and frameworks from the Minority World that dominate the production of knowledge and scientific inquiry (e.g., Abubakar et al., 2024; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). These frameworks may have very little relevance to understanding the schooling or general wellbeing of youth living in Majority World communities where gaining access to life's basic necessities (i.e., food and shelter) and negotiating political upheaval are often part of their everyday life experiences. As developmental researchers, we must be modest in our claims as we acknowledge the biases in our science and the applicability of its constructs to only a narrow slice of the world's population.

6 Conclusion

Given the overwhelming negative impact of racial and ethnic discrimination on Black and Latiné adolescents in the U.S. context, the focus of the current study was to understand how features of the school and classroom racial and ethnic context shape students' experiences with discrimination. Our findings point to the significance of the relative representation between classrooms and schools and their potential mismatch, specifically, the overrepresentation of Black and Latiné youth in academic classes relative to school, as a potential marker of broader issues in the school ethnic climate, particularly related to teacher supportive norms.

Importantly, in the absence of a positive teacher school ethnic climate, Black and Latiné youth appear to face a heightened risk of experiencing discrimination from both adults and peers, leaving them more vulnerable to its well-documented academic and psychological harms. To create educational spaces that truly support the academic and socioemotional development of Black and Latiné students, we must move beyond surface-level diversity and toward intentional alignment between school values and daily classroom experiences. This includes not only diversifying schools and classrooms numerically but also cultivating school ethnic climates that actively promote equity and belonging, beginning with the adults who shape them—teachers. Without such efforts, schools risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to disrupt.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by UCLA Institutional Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional

requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin. Additionally, student participants provided assent prior to participation in the study.

Author contributions

AS: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JM-C: Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KK: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SG: Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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Naming the “*Brown Thing*”: racial consciousness in the Ivory Tower

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Introduction: This paper explores the ethical and emotional dimensions of engaging critical racial consciousness in South African higher education. Racialised educators, particularly Black academics, continue to navigate pedagogical spaces shaped by institutional Whiteness, subtle yet persistent norms that privilege Eurocentric standards and misrecognize non-White authority and experience.

Methods: Using collaborative autoethnography and critical incident analysis, two Black academics engaged in a series of recorded reflective conversations. These dialogues served as both data and analytic spaces. Through retrospective discussion, ethically charged incidents from teaching and supervision were identified, revisited and interpreted.

Results: The narratives reveal how misrecognition and racialised silencing surface in everyday academic encounters, through both overt critique and quiet erasure. These moments disrupt normative routines and compel educators to examine their complicity, positionality and pedagogical stance. Key themes include the emotional labor of teaching, the tension between care and compliance, and the institutional conditions that render Black authority negotiable.

Discussion: Rather than seeking closure, the paper argues for staying with the discomfort of ethical ruptures as a pedagogical and political strategy. It positions critical reflection and vulnerability as necessary for decolonial praxis. We propose that humanizing education begins by naming the “*Brown Thing*”: the embodied, affective, and often unspoken realities of race in the Ivory Tower.

KEYWORDS

critical racial consciousness, higher education, South Africa, decolonial pedagogy, collaborative autoethnography, critical incidents, ethical ruptures, racial identity

Introduction: beginning with the “*Brown Thing*”

In post-apartheid South Africa, questions of race and identity remain deeply entangled with the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Higher education, in particular, reflects ongoing struggles to dismantle entrenched inequalities and Eurocentric norms that persist despite formal political change. Frantz Fanon’s seminal critique of colonial society reminds us that the “colonial world” created enduring psychopolitical scars, as the oppressed come to see themselves through the distorted mirror of the oppressor (Fanon, 1952/2009). Over a century ago and in a different context, Du Bois (1903/2007) similarly described the “double consciousness” of racialised persons (a fractured self-perception of “two warring ideals”

within one body) which is still resonant for Black and Brown educators and students navigating historically White institutions. These postcolonial insights underscore that in the Global South, as elsewhere, race is not a passé issue but a living structure of power and identity. South African universities have thus become key sites of contestation: from the #RhodesMustFall student protests that decried colonial symbols and curricula, to ongoing debates about decolonizing knowledge, the academy is challenged to critically engage with racial identity and transformation (Heleta, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2016). Within this milieu, educators and learners alike face the imperative to develop a critical racial consciousness that can confront hegemonic Whiteness and its attendant injustices (Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

We offer a South African perspective on how youth and educators navigate critical racial consciousness through everyday encounters, both in the classroom and beyond the classroom. Freire's (1970/2005) vision of education as a practice of freedom is instructive here: he argued that through conscientização (conscientization) - a critical awareness and dialogue about oppression - young people and their mentors become "co-investigators" who can transform their world. Our study extends this Freirean spirit to the university space, examining how moments of racial confrontation or confusion can become generative opportunities for learning. In particular, we explore critical incidents in teaching and supervision - those charged encounters when a seemingly simple question or comment (such as the titular query about the "Thing") exposes deeper racialised tensions and ethical dilemmas. We call these moments ethical ruptures; they shake up university norms and force us to think deeply about how and why we teach, and supervise, the way we do. Through these stories, we ask how educators can support students in speaking about race honestly and critically.

We explore how race, ethics, and pedagogy come together in our experiences as educators in South African universities. We do so through a collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2016), a methodology in which we (as two racialised educators working within historically White institutions) collectively reflect on our lived experiences and co-author our narratives. It lets us weave our lived experiences with theory, examining both ourselves and the systems we work within. Drawing on moments in teaching, assessment, and supervision, each of us recounts pedagogical encounters that prompted us to question assumptions, confront our biases, or renegotiate our praxis. Through dialogue and mutual critique, we then analyze these stories for what they reveal about systemic power relations and the potential for transformative learning. In adopting this method, we acknowledge the inherently situated nature of knowledge: our accounts are grounded in our specific histories and positionalities (e.g., as "Black", "Brown", or "Colored" South Africans), yet they speak to broader patterns in how race is lived and learned in the Global South.

In our conversations, one of us raised initial thoughts about the complexities of identifying as "Brown", musing aloud, "I wonder if we can start with the 'Brown' thing". This reflection opens a window into the nuanced nature of racial identity and its intersections with personal experiences. The other scholar shared their discomfort with being labeled as "Colored" (a South African racial classification referring to people of mixed ancestry, shaped by apartheid-era categories) (Posel, 2001), questioning whether this term dilutes or overly simplifies their racial identity to make it

more palatable. "Even though I identify as Black, my Colouredness still announces itself in the spaces I enter", they explained, highlighting the ongoing struggle between self-identification and societal perceptions. These discussions not only reveal the personal challenges we face but also underscore the critical role educational institutions play in shaping identity by providing a platform for critical dialogue about race.

The collaborative aspect ensures that no single narrative dominates; instead, we seek a nuanced, multi-voiced understanding of how racialised educators experience and respond to moments of rupture in and beyond the classroom. We hope these reflections offer new ways to teach with care, dignity, and attention to power, one that recognizes students' and educators' full humanity, including the racialised dimensions of our identities, and that strives for dignity and justice in educational practice (Mapaling and Hoelson, 2022).

We ground our thinking in the work of postcolonial, decolonial, and critical race scholars who help us make sense of race in education. We engage classical thinkers like Fanon, Du Bois and Freire alongside contemporary critical scholars to ground our inquiry. Fanon's (1952/2009) analysis of the internalization of racism and Du Bois's (1903/2007) notion of double consciousness provide language for understanding the identity conflicts and self-reflections that emerge in our narratives. Freire (1970/2005) offers a vision of critical pedagogy where dialogue about difficult issues (including race) is a means of consciousness-raising and co-creating knowledge. From the field of social justice theory, Nancy Fraser's work reminds us that experiences of racial alienation are not only personal but structural: they indicate misrecognition, a form of injustice whereby institutions deny equal respect and voice to certain groups (Fraser, 1997). Such misrecognition constitutes an ethical failure of the education system - one that demands redress through both cultural change and material restructuring. We therefore consider our "ethical ruptures" as openings that expose these failures, prompting questions about how to achieve what Fraser (1997) calls parity of participation for marginalized groups in academia. Critical Race Theory further informs our approach with its assertion that racism is an ordinary, systemic feature of society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). It compels us to interrogate how institutional structures and everyday practices in higher education perpetuate racial inequality, even under the guise of neutrality or meritocracy. In this study, Critical Race Theory supports our analysis of "misrecognition" and the hidden curricula that shape belonging and authority in the university. It affirms the importance of counter-storytelling, our own narratives, as a method of disrupting dominant discourses and making visible lived realities of racialised academics. This lens encourages us to scrutinize how institutional policies, curricula, and everyday interactions in the university may unwittingly perpetuate White normativity, and to value counter-narratives from educators of color as vital knowledge (Ratele, 2018).

Crucially, we situate our analysis in the South African context, drawing on scholars who theorize race and education in ways that resonate with the African experience. Decolonial scholars such as Maldonado-Torres (2007) provide important conceptual framing around the enduring "coloniality" of power in knowledge systems, a framework that has been taken up and extended by African scholars in local contexts. For example, Kumalo (2024) contends that academics have a pedagogic obligation to develop

contextually responsive, decolonial approaches to teaching on the African continent. He frames decolonization as fundamentally about democratizing the knowledge project, ensuring that those historically excluded can now shape curricula and epistemologies on their own terms. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) reinforces this view by conceptualizing the “epistemic freedom” project as a necessary response to colonial and apartheid-era knowledge systems that continue to marginalize African ways of knowing. Similarly, Heleta (2016) challenges South African universities to move beyond symbolic transformation and commit to genuine epistemic justice, the centering of African knowledges, languages and histories in curriculum design and pedagogic practice.

Ratele (2019) likewise emphasizes Africa-centering in intellectual work, calling for what he terms the “Afrocentric question” in our studies and classrooms; essentially, asking how knowledge production might look when African experiences, identities and languages are placed at the core rather than the periphery. These South African perspectives enrich our theoretical toolkit by attuning us to local histories and the urgency of change in our institutions. They help us interrogate how racialised educators negotiate their roles within universities that are still often perceived as Eurocentric or unwelcoming to Black and Brown bodies and ideas. Moreover, they inspire an ethos of resistance and hope: Kumalo, Ratele, and others show that engaging racial identity in education is not a mere academic exercise but part of a larger emancipatory project to reclaim dignity and power for the marginalized.

This paper engages the intersection of racial identity, ethics, and pedagogy within the context of South African higher education. Using collaborative autoethnography and critical incidents as our methodological anchors, we reflect on ethically charged pedagogical encounters that surface misrecognition, power, and pedagogical unease. These ruptures offer more than discomfort; they open generative spaces for critical racial consciousness and humanizing pedagogical transformation. By naming and analyzing these moments, we aim to illuminate how educators and students might collaboratively disrupt entrenched norms and move toward more just, inclusive educational practices.

In doing so, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on decolonial pedagogy and racial consciousness in higher education. It foregrounds the seldom-examined experiences of racialised educators as sites of ethical inquiry, highlighting how reflexive, narrative-driven methods can expose the affective and institutional dynamics that often go unspoken. By framing critical incidents as openings for transformation rather than anomalies, we offer a lens through which to theorize care, recognition and relational accountability in teaching and supervision. In this way, the paper extends conversations about equity in the academy by centering voice, vulnerability and the pedagogical work of unsettling inherited norms.

Theoretical point of departure: Fraser meets Freire

In thinking through the ethical and political dimensions of teaching in higher education, we draw on the work of Nancy Fraser and Paulo Freire. While Fraser offers a structural analysis

of justice rooted in institutional redress, Freire brings to the fore the pedagogical and relational work of humanization and critical consciousness. Together, they help us frame our reflections on the intersections of justice, pedagogy, and recognition in South African higher education.

The social justice imperative in higher education

Fraser (2007) argues that injustice is overcome by dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent particular people from participating equitably. Fraser (2007) premises her discussion by providing a broad definition of justice: it “requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life” (p. 20). This lends itself to Fraser’s concept of participatory parity. Fraser (2007) highlights three dimensions of participatory parity: distributive justice, (mis)recognition, and the politics of representation and belonging (Bozalek and Leibowitz, 2012; Fraser, 2007). Distributive justice involves the extent to which participation is limited by class-based structural inequalities, such as access to technology and the ability to manage the financial demands of university life. In South African institutions for higher learning, this affects Black students disproportionately (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam, 2019). Recognition refers to how individuals are considered in relation to their social markers, like race, gender, and (dis)ability. Misrecognition, on the other hand, occurs when people are not afforded the same opportunities to participate or when there appears to be a lack of respect given to individuals based on their cultural values and differing identities (Bozalek and Leibowitz, 2012; Fraser, 2007; Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam, 2019). The political dimension focuses on issues of belonging, whose voices are heard, and whose needs are provided for. It also looks at who is considered a fully legitimate member of society (Bozalek and Leibowitz, 2012; Fraser, 2007). These three dimensions, while autonomous, are interwoven and cannot be separated (Bozalek and Leibowitz, 2012; Fraser, 2007). Redress in these dimensions - to increase participation - becomes integral when considering a rights-based, decolonized and inclusive higher education (Masuku and Makhanya, 2023).

Pedagogy as the practice of freedom

Freire (1970/2005) begins with the premise that education is never neutral; it either functions to domesticate or to liberate. Central to his critique is the “banking model” of education, where students are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge, which serves to reproduce oppressive structures (Freire, 1970/2005). In contrast, he advocates for a dialogical pedagogy grounded in *conscientização*, the development of critical consciousness that enables learners to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to act against them (Freire, 1970/2005; Mapaling and Hoelson, 2022). Through dialogue, learners and educators engage in a co-intentional process of knowledge-making that humanizes both educator and student (Freire, 1970/2005). This pedagogy is not merely about acquiring knowledge, but about becoming more fully human through

the act of naming and transforming reality (Freire, 1970/2005; del Carmen Salazar, 2013). In higher education, this means cultivating learning spaces that invite marginalized students to name their experiences and interrogate structural exclusions, aligning closely with Fraser's (2007) concept of participatory parity. Freirean pedagogy foregrounds voice, recognition, and the redistribution of epistemic authority, challenging institutional cultures that often misrecognize or silence Black and working-class students (Fataar, 2016; Mapaling and Hoelson, 2022). Importantly, Freire (1970/2005) reminds us that liberation involves risk and discomfort; teaching is a profoundly ethical act that requires humility, vulnerability, and openness to being changed. It is in the *racially troubling moments* of pedagogical unease, when students resist, when norms are questioned, or when educators confront their own complicity, that possibilities for transformation emerge (Lewis, 2012; Zembylas, 2018). These moments are not incidental but pedagogically vital, surfacing the invisible logics of power in the classroom (and beyond) and calling educators into an ongoing praxis of reflection and action. Freire's pedagogy, especially when contextualized in South Africa's historically racialised institutions, compels us not only to teach, assess and supervise differently but to risk being undone and remade through the work of humanization (Kumalo, 2018; Mapaling and Hoelson, 2022).

Methods: collaborative autoethnography and critical incidents

In approaching this paper, we draw on two interrelated methodological resources that allow us to locate ourselves and make sense of our pedagogical experiences. We chose collaborative autoethnography (CAE) because it aligns with our commitment to reflexive, relational, and situated inquiry, allowing us to explore the intersection of our identities and pedagogical experiences through shared reflection. As racialised educators navigating institutions shaped by colonial legacies, we required a method that not only honored subjectivity but also foregrounded the ethics of co-authorship and the politics of voice.

Firstly, we employ CAE not only as a method but as a stance that foregrounds our subjectivities and honors the complexities of our positionalities within the academy. CAE enables a deeply reflexive inquiry, recognizing that we, as scholars and educators, are not outside the research but rather implicated in and shaped by it. Through this approach, we foreground our racial identities and how these intersect with the institutional cultures of higher education. By telling our stories together, we resist the isolating tendencies of academic work and instead emphasize the power of relationality, co-authorship and collective witnessing (Chang et al., 2016; Shabalala and Mapaling, 2024).

CAE allows us to make visible the affective, structural, and ideological forces that shape how we enter, experience and navigate academic spaces. We do not merely recount events; we reflect on how those events make and unmake us intellectually, emotionally and politically. In this way, autoethnography becomes a form of self-writing that archives lived experience, disrupts dominant narratives and opens up space for alternate ways of knowing and being (Simons, 1994).

We paired our CAE approach with the lens of critical incidents: ethically charged, often unexpected moments that disrupt normative routines and demand attention (Joshi, 2018; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). These incidents were not chosen for their dramatic content but for their capacity to reveal the moral texture of academic life. They emerged both inside and outside the classroom, in moments of conflict, silence, shame, recognition or refusal. Each incident is revisited through retrospective reflection, using memory, affect and relational context as interpretive tools (Zembylas, 2007).

Our positionality as researcher-participants

As collaborators in this project, we are both registered clinical psychologists and early-career academics in South African higher education. Nokulunga Shabalala is a Black woman emerging scholar who has been in the academy since 2019 while completing her PhD. She has since engaged critically with assumptions about clinical and research supervision. Her research foregrounds reflexivity, decoloniality and affect and temporality in pedagogy and higher education as a whole. Curwyn Mapaling is a Black man emerging scholar working across mental health, critical pedagogy and well-being in higher education. He joined the teaching and learning side of academia in 2021 while completing his PhD, following prior experience in student support and institutional research.

CAE and research design

This project is framed as a collaborative autoethnographic inquiry (Hernandez et al., 2017), grounded in a series of three recorded conversations between the two authors. Each conversation lasted approximately 2 h and took place over Microsoft Teams. We approached these dialogues with a set of guiding prompts designed to elicit reflection on our experiences as emerging Black scholars navigating racial identity, pedagogy and institutional culture. For example, one guiding question asked: *"How have your personal experiences with race and racial identity shaped your teaching philosophy or approach in the classroom?"* Others explored institutional constraints, emotional labor, and student responses to racial consciousness work.

The conversations were transcribed verbatim and revisited repeatedly as part of a recursive, dialogic engagement. While we did not use formal interviews or structured observation, these guided conversations served as both data and spaces of analysis. The methodological emphasis was on co-constructing meaning rather than extracting individualized "answers".

While duoethnography might seem appropriate given the involvement of two researchers, we intentionally chose CAE for its emphasis on collective vulnerability, positionality and relational ethics (Lapadat, 2017). Duoethnography typically foregrounds dialectical juxtaposition and structured dialogue (Norris et al., 2012), whereas CAE allowed us to work with moments of overlap, discomfort and hesitation, not to resolve them, but to sit with them and explore their meaning. This allowed us to name affective

undercurrents and institutional tensions that might otherwise remain unspoken.

Reflexive thematic analysis

Our analytic process drew on the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), though we did not code for themes in a traditional sense. Instead, we engaged the transcripts as living documents, returning to them through layered readings and conversation. Patterns of meaning were identified through resonance, tension and cumulative reflection. The critical incidents presented in this paper are analytically linked and build upon one another to surface recurring motifs, including institutional refusal, surveillance, emotional labor and the politics of care. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were not “discovered” in the data but constructed through our interpretive engagement with it, informed by our positionalities and theoretical commitments (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Joy et al., 2023).

Ethical considerations

This study relied exclusively on the reflections and experiences of the two authors. There were no external participants. Nevertheless, ethical reflection was central to the process, especially given the sensitive nature of the content. We were mindful of the affective and reputational risks that come with disclosing moments of vulnerability, rage, jealousy or exhaustion in academic spaces. We worked from a position of relational accountability, checking in with each other before, during and after writing. This commitment to care was not only interpersonal but epistemological, refusing the extractive tendencies of research that treats emotion or identity as data points rather than ethical matters.

Findings: framing the critical incidents

The critical incidents presented in this paper are not extracted as isolated moments of drama or rupture. Rather, they surfaced through memory and reflection as moments that linger, where something in the everyday pedagogical interaction unsettled us, stayed with us, or became a reference point for thinking about our roles as educators and as racialised subjects. We did not go in search of them; they emerged in conversation, sometimes hesitantly, and took shape through our dialogue. In selecting these moments, we were not aiming to be representative or exhaustive, but attentive to what moved us, challenged us, or revealed something about the ethical texture of teaching. The incidents are therefore offered not as definitive cases, but as fragments through which we have tried to think more deeply about care, authority, discomfort and responsibility in pedagogical relationships (Joshi, 2018).

To ground these reflections, we each revisit a moment from our teaching and supervision practices that challenged us in ways we could not immediately name but later returned to as sites of ethical significance.

Incident 1 - Shabalala: The Apology that Opened the Door, Repairing the Relational in Teaching

In most of my scholarly work (Shabalala, 2018, 2019, 2022; Shabalala and Mapaling, 2024), I have written about Blackness and institutional barriers to equitable participation in education, Blackness and gender in the South African academy, and have recently started reflecting on teaching practices. Reflecting on dominant traditions within higher education and challenges to radical transformation has allowed for an emergence of a critical racial consciousness - an understanding of how race and racism influence social structures and individual experiences (Arthur, 2023). However, in reflecting and dialoguing for this paper, I realize how difficult it is to maintain a posture of critical racial consciousness, especially in pedagogical encounters where I am predominantly situated.

I work in an institution where the enrollment profile of students is from schools that are largely in the 1st and 2nd quintile (Jonazi, 2021; University of Johannesburg, 2021). Schools in the 1st and 2nd quintiles are those considered most socio-economically disadvantaged, with lower levels of general literacy and embedded in communities characterized by poverty (Jonazi, 2021). Therefore, Kumalo's (2024) argument about our pedagogical obligation - one of creating a contextually relevant curriculum and responsive teaching approach - becomes more apparent. The student racial profile in most of my undergraduate classes is Black, and more recently, in our postgraduate classes, we are starting to see more Black students being accepted into professional programmes. However, it was not until a recent encounter with a master's student that I, as a Black educator and trainer, started asking myself, “*Do I actively work toward social justice and equity in my classroom and my interaction with students, especially Black students?*”.

And so, the story begins. . .

It is a cold winter's morning in June, and the clinical master's students are getting ready to present their cases. This module's (Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy and Psychopathology) assignment also marked the first time master's students would be engaging with case material for a case conference. A case conference is a space where a patient (not a real one in this case) is discussed, in the first instance, to tease out how the student thinks of the patient diagnostically and the implications for treatment. In the second instance, perhaps more importantly, it is supposed to be a developmental space to help the student grow in specific competencies expected of clinical trainees. This being the first time students presented also meant that we could expect great levels of anxiety, uncertainty, and feelings of being under immense scrutiny.

Psychology has struggled to transform itself, and this is both in terms of its offering as well as the students that are selected to train at master's level (Dlamini, 2020). This has resulted in classes (at master's level) being predominantly White (Dlamini, 2024). In 2023, the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) instituted a policy that master's training classes should consist of 75% Black (Colored and Indian inclusive) students (Professional Board for Psychology, 2022). There has been a slow shift toward this in our classrooms; however, the shift in class demographics seems not to be mirrored by shifts in teaching philosophies and praxis. When the 75% was still “just a rumor” a couple of years ago, our then team leader asked an important question in jest, “*Are*

we ready for an all Black class?” - the irony being that we were a predominantly Black team.

Fast forward some years, and a moment happens between a student and me. A young Black student sat in front of the clinical team and their classmates and presented. The presentation had a lot of mistakes, was not well paced and focused on things that did not showcase how much the student had metabolized after nearly 6 months of the training programme. They were among the last to present, and it had been a long 2 days of presentations. In a cruel and demeaning tone, I pointed out all their mistakes and told them they ought to take assessments and assignments seriously, alluding to the student’s commitment or lack thereof to their assessment. I remember them acknowledging the feedback, and they subsequently sat, frozen, until the day of presentations was over. As I walked out of the lecture venue, I saw them and the other students huddled as they consoled and reassured the sobbing student. It was and is this moment that I carry with me. Students looking at me and looking away - a frightening, demeaning presence that made their classmate cry. My heart sank; *“I remember that feeling”*, I thought to myself as I got traumatic flashbacks of my formulation (a written hypothesis of the etiology of an individual’s pain) being sent back to me over and over again for revisions, bloodied in red ink (because it was red ink those days when I trained). From being the only Black student in a master’s class, feeling out of place and misunderstood, not recognized and silenced, to becoming the perpetrator of violence against another Black body. It made me sick, and I had sleepless nights all weekend about it. I felt it was a gross display of power that was not helpful to the student, nor did it hold in mind or affirm how the student learns.

I was seeing the class again on Monday, and fortunately for me, I had my colleague and co-author on this paper with me in class as he was doing a peer evaluation on my lecture. I told him that I plan to apologize to the student and that I felt it was important to apologize in front of the whole class because the humiliation and dehumanization happened in front of all of them. He did not say much, but gently reassured me that I was doing the right thing. I apologized to the student for how I spoke to them, and clarified what I meant, offering them an opportunity for a consultation. The reason this moment will stay with me is because of their response to my apology. They said something to the effect of, *“At the beginning of the year, I had a nightmare. I dreamed I had failed and I had failed in front of everyone”*. Once again, my heart sank - I felt like a sell-out or a “house nigga”, as rapper Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter puts it in his song in *The Story of O.J.* (2017). “House nigga” - not in the literal, historical sense, but in the symbolic role I had come to play: complicit in the very system I had once resisted. I was Black, but positioned on the inside of institutional power, tasked with gatekeeping rather than making space. And as an educator, that accountability - that responsibility - includes recognizing when I have caused harm, even unintentionally. The apology became my act of refusal: a refusal to reproduce the violence I survived, and a commitment to do differently. Part of why I felt like a sell-out was because of my own experiences of training and how that made me feel when I was in their position (see [Shabalala, 2018](#)). So, I know this feeling all too well. *Why did I fail to recognize it and them before harm was done?* The other reason for feeling like a sell-out is because representation matters, and I too was born and raised in a township and resonated

with some of the experiences they would share in class about where they were from and what influenced their clinical work, as those influences positively impacted how they worked with patients when they were placed at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, the 3rd largest hospital in the world ([Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital, 2023](#)). They had ways of knowing and being; their truth and perhaps why we selected them for the programme, but I, as with many who taught and trained them, was not engaged in the co-intentional process of meaning making with the student, paying attention to and affirming how they come to learn, which would have (as we have argued) humanized me ([Freire, 1970/2005](#)).

As the weeks went by, the student, who was never formally allocated to me for supervision (clinical or research), reached out months later for guidance and reassurance. What made this significant was not just the request for help, but the sense that it was only possible because of the decision I had made earlier, to apologize to the student after that case presentation. That apology, though small at the time, was an ethical gesture that acknowledged harm and offered repair. In retrospect, it opened a door, one that allowed the student to return, to trust, and to seek connection. The incident revealed how care in teaching is often registered not through grand gestures, but through attentiveness to the quiet spaces in-between assessment and feedback, connection and care ([Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011](#)). It is through this connection and recognition that the possibility of participating equitably exists.

Incident 2 - Mapaling: What should I call you?

There are moments that rearrange something internal, even when they appear quiet from the outside. This one unfolded at the end of a supervision session, our first, and as it turned out, our last. We were sitting in my office. The student, preparing to leave, paused and asked, *“What should I call you?”*

At first, I was unsure what they meant. Then they clarified, asking how they should address me. I turned the question back to them and asked, *“How do you address the other lecturers?”* They answered easily, *“Prof [So-and-So], Dr [So-and-So]”*. I nodded and asked gently, *“So?”* They paused, then said, *“Prof Mapaling, then?”*

They had already referred to me as “Prof Mapaling” in emails, but in person, their hesitation felt like they were trying to get out of it. Their tone shifted, their eyes didn’t meet mine, and the words felt thin, as though spoken more out of obligation than recognition. [Fanon \(1952/2009\)](#) reminds us that the Black body is never just seen; it is interpreted, overread, misread, and often unreadable within colonial frames of meaning. In that moment, I felt this misrecognition not only as a denial of my professional identity, but as a deeper, racialised failure of relational ethics. What unsettled me most was not their hesitation. It was what their hesitation revealed. Even here, in a one-on-one space, the rules of recognition were not neutral. My qualifications were the same. My title was the same. But something about me, to them, remained illegible. Or negotiable. They were a young White student, a detail I did not have to say out loud to my colleague and co-author, because she recognized it without me saying it.

After our supervision session, I felt something sink inside me. A heaviness. It was not just confusion; it was shame, doubt, and anger. I could not name it fully at the time, but it felt like I had

been made to disappear. Not loudly, but in a silence that made me doubt my own presence. I had offered support, opened a door, and somehow I still felt like an outsider standing in my own office. They ignored multiple emails. When I eventually copied the Head of Department and Programme Coordinator (both White, in case you hadn't already guessed it) they replied almost immediately. That deepened the wound. My authority as their supervisor only mattered when Whiteness endorsed it.

More recently, they walked past me in the corridor. They did not greet me. But they wore a smile, not one of warmth, but of discomfort, the kind that tries to mask something it cannot quite hold. A smirk. Polite but strained. It stayed with me. It stung. It reminded me that the problem was not just interpersonal. It was structural. That kind of smile is not just awkward. It is loaded. It performs a civility that erases the harm it quietly maintains.

I cannot speak for the student, nor do I claim to know their intention. But I know how it landed in my body. Still, I find myself revisiting the moment repeatedly, checking it against doubt. *Was it trauma? Maybe. Anxiety?* Certainly. It reminded me of what Sartre wrote in his preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*: that the condition of the colonized is a nervous condition (Fanon, 1963/2007). That phrase lives in my bones, not as a metaphor, but as affective truth. It captures the self-surveillance, the bodily vigilance, and the emotional second-guessing that follow racially charged encounters, even when they appear minor to others. This is not simply about personal hurt. We are writing from personal experience, yes, but as Massumi (1995) reminds us, the personal is political. My unease was not only mine, it was a trace of the structure that produced it.

It was my colleague who first asked whether it could have been something else (age, authority, gender, or even attraction), and I took those seriously. But I kept returning to what my body already knew. Because I know what some of my White colleagues might say: *"Maybe they didn't know what to call you, maybe they were just nervous, maybe you're being too sensitive"*. This is the burden of racialised interpretation: I cannot simply feel the moment; I must also substantiate it, justify it, defend it. To myself. To others. To the institution. As Eddo-Lodge (2017) observes, these conversations are often met with glazed eyes and quiet resistance, a boredom that signals disinterest rather than disbelief. In these moments, the labor is not just emotional but political. You are made to argue for what your body already knows, and then asked to make it palatable.

So I go back over it, again and again. I keep returning to the fact that they had already written "Prof Mapaling" in their emails. I had a choice. *Do I let them call me Curwyn? Or do I insist, however softly, on being called Prof?* I gently nudged them there with a "So?" and they eventually said it. But their body betrayed the words. I didn't correct them. I didn't push it. I chose gentleness over confrontation. Because I was caught between care and the imperative of humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2005), between allowing them to stay comfortable, or nudging them toward a discomfort that might awaken something deeper.

In choosing care, I carried the discomfort alone.

What hurt most was not what they said or did not say, it was what it did to me. The confusion, the questioning, the self-surveillance that followed. I remember thinking: *Is it because I am young? Is it because I am Black?* I kept asking myself, trying to reason it away, but the feeling in my gut kept answering. As Kiguwa (2019) argues, racially troubling moments often register affectively, through silence, hesitation, bodily unease,

and what remains unspoken but deeply felt. These are not merely interpersonal slights. They are part of what she describes as the hidden curriculum of race in higher education, the unspoken but persistent ways that racial hierarchies continue to shape recognition, belonging, and legitimacy. In this context, Durrheim et al. (2011) remind us that Whiteness is not simply a demographic identity. It is a system of visibility, one that assumes its own neutrality and correctness. It decides who is legible, who is credible, and who must earn their right to be seen. I was not read that way. My professional identity required assertion, and even then, acknowledgment remained conditional. Hlatshwayo (2020) names this as the burden placed on Black academics in historically White institutions. We are made to carry the institutional ambivalence about our presence, always negotiating legitimacy in spaces not built for us. Ratele (2018) extends this critique, arguing that even amidst policies of inclusion, higher education institutions often reproduce older traditions dressed in newer language. Racial transformation, he suggests, can become assimilation into "slightly tweaked" traditions that leave the center intact. This was not a neutral misunderstanding. It was a racialised moment.

I knew it because my body knew it. Because long after it ended, I was still carrying it.

That moment took place at the Potchefstroom Campus of North-West University, formerly known as Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PUCE). Today, it is one of three campuses that make up the North-West University (NWU), alongside the Mahikeng and Vanderbijlpark campuses. PUCE was a historically White institution, rooted in an Afrikaans-speaking Christian conservatism, while the University of North-West, previously the University of Bophuthatswana, was established for Black students from rural communities under apartheid's logic of separation. Although the merger exists officially, the cultural DNA of the Potchefstroom Campus remains largely intact, even after its rebranding to *Eagles*, the institution is still widely known, in name and spirit, as *Pukke*. I work in that part of the institution, and its atmosphere speaks less to transformation and more to preservation (Kumalo, 2018; Ratele, 2018). Arday (2022) argues that such spaces, while outwardly transformed, continue to marginalize Black knowers through the persistence of historical logics embedded in architecture, administration, and curriculum. These exclusions are often disguised as neutral, yet they work to protect traditions that were never designed with us in mind.

The discomfort of the institution is not only cultural but architectural. This is not unique to this university. At the University of Johannesburg, the residue of RAU (Rand Afrikaans University) lingers. At Nelson Mandela University, the ghosts of UPE (University of Port Elizabeth) still walk the corridors. What ties these places together is more than memory. It's concrete. Even when the sun shines outside, the buildings feel cold, formal, and unyielding. As if apartheid's ghosts keep the warmth out. These are not just impressions, they are spatialized forms of exclusion. The walls hold history. And the air remembers who it was built for (Mbembe, 2001).

In our recorded conversation, I reflected aloud, *"As I look over at the chairs that say PU4 CHC"*, chairs I was told to protect and watch over when I was first shown my office. The history that must be preserved. Between the two chairs in that space sits a small coffee table. On it, deliberately, I have placed books by Black authors. Reading material for those who sit in chairs never intended for Black bodies. That arrangement is more than esthetic. It is a quiet

refusal. It was a refusal to allow the space to remain untouched by me, by us. A refusal to let its history be the only story told in that room. I will not be the custodian of White nostalgia. A counter-inscription. That act of placing those books was born out of rage as much as hope. Rage at having to claim space in a room never meant for me. Rage at the absurdity of needing to explain my presence despite the titles, the work, the credentials. And hope that someone might pause long enough to reconsider what belongs where, and who belongs at all. It was a refusal not just of decor, but of erasure. A way to say, I am here. I always was. And I will not decorate the silence with politeness. Kumalo (2018) speaks of historically White universities creating *Natives of Nowhere*, subjects who are expected to perform assimilation without recognition, whose presence is tolerated but rarely embraced. These forms of exclusion are often subtle, manifesting not through overt hostility but through everyday acts of erasure: unanswered emails, strained civility, or the absence of a greeting in shared institutional spaces. These moments produce a dissonant affect, a sense of being physically present while remaining socially invisible, which mirrors the very dynamic Kumalo describes. They signal that inclusion is conditional and that legitimacy remains precarious for racialised academics within institutions shaped by historical logics of Whiteness.

What I felt in that moment was a racialised dissonance. I had worked hard to sit in that chair, behind that desk, yet my presence still needed translation. Du Bois (1903/2007) called this double consciousness, the ache of being seen through someone else's eyes. It's a cruel irony: you are Black enough for our transformation agenda, but not Black enough to be trusted with White furniture.

Scholars like Biko (1979) and Freire (1970/2005) remind us that liberation begins with naming, with reclaiming the capacity to define one's reality against systems that deny it. Fraser (2000) argues that recognition is not just symbolic but material, and its denial undermines justice. In that moment, the student's question was not merely interpersonal. It was institutional. Structural. And it continues to shape what kind of academic I am still becoming.

Discussion

Interpreting the critical incidents

The two narratives, while they differ in tone and context, both reveal what we have called ethical ruptures, encounters that shake assumptions, expose affective fault lines, and demand reflection. These are not isolated moments. They are symptoms of a racialised academic architecture in which power, visibility and legitimacy remain unevenly distributed. Fanon's (1952/2009) notion of the racialised body as always overread or unreadable helps explain why these incidents linger in the body. Du Bois's (1903/2007) "double consciousness" surfaces in the unease, the posturing, the second-guessing that racialised educators perform just to stay legible.

Incident 1 unfolds publicly, anchored in pedagogical power and the difficult decision to apologize. It shows how institutional pressure, if unexamined, can reproduce the very violence it seeks to undo. Incident 2 happens quietly, in a passing question, a hesitant smile, an unanswered email, but its impact is no less corrosive. The silence, the dismissal, the lack of greeting accumulate. One incident registers as disciplinary failure, the other as structural invisibility.

Both lay bare the emotional cost of teaching while Black or Brown in South Africa.

Though only the first narrative explicitly invokes the notion of a "house nigga", the second reflects its symbolic undertones. Both authors occupy institutional spaces not originally built for them. One finds themselves enacting practices shaped by past harm, despite intentions to do otherwise. The other, though formally recognized by title and role, continues to navigate the unease of being misread or not fully acknowledged. The implication is clear: proximity to power does not always equal protection. In fact, it can sharpen the contradictions between institutional belonging and racial visibility. These incidents show that even in positions of authority, racialised academics must still prove, negotiate or soften their presence.

These are not just personal moments. They mirror broader dynamics in South African higher education, where institutional cultures remain shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies (Durrheim et al., 2011; Nyamnjoh, 2016). The persistence of Whiteness in university norms, spatial design and interpersonal dynamics continues to marginalize racialised students and staff, even in "diverse" or "transformed" settings.

The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements laid bare how many students experience alienation in higher education. But our narratives show that staff are not immune from this alienation. In fact, racialised academics often become both participants in and observers of institutional contradiction. These incidents highlight how deeply embedded logics of mistrust and misrecognition still shape who is seen as credible, who is allowed to belong, and how care is practiced in academic spaces.

In both cases, the "Brown Thing" becomes more than a metaphor. It surfaces as a site of affective dissonance, where misrecognition and over-visibility coexist. The incidents remind us that pedagogical relationships are never neutral, they are mediated through race, memory and the institutional architectures we inherit and inhabit.

Implications for practice

These findings carry several implications for educators and institutions:

- For educators, there is an urgent need for reflexive practice that acknowledges how racialised histories inform everyday interactions. Apologies, when issued with care and accountability, can serve as ethical gestures that re-humanize pedagogical relationships (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011).
- For academic developers and curriculum designers, the incidents highlight the need to integrate racial literacy, affective pedagogies, and ethics of care into teaching and supervision frameworks (Fataar, 2016; Freire, 1970/2005).
- For policy-makers and institutional leaders, symbolic transformation must be accompanied by structural and epistemic shifts. The placement of books by Black authors, while small, reflects a counter-inscription of space—a refusal of erasure (Mbembe, 2001; Ratele, 2019). Policies must attend to both demographic inclusion and spatial-symbolic change.
- For student support systems, race-conscious mentoring and structured spaces for dialogue can help mediate the emotional

labor borne by racialised educators and students (Arday, 2018; Kumalo, 2024).

Limitations and future research

While this study offers intimate insights into the lived experiences of two educators, its methodological scope is deliberately narrow. CAE privileges depth over breadth and focuses on meaning-making rather than generalizability. Future research could extend this work by including voices from multiple disciplines, institutions, and racial locations. Additionally, engaging students' perspectives on critical incidents may yield a fuller picture of pedagogical rupture and repair.

There is also scope for exploring the materiality of race in higher education, through office design, spatial geography, and symbolic artifacts, as affective and ideological sites of (non)belonging. Finally, the development of a contextually grounded pedagogical framework that explicitly draws from these narratives could serve as a resource for training, mentoring and policy development.

We would love to wrap this up neatly. . .but

Coming to the end of a paper, what is expected is some sort of conclusion to be drawn from what we have discussed in the paper. But, as much as we would love to wrap this up neatly, it is complex. Some of what makes it difficult is that some of the reflections that have come to us as we had our discussions, we are engaging with for the first time in his paper. However, in this section, we will attempt to bring our thoughts to a close. What has emerged through these moments of telling, listening, and remembering is not a clear resolution, but an invitation to remain with the discomfort, to continue the dialogue, and to consider how the personal ruptures we recount might carry pedagogical significance far beyond the moments themselves.

By examining our reflections on racial identity through the lens of "Brown", we aim to contribute to a richer understanding of how youth can cultivate critical racial consciousness. This exploration not only informs our academic work but also highlights the importance of inclusive practices within educational settings that affirm diverse identities and empower youth as advocates for social change. While grounded in the South African context, our reflections speak to wider struggles around race, recognition, and pedagogy that unfold within, and beyond, the classroom.

Incident 1 illustrated how misrecognition not only hinders equitable participation, particularly for Black students, but also creates a deep sense of non-belonging. What emerged for us, as Black educators, was the appreciation that enduring racial trauma is not without consequence. This is especially the case when the misrecognition is structural and institutional. It results in pedagogical encounters being uncritically engaged with, and we do things in a particular way (that is sometimes harmful) because it has always been that way.

Incident 2 highlighted a more insidious form of misrecognition: the quiet, lingering erasure that occurs through institutionalized

norms of Whiteness. Unlike the overt rupture in Incident 1, here the racialised harm was subtle, but no less profound. The absence of acknowledgment, the hesitation to affirm professional identity, and the conditional nature of recognition all pointed to a systemic discomfort with Black authority. What emerged was a recognition that institutions often perform transformation through numbers, while leaving unchallenged the affective and symbolic architecture that maintains White normativity. For Black educators, this means continually navigating an ambivalent belonging: present, but always questioned; seen, but never fully recognized. The critical incident here is not just about one student's hesitation, but about the institutionalized structures that make such hesitation possible, even expected. It demands that we ask: *What must be unlearned, institutionally and affectively, for recognition to be more than compliance?*

While this paper has focused primarily on surfacing and analyzing ethical ruptures through CAE and critical incidents, we recognize that these insights gesture toward the need for specific pedagogical strategies and policy frameworks that can be developed in future work. We hope to build on this work by developing a teaching philosophy that draws from these moments of rupture and reflection. This paper thus marks not a final word, but a generative point of departure.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because the reflections and narratives are based on the authors' own lived experiences. No external data from identifiable individuals was collected or analyzed. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements because the study did not involve research on human subjects, but rather autoethnographic reflection by the authors themselves, consistent with ethical guidelines for self-reflective and interpretive methodologies.

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Transgressive-racialization: a collective refusal of racial governance

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This analysis introduces transgressive-racialization as a praxis for resisting race's structural imposition in U.S. schools. Drawing on Kantian notions of apperception, Althusser's theory of interpellation, and Omi and Winant's racial formation theory, transgressive-racialization is conceptualized as a collective refusal that unsettles the racial ontologies schools often re/produce. Extending this framework, I further develop the concepts of counterapperception and counterinterpellation to describe possibilities of internally and externally negotiating racialized logics as both imposed and inhabited. The analysis integrates insights from Trans Scholars of Color to ground transgressive-racialization in politics that refuse race's legibility and governability. Educational institutions are positioned not as neutral transmitters of knowledge but as racializing state apparatuses in which students encounter, contest, and occasionally reconfigure the ideological scripts that define them. Transgressive-racialization emerges as a pedagogical praxis of ontological resistance. This interdisciplinary intervention contributes to ongoing conversations in race scholarship, education, and trans studies by offering educators a vocabulary for reimagining racial subjectivity beyond determinism and toward a refusal of racial governance.

KEYWORDS

counterapperception, counterinterpellation, education, racialization, refusal of racial governance, transgressive-racialization

Introduction

From the nation's inception, state-sanctioned institutions have utilized race to militate social, political, and economic structures that have undergone various iterations of domination throughout the United States' (US) history. As a corollary, race permeates every facet of our structural lives, as is apparent from the enduring legacies of slavery and segregated housing to the blatant racial disparities within wealth distribution and the mass-incarceration system. Race's enduring pervasiveness exemplifies how the US maintains a vested interest in re/producing race as a tool for governance. We exist in a racialized society that demarcates people through ethnoracial identities¹ to organize citizens and distribute resources. This system seeks to ensure race remains central in people's lives through the social institutions that uphold and reinforce racialized systemic inequities. Bell (1992) forewarns that the US will continue to

1 I utilize "ethnoracial identity" to describe how even ethnicities are treated as a race. Therefore, ethnoracial identity best encapsulates how structures racialize people based on either/both their ethnicity and their race. For example, the United States categorizes *latinidad* as an ethnicity, but many people, like me, have experienced racialization in how social structures racialize us through our *latinidad* despite *Latine* being structurally labeled as an ethnicity.

contend with the permanence of race by asserting that society should acknowledge racism as an act of defiance and not as an act of submission (p. 10). This analysis builds upon these collective acts of defiance in aims of reconfiguring race's permanence.

As social institutions, schools have the most prevalent reach on U.S. society and aid the state in shaping ethnoracial identities for structural purposes. Schools not only serve as knowledge-producing institutions but also function as people-processing spaces that contribute to students' racialization [see [Leonardo \(2005\)](#)]. By racializing the learning environment, schools teach students the rules of race-making necessary to navigating the racialized nation. [Omi and Winant \(2015\)](#) describe *race-making* as the process of "othering" (p. 105). I expand this definition to describe how social structures, like schools, "make race" to construct a person into a governed, racialized subject. Simultaneously, communities challenge and negotiate the race-making process by redefining the conditions by which they live their racialized lives. Schools serve as critical sites where students learn how the state operationalizes race as an organizing principle ([Leonardo, 2010](#)) but also how to confront racialization's contradictions as they make sense of their ethnoracial identities. As such, schools are one of the nation's most prolific race-making institutions.

This analysis delves into how a social construct, such as race, can have social, psychological, and material consequences. By exploring how race bolsters and interacts with various interconnected systems of social division, I seek to expose racialization's malleable properties to advocate for *transgressive-racialization* as a transgressive act that leverages racialization's fluidity to subvert its structural influence. Drawing from Trans Scholars of Color, I argue that transgressive-racialization is not a liberal project of identity exchange but a practice that unsettles the U.S. racial order. Understanding transgressive-racialization harbors critical implications for education because schools function as institutions that re/produce, enforce, and discipline racialized meanings. Through curriculum, disciplinary policies, social interactions, and institutional norms, racialized students learn how the state mobilizes race to organize society while simultaneously grappling with the dissonance between imposed racial logics and their lived experiences. In this context, transgressive-racialization becomes a praxis to reimagine pedagogies that resist ontological fixity by challenging structures that uphold race as a regulatory force.

My argument first distinguishes transgressive-racialization from misconceptions of identity-crossing through groundings that refuse racial governance inspired by Black trans* feminist thought and critiques from Trans Scholars of Color. Next, I employ an interdisciplinary approach to explore the manifest intricacies in the racialization process that render us racialized beings. This approach is necessary because racialization cannot be understood through a singular disciplinary lens. Racialization functions ideologically, psychologically, linguistically, and through gendered dynamics across dimensions and institutions. Guided by various intellectual fields, I demonstrate how drawing from diverse ontological insights enables us to better grasp racialization's everyday operation to meaningfully resist its structuring power. I apply Kantian logics, Althusserian theories, and educational frameworks to facilitate a multi-layered analysis of how race ideologically functions and how transgressive-racialization then unfolds as a counter-ontological disobedience. Finally, I provide educational examples of how race leverages other identity axes to reproduce itself, and how transgressive-racialization

is applicable as a disruption within these contexts. Deconstructing the racialization process provides the foundation for transgressive-racialization to re-forge a fugitive path toward the disarticulation of a racial regime. In this way, transgressive-racialization draws from the refusal politics of Black trans* feminists' collective acts of illegibility and ungovernability.

Transgressive-racialization and the refusal of racial governance

To disrupt how the US manipulates social structures to racialize citizens, we must understand racialization's functioning mechanisms to advocate for transgressive-racialization²—a term I offer to promote a movement that rejects structural, racial impositions as an extension of the refusal politics long theorized by Black trans* and Trans of Color scholars. This praxis is a refusal of racial governance to live otherwise [see also [Hartman \(2024\)](#)]. To live as a transgressive-racial subject is to inhabit a form of fugitive existence by disrupting the racialized structure that captures and governs racialized subjects through ontological fixity. Transgressive-racialization rejects biological determinism, ascribed social scripts, and racial intelligibility. To be racialized is to become intelligible by the state, enabling its governance upon the subject through surveillance, categorization, and control. I mobilize the "trans" prefix to be in conversation with Black and trans* traditions of ungovernability. Transgressive-racialization challenges the grammar of racialization by calling into question how people internalize and externalize race under systems of power. Being a transgressive-racial subject bolsters existing pathways to be ungoverned and empowers the ontological fugitive.

This analysis would be remiss to not fully engage with critical scholars in trans studies, whose insights are informative to transgressive-racialization. [Snorton's \(2017\)](#) scholarly contributions ground this analysis by establishing that Blackness and transness are historically co-produced through technologies of fungibility, captivity, and biopolitical violence. Their work emphasizes how gender, when applied to Black people, has functioned outside of normative frameworks. Snorton asserts, "Captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable and as an amendable form of being" (p. 57). The history of Black enslavement, particularly the condition of the enslaved Black body, significantly instructs how race and gender are flexible and socially constructed despite the state's efforts to depict them as rigid. Snorton's insights emphasize how the state has constructed identity axes, such as race, language, and gender, as technologies of control but also gives light to how marginalized peoples have leveraged these social constructs as sites of contestation. Thus, modern transness diverts from traditional frameworks of trans studies, relating to medical and personal transition [see [Schilt and Lagos \(2017\)](#)], to highlight how enslaved peoples experienced gender's plasticity under violent domination. In doing so, Snorton shifts transness to also being a racialized, historical process. [Bey \(2022\)](#) further applies Black trans* feminist frameworks to describe how

² The hyphen serves to illustrate the intentional disruption to racialization as a violent act (see [Leonardo, 2005](#)).

transness is the “quotidian act of becoming through openings and refusals” (p. 84). Transness enables us to see gender and race as forms of captivity with transness providing openings for the possible selves that refuse the state’s governance.

Race itself will always exist in our collective memory. Aspiring to fully extinguish race ignores the deep enduring impact race has imprinted on society. Refusing racial governance is a praxis that restructures race as descriptive and not determinate. Transgressive-racialization, therefore, becomes a form of diasporic refusal that enables society to escape into a future where race is not an organizing principle. This approach does not dismiss the state’s detrimental efforts to govern racialized subjects nor erase the racialized historicity embedded in our everyday interactions. To build a world that refuses race entails proactive efforts to destabilize racialization as a determining force and rejects the assumption that society can ever exist as a state that has “outgrown” race—it cannot. However, to take a step toward a refusal of racial governance (i.e., a world that normalizes the disruption of race) requires counter-hegemonic efforts that denaturalize race as essential to how state systems function. This movement is a refusal that discusses race as something else.

Transgressive-racialization would not condone Rachel Dolezal, former president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who presented herself as a Black woman despite being born to white parents (Haag, 2018). Transgressive-racialization does not signify “to change race,” as transracialization might imply. To do so would impoverish the objectives of transgressive-racialization. Many might deem Dolezal’s deceptive actions as a form of “race passing;” however, passing is best defined as “an attempt to move from the cultural margin to the center, from the perspective of the dominant race, passing is deception, an attempt to claim status and privilege falsely” (Ginsberg, 1996, p. 8). In the U.S. context, passing historically refers to nonwhite individuals presenting themselves as white to evade oppression and enhance access to social, economic, and legal privileges. Dolezal’s actions appropriated and exploited blackness to secure herself a more advantageous position within the Black community. Passing does not align with transgressive-racialization because it functions within racial logics. When a person participates in race passing, they are subverting race as fixed but ultimately rely on the very racial boundaries transgressive-racialization aims to refute. Unlike passing, which still portends racial intelligibility, transgressive-racialization refuses a racializing grammar.

Within the public imaginary, Dolezal’s “transracialization” haunts the transgressive-racial subject by conflating refusal with her discourse of deception and appropriation. Consequently, this term can evoke pain and skepticism, particularly for Black and trans communities who have long endured the commodification of blackness and transness. This critique is valid and must be acknowledged. I apply transgressive-racialization to illuminate the terrain already mapped by Black and trans scholars by sitting with the instability of language that will not resolve the tension fueled by transracial politics, but this tension is a productive struggle. Transgressive-racialization is offered in dialogue with, not in substitution for, Trans of Color critique. I do not offer sanitized alternatives but engage with an uncomfortable analytic that exists in the tensions of racial legibility. Transgressive-racialization exists as the extension of an argument already established by Black trans feminists and Trans Scholars of Color [Bey, 2022; Snorton, 2017; Tourmaline (formally known as Gossett et al., 2017)], who have long theorized and lived illegibility and ungovernability.

Engaging in transgressive-racial practices recognizes that oppressive systems cultivate disproportionate possibilities to refuse. The state racializes, and we enact our racialization differently across spaces; and therefore, illegibility does not transpire at a universal rate.

The multiracial movement is an example of how different groups can disproportionately refuse. However, the multiracial identity movement does not achieve the goals of transgressive-racialization because it ultimately reproduces race by legitimizing racial boundaries and logics. Spencer (2011) captures the essence of this point best, “The crucial reality [is] that the ideology of the American Multiracial Identity Movement does absolutely nothing to challenge or subvert this age-old racial equation” (p. 6). As a counterpoint, Zack (1993) clarifies that the construction of the mixed-race identity signifies the incoherence of racial categories by demonstrating how this movement has contributed to destabilizing race as fixed. Multiracial identities are not positions of privilege or evasion. Being multiracial is an imposed identity within the paradox of hypervisibility and erasure. Modi (2023) astutely asserts that mixed-race individuals can wield this imposed identity as an instrument of misrecognition within dominant racial orders. Nevertheless, the aim of racial recognition still reaffirms racial taxonomies because the mixed-race identity continues to operate within the grammar of racial classification. Mixed-race subjects might engage in the terrain of misrecognition by not fully belonging to one race or the other, but the desire for racial recognition remains present. From a transgressive-racialization perspective, the mixed-race movement reinforces racial ideology by accepting the call to be racially named rather than refusing racial legibility. Song (2014) further explores the paradox of mixed-race peoples in how they undermine the concept of people neatly fitting into categories but ultimately concludes that “an assertion of mixedness cannot help but reify this notion of racial difference” (p. 89). The mixed-race identity ultimately seeks to be read. Transgressive-racialization refuses to be racially read at all.

Transgressive-racialization is strongly aligned with transversal politics. Transversality, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) foundationally establish, manifests through relational movement across structured systems to disrupt and induce new subjectivities. They explain how transversality materializes “between things [and] does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again...a transversal movement sweeps one and the other away” (p. 25). For Deleuze and Guattari, transversality destabilizes by moving across systems, such as a multiracial coalition that connects through their heterogenous racialized identities. Transgressive-racialization builds upon and departs from transversality by disrupting the psychic frames of apperception and interpellation (to be elaborated below) that enforce racial coherence.

Lastly, feminist and decolonial scholars, like Lugones (1987) and Sandoval (2013), have reworked transversality as a praxis of disidentification. Specifically, Lugones explores the possibility of world traveling as a way of entering different meaning systems that construct and reconstruct worlds (p. 16). Although transversal traditions inform transgressive-racialization, the transgressive-racial subject does not cross into new worlds to transform them; they exit the demand to be seen and known within the terms of racial legibility. Like Wu Tsang (Bailey, 2016), who intentionally withholds racial identifiers, transgressive-racialization is a disarticulation of the state’s demand for legibility. Transgressive-racialization is not simply transversal but also a refusal to be seen, named, or governed through race. The

transgressive-racial subject does not pass between identities but removes themselves from the epistemic and ontological forms of racialized intelligibility that the racial state needs to operate.

Existing frameworks of racialization

To understand how transgressive-racialization disrupts race as a structuring logic, we must first understand race's functionality and historicity. According to Omi and Winant (2015), racialization extends "racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (p. 111). Racializing someone, or something, involves imposing symbolic meanings based on phenotypical and cultural markers. Omi and Winant describe this process as a "combination of centripetal and centrifugal forces" (p. 44) in which we are immersed (this analysis will later explore such forces). Lewis (2003a) elaborates how racialization involves assigning the body to specified, and imaginary, racial categories that people adduce to identify themselves and others based on symbols, attributes, qualities, and other constructed meanings (p. 287). Racial categories are identifiers that determine how opportunities and resources are distributed along racial lines. In a corporal sense, racialization entails extending racial meanings to the body and mind. Despite proffering a foundational understanding of racialization, these insights fail to provide a substantial explanation as to why race has become the force by which we perceive our world. What more is happening to make race the *raison d'être* of our structural existence?

Across time, the US has re/made race through racial projects, which "link significations or representations of race with social structural manifestations of racial hierarchy or dominance" (Winant, 2001, p. 100). Omi and Winant (2015) define this system of racial projects as racial formation, "The sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 109). Through racial formation, U.S. society and its social structures have continuously re/made ethnoracial identities by racializing people with symbolic meanings that structurally organize them into an ethnoracial hierarchy. The racial formation process is not solely a top-down force but also bottom-up. Racial formation, which has ineluctable effects on people's lives, is not stagnant but evolves over time. Throughout history, groups have consistently challenged the state's racialized impositions and the ways race materializes in the social order. Zepeda-Millán and Wallace (2013) illustrate how Latine participants in the 2006 immigration rights protests developed a heightened sense of their latinidad because the social movement served as the collective construction and affirmation of their Latine identity. Racial formation can be a unifying and divisive force. But race, as an instrument of the state, fundamentally possesses a divisive function.

Omi and Winant proclaim that race is a master category because it is the "fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States" (p. 106). As a master category, race is a signifier that remains salient throughout all social interactions, influencing how social structures frame our collective and individual psyches. In other words, race is never not in play. Many might claim that other oppressive structural identities, such as gender, are equally integral to a person's subjugation, which Omi and Winant (2015) would not deny. Systems that function on axes of inequality work in tandem with each

other as part of the racialization process. This analysis specifically explores how race leverages language and gender to racialize subjects.

Race as malleable

Roediger's (2006) work exemplifies racialization's adaptability in the US through the nation's immigration history. Such historical precedents have caused racial identities to expand or contract, based on the nation's structural needs. For instance, he explains how U.S. citizens from Western Europe, who served as part of the white dominant class, initially relegated Slavs and Italians to a nonwhite status to exploit their labor. Political reformers eventually embraced these groups into the white identity when rendering them white facilitated political gain for the dominant group (pp. 74–75). Roediger argues that, prior to achieving whiteness, certain immigrant communities underwent a form of "inbetweenness," wherein previously considered "nonblack" immigrants held a mid-tiered status in between white and Black communities (p. 32). *Inbetweenness* preserved nonblack-but-potentially-white immigrants' cultural heritage while distinguishing them from African Americans to secure a more advantageous status, evincing that racialization is not stagnant but a recursive process that adapts.

The structural forces that racialize people are powerful, but they ultimately are not determinative. C. Kim (1999) cautions against notions of ethnoracial hierarchies as potentially narrowing how we understand racialization, which, according to C. Kim, is relational and "continuously contested and negotiated within and among racial groups" (p. 197). Molina et al. (2019) further explain that racial categories do not form in isolation but are relational projects of white supremacy through which racial categories are "coproduced and co-constitutive, and always dependent on constructions of gender, sexuality, labor, and citizenship" (p. 3). Race exists as a relational framework to other structural identities, an ontology that merges with other structural identities to construct racialized subjectivities. Transgressive-racialization seeks to break this link of co-production between race and other identity axes.

This analysis recognizes that some groups, like Black Americans, have less latitude to contest their racialization. After all, a case could be made that U.S. institutions are built on anti-blackness (Dumas and Ross, 2016). Yet, Black identities are also continuously negotiated and redefined (Harper and Nichols, 2008; Celious and Oyserman, 2001). Womack and Dingle (2010) studied Black Americans who challenged structural definitions that were specifically associated with historical and cultural markers. Their conclusions illuminate how there is a new class of Black Americans who identify beyond historical definitions of blackness and instead reimagine their Black identity through their personal interests, viewpoints, and lifestyles. The study's participants rejected how social structures aim to constrict definitions of blackness. Their negative ontology, establishing who they are by rejecting who they are not, exemplifies a group's semi-agentive efforts to bend the confines of their structural impositions. Womack and Dingle's findings reflect Black community members who can contest Black structural definitions because their socioeconomic privileges shielded them from racialization's full effects. Thus, the ability to redefine one's Blackness is not a privilege most can leverage. Since race is unfixed, racial groups can rework structural definitions all while seeking to escape racialization's structural effects.

These examples substantiate the core premise of transgressive-racialization by demonstrating that racialized subjects are not always legible by the state and have agency in challenging racializing structures. As demonstrated, people can transgress their racialization by reconfiguring or disarticulating racializing scripts. Transgressive-racialization foregrounds this disruption as an ontological challenge that exposes race's instability and advances the possibility of becoming illegible within the dominant racial order. In this sense, transgressive-racialization counters structures that rely on the state's recognition and conformity to racial hierarchies. Its ontological disobedience exemplifies race's contingent and constructed nature. This fugitive relation to race unsettles the state's ability to govern through racialized relations, advancing how transgressive-racialization seeks to refuse racial governance.

Racialization's centrifugal and centripetal forces

Thus far, I have explored how groups adapt race to serve their structural needs. In doing so, dominant groups subjugate marginalized communities by systematically disadvantaging them through their ethnoracial identities. In response, racialized groups have mobilized to resist and destabilize how dominant groups deploy race as an instrument of marginalization and social control. Their resistance showcases how groups have already engaged in movements of transgressive-racialization. However, to destabilize racialization, we must first understand the mechanisms through which race operates. There is limited discussion on what the process of racial formation fully entails. Below, I expand established theorizations of racialization to examine how people become racialized subjects with examples in schooling contexts.

We are racialized beings who, on a daily basis, encounter structural centrifugal and centripetal forces as part of the racialization process. Racialization is the apperception (centrifugal forces) and interpellation (centripetal forces) of imaginary racial meanings that construct individuals as racialized subjects. Apperception, in the case of racialization, refers to the process by which individuals make sense of their world through racialized and intra-psychological schemas, such as internal and often unconscious filtering of their social reality that reflects dominant ideologies. Interpellation, complementing apperception, serves as an external and centripetal force that calls individuals into internalizing racialization through their interpsychological interactions with institutions, discourse, and everyday socialization.

Racialization is not merely the extension and ascription of imagined racial meanings as Omi and Winant purport. Rather, racialization consists of the apperception and interpellation of racialized meanings that are internalized and externally imposed to shape how individuals inhabit and perform their racialized subjectivities. Understanding the process of interpellation and apperception first requires a deeper engagement with ideology as a structuring force that shapes subject formation. Through ideology, the subject externally calls to racial legibility and internally recognizes the self as racialized. Ideology naturalizes race as an ontological truth by sustaining the recursive process in which the subject is hailed and comes to self-identify within a constructed and regulatory mode of governance.

Racial ideology's evasive effects

To better comprehend our racial subjectivity, we need to examine how ideology distorts our ability to identify racialization's centrifugal and centripetal effects. Fields (1990) intellectual contributions may shed light on how the nation's collective consciousness (re)creates ideology to make sense of our social reality. She defines ideology:

The descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence, through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day. It is a language of consciousness that suits the particular way in which people deal with their fellows... [The] interpretation in thought of social relations through which they constantly create and re-create their collective being. (p. 110).

Ideology eludes our structural understanding because we fail to recognize ideology through its material manifestation, further obscuring its pervasiveness. Building upon Althusser's (2003) theory of ideology, Leonardo (2005) explicates Althusser's ideology as functioning like the unconscious. According to Althusser's view, Leonardo describes ideology as possessing a practical dimension, wherein people employ ideology to construct a worldview that informs their actions, ultimately manifesting in material consequences. As an ideology, race has a material existence. For instance, in schools, racial ideology perpetuates disproportionate disciplinary measures that lead to material ramifications for students' career prospects and continued educational attainment (Hooks and Miskovic, 2011; Irby, 2014). Yet, without a materialist lens, ideology remains unexamined, distorting how we perceive our structural existence.

By construing how we perceive our daily realities, ideology functions like a filter transposed upon our lives. Despite ideology's material consequences, Fields (1990) explains that ideology paradoxically exemplifies how the reality we perceive is not reflective of our objective truths, which is typical for Marxist understandings of ideology. As Leonardo (2005) asserts, the US has an exceptionally unique strand of ideology that defines the nation's collective consciousness—racial ideology. Collectively and individually, he argues that we make and remake race as an ideology in *apparent perpetuity*, not unlike the unconscious. Through racial ideology, European Americans resolved the hypocrisy between liberty and slavery (Fields, 1990). Racial ideology rationalizes how the narrative of equal protection for all signifies, in practice, fewer human rights for others. Most of all, racial ideology creates a fallacious logic that informs and naturalizes the social relations of domination and subjugation to serve the dominant group's interests (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Giddens, 1983). Racial ideology is not logical and exists even through irrational contradictions. A transgressive-racialization approach leverages these contradictions to destabilize how racial ideology normalizes racialized ascriptions.

Ideology explains why People of Color also have a racial investment. Patillo's (2003) ethnography on how African Americans contest representations of blackness found that participants' efforts to uplift blackness were built upon the post-civil rights movement to establish and preserve Black presence beyond marginalized spaces. For many People of Color in their study, race is not simply a social construct imposed upon them by dominant groups but a source of identity, community, survival, and opposition in an oppressive system. This being the case, racial investments by People of Color are an

ideological response to a system that has historically sought to erase and marginalize their existence. [J. Kim \(1999\)](#) exemplifies this racial investment through the formation of the “Asian American” identity. They explain how Asian-presenting peoples created “Asian American” in solidarity with the Civil Rights movement and as a strategic response to dominant narratives that casted them as perpetual foreigners. Ideologically, race becomes both a force of oppression and resistance.

Racialization’s centrifugal forces

Racialization is a European invention and derives from the European paradigm of thought. Europeans and their descendants have significantly contributed to how race, as a social construct, has emerged as one of the most influential social organons. Immanuel Kant, a key figure in 18-century European intellectual development, propagated influential philosophies about human difference and social cognition. His ideas are informative in explaining how race functions because his works significantly shaped the racializing systems that the US inherited and continues to uphold when re/producing race. Kant’s framework enables us to identify racialization’s centrifugal forces of the mind.

[Kant \(1781\)](#) introduced *apperception* to explain how our self-consciousness organizes our social world. Through apperception, we synthesize how we conceive our world in three exponents: (1) how we perceive ourselves in relation to our objective world; (2) how we organize these perceptions; and (3) how we cohere these perceptions into a unifying whole. Individuals, as subjects, accept, contend, negotiate, and resist structural forces; however, every interaction informs how they understand racial meanings. Apperception differs from perception, with perception being the immediate sensory experience and apperception being the accumulated synthesis of sensory experiences that create a coherent sense of self and meaning. The social structures, in which we exist, exert unremitting and enigmatic forces that influence our cognitive processes and inform our ideologies. Our apperception fuses an interplay between perception, cognition, and personal history that imbues our individual psyches. In a racialized society, race’s social and cultural constructs shape our apperception to endow our external world with subjective significances that create racially apperceived realities. An individual’s apperception is unique to them and represents the effects of structural centrifugal forces on a person’s mental frameworks. Like rose-colored glasses that saturate our vision, our apperception serves as an internal, psychological, and centrifugal force that informs how we racially view our existence.

In a society built upon racialized logics, the apperceiving subject is already racialized through historically shaped, state-sanctioned perceptions of self and others. Transgressive-racialization intervenes this process by subverting the psychic incorporation of racialized scripts. Apperception renders our world legible and rational. Transgressive-racialization unmakes race as part of this legibility and rationality by exposing how our racialized consciousness is unnatural and a product of a racial ideological governing. In alignment with [Sandoval’s \(2013\)](#) *oppositional consciousness* as “the practitioner’s ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against” (p. 59). To this end, *counterapperception* becomes part of the

transgressive-racialization movement that develops an oppositional consciousness. Counterapperception, for the transgressive-racial subject, is the deliberate restructuring of one’s racialized consciousness in opposition to the internalized scripts that racial ideology imposes. The transgressive-racial subject counters logics that apperceive race as having rational power. Understanding how racial ideology structures our apperception requires us to also examine the external forces that rationalize race. If structural forces possess a systematic consistency that enable centrifugal forces to influence our apperception, then centripetal forces complementarily function to shape our interpellation. They function as twin engines that fuel racial ideology.

Racialization’s centripetal forces

[Althusser \(1971\)](#) describes interpellation as the subject’s ideological transformation in which the individual identifies, or internalizes, their position in society based on dominant ideologies. He explains that we become interpellated subjects through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as schools, which serve as institutions for social control. ISAs interpellate individuals to subsume imparted knowledge for the purpose that they internalize societal roles. [Backer \(2018\)](#) more plainly describes interpellation as the “everyday practice that exerts a force in the overall balance of social forces” (p. 2). Through interpellation, individuals accept structural definitions of race that contribute to the U.S. ethnoracial hierarchy and act on behalf of race as an ideology. As individuals navigate this racialized structure, they constantly engage with ISAs that strive to interpellate them into racialized subjects and racialize the spaces in which they exist. ISAs adapt to sustain themselves; and thus, the ways in which ISAs interpellate racialized subjects evolves and is ever-changing.

[Leonardo \(2005\)](#) describes schools as a racial state apparatus (RSA), distinct from Althusser’s own use of RSA, or repressive state apparatus, whereby “the school is a material institution where race takes place, where racial identity is bureaucratized and modernized, where people are hailed as racialized subjects of the state” (p. 409). As an RSA, schools interpellate students into racialized subjects by positioning them as intelligible through the state’s racialized logics. Transgressive-racialization, however, rejects the notion that subjects only come into being through state legibility. The transgressive-racial subject does not escape interpellation but invalidates race as an interpellative force. Transgressive-racialization is not a failed interpellation but a mode of fugitivity from institutions’ attempts to racially subjugate, serving as a form of counterinterpellation.

[Lecerle \(2006\)](#) defines *counterinterpellation* as the negotiation of interpellated forces whereby a person rejects structural narratives, values, and hierarchies to reconstruct how they define their subjective position. A counterinterpellative negotiation of structural definitions requires encountering the interpellative force in order to debilitate its efficacy. Through counterinterpellation, individuals can reclaim their identities but not without a cost. Counterinterpellation, according to [Backer \(2018\)](#), has “ideological and political ramifications” (p. 10), for interpellative forces are constantly endeavoring to preserve their ideological dominance. A counterinterpellative negotiation seeks to “shift the balance of forces away from the ruling class’s control” (p. 11). In rejecting one’s racialization as a counterinterpellative act, the individual must understand how race functions to counterinterpellate race’s interpellative effects. Simply stated, to counterinterpellate, the

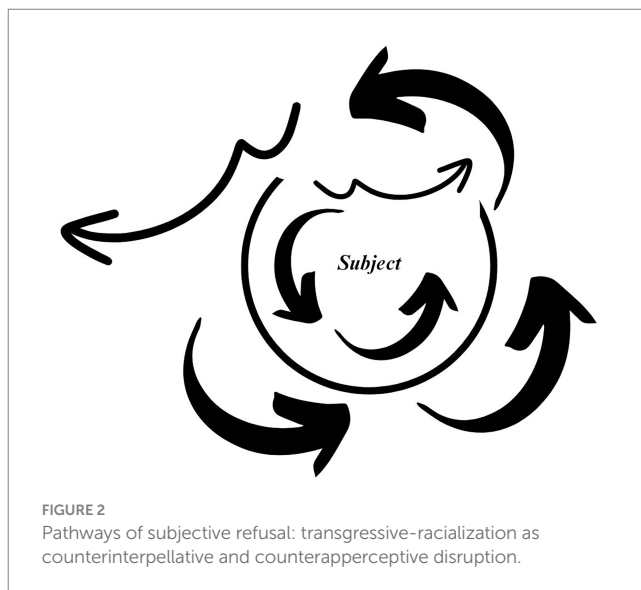
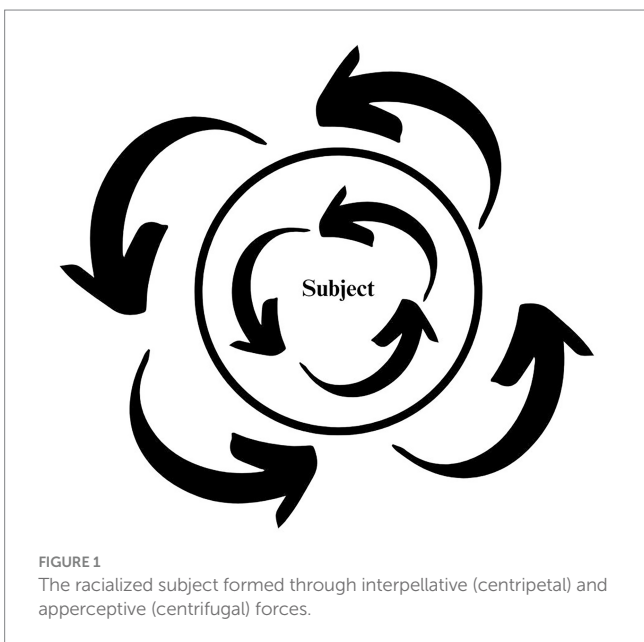
transgressive-racial subject must learn how the structure imposes race upon them, then resist and reshape structural identities to subvert the racializing forces that seek to govern them. Counterinterpellation does not entirely evade the dynamics of interpellation. Rather, counterinterpellation provides space for alternative narratives, or identity formations, to emerge and remain operative within the broader framework of the interpellative process, i.e., does not escape interpellation but evades racialized interpellation. Individuals who resist racial narratives are still subject to the pervasive influence of societal structures and norms. Bunch (2013) refers to counterinterpellation as a form of unbecoming. They identify the unbecoming subject as an agent of social change (p. 48); and thus, a counterinterpellative act does not liberate the person toward a more individual sovereignty but aims to undermine race as an interpellative force.

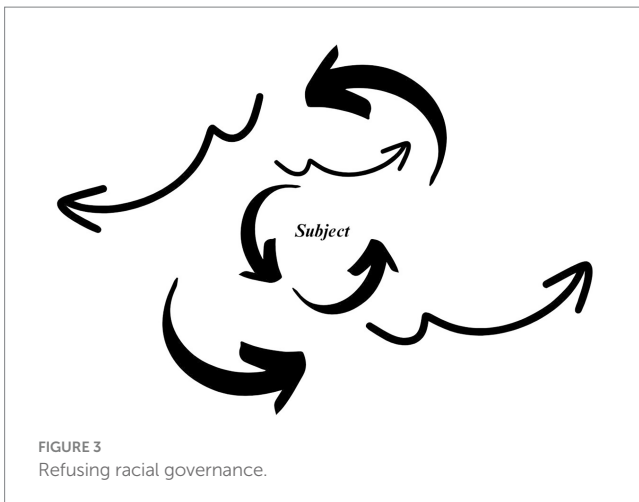
Figure 1 illustrates the systematic and recursive process of racial subject formation through the dual operations of interpellation and apperception. The outer arrows represent interpellation's external forces, such as social, institutional, and ideological structures that "hail" individuals into racialized legibility. These outer forces persistently position the subject into systemic recognition through externalized ascriptions. The inner arrows signify apperception, as the internal process through which the subject understands themselves. Through apperception, the subject internalizes stereotypes, self-surveils along prescribed and self-ascribed definitions, and employs strategies of resistance and negotiation. This diagram visualizes how racialization is the incessant interplay of external and internal forces that the subject encounters daily. Racialization, through apperception and interpellation, is like the air we breathe; it surrounds us constantly to shape us and our environment. We externalize and internalize race with each exhalation and inhalation.

Figure 2 depicts how transgressive-racialization serves as counterinterpellative and counterapperceptive acts. The external multidirectional arrow represents counterinterpellation as a disruption to the external forces by forging a rupture to the normative systems that hail the subject into a fixed identity. Similarly, the internal

multidirectional arrow portrays counterapperception as interrupting the internalization process. Rather than forming a stable self-image, the subject exits into a new path of withdrawal as they bend away from the recursive loop that metabolizes state-sanctioned subjectivity. These forces no longer fully shape the subject. This ontological disobedience opens space as an exit from legibility—a shape that we can no longer articulate. The incomplete shape is central to this visualization, for it demonstrates how the subject is no longer enclosed and no longer fully governed. Their refusal of containment unmakes ontological boundaries. Stated earlier, counterinterpellative and counterapperceptive acts do not escape interpellation and apperception all together. As demonstrated by the recursive arrows prominent in Figure 1, dominant forces will persistently try to quell disruptive acts by absorbing them back into the dominant, structural formation.

Over time, collectively sustained counterinterpellative and counterapperceptive acts will cultivate a subjectivity that is no longer fully enclosed by dominant and racializing forces. Unlike Figure 1, in which the subject is contained by recursive operations of interpellation and apperception, Figure 3 visualizes the loosening and dispersal of these mechanisms. Dominant forces, as portrayed by the recursive arrows, remain present as remnants of the racial regime will always exist. A world that refuses racial governance does not exist "after" race because past structures possess a haunting underlife ever seeking to re-entrap the subject. For example, the U.S. has abolished slavery, but its racialized hierarchies perdure. In Figure 3, the subject remains centered but no longer completely governed. Whereas Figure 2 represents the ripple effects that social movements have enacted to shift paradigms, Figure 1 exhibits how dominant forces ultimately re-absorb failed counterinterpellative and counterapperceptive acts. This results in a return to a re-configured Figure 1 that continues to function on axes of domination. Figure 3, thus, gestures toward a world that refuses race in which racialization loses organizational power, even as dominant systems seek to re-integrate racialized structures. Progress functions like pendulum swinging from Figure 1 to Figure 2; and therefore, Figure 3 is the horizon we seek when we refuse and disrupt. By refusing racial governance, the fugitive subject thrives in the wake of destabilization.





By engaging in counterinterpellative and counterappercptive acts, like transgressive-racialization, individuals and communities can actively strive to subvert racialization. Transgressive-racialization forges a path for alternative interpellative and appercptive forces that foster the emergence of a more transformative ideology in which subjects can find a different sense of self. Stanley's (2021) archival work on the state's violence toward trans/queer peoples describes their experiences as a refusal politics by which being trans is a rejection to be governed or legible by the state. They describe being ungovernable as both a "trace" and "map" for liberation (p. 123). Their framing of ungovernability offers a powerful insight into transgressive-racialization as an ungovernable relation to race. Transgressive-racialization, as a counterinterpellative and counterappercptive act, refuses the state's demand for legibility and containment; transgressive-racialization is a form fugitivity out of racial governance. No other institution better sustains the racialization process than schools.

Racialization and transgressive-racialization through structural identity axes

When children enter the school building, they do not simply learn the rules of race but additionally undergo the racializing process. Lewis (2003b) explains that "schools play a role in the production of race as a social category both through implicit and explicit lessons and through school practices (p. 188). Leonardo and Grubb (2018) specifically identify the school curriculum as contributing to the racial order through fact selections by which students learn race's significance in their lives, equating curriculum-making to race-making (p. 16). Schools' everyday social interactions aim to create fixed racial boundaries that reproduce racialization through internal and external ascriptions (Lewis, 2003a), or as Omi and Winant would identify as centrifugal and centripetal forces. According to Lewis, the racial-ascription process aids individuals in ascertaining to which racial category a person might belong. Lewis describes external ascriptions as to how others racialize an individual; inversely, internal ascriptions relate to how a person racializes themselves. Both internal (appercption's centrifugal forces) and external (interpellation's centripetal forces) ascription processes contribute to a person's racial formation. Jenkins (2014) further alludes to how the racial-ascription

process is not a science but a reference system by which individuals employ unconscious and automatic processes that identify racial markers in order to inform how we racialize others and ourselves.

In schools, racialization happens in every instance from the macro structure to an individual's everyday interactions. Racialized indicators such as language, culture, skin color, name, and socioeconomic status constantly mediate the racialization process. Yet, within these racial dynamics, students engage in transgressive-racial acts when they refuse and negotiate the racial scripts that schools impose. To demonstrate the conditions that involve racialization's centrifugal and centripetal forces, I will focus on how racialization, as a relational ontology, leverages other identities, such as language and gender, to reproduce itself and how racialized subjects can engage in transgressive-racialization to subvert how social structures racialize them.

Racialization and transgressive-racialization through language

Language is racialized and racializes. In the US, language has undergone a raciolinguistic enregisterment: the process by which "race and language are rendered mutually perceivable...this raciolinguistic perspective directs attention to the ways that race is socially constructed through language but also to the ways that language is socially constructed through race" (Rosa, 2019, p. 7). The racialization process employs race and language as mutually constitutive. This process entails linguistic practices and features that society racializes by linking them to already-existing racial categories. Through raciolinguistic enregisterment, language constructs differences that reflect racial ideologies. Fanon's (1952) poignant observation recognizes the relationship between race and language when stating, "The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be all the whiter as he gains mastery of the cultural tool that language is" (p. 38). He identifies language's ability to function as a powerful tool that can distance or increase proximity to the dominant class. Raciolinguistic enregisterment explains how language practices shape a person's racial experiences. Anzaldúa (1987) best portrays the interdependence of linguistic and racial identities when describing how a person's "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—[they are their] language" (p. 59). The ways in which individuals speak and the language they use are intertwined with their structural identity.

In a schooling context, Rosa's (2019) ethnographic account found that many students in a Chicago public school experienced the phenomenon of "looking like a language, sounding like a race" (p. 2) when their educational environment racialized them through language. He describes how society perceives language as racially embodied (looking like a language) and race as linguistically intelligible (sounding like a race). The US's history of othering non-English languages employs Spanish as a powerful social construct that shapes and racializes identities. Rosa found that students experienced raciolinguistic enregisterment when speaking Spanish because of the language's inextricable link to being Latine. When students spoke Spanish, they were not only engaging in a linguistic activity but also performing a racial identity that leveraged racial markers that externally ascribed (centripetally forced) students to the Latine identity. As structural narratives associate Spanish with Latine

identities, Rosa found that speaking Spanish contributed to students' racialization.

In contrast, Latine students who did not speak Spanish, or lacked native-like proficiency, felt that they were not Latine enough (Martinez and Nuñez, 2023; Sanchez et al., 2012). In these cases, the absence of Spanish fluency did not diminish racialization but reinforced structural narratives of latinidad by juxtaposing perceived deficiency to imposed structural narratives, serving as a consistent reminder of what "being Latine" means. This type of interpellation enables social structures to racialize students who feel "not Latine enough" by forcing them into an inflexible category and labeling them as deficient for not adhering to what structural narratives proclaim they should be. A Latine student's limited Spanish proficiency, therefore, becomes deeply intertwined with a deficit narrative that reinforces their externally and internally ascribed racialization. In this example, the school acts as an ISA that interpellates Latine students by positioning them as linguistically deficient. Interpellation, the process in which subjects are hailed into their subjective position by dominant ideologies, serves as a "calling out" of students for failing to uphold their ascribed structural identity; interpellation racializes them through a deficit frame and potentially positions them to apperceive this deficiency.

Disrupting Language Racialization. Despite structural attempts to racialize a person through language, this aspect of racialization is not fixed. Alim (2016) expounds on a person's ability to operationalize language as a transracial mechanism. He applies transracialization as the ability to apply raciolinguistic performances to make and remake race (p. 48) through accents, body language, code-switching, and verbal expressions, which serve as resistant reactions to translate oneself beyond racial boundaries (p. 36). Alim's (2016) scholarly contributions significantly inspire how I apply transgressive-racialization.

For Alim, the prefix "trans" is paramount because the term invites us to understand transgressive-racialization as a means to *transgress* structural impositions and *transcend* beyond racial boundaries (Alim's italics). Alim's work informs how becoming a transgressive-racial subject enables us to disrupt race as a counterinterpellative and counterapperceptive act. A person's linguistic transracialization subverts and destabilizes the idea of race (p. 47). His scholarship informs how transgressive-racialization is more than coding and decoding race across racial formations but also a means to resist and withdraw from such codifications. For Alim, transracialization is about "doing race and undoing race in an effort to develop a subversive transracial politics" (p. 48). Given the powerful effects of structural racialization, Alim recognizes the limits of transracialization, thereby providing a platform for transgressive-racialization to emerge as an effective praxis of refusal. Nonetheless, understanding language's ability for transgressive-racialization equips groups to collectively (re)shape racial definitions that counter structural influences on racial boundaries. Alim's model underscores how speaking serves as a counterapperceptive and counterinterpellative tool that advances the goals of transgressive-racialization.

Racialization and transgressive-racialization through gender

Butler (1990) describes gender as a "corporeal style" (p. 139) that is determined by society's gendered script. According to Butler, gender

is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" (p. 25). Gender is not something one is but something one does. A person does not exist as their gender; rather, they perform their gender. Butler's (1990, 1997) theory of gender performativity addresses how gender performance occurs when meaningful effects shape gender identities. They explain how gender is an act, or a performance, and that social expectations and pressures construct a person's gendered identity. Over time, performativity becomes unconscious, whereas performance is a daily (and sometimes conscious) act. Similar to how someone is racialized through social structures, so can structures gender them. Racialized gender, therefore, provides a critical analysis of gender and race's converging effects through socialization practices that influence one's ethnoracial identity (Few, 2007). I define *racialized gender* as the mutual constitution of gender and race, whereby gendered expectations are fundamentally shaped by an individual's racialization.

Different from Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional framework, which would view race and gender as intersecting institutional failures, one's racialized gender engages with identity axes as a mutually constitutive identity rather than two distinct identities that intersect. Identities have an intra-active relationship because identity axes, like race and gender, do not merely cross paths but act upon each other and merge to create a unique structural identity. For example, someone is not simply male and Latine, they are a Latine male. This perspective identifies the compounding effects of being a Latine male which differs from the amplified impact of being a Latine trans male. Maleness is structurally different for Latinos than for Latine trans males. Analyzing these identities through their intra-active relationship (because they actively build upon each other) best reflects how structures racialize subjects through gender. This process is especially visible in how femininity and masculinity are constructed and made legible in schools, where students' gendered and racialized performances become technologies for state regulation.

Disrupting Gendered Racialization. In educational contexts, students' racialized and gendered performances alternatively serve as central practices within the transgressive-racialization movement. Youdell's (2006) observations of regulating students' bodily presentations illuminate how students are made intelligible through their racial and gendered performances. Their analysis underscores how performance alternatively functions as an act of contestation and reconstitution. Youdell found that students' discursive performances, such as the clothes they wear, their bodily gestures, and behavior, challenged structural narratives of racialized femininities and masculinities. More specifically, they found how students' performances enabled them to "reconstitute themselves *again differently*" (p. 16, Youdell's italics). This reconstitution, while occurring within racialization's constraints, implicates the epistemic and embodied disruption that transgressive-racialization names: a refusal to be fixed within racializing logics.

Extending this analysis, Cervantes-Soon (2016) also found how young Latinas subverted dominant racialized and gendered scripts that schools imposed upon them by reconstituting themselves differently. These young women rejected ascriptions of being "unfeminine" and re-narrated themselves into *mujeres truchas*, women who 'will not take it anymore' (p. 1216). In alignment with the transgressive-racialization movement, the *mujeres truchas* engaged in a racialized, gendered, and linguistic politics of refusal by

reconstituting their subjectivities. They were no longer Latina but the illegible *mujer trucha*. In this context, they rejected “Latina” due to how the state associates this structural identity with hypersexualization and intellectual deficiency. [Bey \(2022\)](#), however, would describe this rejection of gendered structural narratives as an attempt “to vitiate gender *through* itself, un-doing itself by way of an unyielding, radically opening ungendering” (p. 69, *Bey’s italics*). Thus, a reframing of *Cervantes-Soon’s* findings (and *Youdell’s*) would identify these young women as ungendering themselves through the dissolution of ontological fixation. When *Women of Color* reject structural impositions, they are simultaneously dismantling gendered and racialized definitions by creating new ways of being.

Following [Alim \(2016\)](#), there is a potential to characterize their racialized gender fluidity as a transgressive-racial act because they re-named themselves differently. The state cannot govern a *mujer trucha*. Students in both studies demonstrated their awareness for the fluid and adaptive nature of their racialized gender when enacting various gendered traits that crossed and escaped cultural and racial boundaries. They adapted their gender expression based on their environments, further alluding to the potential of transgressive-racialization as a counterinterpellative and counterappercptive act. *Youdell’s* and *Cervantes-Soon’s* study in schools further provide an example of counterappercption in action through the deliberate restructuring of self-consciousness to challenge and redefine the centrifugal forces that shape perception and identity [see also [Sandoval \(2013\)](#)]. To understand this process, it is important to rearticulate that appercption refers to how individuals make meaning of their world through internalized, unconscious social and cultural schemas. Appercption is saturated with dominant ideologies that encode race, gender, and class into our cognitive landscapes. Therefore, counterappercption, much like counterinterpellation, involves actively negotiating and contesting how we accept implicit assumptions, biases, and hierarchies embedded within our appercived realities.

The students in *Youdell’s* and *Cervantes-Soon’s* studies exemplified counterappercption by expressing femininity differently across various social spaces, revealing their rejection of how social structures want them to enact and perceive gender as fixed. Their counterappercptive actions of consciously adapting their gender expression reflect a reconfiguration of their gendered self-perception. Their actions required a conscious acknowledgement that structural definitions are not psychologically and cognitively sedimented. Students in the studies leveraged this fluidity to shape their identities to exist differently in different spaces. By doing so, they not only challenged the structural and interpellative effects of their racialized gender identity, but they demonstrated a rejection of their appercived realities surrounding racialized femininity. These studies emulate how people experience, and sometimes seek, ethnoracial boundary unmaking as a means to refuse their racialization.

Transgressive-racial pedagogies

As schools are on one of the most powerful ISAs that racialize students through interpellation and appercption, they are also ripe sites for educators and students to deploy counterinterpellative and counterappercptive strategies through transgressive-racial pedagogies. A transgressive-racial pedagogy is an educational

approach that enables students to re-configure and refuse racializing interpellative and appercptive school norms. This pedagogical strategy aims to equip students with the ability to disrupt institutional and epistemological structures that impose race as fixed. Teachers should facilitate learning activities so that the classroom becomes a fugitive space, where students can practice engaging in identities that exist outside of state legibility. Doing so supports students’ becoming of possible selves and shifts away from affirming fixed subjectivities. Transgressive-racial pedagogies encourage refusal of racialized scripts and open space for the reimagined subject.

[Paris \(2012\)](#) provides an example of a transgressive-racial pedagogy through his use of counterscriptural economy—youth-authored identity texts that “resisted and offered [students] possible revisions for the dominant economy school and state sanctioned reading and writing” (p. 2). Learning activities that enable students to re-narrate themselves, like Paris’ counterscriptural economy, serve as refusals of being read through structural racial optics and proffers alternative ways of becoming. Paris demonstrates how educators can design learning to author non-normative modes of identity that disrupt state-sanctioned scripts. In this case, students’ re-narration challenges interpellation by rejecting the call to “hail” state-sanctioned scripts. In doing so, students can further engage in counterappercption by resisting to see themselves through the dominant gaze and seeing themselves as otherwise.

Similarly, [Sarkar \(2009\)](#) provides a case study for hip hop as a pedagogy of language mixing that defied racial-linguistic associations by strategically blending languages typically isolated from each other. In working with Black and Latine youth in Montreal, Quebec, Sarkar observed how French, English, Creole, and Hip Hop slang rendered students linguistically illegible under “proper” French and English standards. Through language mixing, students constructed new subjectivities that prioritized “becoming” rather than upholding a fixed, state-sanctioned racial and linguistic identity. Their work showcases how educators can deploy hip hop pedagogy as a fugitive practice in which students perform themselves in ways that make them illegible to the state. Sarkar’s findings identify how language mixing enabled students to contribute actively to the creation of linguistic and cultural diversity that did not align with the local, historical structure (p. 149). As a counterinterpellative act, students refused to abide by institutional linguistic norms by creating their own cultural-linguistic practices. Doing so additionally provided a space for students to create new linguistic identities only legible through their peer networks, aligning with the transgressive-racialization movement.

Conclusion

As schools play an essential role in the racialization process, educators must intervene by engaging with transgressive-racial pedagogies that encourage students to think critically about how race is an invented social construct with a fluid nature for them to challenge. Race is more than adaptable, it is elastic. The US has historically exploited racialization to designate race as an essentializing function in our structural existence by conferring race with elastic properties. If race’s elasticity has fortified social structures, transgressive-racial actors can reappropriate its malleability to unmake racial boundaries by challenging the limitations that social structures enforce and regulate.

The transgressive-racial subject has no set racial boundaries because transgressive-racialization bounds no one. Transgressive-racialization does not seek inclusion in the state's racial categories but aims to unsettle them. The state will employ every structural power possible to counter efforts that make race obsolete, but refusing racial governance begins in the everyday interactions we have with each other.

I apply transgressive-racialization as the deliberate and conscious act of rejecting and redefining imposed extensions and ascriptions of racial meanings by exercising race's elastic nature. This project is indebted to Black and other Trans Scholars of Color whose work push us to reject how the state produces technologies of governance and legibility and whose insights demonstrate that survival results in politics of refusal. In articulating transgressive-racialization as a fugitive praxis, this refusal does not seek new subjectivities. The ultimate goal of transgressive-racialization is to render race structurally obsolete by unveiling its inherent irrationality through counterinterpellative and counterappercptive acts. The transgressive-racial subject recognizes that we are not fixed beings solely defined by structural labels. Thus, to truly propel society toward a world where race holds no structural significance, we must confront and engage with race as an unfixed property, thereby debilitating its structural centrifugal and centripetal effects. Embracing transgressive-racialization fosters the possibility of rearticulating and reconstituting race as defunct. As a movement to refuse racial governance, transgressive-racialization serves as a vital strategy for fugitive subjects to oppose and delegitimize racialization.

Author contributions

JP: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Navigating aspirations: the role of self-concept in shaping academic performance among diverse adolescents

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This manuscript investigates the relationship between adolescents' aspirations and academic performance, focusing on self-concept dimensions such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-regulation. Using empirical data and a longitudinal design, the study examines how these elements of self-concept mediate the link between aspirations and academic success, with particular attention to adolescents from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in South Africa. Although the research is situated in a historically racialized educational system, the findings reveal that socio-economic disparities, rather than race alone, are key drivers of educational outcomes. By applying the lens of critical racial consciousness, this study highlights how systemic inequalities in schooling contexts interact with psychological factors to influence learner development. Findings showed that self-regulation, academic self-efficacy, and self-esteem were positively linked to performance. In addition, systemic inequalities such as resource deprivation, underfunding and curriculum marginalisation restricted students' possibilities. The manuscript offers actionable insights for educators and policymakers by advocating for interventions that support self-concept development in under-resourced environments. It argues that fostering self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-esteem is essential for enabling students to bridge the aspiration-attainment gap. Through the lens of critical racial consciousness, the manuscript contributes to the discourse on educational psychology and adolescent development by emphasizing the need for targeted interventions that consider the structural and social determinants shaping youth aspirations and achievement.

KEYWORDS

adolescents, aspirations, critical racial consciousness, longitudinal study, self-concept, socio-economic inequality, South Africa

1 Introduction

Adolescence is a formative period during which individuals develop goals and aspirations that shape their identity and future trajectories (Baqoyeva, 2025; Crockett and Crouter, 2014). Adolescent aspirations, conceptualized here as possible selves, are influenced by education. Adolescents' thinking is shaped in a school environment where most of their development takes place. Education is regarded as one of the most crucial factors in reducing poverty and inequality, enhancing economic growth, reducing unemployment and improving well-being (Mlachila and Moeletsi, 2019; World Bank, 2018). However, a gap exists between the envisioned education and the actual education received (Spaull, 2013; Van Jaarsveld and Van Der Walt, 2018), also known as the aspiration-attainment gap (Oyserman, 2015b).

The aspiration-attainment gap refers to the difference between what youth hope to achieve or aspire and what they actually attain over time. In other words, although many young people envision high academic and career achievement, systemic barriers and contextual factors often

prevent them from fulfilling these aspirations. This results in underachievement and reinforces existing inequalities, especially in under-resourced contexts. As indicated, this gap is evident at several levels, including policy, school governance, curriculum delivery, and student's academic outcomes.

At the policy level, the post-apartheid South African government devotes nearly 20% of the national budget to address historical educational inequalities (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2023). However, the dropout rate of high school students is substantial, at almost 50% (Spaull, 2015; Van der Berg et al., 2019; Van Wyk, 2015). Additionally, there are large racial inequalities in matric attainment (Spaull, 2015), especially in historically Black and Colored schools (Hartnack, 2017; Naidu, 2022).

In terms of school governance, South African schools are sometimes described as being in *crisis* (BusinessTech, 2022; Fleisch, 2008; Jansen, 2017; Modisaotile, 2012; Roodt, 2018) and *dysfunctional* (Bloch, 2009; Letseka, 2014; Moloi, 2019; Pretorius, 2014; Taylor, 2006). According to the National Education Infrastructure Management System [NEIMS], (2021), schools are under-resourced, have faulty construction and often lack adequate electricity, water, sanitation and fencing.

For various reasons, curriculum delivery is rarely achieved in South African schools (Chaudhary, 2015; Mamabolo, 2021; Naaman, 2017). There is a shortage of teachers in classrooms leading to a high pupil-teacher ratio (Case and Yogo, 1999; Kimani, 2022). In rural community schools, many teachers are unqualified, often possessing only a matric while enrolled in, but not yet having completed, a tertiary qualification (Savides, 2017).

In terms of students' achievement, few students who complete matric qualify to enter university, and those who do often leave before completing their programs or take longer to finish their degrees (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013; Letseka and Maile, 2008; Makoni, 2017; Thomas and Maree, 2022). Persistent differences in academic achievement are rooted in the enduring legacy of educational disparities under apartheid, which continue to disadvantage students, especially Black students (Fiske and Ladd, 2004; Gore, 2021). These differences are evident between students from predominantly segregated schools, which are dominated by the majority ethnic group, Black people, and are located in poor township communities. This educational inequality is further reflected in the distribution of resources across schools.

2 The South African schooling system

South African public schools are funded through a quintile system, which classifies schools based on the poverty level of the surrounding community and the quality of the school's infrastructure (Mestry, 2018). The system ranks schools into five quintiles, with Quintiles 1 to 3 representing schools in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas and Quintiles 4 and 5 representing schools in better resourced communities (Van Dyk and White, 2019). Schools in Quintiles 1–3 receive the highest funding per student and are designated as no-fee schools, while those in Quintiles 4–5 receive less government funding and are considered fee-paying schools (Department of Basic Education, 2022; Mestry, 2018).

This classification system reflects broader socio-economic inequalities and has important implications for students' educational

experiences. Students in lower-quintile schools often face overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers, limited access to resources such as libraries and laboratories, and poor infrastructure. These inequalities significantly affect their academic engagement, self-concept, and future aspirations. In contrast, students in higher quintile schools, typically located in suburban areas, are more likely to benefit from well-maintained facilities, access to technology, and additional private funding, which can foster a more supportive learning environment and better academic outcomes.

3 Problem statement

While prior research has established a connection between aspirations and academic achievement, less is known about the role of self-concept in mediating this relationship. Specifically, the influence of psychological factors such as self-regulation, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, within the context of historical social and structural inequality and educational disparity, as experienced in South Africa, remains underexplored.

To support the study, the following objectives were outlined:

1. To examine the relationship between adolescent aspirations and academic performance over time.
2. To investigate the influence and potential mediating and moderating roles of self-concept factors (self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-regulation) in this relationship.
3. To contextualize possible identities within frameworks of critical racial consciousness and socio-economic inequality.

4 Significance of the study

This study enhances our understanding of how aspirations function within unequal schooling environments, particularly for South African adolescents. By focusing on self-concept and its potential mediating role, the research identifies psychological processes that may support or hinder academic success. The findings highlight the significant impact of socio-economic disparities on educational outcomes. This is important not only in the context of social change in South Africa, but also globally. The results can inform parents, teachers, school administrators, and career counselors about adolescents' aspirations, assisting students in planning for their futures. As such, the study provides a foundation for policy recommendations that prioritize equity-oriented and culturally responsive interventions.

5 Self-concept

Students' self-concept influences their academic achievement and performance (García-Martínez et al., 2022; Green et al., 2006; Marsh, 1990; Marsh and Hau, 2003; Tus, 2020). Self-concept is an overarching answer to the question, "Who am I?" (Baumeister, 1999; Mann et al., 2004; Markus and Wurf, 1987). Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between self-concept and academic performance (Conlon et al., 2006; Green et al., 2012; Huitt, 2004; Jansen et al., 2014; Marsh and Martin, 2011). In the present study, the researcher focused on the

following psychological factors including self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-regulation, to determine their influence on the relationship between adolescents' aspirations and academic performance (Lane et al., 2004).

Self-regulation refers to the degree to which students regulate their learning meta-cognitively, motivationally, and cognitively (Pintrich, 2000; Shen and Liu, 2011; Zimmerman, 1986, 1989, 2002, 2013; Zusho et al., 2003). Self-regulated students demonstrate high effort and persistence (Zimmerman, 1990). They actively seek information, structure their environments to support learning (Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons, 1986), and engage in practice opportunities (Zimmerman, 1990). They persist with tasks despite challenges (Schraw et al., 2006) and report greater intrinsic motivation (Alpaslan, 2016; Cheung, 2015; Schunk, 1989; Zimmerman, 2002; Zusho et al., 2003). Thus, self-regulation processes are key to academic success (Paris and Paris, 2001; Schunk and Ertner, 2000).

As previously discussed, self-regulation processes include planning, monitoring, and evaluating performance and progress, and thus influenced by self-efficacy beliefs (Shen, 2016). Studies on the role of self-regulation in academic achievement have found that academic self-efficacy beliefs directly affect cognitive and meta-cognitive learning strategies, effort regulation, and time management (Sadi and Uyar, 2013; Sungur, 2007).

Students with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to set goals, persevere in the face of challenges, and believe in their ability to succeed (Zimmerman et al., 1992). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to complete specific tasks within a particular domain, in this case, academic tasks. Research consistently shows that higher levels of academic self-efficacy are associated with improved academic performance, increased motivation and the use of effective learning strategies.

Similarly, self-esteem, a person's overall evaluation of self-worth, has been linked to important academic behaviors and emotional regulation in learning contexts. It influences mood, decision-making and how individuals respond to success and failure (Gerrig and Zimbardo, 2012; Kohn, 1994; Sedikides and Gress, 2003; Swann et al., 2007). Students with high self-esteem tend to exhibit greater confidence, openness to learning, and resilience, all of which support academic success. For example, they are more likely to accept themselves, acknowledge their imperfections, and view challenges as opportunities for growth (Farčić et al., 2020).

In summary, self-regulation, self-efficacy and self-esteem are widely recognized as key components of academic achievement. Self-regulation enables sustained effort toward learning goals, self-efficacy reflects confidence in one's ability to succeed, and self-esteem shapes how students internalize motivation and interpret academic outcomes. However, academic success is not determined solely by an individual's current self-concept or past performance. Crucially, it is also influenced by students' visions of who they might become, their possible selves, and their perceived attainability of these futures.

6 Theoretical frameworks

Drawing on Markus and Nurius' (1986) theory of possible selves and Oyserman's (2007) identity-based motivation theory, this study recognizes that students' motivation and engagement are closely linked to their aspirations and expectations for the future. Markus

and Nurius (1986) shifted the focus from research on ideal selves to research on possible selves, conceptualizing *possible selves* as a bridge between cognition and motivation (Markus and Nurius, 1986, p. 954). When imagining and reflecting on the future, three essential forms of possible selves are typically constructed: the selves we hope to become, termed the hoped-for possible selves, the selves we fully expect to become, referred to as the expected possible selves, and the selves we are afraid of becoming, also known as the feared possible selves (Chalk et al., 2005; Cross and Markus, 1991; Markus and Nurius, 1986; Markus and Ruvolo, 1989; Oyserman and Fryberg, 2006). Possible selves guide and regulate behavior by providing a roadmap that connects the present to the future (Bak, 2015; Hoyle and Sherrill, 2006; Oyserman et al., 2004). They are informed not only by current evaluations of an individual's strengths, weaknesses, talents, and characteristics, but also by evaluations of "what is possible for people like me." This perspective led to the extension of the concept of possible selves to possible identities (Oyserman and James, 2011). Framing possible selves as possible identities allows for consideration of the future self in terms of social categories such as gender, culture, and socio-economic context, offering a multi-layered understanding of adolescent development (Oyserman and James, 2011). In unequal societies like South Africa, the interplay between self-concept and aspirations is deeply influenced by contextual factors, including the legacy of apartheid, persistent economic inequality and disparities within the school system.

As part of the extension of the theory of possible selves, identity-based motivation theory proposes that people use information from their immediate context to decide how to act in a given moment (Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2015a, 2015b). The theory seeks to explain the processes through which identity influences behavior. In unequal societies like South Africa, the interplay between self-concept and aspiration is strongly shaped by context, including the legacies of apartheid, persistent economic inequality, and school-based disparities. This emphasizes that the capacity to imagine and pursue positive possible selves is shaped by contextual factors.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an interdisciplinary framework that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s from legal scholarship in the United States. It examines how race and racism are embedded in laws, policies, and institutions, perpetuating systemic inequality (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). The theory challenges dominant narratives of neutrality and meritocracy, arguing that racism is not merely individual prejudice but a structural feature of society (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT provides a powerful framework for analyzing how apartheid's racial hierarchies persist in South Africa's education system, shaping disparities in resources, academic outcomes, and student aspirations (Soudien, 2012; Fataar, 2017). While CRT originated in U. S. legal scholarship (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), its views resonate deeply in post-apartheid South Africa, where race and class intersect to reproduce inequality (Ndimande, 2016). Despite democratic reforms, apartheid-era spatial planning, township versus suburbs, and school funding disparities (Quintile 1–3 versus Quintile 5), continue to perpetuate racialized inequality (Spaull, 2013). For example, township schools, which predominantly cater for Black students face overcrowding, a legacy of Bantu education (Ndimande, 2013). Post-apartheid education policies reflect partial equity gains but have not to dismantled structural barriers (Motala and Sayed, 2009).

7 The present study

This study frames self-concept not only as an internal psychological trait but also as a social and political construct, influenced by institutional context, racialized experiences and access to opportunity. By integrating critical race theory and possible selves theory, the study explores how students navigate the intersection of their current and future aspirations within unequal educational landscapes.

8 Methodology

The present study examined the influence of psychological factors such as self-regulation, self-efficacy and self-esteem on academic performance. To support the study, the following objectives were outlined:

1. To examine the relationship between adolescent aspirations and academic performance over time.
2. To investigate the influence and potential mediating or moderating roles of self-concept factors (self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-regulation) in this relationship.
3. To contextualize possible identities within frameworks of critical racial consciousness and socio-economic inequality.

Hypotheses:

$H_{1a}^{(Null)}$ – Adolescent aspirations have no influence on academic performance.

$H_{1b}^{(Alt)}$ – Adolescent aspirations influence academic performance.

RQ1: What is the relationship between adolescent aspirations and academic performance?

$H_{2a}^{(Null)}$ – Self-concept factors have no impact on the relationship between aspirations and academic performance.

$H_{2b}^{(Alt)}$ – Self-concept factors will significantly influence the relationship between adolescent aspirations and academic performance over time; some factors will either mediate or moderate this relationship between adolescent aspirations and academic performance.

RQ2: To what extent do self-concept factors (self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-regulation) influence the relationship between aspirations and academic performance?

$H_{3a}^{(Null)}$ – There is no significant change or difference in the motivational role of possible identities between students over time.

$H_{3b}^{(Alt)}$ – The motivational role of possible identities will change over time and will differ between students from Quintile 2 and Quintile 5 schools.

RQ3: How does the motivational role of possible identities change over time, and to what extent do these changes differ between various socio-economic schooling contexts?

The study employed a quantitative, longitudinal panel design to examine the changes in the relationships among the following psychological factors: self-regulation, academic self-efficacy, self-esteem, aspired identities, and academic performance. Data were collected four times over an 18-month period from students attending three mixed-gender public high schools in Johannesburg, South Africa. The same constructs were assessed at each data collection point, except for objective academic performance, which was measured once using end-of-year exam results.

8.1 Sampling method and participant recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Three schools were selected to ensure diversity in socio-economic status and racial composition by including institutions from different categories of the South African school quintile system. One school was selected from Quintile 2 (representing under-resourced, no-fee township schools), one from Quintile 4 (a mid-range school), and one from Quintile 5 (a fee-paying, suburban school).

Within each school, all Grade 9 and Grade 11 students were invited to participate in the study during their Life Orientation periods, ensuring inclusion across gender, race, and academic levels. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all students and their guardians before data collection began.

8.2 Representativeness and socio-economic diversity

The inclusion of schools from three distinct quintiles was intentional and aimed to capture a socio-economically diverse sample. Quintile 2 schools are typically located in economically disadvantaged township areas and serve predominantly Black students. In contrast, Quintile 5 schools are located in suburban areas, have historically served White students, and have greater access to resources. Quintile 4 schools fall in between, often serving racially and economically mixed communities.

This approach ensured that the study included students from varied socio-economic backgrounds and school environments, allowing for a comparative analysis of how different schooling contexts impact students' aspirations and self-concept development. The sample thus reflects a cross-section of public school students within Johannesburg's urban education landscape, with differing levels of access to educational resources and support structures. Schools are also commonly classified based on the surrounding community as either *township* or *suburban* schools (Pretorius and Klapwijk, 2016). Although formal segregation has ended, South African township schools remain largely segregated because the majority of students are Black people. In contrast, suburban schools are desegregated and are attended by students from both the majority and minority groups with similar economic backgrounds.

8.3 Sample size

The overall sample size at Time 1 was 682 participants. Of these, 403 students participated at Time 2, 557 students participated at Time

3, and 261 students participated at Time 4. The number of participants from the three schools was comparable. Additionally, the sample size of Grade 9 participants was larger ($n = 364$) than that of Grade 11 participants ($n = 318$). See Table 1 for the number of participants per time for each school and grade.

As previously mentioned, all three schools were mixed gender. Table 2 presents the gender distribution of the participants.

School 1 and School 2 were located in townships populated by Black South Africans, while School 3 was a historically White suburban school. Analysis of the retention rate indicated a decline in the number of participants between Time 1 and Time 2, which can be attributed to data collection at Time 2 occurring during mid-exam preparation. A comparison of the demographics of the participants, it can be noted that gender was approximately equally distributed.

8.4 Procedure

Ethical clearance and permission to conduct the study were obtained from the university, the provincial education department and the headmasters of the respective schools. Data were collected at the beginning of the academic year in April 2018 (Time 1), mid-year in July 2018 (Time 2), at the end of the academic year in October 2018 (Time 3), and at the beginning of the following year in March 2019 (Time 4). Participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were distributed during their Life Orientation class.

8.5 Measurements

8.5.1 Possible selves

Expected and feared possible identities were assessed using the instructions as outlined in the Possible Selves Questionnaire (Oyserman et al., 2004). Participants were asked to imagine what they expected to be and what they would not like to be in the future. Two independent raters evaluated the expected and feared possible identities according to the Oyserman et al. (2004) classification.

This classification distinguishes expected and feared possible identities related to academic achievement (school-oriented), interpersonal relationships, personality traits, physical/health issues, material/lifestyle, non-normative responses, and an additional category or responses that did not fit anywhere, were labeled not-codable. Interrater reliability for coding possible selves showed moderate to substantial agreement ($k = 0.60-0.79$), consistent with Landis and Koch's (1977) interpretation guidelines. All ambiguous classifications were discussed by the raters until agreement was reached.

8.5.2 Academic possible identities

This construct was assessed using the multi-dimensional 51-item Persistent Academic Possible Selves Scale (PAPSS) for Adolescents (Lee, 2013; Lee et al., 2016). The scale consists of three goal dimensions and five domain-specific dimensions. The goal dimensions include improving class marks, being a better student and paying more attention in class. The domain-specific dimensions are: social group identity, peer group identity, self-concept, motivational self-regulated learning and performance. The 51-item PAPSS for Adolescents demonstrated excellent Cronbach's alphas (Time 1: $\alpha = 0.94$; Time 2: $\alpha = 0.96$; Time 3: $\alpha = 0.96$; Time 4: $\alpha = 0.95$).

The adapted self-regulation scale, consisted of nine items from the self-regulation dimension of the Motivational Strategy for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ; Pintrich and De Groot, 1990) and three items adapted from the motivational self-regulated learning subscale of the PAPSS for Adolescents (Lee, 2013; Lee et al., 2016). The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistencies (Time 1: $\alpha = 0.72$; Time 2: $\alpha = 0.72$; Time 3: $\alpha = 0.75$; Time 4: $\alpha = 0.76$).

Self-efficacy was assessed using nine items adapted from the self-efficacy dimension of the MSLQ (Pintrich and De Groot, 1990).

TABLE 1 Number of participants per time for each school and each grade.

Time points	Grade	School 1	School 2	School 3	Total
		Quintile 2	Quintile 4	Quintile 5	
Time 1	Grade 9	85	148	131	364
April 2018	Grade 11	110	108	100	318
	Total	195	256	231	682
Time 2	Grade 9	6	140	91	237
July 2018	Grade 11	25	89	52	166
	Total	31	229	143	403
Time 3	Grade 9	80	139	107	326
October 2018	Grade 11	74	77	80	231
	Total	154	216	187	557
Time 4	Grade 9	41	72	50	163
March 2019	Grade 11	34	15	49	98
	Total	75	87	99	261

TABLE 2 Number of participants according to gender per time point.

Gender	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4
Male	326	202	257	119
Female	356	201	300	142

The scale showed high reliability coefficients for all four time points (Time 1: $\alpha = 0.86$; Time 2: $\alpha = 0.88$; Time 3: $\alpha = 0.88$; Time 4: $\alpha = 0.88$).

The self-esteem construct was assessed using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989/2015). The scale, consisting of the remaining nine items, demonstrated acceptable reliability coefficients (Time 1: $\alpha = 0.69$; Time 2: $\alpha = 0.74$; Time 3: $\alpha = 0.73$; Time 4: $\alpha = 0.74$).

For subjective academic achievement, participants were asked to answer the following questions: (1) “What *past* marks did you score for most of your subjects *last year*?” (2) “What marks do you *expect* to score for most of your subjects *this year*?” and (3) “What marks do you *hope* to score for most of your subjects *this year*?”

Objective academic achievement data were obtained from school management in the form of end-of-year examination results.

8.6 Data analysis plan

To examine the relationship between adolescents’ aspirations, self-concept (self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-regulation) and academic performance, a series of quantitative analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 28 (IBM SPSS 28).

Preliminary analyses involved screening the data for missing values, normality and reliability. Internal consistency of the scales was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha (Cronbach, 1951). Cronbach’s alpha is a widely used measure of internal consistency reliability, with values above 0.70 generally considered acceptable, values above 0.80 regarded as good, and values above 0.90 indicating excellent reliability (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). In this study, acceptable reliability values were observed across all time points, confirming the consistency of the scales.

8.7 Missing data handling

Participants with excessive missing data, defined as more than 30% of items missing on a scale, were excluded listwise. For the remaining data, Little’s MCAR test indicated that data were missing completely at random, justifying the use of listwise deletion in the main analyses.

8.8 Hypothesis testing

To address Objective 1, Pearson product–moment correlations were computed to examine the relationship between adolescent aspirations and academic performance over time. A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess whether adolescents mentioned possible identities from the academic achievement domain. This method was selected to evaluate within-subject differences across four time points and to test whether observed changes were statistically significant over the 18-month period. Mauchly’s test was conducted to assess sphericity, where violations were observed, Greenhouse–Geisser corrections were applied.

To address Objective 2, a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed at each time point. These analyses tested whether self-concept factors (self-efficacy, self-esteem and

self-regulation) significantly predicted academic performance and whether these factors mediated or moderated the relationship between adolescent aspirations and academic performance.

Separate models were tested for subjective and objective academic performance as dependent variables. The assumptions of linear regression, including linearity, normality, homoscedasticity and absence of multicollinearity, were tested using residual plots, variance inflation factors (VIF) and normal probability plots.

Regression models were used instead of structural equation modeling (SEM) due to sample size limitations and the exploratory nature of the analysis. While a generalized linear model (GLM) could have been appropriate for testing multiple dependent variables simultaneously, the use of separate regression models allowed for more focused analysis.

Effect sizes, standardized coefficients (β), R^2 values, and p -values were reported for all regression analyses. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, and confidence intervals were used to estimate the precision of the results.

For Objective 3, the study contextualized possible identities within frameworks of critical racial consciousness and socio-economic inequality. Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted at each time point to assess the motivational role of possible identities. Assumptions of linearity, independence of errors (Durbin-Watson test), homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity ($VIF < 5$) were verified before analysis.

9 Results

This longitudinal panel study examined the relationship between adolescents’ aspirations and academic performance, focusing on self-concept dimensions such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-regulation, in a diverse South African context.

The findings from the correlation analyses suggest that adolescents’ aspirations, measured as persistent academic possible selves, are consistently and positively linked to self-concept factors such as self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-regulation over time (see Table 3). This supports the theoretical premise that self-concept plays a central role in sustaining motivation and shaping academic trajectories (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, 2015a,b). The weaker and sometimes negative associations between school climate and academic performance, especially at later time points, may reflect the influence of structural and contextual inequalities highlighted in Critical Race Theory, where the broader school environment may not always align with or support students’ academic identities. Importantly, the strengthening relationship between subjective and objective performance over time highlights how improving self-concept can lead to better academic results, particularly in under-resourced contexts.

The findings suggest a strong relationship between adolescent aspirations and academic performance, as evidenced by the high frequency of academic achievement-related possible identities. Adolescents most frequently identified future selves within the academic achievement domain, even when referencing negative or feared identities. Comparisons of the different domains of positive and negative possible identities revealed that the academic achievement domain was significantly different from all other domains.

9.1 Assumptions for regression analysis

All regressions were conducted after checking standard assumptions. In terms of normality, residuals were normally distributed, confirmed through visual inspection of Q–Q plots and Shapiro–Wilk tests ($p < 0.05$). Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were within acceptable limits (<2.0), indicating no multicollinearity. Scatterplots of standardized residuals indicated linearity and homoscedasticity. See Table 4 for full regression results and beta coefficients.

9.2 Repeated measures ANOVA results

Across all four time points, repeated measures ANOVA indicated that the academic achievement domain was consistently and significantly different from all other domains for both positive and negative possible identities.

At Time 1, positive academic identities ($M = 0.78, SD = 0.2$) and negative possible identities ($M = 0.38, SD = 0.31$) differed significantly from other domains, $F(3.20, 145.56) = 948.94, p < 0.001$, with sphericity violations addressed using the Greenhouse–Geisser correction ($\epsilon = 0.537$).

At Time 2, academic achievement remained significantly higher (positive: $M = 0.79, SD = 0.27$; negative: $M = 0.34, SD = 0.35$) than other domains $F(5.06, 214.92) = 413.32, p < 0.001$. *Post hoc*

Bonferroni comparisons confirmed that academic achievement scores were significantly greater ($p < 0.001$) than all other domain scores.

At Time 3, both positive ($M = 0.75, SD = 0.31$), and negative ($M = 0.35, SD = 0.36$) academic identities again exceeded other domains, $F(1, 507) = 2249.24, p < 0.001$.

At Time 4, the same pattern persisted (positive: $M = 0.80, SD = 0.27$; negative: $M = 0.39, SD = 0.35$) confirming the stability of academic achievement’s prominence across the study period.

Overall, these results demonstrate that participants consistently rated academic achievement as their most salient possible identity, both positively and negatively, over time.

Furthermore, the greater number of positive compared to negative possible selves, particularly in the academic domain, suggests that academic aspirations are central to how adolescents envision their futures. This aligns with research by Oyserman et al. (2006), which indicates that adolescents are more readily able to articulate hoped-for academic selves than feared ones. These results imply that academic aspirations are not only salient in adolescent identity development but may also serve as motivational drivers of academic performance.

To determine the role of self-concept in mediating the relationship between adolescents’ aspirations and academic achievement. The findings consistently showed a positive association between the psychological factors, namely self-regulation, academic self-efficacy, self-esteem, and academic performance. These results align with previous studies, that have

TABLE 3 Correlations of the different variables for Time 1, Time 2, Time 3, and Time 4.

Variables	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4
Persistent Academic Possible Selves ↔ Motivation	0.45**	0.46**	0.44**	0.45**
Persistent Academic Possible Selves ↔ Self-efficacy	0.52**	0.51**	0.50**	0.49**
Persistent Academic Possible Selves ↔ Academic Goals	0.48**	0.49**	0.47**	0.46**
Persistent Academic Possible Selves ↔ Subjective Norms	0.43**	0.42**	0.41**	0.40**
Persistent Academic Possible Selves ↔ Peer Identity	0.41**	0.40**	0.39**	0.38**
Self-regulation ↔ Self-efficacy	0.50**	0.51**	0.49**	0.48**
Self-regulation ↔ Academic Goals	0.47**	0.46**	0.45**	0.44**
School Climate ↔ Subjective Academic Performance (Hoped-for)	ns	ns	ns	ns
School Identification ↔ Subjective Academic Performance (Expected)	0.28*	0.27*	0.29*	0.28*
Objective Academic Performance ↔ Self-efficacy			0.21*	
Objective Academic Performance ↔ Self-esteem			0.19*	
Objective Academic Performance ↔ Academic Goals			0.20*	

* $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$. ns refers to not significant.

TABLE 4 Summary of regression analyses per time point.

Time point	$F(df1, df2)$	p -value	R^2	Significant predictors
Time 1	$F(3, 670) = 7.67$	<0.001	0.033	Self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.15, p = 0.001$), Self-esteem ($\beta = 0.08, p = 0.033$)
Time 2	$F(3, 398) = 7.34$	<0.001	0.052	Self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.16, p = 0.005$)
Time 3	$F(3, 550) = 10.85$	<0.001	0.056	Self-regulation ($\beta = 0.17, p < 0.001$)
Time 3 (Objective)	$F(3, 553) = 4.11$	$=0.007$	0.022	Self-esteem ($\beta = 0.11, p = 0.009$)
Time 4	$F(3, 278) = 11.41$	<0.001	0.110	Self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.27, p = 0.006$), Self-regulation ($\beta = 0.23, p = 0.023$)

demonstrated positive relationships between these constructs (Ahmadi, 2020; Bhatt and Bahadur, 2018; Lane et al., 2004; Maropamabi, 2014).

To examine the influence of self-concept factors on academic performance, multiple linear regression analyses were conducted across four time points, followed by mediation and moderation analyses using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Models 4 and 8), with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The predictors included academic self-efficacy, self-regulation and self-esteem. Subjective academic performance (hoped-for marks) was the dependent variable at all time points, while objective performance (end-of-year exam results) was assessed only at Time 3.

9.2.1 Time 1

The regression model was significant, $F(3, 670) = 7.67, p < 0.001$, explaining 3.3% of the variance in hoped-for academic performance. Both self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.15, t = 3.265, p = 0.001$) and self-esteem ($\beta = 0.08, t = 2.137, p = 0.033$) significantly predicted performance, while self-regulation was not significant, partially supporting Hypothesis 2.

9.2.2 Time 2

The model remained significant, $F(3, 398) = 7.34, p < 0.001$, accounting for 5.2% of the variance. Only academic self-efficacy significantly predicted subjective performance ($\beta = 0.16, t = 2.816, p = 0.005$). Self-regulation ($\beta = 0.08, t = 1.510, p = 0.132$) and self-esteem ($\beta = 0.04, t = 0.796, p = 0.426$) were not significant, again partially supporting Hypothesis 2.

9.2.3 Time 3

For subjective performance, the model was significant, $F(3, 550) = 10.85, p < 0.001$, explaining 5.6% of the variance. Self-regulation was the only significant predictor ($\beta = 0.17, t = 3.410, p < 0.001$), while self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.07, t = 1.394, p = 0.164$) and self-esteem ($\beta = 0.07, t = 1.718, p = 0.086$) were not significant. This partially confirms the hypothesis.

Regarding objective academic performance, the regression model was significant $F(3, 553) = 4.11, p = 0.007$, explaining 2.2% of the variance. Only self-esteem significantly predicted the exam results ($\beta = 0.11, t = 2.610, p = 0.009$), while self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.09, t = 1.779, p = 0.076$) and self-regulation ($\beta = -0.05, t = 1.039, p = 0.299$) were not significant.

9.2.4 Time 4

The model was significant, $F(3, 278) = 11.409, p < 0.001$, explaining 11% of the variance in hoped-for subjective academic performance. Both self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.27, t = 2.744, p = 0.006$) and self-regulation ($\beta = 0.225, t = 2.290, p = 0.005$) significantly predicted the outcome variable. However, self-esteem ($\beta = 0.086, t = 1.191, p = 0.235$) was not a significant predictor. This partially supports the hypothesis.

9.3 Mediation and moderation analyses

Mediation and moderation analyses were conducted using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4 and 8) with 5,000 bootstrap samples.

9.3.1 Time 1 and time 2

Mediation analyses tested whether self-regulation mediated the relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance. At both time points, self-efficacy significantly predicted self-regulation (Time 1: $b = 0.50, p < 0.001$; Time 2: $b = 0.42, p < 0.001$). However, self-regulation did not significantly predict academic performance at either time point, indicating no mediation effect.

Moderation analyses examined self-esteem as a moderator between self-efficacy and academic performance. Self-esteem moderated this relationship, with the strength of the self-efficacy performance link varying by levels of self-esteem.

9.3.2 Time 3

Mediation analysis showed that self-efficacy significantly predicted self-regulation ($b = 0.49, p < 0.001$). Self-regulation, in turn, significantly predicted academic performance ($b = 0.25, p = 0.001$), while the direct effect of self-efficacy was not significant, supporting a mediation effect.

Moderation analysis revealed a significant interaction between self-efficacy and self-esteem on academic performance ($b = 0.21, p = 0.017$), indicating that self-esteem moderated the effect of self-efficacy.

9.3.3 Time 4

Self-efficacy significantly predicted self-regulation ($b = 0.49, p < 0.001$). However, self-regulation did not significantly predict academic performance, indicating no mediation effect.

The moderation model showed no significant interaction between self-efficacy and self-esteem. Self-esteem significantly predicted academic performance, while the effect of self-efficacy varied with levels of self-esteem but did not show significant moderation.

In summary, across the four time points, academic self-efficacy consistently predicted self-regulation, but the mediating role of self-regulation between self-efficacy and academic performance was supported only at Time 3. Self-esteem moderated the relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance at Times 1–3 but not at Time 4. These findings partially support the hypotheses and highlight the dynamic roles of self-concept components in academic outcomes over time.

From a Critical Race Theory perspective, the observed differences in possible identities between participants from Quintile 2 and Quintile 5 schools highlight the enduring impact of structural inequalities in South African education.

At Time 1, significant disparities emerged in the articulation of negative possible identities, with students from the under-resourced Quintile 2 school more likely to anticipate constrained or limiting futures. By Time 3, both positive and negative possible identities showed significant variation across school contexts, highlighting the cumulative influence of unequal educational environments on students' visions of self.

When assessing the motivational role of possible identities, a significant relationship emerged only at Time 3. This suggests that the effect of future-oriented self-concept on motivation is context-dependent becoming more pronounced over time and shaped by school context (see Table 5). Nearly half of the Quintile 5 participants expressed concrete career goals, such as "becoming a lawyer or doctor" and consistently mentioned the same careers over time. In contrast, participants from the Quintile 2 school more often expressed broader, survival-oriented aspirations, such as "finish matric," "get a job," or "become a soccer player."

TABLE 5 Summary of multiple regressions on possible identities.

Variable	F	df	p-value	Partial η^2	Interpretation
Negative possible identity (Time \times School)	5.62	2, 180	0.004	0.059	Significant interaction between time and school context
Positive possible identity (Time \times School)	6.73	2, 180	0.002	0.070	School context influences development of positive identities over time
Motivation (Regression, Time 3)	7.85	1, 90	0.006	$R^2 = 0.28$	Possible identity predicts motivation at Time 3

These findings suggest that systemic disparities in school resources shape not only academic outcomes but also the specificity, stability, and motivational power of students' possible selves.

10 Discussion

This study highlights the significant role of self-concept in mediating the relationship between adolescents' aspirations and academic performance in a context marked by deep socio-economic and racial inequalities. By focusing on self-regulation, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, the findings show that while adolescents do aspire to academic success, the attainability of their goals is shaped by contextual limitations, including the quality of schooling and systemic inequities. The integration of Critical Race Theory reveals that disparities in educational outcomes are not merely individual failings but are structurally produced and maintained. Therefore, addressing the aspiration-attainment gap requires interventions at both psychological and systemic levels.

11 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between adolescents' aspirations, self-concept, and academic performance within the South African context, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of a quantitative approach and a longitudinal panel was meant to examine relationships over time. However, 18 months is not long enough to capture long-term developmental changes, especially across transitional life stages. Second, the reliance on self-reported data for key constructs such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-regulation introduces potential biases, including social desirability and recall bias, which may affect the accuracy of responses. Third, although the study was conducted in different basic education districts, representing various socio-economic strata (Quintiles 2–5), these students and schools are situated within the same province. This limits the generalisability of the findings to other provinces or national contexts. Fourth, differences between school environments, such as suburban versus township norms, may introduce variability in how socio-cultural contexts influence students' aspirations and self-concept. Fifth, factors such as parental involvement, peer influence, and access to external support systems were not measured, and these may have influenced students' self-concept and academic trajectories.

12 Recommendations

The majority of South Africa's population comprises Black people. In an attempt to overturn apartheid legacies, historically White schools were opened to students of all races. However, the desegregation

process of these schools has followed an assimilation approach, where the values, traditions and customs of White South Africans frame the school context. This might make it difficult for the Black students to develop a sense of belonging (Bazana and Mogotsi, 2017; Soudien, 2012). Township students are also not immune to feeling lost in the school environment, and a variety of factors inform their views of the school. For example, the lack of resources, especially the crowded classrooms, have an impact on how they connect with the school environment. While the school climate shapes students' achievement, the classroom environment remains the most crucial area where the teachers have direct interaction with the students. Teachers need to engage with the students in a way that makes them feel valued and prevent feelings of inadequacy, which could have a negative impact on their overall well-being (Iovino et al., 2021).

Policy and practice responses should prioritize the development of students' self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-regulation to address the aspiration-attainment gap, particularly in under-resourced contexts. This can be achieved through:

12.1 Promoting academic self-efficacy through targeted classroom practices

Teachers can strengthen students' self-efficacy by providing structured opportunities for mastery and success in progressively challenging tasks. Breaking down complex work into manageable tasks allowing students to build confidence progressively. Peer modeling and mentoring, where peer successes are showcased, can reinforce students' belief in their own potential.

12.2 Enhancing self-regulation through structured support

Given that self-regulation significantly predicted academic outcomes at certain time points, schools can integrate self-regulatory skills into daily instruction. Strategies may include guided goal setting, self-monitoring checklists, and reflective activities that encourage students to evaluate their own progress and adapt strategies accordingly.

12.3 Building self-esteem within culturally responsive frameworks

Culturally relevant teaching materials that reflect students' identities and lived experiences can affirm self-worth. Applying principles from Critical Race Theory, teachers can facilitate critical discussions about structural inequalities and empower students to see themselves as agents of change within their communities.

12.4 Curriculum enhancements and teacher training

Embedding self-concept development within Life Orientation modules can ensure sustained attention to these psychological constructs. Teacher professional development should include training in culturally responsive pedagogy and motivational strategies. Mentorship programs and structured family engagement can extend this support beyond schools.

12.5 School-wide support structures

Under-resourced schools can benefit from dedicated safe spaces, peer support groups and counseling services focused on psychological wellbeing. These structures can help students develop resilience, sustain motivation and maintain a positive self-concept despite challenging circumstances.

Beyond the school level, school management teams should advocate for budget reallocation to direct more resources toward Quintile 1–3 schools, with investment in laboratories, libraries, and teacher development. Curricula should be revised to include African epistemologies and histories, creating culturally affirming and identity-relevant learning environments. Interventions should also involve collaborations between teachers, social workers, psychologists, health workers, community organizations and parents to strengthen holistic student support.

Future studies could enhance these findings by extending the study duration to several years, rather than just 18 months. Participants could be tracked as they transition from matric, the last year of formal schooling until they complete a three-year tertiary program. Researchers could consider adapting or developing new scales specifically tailored to the context and population under study. For example, the use of Afro-centric psychometric tools that reflect communal values such as Ubuntu (Nsamenang, 2010) and exploring transnational comparative research on the aspiration-attainment gap in other post-colonial contexts such as India and Brazil.

13 Conclusion

This study highlights the urgent need to address educational inequality not solely through interventions aimed at individual students, but through comprehensive, systemic transformation. The findings demonstrate the role of psychological factors in the relationship between adolescents' aspirations and academic performance. However, these psychological processes are not developed in a vacuum; they are shaped by the broader social, economic and historical contexts in which students live and learn.

Critical race theory provides a powerful lens through which to understand how South Africa's schooling system continues to operate as a site of racialized power. Resource deprivation, underfunding and curriculum marginalization shape and restrict students' perceptions about what is possible and attainable for them (Batisai et al., 2022; Chuene and Teane, 2024). The findings point to the urgent need for policies and school-based interventions that support the development of students' self-concept. By equipping teachers and school systems to nurture

self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-worth, education policy can better close the aspiration-attainment gap and ensure more equitable academic outcomes. Empowering adolescents to see themselves as capable and worthy of success is not only crucial and relevant in a post-apartheid South African context, but it is also a global obligation.

Data availability statement

The data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and institutional approval.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by The Unisa College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee and the Gauteng Department of Basic Education Research office. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

NM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Violence and invisibility: a collective case study on suicide among Emberá Indigenous youth in the Colombian Pacific

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Ethnic minorities are exposed to greater risks of mental health problems than other groups, intensified during specific developmental periods by gender, psychosocial factors, racism, stigmatization, and social exclusion. In Colombia's Pacific region, the Emberá Indigenous population has experienced a significant number of youth suicides in recent years, described as a "suicide epidemic." This study aimed to deepen the understanding of suicide among Emberá youth by analyzing its characteristics, the institutional and professional strategies addressing it, and the processes of institutional racism and social exclusion at play. A collective case study approach was applied, drawing on primary and secondary sources, including interviews and a documentary review of 76 materials, to provide a contextualized understanding of suicide incidence in the Chocó region and to inform future educational, community, and activist actions. Findings indicate that suicidal behavior in this group has distinctive characteristics requiring approaches that go beyond nominal cultural sensitivity, engaging directly with lived realities and structural conditions. Current strategies reveal significant weaknesses, particularly in coordination and in adopting intersectional perspectives to address multi-problematic contexts. Results also highlight the impact of racism and exclusion on the emotional experiences of Emberá youth, expressed through both institutional discrimination and internalized racism. The study concludes by proposing the strengthening of institutional racism and psychosocial exclusion as analytical tools for addressing violence and invisibility in suicide cases, while emphasizing future pathways for action, particularly the active participation of young people in the design, implementation, and monitoring of protective strategies against suicide risk.

KEYWORDS

suicide, Emberá youth, institutional racism, psychosocial exclusion, community mental health

1 Introduction

Subjected to historical conditions of vulnerability and precariousness, as well as significant processes of defenselessness due to limited state protection, indigenous communities in Colombia face high rates of poverty, victimization from armed conflict, displacement, barriers to services, and elevated physical and mental health risks, including suicidal behavior (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, 2016; Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística – DANE, 2021; Estévez-Paz et al., 2024; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica Ministerio de Cultura—Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2017). Constitutional Court Ruling 004 of 2009 recognized several

Indigenous groups as at risk of extinction. Precautionary measures by the [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights \(2015\)](#) and the Constitutional Court's Judgment T-302 of 2017 regarding the Wayuu ([Corte Constitucional, 2017](#)) also acknowledged violations of fundamental rights to different indigenous communities.

Indigenous peoples have endured violence and dehumanization from colonial times to the present. Episodes such as the 1967 murder of 16 Cuiba in the Colombian plains, where the defense argued that hunting Indigenous people was a common practice and that the accused were therefore unaware they were committing a crime ([Castro, 1976](#); [García, 2013, 2022](#)), as well as massacres such as the 1971 Planas massacre, carried out by military forces, and the 2002 Bojayá massacre in Chocó, in which at least 79 people were killed during combat between FARC and paramilitary groups ([National Center for Historical Memory, 2012](#)), which together illustrate a persistent dehumanization dating back to the Conquest ([Gómez-López et al., 2012](#); [Martínez Silva et al., 2020](#); [Urrego-Mendoza et al., 2017](#); [Urrego-Mendoza et al., 2017](#)), repeatedly denying Indigenous peoples full recognition of their personhood.

In addition to these historical inequalities, Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups are also central to studies of racialization, psychosocial exclusion, and political change due to their demographic importance. According to DANE, 14.4% of Colombia's population self-identifies as Indigenous or Afro-descendant. In the 2018 Census, 1,905,617 people identified as Indigenous, belonging to 115 communities and 65 languages, placing Colombia among the countries with the greatest Indigenous diversity.

Constitutionally, Colombia has shifted from a *mestizo* ideal of "national homogeneity" to a multicultural vision that embraces "difference," however, such discursive transformations have not ended practices of racial and ethnic invisibility, exclusion, and discrimination ([Viveros-Vigoya, 2015](#); [Wade, 2021](#)).

Among the various forms of vulnerability and psychosocial suffering experienced by Indigenous peoples, the so-called "suicide epidemic" among Emberá youth, reported since at least 2003, stands out as both a pressing research problem and an urgent challenge for policy and intervention.

The Emberá live in Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador. In Colombia, they inhabit the Pacific region (Chocó, Cauca, Nariño, Antioquia, Córdoba, Risaralda, and Quindío). The 2018 census reported 77,714 Emberá, predominantly in Chocó. Family lines include Chamí, Katío, Dóbida, and Eperara Siapidaara. They share a common language with internal variations between families and a worldview of "three worlds," a strong territorial bond, and traditional medicine to sustain balance and harmony. Subsistence relies on hunting, fishing, gathering, and shifting agriculture; however, following colonization and, more recently, as a result of mobility restrictions and climate change, communities have experienced territorial dispersion and increasing sedentarization. Social organization centers on the extended family with gender- and age-based divisions of labor. The economy is largely endogenous, with minimal participation in external markets. Traditional authorities include the family head (often the eldest) and the *jaibaná*, ancestral doctor and key figure in their religious practices. Legal reforms introduced the Indigenous Council, and younger members have emerged as leaders ([Romero-López et al., 2019](#)).

The Emberá have historically suffered multiple violations of living conditions. According to a report by the Association of

Indigenous Councils and Authorities of the Chocó Department [OREWA], between 1985 and 2012, more than 30,000 Emberá were displaced from their territories by the armed conflict, representing 30% of their population ([Romero-López et al., 2019](#); [Orewa, 2013](#)). They have also faced extractivism ([Urrego-Mendoza et al., 2017](#); [Bello and Rangel, 2002](#)), acculturation and complex intergroup relations ([de Sepúlveda López Mesa, 2008](#); [UNICEF, 2012](#); [Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social and Organización Panamericana de la Salud, 2016](#); [Martínez Silva et al., 2020](#)), and diverse forms of vulnerability and discrimination ([UNICEF, 2012, 2017](#); [Dolezal et al., 2021](#); [National Alliance of Mental Illness, 2021](#); [World Health Organization, 2014, 2021](#)).

Among the highest-risk groups, the literature presents a historical record of elevated rates of suicidal behavior among indigenous peoples ([UNICEF, 2012](#); [Vargas et al., 2017](#); [Dolezal et al., 2021](#); [National Alliance of Mental Illness, 2021](#); [World Health Organization, 2021](#); [Estévez-Paz et al., 2024](#); [Pollock et al., 2018](#)). In Colombia, among cases where group identity was identified, 87% involved Indigenous, Afro-descendant, *palenqueros* and gypsies ([Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses, 2023](#)). Other reports indicate suicide risk was 2.7 times higher among Indigenous people than non-Indigenous in Amazonas between 2008 and 2016 ([Estévez-Paz et al., 2024](#)), and higher than the national rate in Vaupés ([Martínez Silva et al., 2020](#)). Thus, evidence suggests that the suicide rates in Indigenous communities substantially exceed general and national prevalence ([Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística – DANE, 2021](#); [Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, 2018](#); [World Health Organization, 2014](#)).

In the case of the Emberá, despite significant underreporting, the prevalence is higher than among other Indigenous groups in Colombia, with patterns that diverge from national and global trends in terms of gender, causes, and symptoms (MINSALUD/PAHO, 2016). Humanitarian organizations estimate that in parts of Chocó the rate may be eight times the national rate ([Romero-Peñuela, 2024](#)). In September 2024, [Asociación Orewa \(2024\)](#) stated: "We receive daily reports from the territories about suicides in our communities, especially among young people and adolescents, which concerns us even more".

Research on Indigenous mental health, and on the Emberá in particular, remains limited, producing contradictions and gaps. Most records come from state institutions and show recurrent underreporting, partial data, and, at times, non-comparable or biased information ([Tuesca-Molina et al., 2019](#)). Regarding racism and psychosocial exclusion, documentation is limited to mere acknowledgements of their presence, without the support of systematic or rigorous empirical investigations.

Across the social and health sciences, models of suicidal behavior include sociological ([Durkheim, 2008](#)), psychodynamic ([Freud, 1996](#)), cognitive ([Beck, 1976](#)), interpersonal ([Van Orden et al., 2010](#)), contextual-existential ([González González et al., 2021](#)), and, more recently, the neurobiological stress–diathesis model ([Ganança et al., 2015](#)). Approaches to Emberá youth suicide can be grouped into clinical, cultural, and psychosocial perspectives. These perspectives have coexisted without major contradictions due to the different emphases of their approaches.

Despite the value of these approaches and the efforts to avoid psychologizing suicide, the Emberá case exposes challenges in accounting for situated social and cultural factors. For example,

Vásquez (2023) found that prior psychiatric diagnoses did not sufficiently predict suicidal behavior in the Colombian population; socioeconomic and spatial indicators did. From the earliest theories, suicide behavior has a strong social content (Durkheim, 2008). Likewise, psychological models have shifted from individual explanations to empirical, contextual recognition of inequality and exclusion (Rodríguez, 2021). Yet the effects of racialization and psychosocial exclusion on the Emberá remain scarcely documented.

We argue that understanding the “suicide epidemic” among Emberá youth benefits from the lenses of psychosocial exclusion and institutional racism. Psychosocial exclusion highlights intersectional factors often neglected by psychological approaches and is defined as the systematic denial of opportunities to participate in the material, political, ideological, technical, and symbolic benefits of culture for a given group, either by denial or by the absence of a psychosocial niche to desire them (Rodríguez, 2021). These processes constitute major mental health risks by integrating multiple sources of vulnerability (Andersen, 2006).

Racism is understood as a set of discursive, practical, and representational operations (Hall, 2017; Wallerstein and Balibar, 1988) that manifest as violence, discrimination, humiliation, intolerance, segregation, and dispossession, articulated through prejudice, inferiorization, invisibility, stigmatization, stereotyping, and physical and social exclusion (Buraschi and Aguilar-Idañez, 2019; Wallerstein and Balibar, 1988). It produces both racist communities and racialized communities that, “as in a mirror, are forced to perceive themselves as a community” (Wallerstein and Balibar, 1988, p. 32), introducing the contradiction of attributing identities to communities that, as Fanon (2009) pointed out, are at the same time denied the right to define themselves; thus, racism involves different social and institutional actors with different interests and positions of power, expressed in historical, political and economic frameworks which, despite their variations, share processes and mechanisms that produce suffering and social harm.

This study proposes focusing on the notion of institutional racism as a way to explore the dimension of racialization. The notion was originally formulated by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), referring to the legal framework and behavioral patterns of oppression towards Black people. Following Buraschi and Aguilar-Idañez (2019), we understand institutional racism as a system of policies, discourses, practices, and procedures implemented by institutional entities, their agents, and professionals within care systems. These actions undermine the rights of individuals and groups on racial and ethnic grounds, manifesting in prejudiced processes, ignorance, stereotypes, and disregard, among other forms of discrimination.

Institutional racism in Indigenous contexts has been only partially addressed on the continent. Existing approaches have primarily examined the criminal justice system (Rotta-Almeida et al., 2021) and barriers to healthcare access (Thomazinho, 2024) in Brazil, as well as enforced disappearance (Mora, 2017) and governmental discourse (Orozco-López, 2018) in Mexico, thereby reflecting diverse perspectives with different points of emphasis. In the case of Colombia, the scarce references available tend to focus predominantly on Afro-Colombian communities (Restrepo, 2009; Mosquera Rosero-Labbé and León Díaz, 2015; Martelo Ortiz, 2021).

The notions of institutional racism and psychosocial exclusion constitute valuable analytical tools for examining the problem of suicide among Indigenous youth, insofar as they make it possible to

discern multiple dimensions related to health, living conditions, and the interactions between Indigenous social actors and those from other contexts. Authors such as Cortez-Gómez et al. (2020), for example, in their analysis of health-related dimensions, have identified as manifestations of racism towards Indigenous communities the absence of programs or resources, geographical barriers to care, as well as discriminatory practices by health personnel. Institutions as Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social (2016) and Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social and Organización Panamericana de la Salud (2016), have documented the weight of prejudice and racialization affecting Indigenous communities in Colombia. An approach that more broadly explores the intersectionalities associated with the phenomenon of suicide among Emberá youth could provide an opportunity not only to deepen understanding of the phenomenon, but also to inform public policy debates and diversify potential avenues for intervention.

This study has the general objective to provide a deeper understanding of suicide among Emberá Indigenous youth in the Colombian Pacific through the analysis of racialization and psychosocial exclusion. Specifically, it aims to describe the characteristics of suicide among Emberá youth as reported by Indigenous, institutional, and professional actors. Secondly, it is proposed to examine institutional and professional mechanisms and strategies addressing suicide among Emberá youth. Finally, it aims to analyze the mechanisms of institutional racism and psychosocial exclusion involved in the suicide phenomenon among Emberá youth.

To fulfill its research objective, this study employs a collective case study design, which enables the incorporation of the widest possible range of voices and social actors involved in the issue of suicide among Emberá youth. To this end, a multi-source approach will be employed. The findings are expected to foster dialogue with public and private institutions, as well as with the communities involved, with the aim of contributing to decision-making processes and analytical inputs for public policy, the design of contextualized interventions, and greater awareness of the needs and perspectives of Indigenous communities facing these living-condition challenges.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Design

This research is a collective case study (Stake, 1995), understood as a design in which multiple cases or units of analysis are examined to provide a detailed and comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon. In this study, the general objective was to deepen the understanding of suicide among Emberá Indigenous youth in the Colombian Pacific by analyzing processes of racialization and psychosocial exclusion. To this end, the study incorporated various primary and secondary data sources related to cases of suicide among young people in the Emberá community.

2.2 Study population

The unit of analysis comprised verbal data concerning suicide among Emberá Indigenous youth, originating from a total of six sources, as presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Type of data and source of information.

Type of data	Code	Number of documents	Source of information
Indigenous organizations	Org	4	Statements from indigenous organizations
Press documents	Press	15	Press articles, documentaries and podcasts
Official documents	Doc	32	Official documents, statistical reports and public records from different state and international organizations
Non governmental organizations (NGOs)	NGO	2	Public documents, videos, and statements from NGOs
Academic texts	Acad	21	Academic papers, book chapters, and undergraduate and graduate research projects
Interviews	Int	2	Key informant interviews

The selected data came from two major analytical sets: interviews and documents.

Interviews: Two in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with two key informants, selected according to a criterion of convenience. The first interview involved an Indigenous woman who had lived in the territory under study. This interview, conducted prior to the present research, explored participant's subjective experiences concerning mental health in relation to her ethnic identity. The second interview involved the local coordinator of an NGO with extensive experience in interventions in the context of interest for this research. This semi-structured interview addressed the phenomenon of suicide among Emberá youth, intervention practices, case characterizations, and the participant's observations on racism and exclusion.

Documents: In the case of the documents used for this study, materials were selected if they:

- 1) Addressed suicide or mental health among Emberá youth in the Colombian Pacific.
- 2) Related to suicide or mental health in other Colombian Indigenous populations; or.
- 3) Consisted of official or institutional Colombian reports on Indigenous suicide or mental health.

Two main strategies were used to collect the documents:

- 1) Review of materials collected by the authors in intervention and advisory activities prior to the research; and
- 2) Conducting search of materials from Indigenous organizations, public institutions, and NGOs, as well as academic materials available digitally.

The search criteria corresponded to the terms: "suicide," "Indigenous Emberá People," "Colombia," "suicide epidemic." Academic materials were identified using the following search engines: Scopus, Google Scholar, Redalyc, Scielo, and Dialnet. Both peer-reviewed publications and gray literature were included.

2.3 Sample size

As this was a collective case study, the design did not aim for generalization but rather the deepest possible exploration of the materials related to the case. Once the data for the study were collected and selected, a total of 76 data were included. The complete list of materials is presented in the [Supplementary material](#).

2.4 Analysis strategy

The methods followed the four steps for case study research described by Yin (2009):

- 1) Defining and selecting the cases: the case study was defined by relevant data on suicide among Emberá youth. For this purpose, all available data were initially considered, and classified into six large sets of data producers according to the reported selection criteria.
- 2) Using multiple cases: data were obtained from Indigenous Organizations, Press Documents, Official Documents, NGOs, Academic Publications, and Interviews, consolidating a total of six large sets of information that provided diverse perspectives and interests.
- 3) Strengthening the evidence using different data sources and techniques: the documents were treated as "standardized artifacts" and grouped based on their specific production formats (Wolff, 2004). Each type of data was given an abbreviated code, later used to categorize each piece of data based on a number and the year of production.
- 4) Analyzing the evidence: once the materials were collected, an initial relevance filter was performed. Two categories were consolidated: (a) data related to the Emberá people, particularly youth; and (b) data related to other Colombian indigenous communities.

Following an initial review, a categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995) was performed using an analytic induction process (Mitchell, 2000), seeking patterns of correspondence between data and their possible associations with other relevant themes. This process was conducted through thematic content analysis (Bardin, 1986), in three general phases: pre-analysis; exploitation of the material, and treatment and interpretation of the results. The aim was to identify "nuclei of meaning" that make up the communication and whose presence, or frequency of appearance, could mean something for the chosen analytical objective" (p. 80). The three stages involved the realization of processes of coding, categorization and inference, resulting in the themes presented in the results.

In line with the research objectives, metacategories were initially organized as a theoretical reference using the three criteria proposed by Devereux (1961) concerning ethnographic aspects of suicidal behavior in the Mohave Indian Tribe. These were: (a) Self-image; (b)

Lay characterizations; (c) Professional characterizations. Once the categorization process was completed, the researchers established three broad metacategories.

- 1 Characterization of Suicide: findings on the characteristics of suicide in the Emberá group.
- 2 Intervention devices and strategies: findings related to professional and institutional intervention processes.
- 3 Suicide, racism, and exclusion: themes related to racism and psychosocial exclusion.

These three metacategories correspond to the specific objectives of the research.

Although the process allowed for the consolidation of a relevant dataset reflecting diverse voices and interests, some limitations and biases must be acknowledged. First, due to the difficulty of accessing informants, the findings depended heavily on the quality of the available materials, which may not fully capture the complexity of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the sources are not free from potential contradictions as well as professional and academic biases.

2.5 Ethics statement

Giving the highly vulnerable conditions of the studied group, this research adopted a minimally invasive design, excluding direct contact with members of the Emberá population, including survivors or family members. To this end, the data used in this research relied on both primary and secondary sources.

Primary data involving human subjects, collected prior to the start of the study, were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology at Universidad del Valle, Cali, Colombia (no. CEIFP-47-24) in response to a formal request for approval made by APS. Primary data collected during the study included signed informed consent. Secondary data were obtained from publicly available documentary sources and did not require the request for informed consent. All procedures were conducted in accordance with local legislation and institutional requirements.

3 Results

3.1 Metacategory 1: characterization of suicide

3.1.1 Characteristics of suicide

Assuming the limitations of underreporting, the occurrence of suicidal acts in remote locations, as well as possible cultural biases, it is possible to present the following characterization of suicides among the Emberá people in the Chocó region.

3.1.1.1 Young people as the predominant age group

Sources indicate that the age group most at risk is children and adolescents (Acad.3.2023; Acad.3.2017; Doc.5.2016; Acad.2.2021; Press.2.2024; Press.3.2024; Doc.4.2024). Between 2003 and 2006, at least 20 suicides were reported, mostly among adolescents and young adults (Press.1.2003; Acad.1.2008). Another report cites 30 cases between 2009 and 2015 (Acad.1.2017). Indigenous organizations

documented at least 200 youth suicides from 2000 to 2016 (Org.1.2016), and in 2020 more than 10 cases were reported in the municipality of Bojayá (Org.2.2020). Of the 22 suicides recorded in 2021, 20 involved individuals under 18 years of age (Press.2.2021). Similar proportions are reported among the Dobidá, where adolescents and youth account for the majority compared to adults (Acad.1.2017). In 2023, an Indigenous leader reported 343 cases recorded by his organization since the beginning of the so-called “epidemic” (Doc.1.2023).

3.1.1.2 Gender variations

Official and unofficial sources show changing gender patterns. Current reports indicate that suicide rates among young Emberá women are equal to or higher than those among men (Acad.1.2017; Acad.1.2020; Acad.2.2021; Press.1.2024). This contrasts with other Colombian Indigenous groups and global epidemiological trends, where male suicides typically predominate at ratios of up to 7:3 (Acad.1.2020; Doc.6.2023).

Regarding the gender issue, the data show some differential patterns, such as physical aggression prior to suicide in women (Acad.1.2017), greater cultural shocks in women due to the impossibility of accessing Western products, as well as exposure to different lifestyles by non-indigenous professional women (Acad.1.2017), greater willingness to replicate the suicidal act (Acad.1.2017).

3.1.1.3 Location

Although there are references to suicides from the 1990s (Doc.5.2016), documented cases begin in 2003 on the Salaquí River (Press.1.2003; Acad.1.2008). Reports from Indigenous organizations describe a dispersed pattern across Chocó, including Quibdó, Juradó, Istmina, Litoral del San Juan, Bojayá, Medio San Juan, Riosucio, and Bahía Solano (Doc.1.2023). Official registries also indicate differential victimization patterns linked to armed conflict affecting the Emberá (Alto and Bajo Baudó, Bojayá, Carmen del Darién), Emberá Katío (Bagadó), Emberá Chamí (Quibdó, San José del Palmar), Emberá Dobidá (Bojayá, Medio Baudó), and Wounaan (Litoral del San Juan, Bajo Baudó) (Doc.2.2021). These dynamics are crucial for detection and intervention, given the relationship between violence and suicidal behavior.

3.1.1.4 Suicide techniques

Methods vary over time. In the first decade, poisoning predominated, consistent with national trends; more recently, hanging has become the most frequent method (Doc.5.2016; Acad.3.2017). It typically involves the *paruma* (traditional Emberá skirt) and may occur either at home (*tambo*) or in remote areas (Acad.1.2008). No data specify gender or motive differences. This contrasts with findings from the National Institute of Forensic Medicine, which documented predominance of male suicides and poisoning between 2010 and 2014 in the general population (Doc.1.2014).

3.1.1.5 Symptoms and manifestations

Distinctive patterns are observed among young Emberá, some of which are not documented either in the general Colombian population or in other Indigenous groups (Acad.1.2008; Acad.1.2012; Acad.2.2014; Acad.1.2017; Acad.1.2020; Acad.3.2023). Table 2 shows these symptoms and manifestations as reported by both native professional and institutional characterization.

TABLE 2 Symptoms and manifestations.

Category	Native characterization	Professional and institutional characterization
Affective manifestations	" <i>Jai de Tontina</i> ," characterized by "boredom" and/or anger, also call " <i>aburrimiento</i> "	sadness, asthenia, hypersomnia, dysphoria. Also associated with somatic symptoms.
Somatic and psychomotor manifestations	<i>Wawamia</i>	Seizures
	Scattered symptoms	myalgia, hypersomnia, headaches
	" <i>Loquera</i> " ("Craziness"): types: dancer, singer, fighter, talkative, or mute.	psychomotor agitation, language disorders
	" <i>Revolcadera</i> " ("Rolling around")	psychomotor agitation, language disorders
Ideatory and sensory-perceptive manifestations	" <i>Pensar mal</i> " ("Having bad thoughts")	intrusive thoughts of a traumatic nature
	Scattered Symptoms	Dreams or apparitions linked to death, hallucinatory experiences
Psychobiological habits		Heavy consumption of intoxicants

The classification presented omits dynamic elements and possible variations between groups. Nor does it correspond to a clinical pattern. For example, while almost all suicide cases have manifested *Wawamia*, not all *Wawamia* cases lead to suicide attempts (Acad.1.2012).

Some illustrations: "Before killing herself, after *tontina* and *revolcadera*, she dreamed a lot" (Acad.1.2008). Another illustration of *aburrimiento*: "One gets *aburrido* (bored), maybe they do not like you and all that, then one gets bored like that. That's why one thinks a lot of things... one stays bored, eh... like sick, loses one's mind. Well, they do a lot of things. On that side, many people have also been killed like that." (Acad.1.2022). Other: "She started with that *tontina*, that *jai* that would not leave her alone. Headache, her bones feeling like they were being squeezed... well, like she was sick with malaria, that's all. But then she started with that thought. She *pensaba mal* (thought badly) and *pensaba mal* (thought badly). She told me she missed her children a lot (...) that there was nothing to eat, what were we going to do (...) that life wasn't worth living like this..." (Acad.1.2008).

3.1.1.6 Types and causes of suicidal behavior

Considering the native and historical categories of Indigenous peoples, the material allows us to identify three types of suicide, each associated with different causes. There are potential overlaps between types and causes, particularly regarding the effects of violence from armed conflict and illegal groups. The classification presented here seeks to aid understanding; in practice, motives and causes are dynamic, cumulative, and interdependent, as reported by multiple sources (Acad.1.2008, Acad.1.2022).

3.1.1.7 Suicide as a native category

Interview reports and bibliographical material allow suicide to be characterized as the result of the action of evil spirits, "curses," and disharmonies marked by spiritual components and the relationship with the territory. At the same time, both official and investigative literature report this type of suicide as a culturally situated modality.

To facilitate the presentation of the material, the results are shown in Table 3.

It is necessary to emphasize that in this case, there is significant cultural contextualization in the group. While disharmony may encompass different elements that could be interpreted by external groups as a unity, the available material allows specificities that are not always captured.

Perhaps the best example is the category of displacement and armed conflict. In this context, indigenous informants' reports provide insight into the weight of the armed conflict, incorporating nuances specific to their worldview. Disharmony is not only caused by the violent actions of armed groups, but is also perceived through the harm and blame assigned to young people who are recruited or choose to join these groups in pursuit of better livelihoods. In such cases, the responsibility of young people is seen as a factor that predisposes them to the actions of evil *jais*.

Another important illustration can be found in the complex handling of the figure of *jaibanás*. It is documented that, at the beginning of the wave of suicides, some groups interpreted the responsibility as the manipulation of evil *jai* for selfish purposes, such as controlling certain young women for sexual purposes. This entailed various reprisals, including the murder of *jaibanás* or the banishment of others (Acad.1.2008). However, just as some spiritual figures were assumed to be responsible, there is a coexisting belief that the possibility of recovery and cure in some cases could only occur through the action of "good" *jaibanás* who could perform the corresponding ceremonial actions while also assuming responsibility for cases that, from their perspective, would require Western therapeutic strategies.

3.1.1.8 Suicide as a professional and institutional category

The professional and institutional category allows us to differentiate three broad sets of causes or motives. To facilitate the presentation of the material, the results are shown in Table 4.

3.1.1.9 Collective suicide

In addition to the native and professional categories, it is possible to include a final category that could be called collective suicide, and in which native and professional records are found. Both Emberá informants, official and academic literature offer characterizations that could be attributed to contagion, as well as to individual reactions of protest or resistance. Although there are no direct reports of collective suicides among the Emberá people, others have been reported in the history of Colombian indigenous peoples, as well as in other geographical contexts. What is possible to affirm is that, in the Emberá case, the category exists as a possibility for collective suicidal action (Press.1.2007; Acad.2.2014).

Table 5 shows the different forms of collective suicide found in the analysis of the material.

Two illustrations are offered regarding this category. In relation to the issue of contagion, an informant reported: "And then this is going to happen here and it's going to spread to another region, to another

TABLE 3 Types and causes of suicide in native category.

Category	Theme	References
Action of evil spirits (Jai)	a) Spirits imposed by a jaibaná (<i>Jaibaná Jai</i>) b) Evil spirits of members who were recruited by irregular groups that are not in peace and introduce disharmony	Acad.1.2008; Acad.1.2012; Acad.1.2017; Acad.1.2022; Acad.1.2008; Acad.1.2022.
Disharmonies associated with armed conflict, displacement, and extractive activities	a) Precariousness b) Loss of territories c) Different forms of violence by irregular groups d) Spiritual vulnerability resulting from displacement	Acad.1.2017; Acad.1.2020; Acad.2.2014; Acad.3.2017; Acad.1.2020; Acad.1.2008; Doc.2.2016; Doc.5.2016; Acad.3.2017; Org.2.2020; Acad.1.2022; Press.1.2023; Doc.1.2023; Int.2.2024; Acad.1.2022; Int.2.2024.
Disharmonies due to interpersonal reasons:	a) Physical or psychological aggression by other community members b) Interpersonal problems such as infidelity, gossip, rivalries, and curses c) Loss of loved ones due to death or displacement	Acad.1.2008; Acad.1.2010; Acad.1.2012; Acad.1.2017; Acad.2.2017; Acad.3.2017; Acad.1.2017; Acad.1.2020; Acad.1.2022.
Loss of traditions, cultural clashes, and discrimination	a) Cultural clashes due to practices incorporated from Western culture and miscegenation b) Western pressures on traditional forms of leadership, influence of religious groups, c) Loss of jaibanás	Acad.01.2008; Acad.1.2010; Acad.1.2012; Doc.2.2016; Acad.1.2022; Acad.1.2017; Acad.3.2017; Doc.1.2019; Acad.1.2020; Doc.1.2023.

TABLE 4 Types and Causes as a professional and institutional category.

Category	Theme	References
Suicide as a direct result of the effects of displacement and the actions of different armed groups	This category represents the most common in the analysis and explanation of all available sources, and corresponds to the understanding of the effects of armed conflict and the displacement occurring due to the conflict as a fundamental explanatory factor for suicidal behavior. Predominant presence in the media may be associated with the importance of the armed conflict on the national agenda.	Acad.1.2008; Doc.2.2016; Doc.5.2016; Acad.3.2017; Org.2.2020; Acad.1.2022; Doc.1.2023; Doc.2.2023; Doc.1.2024; Doc.1.2024; Int.2.2024; (Press.1.2021; Press.2.2021; Press.3.2021; Press.2.2022; Press.1.2023; Press.3.2023; Press.4.2023; Press.2.2024; Press.3.2024; Press.4.2024)
Social and individual risk factors	The analysis of the motives is explained by general psychological theories that include risk factors such as premorbid conditions, substance use, problems in the primary family group, among others.	Acad.1.2017; Doc.2.2016; Doc.5.2016; Acad.3.2017.
Dissatisfaction of basic needs, cultural factors, and discrimination	This category encompasses economic, social, and cultural variables, as well as the effects of discrimination and racialization. They are usually presented separately from psychological variables. In some cases, they emphasize their differentiation from psychologized explanations	Acad.1.2012; Doc.2.2016; Doc.5.2016; Acad.3.2017

TABLE 5 Types of collective suicide.

Category	Theme	References
Suicide by contagion	It includes explicit expressions of imitating suicidal behavior, along with the desire to reunite with family members who have previously committed suicidal acts	Doc.5.2016; Acad.1.2017.
Suicide as political resistance to land dispossession and external threats	This category includes historical elements, beside practices documented among other Indigenous peoples in the country, such as the U'wa people.). More recently, Emberá leaders have made similar threats of collective suicide in response to potential territorial loss, as seen in the context of threats to the sacred Careperro hill	Acad.2.2014; Acad.3.2017; Acad.2.2021; Press.1.2007).
Suicide as an individual protest against injustices within the community	This category includes protests against mistreatment by other members, excessive disciplinary controls, and gender-based violence.	Acad.1.2012; Acad.1.2022.

municipality, and that's what's happening. Look what happened... it started in Riosucio, from Riosucio it spread to the municipality of Quibdó, from Quibdó it spread to the municipality of Juradó, and from Juradó it spread to the municipality of Alto Baudó. And it's spreading..." (Acad.1.2017).

In cases of suicide as an individual protest, suicide has an agentic interest in expressing discontent to the rest of the community. It is significant that reports in this category are associated with the suicide of women and that protests are often accompanied by elements of gender-based violence perpetrated by parents, authorities, and

husbands. Reports of anger and *aburrimiento* (“boredom”) in response to these events are common (Acad.1.2012; Acad.1.2022). An illustration from a young Emberá girl: “If someone does not let you get married, you kill yourself. With that, you scare them, but it’s also because a voice tells you to kill, because you get bored. Then, you start thinking a lot, you get that thinking in the night and then you say that you want to kill and say that you want to kill, when you get angry...” (Acad.1.2022).

3.2 Metacategory 2: intervention devices and strategies

This section presents findings related to intervention strategies and devices for suicidal behavior. While there are elements related to the case of Emberá youth, the literature reviewed focuses on the broader set of interventions for the indigenous group across the country, which implies a more general vision than one focused on developmental periods.

3.2.1 Structural, operational, and administrative difficulties

Reports indicate that Chocó, with more than half a million inhabitants, had only one psychiatrist for the entire department in 2023 (Int.2.2024). Institutional reports indicate 314 health service providers: 2% public and 98% private, with just one secondary-level hospital in Quibdó leaving most indigenous communities without access to specialized care (Doc.3.2023; Doc.5.2024; Int.2.2024). As a result, indigenous mental health needs are frequently ignored, unreported or insufficiently addressed (Org.2.2020; Acad.1.2021).

A professional describes the gap: “There is a fundamental problem, what they do in Bogotá are evidence-based routes, so they have the best existing knowledge and that is valid, but when you arrive, leave Bogotá and take this route to any other department in Colombia, you already have a problem because of the professionals’ actions, there is no one to do it. Vaupés has 3 psychologists and there are 46,000 people, Amazonas has 6 and the problem is that those 3 psychologists are in urban areas and 80% of the population locates in rural areas, then what route works there?” (Acad.2.2020).

Institutional documents also report this situation. With insufficient staff to monitor suicidal behavior, patients must be referred outside the department. Delays often prevent access, compromising follow-up and recovery. An agent from an educational institution states: “At the school, there is only one psychologist as a school counselor. Their role is to receive and refer. Whether they provide interventions is their own matter, not their responsibility. I believe there should be another psychologist. There are 1,300 students at the school, 200 at the boarding school, 200-something at the “Nicolásito” school, and 100-something at the other campus. Only one professional for 2,000 students or so” (Doc.2.2022).

Various administrative barriers that hinder their implementation’s effectiveness are also identified (Doc.4.2016; Doc.1.2020; Doc.2.2022; Acad.1.2023). These include restricted budgets, evaluation processes, and insufficient staff for projects that must be completed within 12 months (Doc.1.2020). Professionals are sometimes required to use their financial resources to cover certain elements necessary for the intervention (Doc.1.2020; Doc.2.2022). There are also extensive administrative procedures that reduce the time and quality of

interventions, and poor inter-institutional coordination delays suicide care pathways (Doc.2.2022). Access barriers for indigenous peoples also arise from language, as institutions lack translators or interpreters (Int.2.2024).

International Cooperation Organizations (ICOs) contribute to the humanitarian response in the territory. They provide general and mental health services, usually limited to emergencies: initial assessments, suicide risk identification, safety plans, and temporary support. Yet the professionals note that, despite interdisciplinary teams, institutional services remain limited by connectivity, language, and geographic barriers (Int.2.2024). Their actions, however, cannot overcome the structural difficulties. Thus, in meetings and committees, some international organizations state: “No care is provided for children and adolescents” (Doc.1.2023).

3.2.2 Monitoring limitations

Official documents monitoring suicide-related care policies are scarce. Only ICBF reports provide follow-up, specifically on suicide among indigenous youth in Vaupés (Doc.1.2020) and among the Guainía ethnic group (Doc.2.2022). This limited evidence makes it difficult to assess the efficiency and implementation of proposed models. Although all documents present explicit proposals regarding the need for community outreach, there is not enough evidence of its implementation (Doc.1.2020). One example is the technical guidelines for the prevention of suicidal behavior in the indigenous population, which advocate an intercultural approach, community participation and traditional practices (Doc.2.2016). While these guidelines emphasize strengthening families, communities, and individuals, it is not clear whether this strategy is being applied on a sustained basis, or even whether these guidelines have been implemented.

These limitations may contribute to indigenous groups’ criticism and rejection of health institutions due to deficiencies in service (Acad.3.2023), as well as to the limited impact of information and support campaigns run by both Health Secretariats and indigenous authorities (Acad.3.2017).

3.2.3 Challenges of interculturality

Since 1991, Colombia has been constitutionally recognized as a multiethnic and multicultural country, mandating the inclusion of interculturality in intervention proposals. This framework incorporates healthcare, ethno-education, prior consultation, safeguard plans, and differentiated protection mechanisms. Interculturality also values traditional therapeutic practices and requires participatory approaches involving indigenous communities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of services, with the aim of overcoming historical barriers of exclusion and discrimination (Doc.5.2016).

In 2010, indigenous leaders proposed creating the Indigenous Health System (Doc.1.2016), approved in 2014 by National Government. It is articulated with the general social security system in health and grounded on the strategic axes of indigenous peoples: (1) comprehensive laws of life, (2) autonomy, self-determination, and self-government, (3) territory and territoriality, and (4) complementarity for health care and “*Buen Vivir*” (Good Living) (Doc. 1.2016). However, professionals note that its development remains a debt of the national government (Doc.1.2016; Doc.1.2023).

Since 2016, several intervention designs have adopted a “cultural sensitivity” perspective with clear and structured strategies and interventions (Doc.1.2015; Doc.5.2016; Doc.2.2017; Doc.1.2020). The

document “Guidelines for the implementation of community health devices” (Doc.2.2020) highlights differential care devices as an opportunity for promoting mental health and preventing psychoactive substance consumption. Yet, implementation faces obstacles in communities affected by armed conflict (Doc.1.2015; Doc.5.2016; Doc.2.2017; Doc.2.2020).

Thus, despite the recommendations established in Colombia’s health and interculturality regulations, there are situations in which care systems do not accommodate interculturality. This can be illustrated by the suicide registration and alert service official reporting system. While the system exists and represents a potentially useful strategy, it is inadequate for the early reporting and follow-up of cases in indigenous communities, either due to geographically dispersed locations, connectivity, language, or the lack of intercultural dialogue on risk and protective factors in mental health (Doc.5.2016; Doc.1.2020).

Despite regulatory advances, health systems often fail to accommodate interculturality. For example, the suicide registration and alert system provided by the Ministry of Health. While potentially useful, it is inadequate for indigenous contexts due to geographic dispersion, connectivity, language barriers, and lack of intercultural dialogue (Doc.5.2016; Doc.1.2020). Although there has been a desire and interest in generating this dialogue, in practice, it has not been easy to achieve this objective. As an ICBF report observes: “The design of protocols, routes, plans, and programs are conceived with compliance in mind with institutional requirements. This means that, upon reaching the communities, they must respond to the operational and political needs that dictate institutional work” (Doc.1.2020; Acad.2.2020).

This is reflected in subtle elements, such as scheduling community meetings during office hours, ignoring the fact that these times correspond precisely to the communities’ daily activities. These difficulties are exacerbated by language differences. In the case of the Emberá Chamí ethnic group, they retain their native language, which is a blend of dialects from other indigenous ethnic groups, making it very distinctive. Although it gives it an important intangible value compared to other communities, it makes communication even more complex (Acad.2.2023). Related to this issue, it is striking that the clinical practice guide provided by the Ministry of Health to address the issue of suicide in Colombia states the need for an interpreter only in cases of language difficulties, without considering the cultural subtleties that the native language entails in the socio-emotional management of suicide (Doc. 2.2017).

Nevertheless, some interculturality grounded initiatives exist. One example is a support program with indigenous women, combining cultural practices such as weaving with the co-creation of radio messages in native languages to promote harmony, life, and well-being in the context of displacement (NGO.2.2023).

3.2.4 Contradictions between professional and native perspectives

Significant tensions exist between professional views of suicide and indigenous interpretations. It occurs even with interventions carried out from culturally focused perspectives. This is evidenced in the following comment: “It was found that the families of some Tikuna indigenous people who have committed suicide view this event as an evil or a curse (...); while the participant from [An Organization with

an Intercultural Approach] believes that suicide should not be viewed as a negative aspect; it is owing to their worldview, for death is viewed as something positive.” A contrast is also observed between opinions related to the influence of education on potential suicide prevention. While community interviewees interpret it as having a positive influence, the interveners view it as negative because it violates their community’s traditions and customs (Acad.2.2020). This can also be seen in the evaluation of care routes: community members reported serious limitations in an intervention, while organizations claim 85–95% effectiveness (Acad.2.2020).

All of these elements foreground the difficulties institutional practices face in integrating indigenous elements into their interventions. Despite the evident positive intentions and clarity of the programs, there are various obstacles that institutional mechanisms generate in producing culturally sensitive interventions. In this regard, one government institution explains: “The institutional rejection of traditional indigenous child rearing and care practices hinders open dialogue between institutions and communities about these practices and other sensitive issues such as abandonment, violence, suicide, and community conflicts” (Doc.1.2020). Another report indicated: “The professionals forge they are working with the Emberá population and do not use appropriate language to be understood or to achieve the objective of the activity” (Doc.1.2023).

The journey has involved the critique and the transformation of interventions and models based on “imposed needs” in processes such as schooling and professionalization outside the framework of the groups’ worldview, clashes in the understandings of suicide, as well as psychological emphases reported in previous years (Acad.3.2017).

3.2.5 Intervention focal points focused on conflict and displacement

The initial presence of humanitarian response organizations in the Chocó department was due to the continued forced displacement scenarios caused by the violence of the armed conflict and the presence of illegal armed groups (Acad.1.2008); thus far, “there are armed confrontations in the territory, which has resulted in displacement and confinement of communities, and restrictions on daily activities” (Doc.6.2024). Many territories continue to be affected by the armed groups’ actions, causing internal displacement of communities. Most of these displacements reach the urban center of Quibdó, capital of the department of Chocó. This local context is also affected by the presence of armed and criminal groups and a weak institutional response structure in health, education, and protection for the affected population. Therefore, basic humanitarian response actions are continuously activated (Int.2.2024).

For this reason, a significant proportion of institutional literature rightly focuses its intervention on elements inherent to the dynamics of conflict and displacement. While this focus is justified, it can overshadow other factors also relevant to the problem of suicide in communities. This is the case with internal conflicts within social groups, where different forms of tension can be seen between traditional authorities, new leaders, and youth groups (Acad.1.2017), also in the manifestations of gender-based violence and disciplinary strategies (Acad.1.2008; Doc.1.2022; Press.2.2023), as well as different forms of rationalized suffering associated with discrimination and the narrowing of realistic opportunities for improvement and well-being for younger groups (Acad.2.2014; Acad.1.2014; Acad.1.2012).

Sometimes, it is also possible to observe that some indigenous organizations and informants also emphasize armed conflict and displacement as the cause of suicides, omitting elements of their worldview (Org.1.2016). The importance of armed conflict and displacement is even more evident in press articles, which frequently report them as the root cause of the suicide epidemic (Press.1.2021; Press.2.2021; Press.3.2021; Press.2.2022; Press.1.2023; Press.3.2023; Press.4.2023; Press.2.2024; Press.3.2024; Press.4.2024).

3.2.6 Multilevel intervention needs

Documents highlight different strategies for planning interventions. These include the existence of a national mental health observatory, regulatory advances in interculturality, guidelines for incorporating an intercultural approach into human talent training processes for the health care of indigenous peoples, ethnoeducation, regulatory guidelines for the protection of indigenous peoples exposed to manifestations of violence due to armed conflict, recognition of autonomy in their governments, and protection of territories (Doc.1.2020; Doc.2.2022; Acad.2.2020; Doc.1.2021; Doc.3.2024). Models focused on psychosocial intervention, productive projects, and strengthening of Indigenous organizations also have been documented (Acad. 1.2008); nevertheless, a major challenge is the coordination of multilevel interventions that allow the development of actions on the material, social, and psychological levels with optimal utilization of the communities and institutional resources. An Indigenous organization expressed this in the following terms: “The attention we demand must be comprehensive and coordinated among institutions, Indigenous organizations, and their Councils. Health care must be supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, the ICBF, and the DPS; with productive projects that allow for the achievement and guarantee of food sovereignty, the Ministry of Transportation must guarantee the opening of rural roads in some areas” (Org.1.2016).

The importance of coordination was also raised by an Indigenous leader from the Departmental Indigenous Women’s Program, who emphasized the importance of cooperation between organizations coordinating projects and programs with Indigenous organizations. In some cases, they arrive unannounced in the territories and without adequate professionals (Doc.1.2023).

Some institutional documents reveal different efforts in this direction. A report of experiences with the Guainía ethnic group reveals a real interest in integrating traditional and Western medicine. It states: “The departmental hospital has expressed interest in including Indigenous authorities and traditional doctors in the planning of health interventions. Indeed, it has created spaces for intercultural encounters where the needs of traditional doctors and midwives have been heard, and joint planning for the coordination of health actions has begun.” However, despite efforts to coordinate health interventions, the same document states that “the recognition of traditional medicine and its coordination with Western medicine has not been achieved” (Doc.2.2022).

A proposal in this direction can be seen in some attempts to understand suicidal behavior in the Vapués communities, which integrate structural elements (such as racism, colonialism, and modernization) with processes of breaking cultural norms and dialogue between otherness, in-group elements, and elements of one’s worldview (Acad.1.2020).

Regarding youth groups, it is documented the importance of interventions that address their lack of life prospects and future

interests and opportunities for dialogue with elders and family figures (Acad.1.2012), along with the development of activities that strengthen community participation and belonging have been documented. As one Emberá youth leader commented: “Young people feel alone” (Doc.1.2023).

3.3 Metacategory 3: suicide, racism, and exclusion

3.3.1 Victimization

By 2015, 94.0% of victimizing incidents were forced displacement, with a higher incidence than the general population (Doc.3.2016). Chocó ranked fifth nationwide in victim percentage in 2015 and rose second in 2023 (Doc.5.2023).

In health, although the Emberá are not the municipality with the highest maternal and prenatal mortality, they ranked first in Mandatory Notifiable Events (19.95% between 2009–2014) (Doc.3.2016). The department also showed the country’s highest risk indicators—low birth care, limited prenatal care, few licensed health centers, and fewer beds—meeting 70% of significantly high-risk indicators, likely linked to isolation (Doc.1.2018).

In education, 40% of Emberá people are illiterate; 51.2% completed only primary school; and 3.2% of those over 25 report no educational attainment (Doc.2.2021). Socioeconomic reports place Indigenous peoples—along with Afro-Colombians—at the bottom of wealth distribution: 57.8% are in the lowest quintile (Doc.2.2015; Doc.1.2018). No other group reports worse conditions. These data reveal sustained inequities that heighten psychosocial risk for youth.

3.3.2 Barriers to registration and visibility

Chocó region is one of the Indigenous regions with the highest pattern of non-random census omissions in 2005 and 2018 (Doc.3.2022). It is likewise one of the regions with major coordination difficulties in health, education, and security assistance (Org.2.2020; Acad. 1.2021), which is frequently interpreted as omissions by the State. As noted: “The State shows no interest and fails to comply with the obligations of victims of displacement due to violence. There are delays in restoring rights and guaranteeing well-being or priority protection, causing difficult situations for Indigenous people” (Acad.3.2017).

These factors are compounded by limited access to isolated or unwilling communities (Doc.2.2015); possible record-keeping failure, as reported by indigenous Tikuna people, who point out that the police do not record reported suicides (Acad.2.2020), and culturally based information omissions, as occur among the Wiwa people, who believe that the disease should not be discussed (Org.1.2020). Diverse locations and contexts also shape understanding. Thus, it can be seen how the Emberá Katío place particular importance on armed conflict as a trigger for the suicide epidemic, while the Emberá Chamí emphasize disharmony (Acad.1.2022).

These barriers hinder reporting and, thus, intervention design. An example can be seen in the Forensic Epidemiological Alert System for 2023 (Doc.1.2025). When examining the available tool and comparing it with the report from Indigenous organizations for the first months of 2023, the following significant differences are found (see [Table 6](#)).

Even if all the reports from the Epidemiological Alert System for 2023 are added, the total number of reports would be only 13 cases,

TABLE 6 Comparison of suicides January – April 2023.

Epidemiological alert system		Report indigenous organizations	
Suicides	Municipalities	Suicides	Municipalities
5	Quibdó, Istmina	22	Quibdó, Carmen del Atrato, Bojayá, Nuqui, Lloró, Andagoya, Bagadó, Alto Baudó, Medio Baudó, Bahía Solano
Total cases: 5	Total municipalities: 2	Total cases: 22	Total Municipalities: 10

which corresponds to only 59% of the total number of cases reported by Indigenous organizations in the first four months of the year (Doc.4.2023 and Doc.1.2023). This pattern was repeated from 2010 to 2014, when Forensic Medicine reported only one suicide in a Dobiá reservation, where 14 suicides and more than 150 attempts occurred until 2015 (Acad.1.2017).

Underreporting is widely documented (Doc.2.2018; Acad.1.2022; Press.1.2024; Acad.1.2024). The Constitutional Court's T-302/2017 ruling included registration limits in the "Unconstitutional State of Affairs" (Doc1.2017). In Amazonas, only one in three Indigenous suicides was reported between 2008–2016 (Acad.1.2024). This element constitutes a primary and determining factor in invisibility.

3.3.3 Tensions, interactions, and acculturation

The history of Indigenous peoples and Western culture is marked by different forms of material and symbolic violence. This relationship has developed a dynamic process of confrontation between worldviews, as well as different forms of legitimate appropriation by Indigenous groups. In the matter of suicidal behavior, this element can be seen in the Emberá case from different angles. On one hand, in the penetration of the Judeo-Christian religious imaginary regarding dimensions of good and evil (Acad.1.2008), modifying the understanding of spiritual elements with diabolical ones, along with changes in the understanding of free unions between young people (Acad.1.2008; Acad.1.2017; Acad.3.2017).

It is also possible to document the impact of Western discourse on the part of the State and the different organizations with whom there have been interactions and different forms of dialogue, as corresponds to the incorporation of the notion of a "suicide epidemic," as well as categories of insanity and mental illness (Acad.1.2008).

Another notable element of these complex interactions with foreign agents and groups is the manifestation of fears of miscegenation, perceived by the elders as a form of contamination of their own group in the face of new demographic patterns (Acad.1.2017; Acad.1.2022; Acad.1.2008). This makes it possible to document different tensions, sometimes associated with anxieties about racial contamination or changes in cultural patterns, among members of the Emberá community that directly affect the younger groups. This is manifested in the negative perception of miscegenation among Emberá youth with whites and Afro-descendants (Acad.1.2008), changes in the roles of power and success, shifting from the elders to teachers, professionals, and politicians (Acad.1.2017), the new organizations of the cabildos and their tensions with traditional authorities or "heads of families" (Acad.1.2012). It is significant that some myths, as well as the reports of some affected by *Jai Tontina*, report that the *jai* has an Afro-descendant's physiognomy (Acad.1.2017; Acad.1.2022), besides, it is documented as sinful to have sexual relations with Afro-Colombians and *chilapos* (mestizos) (Acad.1.2008).

Thus, it is possible to affirm that it is a community in which there are different patterns of assimilation and tensions towards other ethnic groups, as well as greater or lesser interaction with urban spaces and institutions, which affects subjective processes, influences, and expectations of well-being. At times, Emberá organizations explicitly demand State intervention and accountability for unmet constitutional duties (Org.1.2016; Org.2.2020; Org.1.2024; Doc.1.2023).

3.3.4 Subtle prejudice and other forms of racialization

Prejudice and discrimination against indigenous groups in general, particularly the Emberá group, appear to be marked by dynamics of subtle prejudice and forms of symbolic, institutional, and structural rationalization.

Research on prejudice towards Indigenous groups in Colombia is scarce, and none specifically targets the Emberá. Searches on suicide among Emberá youth show low frequencies (Acad.1.2025), suggesting limited interest. General studies report fewer negative stereotypes towards Indigenous peoples than Afro-descendants; some positive traits appear (cultural richness, introversion) (Acad.2.2012). When prejudice surfaces, it is often subtle (Acad.1.2019). As an Indigenous artist states: "So many cases of racial discrimination, invisible or reported privately or publicly, for more than five centuries, and still today we experience subtle signs of racism" (Acad.1.2014).

All of these elements seem to correspond more to an action of disinterest and invisibility. As the aforementioned visual and Indigenous artist states: "In a country that ignores the geography, history, and past of the Indigenous people, it is an easy way out to associate a single feathered Indigenous person with all the Indigenous people in the country and to confuse the specificities and individualities of each population lightly, without respect, without appreciation, and in a biased and irresponsible manner: it does not matter in a country that wants nothing to do with Indigenous peoples" (Acad.1.2014).

However, this profile of invisibility and disinterest seems to change dramatically in contexts where social groups are directly exposed to protests and displacement of Indigenous groups to population centers, situations in which significant elements of racialization, dehumanization, and stigmatization of Indigenous groups emerge, as documented in public and social media reports regarding protests by the Emberá group in urban centers (Press.1.2022). Young groups are aware of this dynamic, experiencing significant tensions between the appropriation of Western culture's positive objects, such as money, clothing, and the privileges of city life but fear ridicule over Spanish and discrimination (Acad.1.2012).

Regarding the dynamics of structural and institutional racialization, the Colombian Constitutional Court has determined the "widespread, unreasonable, and disproportionate violation of the children's fundamental rights of an indigenous ethnic group, caused by the structural failures of national and territorial entities" (Doc.1.2017).

In one of the documents analyzed, an informant expressed it in this phrase: “It is better to die quickly and not to feel so much misery and loneliness and suffer so many blows and insults” (Acad.1.2012).

3.3.5 Internalized racism, self-deprecating mythical narratives and victim blaming

Exploring self-perceptions, it is possible to find various pieces of evidence of internalized racism. While it can not be claimed that they explain suicidal behavior, they can certainly be considered an important risk factor.

In an interview conducted by one of this text’s authors with an Indigenous woman settled in a town in the Colombian Pacific, she reported: “I say that there are people who think we are cool as Indigenous people, they think our culture is cool, but when I was little I did not know my origins, I felt like I wasn’t part of it (...) I thought of myself more as Black than Indigenous. As I grew up, I saw how beautiful women wore the *paruma* and the necklaces, but I said: I’m not going to dress like that, I’m not going to let them look at my chest, until one day I realized that I was from the people (...) I started liking all of that, the way of living, the food, the paintings, the clothing, everything until I became part of all this” (Int.1.2024).

An example of self-deprecating elements can be found in the myth reported by some Emberá peoples about the difference in poverty between white men and the Emberá. This myth, reed in the Emberá group’s Jaikerazabi community but also present with variations in the Dobidá group, describes the origin of the Emberá’s poverty as the result of their laziness in performing the tasks assigned by the god Karagabí (Acad.2.2024).

When an informant was asked if the indigenous people had been punished for the actions of some of its members, he replied: “Yes. And so, in terms of the Emberá, in terms of the elders, it’s nature itself that’s taking its toll. It’s an element of restoring order. It’s necessary to return to harmony. So the elders, the elders, are saying: There’s a whole lesson here: either we return to the path our Ancoré showed us, or this is the end of the Indigenous people, of all Indigenous people. Physically and culturally” (Acad.1.2017).

Another element that could include victim-blaming processes is references to divine abandonment for the actions of the people themselves. An example is an Emberá teacher’s statement that “For failure to obey divine norms, God has abandoned us, and that is why humanity is allowing evil to rule” (Acad.2.2017). A *jaibaná* reported in his view that the suicides occurred “because of a punishment from God. In that community, many people were killed, and it was said that some members of that family belonged to the guerrillas or the paramilitaries; that is why God punished them and sent *jai* to take their lives” (Acad.1.2008). For his part, an Emberá Chamí teacher stated in an interview that, for disobeying divine norms, “God has abandoned us, and that is why humanity is allowing evil to rule” (Acad.2.2017).

4 Discussion

This collective case study examined suicidal behavior among Emberá youth using primary and secondary sources, with contributions from different social actors. The data analyzed indicate that suicide patterns among the Emberá differ significantly from other Indigenous groups in Colombia and from the general

population. These patterns do not suggest a uniform process but rather a distinctive trend of theoretical and practical relevance. Notably, suicide is concentrated among youth, with the number of women equaling or surpassing that of men, and it presents identifiable physical, somatic, and psychological manifestations such as *Jai de Tontina*, *Wawamia*, and *Pensar mal*, which the group organizes according to its worldview. Variations in motives and precipitating elements exist even among families located in different territories. Together, these elements highlight a specificity that requires a situated understanding. One possible explanatory route lies in [Devereux’s \(1973\)](#) notion of “ethnic disorder,” in which a cultural group interprets symptoms, causes, and evolution according to its own frame of reference, rendering behavior “not only predictable, but especially predictable in terms of the cultural frame of reference” (p. 71). Although such disorders can be classified within modern nosological strategies, their structure and function remain cultural. This is crucial given the professional tendency to interpret suicidal behavior within Western frameworks, thereby overlooking the cultural functions it represents for the Emberá.

A second area of discussion concerns the causes and types of suicide found in the data. Comparing native accounts with those of professionals and institutions reveals important similarities, especially regarding victimization. Alongside historical inequalities, the Emberá face armed violence, displacement, and the loss of ancestral territories ([de Sepúlveda López Mesa, 2008](#); [Comisión de la Verdad, 2020](#)), as well as extractive economies linked to mining ([Urrego-Mendoza et al., 2017](#); [Bello and Rangel, 2002](#)). These factors expose them to precarious health, food security, and safety conditions ([Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, 2016](#); [Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social and Organización Panamericana de la Salud, 2016](#)). Both native and professional perspectives also point to disrupted traditions, compromised subsistence, and emerging threats such as acculturation, miscegenation, internal conflicts, harsh disciplinary practices, gender violence, and the burden of internalized racism, self-blame, and hopelessness, all of which heighten the risk of suicidal behavior ([Cisneros Rivera, 2024](#)).

Where the perspectives diverge is in the interpretation of *disharmony* as a native category. For the Emberá, suicidal behavior is explained through interconnected spiritual, social, economic, and environmental variables that challenge Western categories. From this perspective, disharmony encompasses causes ranging from armed conflict, displacement, and extractive activities (associated with precariousness, loss of territory, violence by irregular groups, and spiritual vulnerability) to interpersonal tensions (such as physical or psychological aggression, infidelity, gossip, rivalries, and curses), as well as losses related to tradition, cultural clashes, and discrimination (pressures from Western leadership models, the influence of religious groups, and the decline of *jaibanás*). The potential triggers identified operate at different levels of impact and through distinct pathways of action, yet these nuances risk being obscured when subsumed under overly broad categorizations of *disharmony* by professionals and institutions. An indigenous informant provides an insight into the variety of elements that can coexist in the decision to commit a suicidal act within the community. In her words: “She started with that *tontina*, that *jai* that would not leave her alone. Headache, her bones feeling like they were being squeezed... well, like she was sick with malaria, that’s all. But then she started with that thought. She *pensaba mal* (thought badly) and *pensaba mal* (thought badly). She told me she

missed her children a lot (...) that there was nothing to eat, what were we going to do (...) that life wasn't worth living like this...”.

By professionals and institutions, analysis of interventions revealed two main sets of results. The first concerns structural and design-related difficulties, including operational, administrative, and monitoring limitations. These issues undermine the effectiveness of actions, even when interventions display theoretical and methodological rigor. While institutional discourses often acknowledge inequity, responses remain largely symbolic, reproducing vulnerability.

The second set relates to intercultural challenges: contradictions between professional and native perspectives, tensions in contextualization, and differences in priorities, particularly in addressing armed and historical violence. It is important to note that these tensions arise even when professionals and institutions demonstrate a genuine interest in cultural sensitivity. This underscores the need to review analytical categories, with particular emphasis on exploring the group's perspectives, sensibilities, and needs.

A key theme is the fragility of multilevel interventions. As Thomazinho (2024) has also noted, these difficulties appear to be linked to limited coordination among different actors, a situation that ultimately reinforces institutional racism. Another factor shaping this dynamic is the challenge of addressing intersectional issues; challenges that, nonetheless, represent unavoidable commitments in the development of interventions in these contexts.

A good example of the challenges of multi-level intervention can be seen in this comment from an indigenous informant: “The attention we demand must be comprehensive and coordinated among institutions, Indigenous organizations, and their Councils. Health care must be supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, the ICBF [Colombian Institute of Family Welfare], and the DPS [Administrative Department for Social Prosperity]; with productive projects that allow for the achievement and guarantee of food sovereignty”. Although the link between agriculture and mental health may not be obvious to a Western audience, it is coherent within the Indigenous interpretation.

Another notable element that emerges from the analysis of the interventions is the limited presence of young people's voices in the interventions. A professional from an international institution expressed himself harshly when pointed out: “No care is provided for children and adolescents.” Although this statement may require qualification, evidence of interventions effectively addressing young people's needs and expectations remains limited.

Emerging categories associated with racism and exclusion can also be grouped into two sets. The first involves mechanisms of institutional racism, including victimization, barriers to registration and visibility, and processes of acculturation. The second reflects the direct psychosocial effects of racialization, such as subtle prejudice, internalized racism, self-deprecating mythical narratives, and victim-blaming. Although further empirical evidence is needed, the findings reveal consistent reports of self-denigration and internalized racism, along with heightened suffering linked to vulnerable conditions. One informant's account illustrates this point: “It is better to die quickly and not feel so much misery and loneliness and suffer so many blows and insults”.

There are not any major references to contrast these findings and analyses with respect to Institutional Racism and Psychosocial Exclusion in the study population. However, the existence of elements regarding vulnerability and the long history of effects is consistent. Our proposal here is to view violence in its different forms and

invisibility as key elements of analysis that can be integrated into different models of suicidal behavior. We share the proposal of Restrepo (2009), for whom the different forms of violence (and, in this case, also invisibility), far from representing “simple anomalies,” correspond to constitutive elements of relations of inequality. In this case, this inequality is the result of a long historical process regarding the Emberá people as a marginalized group.

An analysis based on institutional racism, framed through the metaphor of “the rules of the game” (Romero, 1998), helps to understand how institutions reproduce racialization while appearing to recognize inequity. As North (1990) suggests, institutions establish the rules and obligations of human interaction. Thus, although official discourse specifies routes, recommendations, and mechanisms within legality, actions often fail to mitigate inequities. Racism and exclusion are therefore expressed not in explicit discrimination, but in diffuse and fragmented interventions, precarious implementation, and limited integration of Indigenous voices.

These difficulties interact with other factors such as the presence of illegal armed groups, geographic isolation, and limited human and material resources, which restrict effective responses and reinforce social distance. As Aguilar-Idañez and Buraschi (2016) argue, “physical distance is inversely proportional to social distance” (p. 30), and humanitarian approaches often extend compassion without assuming moral responsibility (Buraschi and Aguilar-Idañez, 2019). This generates a paradox: while Indigenous peoples are sometimes recognized with compassion and symbolic worth (Ojeda and González, 2012), closer interaction often triggers racialization and fear, as they occur in interactions with these groups in large cities where they sometimes go to protest (Cuitiva, 2022). The Emberá thus embody a paradoxical position, simultaneously rendered invisible through isolation and subjected to discrimination through proximity. Despite frequent references to racism and exclusion, these categories are rarely translated into concrete strategies, which limits opportunities for transformation. As Tuesca-Molina et al. (2019) note, biases in Indigenous health research can also perpetuate harm.

These findings highlight the need for interventions that move beyond recognition of intercultural realities to achieve substantive impact. Multidimensional interventions are essential, given the complex conditions of psychosocial exclusion (Rodríguez, 2021). However, multidimensionality itself presents theoretical and technical challenges that cannot be solved merely by involving multiple actors. True multidimensionality requires grounding in justice and must begin with ensuring minimum conditions of security and sustainable livelihoods, balancing macrosocial determinants of vulnerability with microsocial ones. A useful parallel is the Latin American tradition of community psychology, where participation is understood as the construction of shared knowledge with epistemological, political, theoretical, and methodological foundations (Montero, 2006; Montero, 2011a, 2011b).

For Emberá youth, one particularly promising path lies in the development of stronger community education alternatives. By granting youth a central role in their design and implementation, such initiatives could both problematize the structural and racialized violence they face and generate realistic alternatives for self-realization in accordance with their values, while also facilitating access to the material and symbolic benefits of society.

One practical implication of this study is the need to critically examine the use of general social and psychological concepts. Armed

conflict illustrates this point: whereas a Western perspective might assume a direct causal link between stressors, Emberá interpretations connect it not only to violence and confinement but also to the symbolic loss of territory, rituals, and subsistence, as well as to forced recruitment, gender-based violence, and heightened generational tensions. For professionals, the challenge is to engage with these diverse meanings of disharmony rather than reduce them to a single explanatory category. This is especially relevant for understanding displacement as a key determinant of suicidal behavior. While its central role should not be overlooked, analyzing displacement in relation to the multiple disharmonies it produces at social, community, and individual levels may foster broader possibilities for intercultural dialogue.

A second implication concerns the incorporation of the identified indicators into the design of multidimensional interventions capable of addressing the intersectional and multi-problem challenges faced by the population.

Regarding public policies, it is essential to strengthen internal auditing and monitoring strategies that support the development of interventions which are not only culturally sensitive but also responsive to the population's real needs and sustainable over time.

This study has several limitations. The main limitation is the predominance of secondary sources and the inability to recruit informants from the communities who had directly experienced personal or family exposure to suicidal behavior. This limitation also involves the difficulty of achieving a dynamic understanding of the data, a goal constrained by the characteristics of the study design. A second limitation concerns data quality, as some sources were vague and difficult to compare. Another limitation is the lack of data and analysis of suicide attempts, which had to be discarded due to quality issues.

Beyond these limitations, there are also several potential risks of bias. The first relates to the limited availability of previous empirical research on the population, which hinders the establishment of reliable comparison patterns. A second source of bias stems from the impossibility of subjecting the collected material to processes of analysis, validation, and discussion with members of the Emberá community. Finally, studies of this kind inevitably carry risks of overgeneralization and ethnocentric bias on the part of the authors".

Taken together, these limitations and risks highlight the need for more robust and participatory approaches in future research. First, it is necessary to deepen understanding of the cultural frameworks through which Emberá youth interpret suicidal behavior, in order to strengthen prevention, support, and intervention strategies. Second, studies and interventions must be designed to address the lack of coordination and the shortcomings in responding to intersectional challenges.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because the data used in this research include both primary and secondary sources. Primary data involving human subjects, collected

prior to the start of the study, were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology at Universidad del Valle, Cali, Colombia (no. CEIFP-47-24) in response to a formal request for approval made by APS. Primary data collected during the course of the study included signed informed consent. Secondary data were obtained from publicly available documentary sources. All procedures were conducted in accordance with local legislation and institutional requirements. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article because the human data pre-existed the research, resulting from intervention activities. The remaining data are documentary.

Author contributions

PER: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. APS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. CC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

APS works for Heartland Alliance International Colombia as senior specialist in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support. The organization did not provide funding for this study.

The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Glossary

Aburrimiento (also aburrido or burrido) - Characterized by isolation from the community, loss of interest, and hypersomnia.

Jai - Refers to spirits or supernatural forces that can influence people's lives in a positive or negative way.

Jaibaná - Tribal doctor. He embodies a figure of spiritual, wise, and moral nature. His power can be used for good or evil.

Jaibaná Jai - Spirits imposed by a jaibaná.

Jai de Tontina - Possession of a male spirit in the body and spirit of a woman. It is usually attributed to spells cast by jaibanás. Characterized by "boredom" and/or anger.

Loquera - Informal expression in Spanish for "madness." It can present different types: dancer, singer, fighter, talkative, or mute.

Pensar mal - Informal expression in Spanish for "To think badly." An ideational state of fixed ideas, often associated with painful or traumatic experiences.

Revolcadera - Informal expression in Spanish, characterized by a state of psychomotor agitation.

Wawamia - It can be understood as a spirit that induces suicide. It also corresponds to manifestations similar to seizures.



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Say my name: name-based microaggressions as a function of white cultural hegemony in South African educational contexts

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In most African societies, particularly among Black people, names are central to people's identity and are central to how young people develop a sense of self. In the post-colonial-apartheid context of South Africa, which we argue is largely governed by white cultural hegemony, the occurrence of varying subtle forms of racism is inevitable. Name-based microaggressions are one defining feature of the post-colonial-apartheid white cultural hegemonic context, specifically within educational contexts. In this article, we illustrate how white cultural hegemony gives rise to name-based microaggressions, perpetuated towards Black youth in the South African educational context, mostly by educators. We conducted eight (8) semi-structured interviews with Black youths based in a South African university, who had experiences of name-based microaggressions. The interviews were analysed using Thematic Analysis, yielding three (3) themes: name mispronunciations and Black names as an inconvenience, name-based microaggressions in the educational context, and the effects of name-based microaggressions. We conclude by showing how name-based microaggressions can have deleterious effects on the identity development of youths who are victims, affecting the ways in which they view themselves in relation to their culture, as well as the relationship they have with peers and educators. This article highlights the need for inclusive educational environments that honour students' identities to avoid the perpetuation of racism in the educational context, and the associated effects of the occurrence of name-based microaggressions within the education space.

KEYWORDS

name-based microaggressions, white cultural hegemony, south African educational context, name mispronunciations and black names as an inconvenience, name based microaggressions in the educational context, effects of name based microaggressions

Introduction

The 2024 election in the United States of America (USA) brought to the fore several issues related to how racism, within a global white cultural hegemony, can manifest in various ways—least of which is what [Srinivasan \(2019\)](#) has termed name-based microaggressions. Name-based microaggressions are subtle, sometimes unconscious, and often disguised as unintentional mispronunciations, *kin-enhancing* renaming of the racialised other (see [Kohli and Solórzano, 2012](#)). In many instances, this racialised Other is *the Black object* of the (white) colonial gaze (see [Musila, 2017](#)). Kamala Harris, who was the presidential candidate in the USA, endured mispronunciations of her name, which was often positioned by the perpetrators

as unintentional, but in other instances intentionally done to—as [Manganyi \(1984\)](#) argued of racism—‘make strange’. This mispronunciation of Kamala’s name is not necessarily new within the USA, but it is also not a phenomenon that is particularly unique to that context. By and large, the mispronunciation of Black people’s names is an entrenched practice of colonial misrecognition that exists in most, if not all, places where there has been colonial rule (see [Srinivasan, 2019](#)).

The practice of renaming people has a long history, particularly in places where colonisation accompanied by slavery, has existed. For instance, during slavery, many Black slaves who were brought into America were renamed by their white slave owners ([Inscoc, 1983](#)). This practice was true across the slave owning world, wherein slaves were renamed to reflect their masters’ culture, or as [Hawthorne et al. \(2025, p.1\)](#) explicated, “[t]he power to name is the power to claim, which is why naming and renaming practices seem central to enslaved people and their descendants.” The renaming practices during slavery do not merely reflect a practice of ease of recognition but rather were driven by an attempt at forced assimilation and indoctrination with Western-colonial culture.

In contemporary times, the practice of renaming has morphed into name-based microaggressions through mispronunciations, nicknaming or through Black people being given Christian—read white—names, which has been historically prevalent in the colonised world ([Cakata and Ramose, 2021](#)). In South Africa, there are many examples, perhaps for most South Africans even commonplace, of instances of renaming and mispronunciation of Black names dating back to slavery—see example of Kroata ([Conradie, 1997](#)). As is with the example of Kroata, because of the enmeshed relationship between colonial rule and Christianity, the church and missionary schools appear to be central in this practice. Famous examples of racialised renaming include struggle heroes against colonialism and apartheid, who were renamed as they entered the missionary school system, either for the convenience of the white teachers or simply because their names were deemed inadequate ([de Klerk and Lagonikos, 2014](#)). The most popular example of being renamed, is the global icon Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela ([Soudien et al., 2014](#)), who was not named Nelson until he entered missionary school, and Albertina Nontsikelelo Sisulu, the anti-apartheid and women’s rights activist, who chose the name Albertina from a list of names as she entered school ([van Niekerk and Freedman, 2023](#)).

The renaming of Black children and the mispronunciation of Black names is linked to the infra-humanising of African indigenous languages and cultures, which continues to maintain white dominance. This is particularly conspicuous within education, both basic and higher, as [Dlamini \(2024, 2020\)](#) maintained that language remains a central component of how Black people are continuously marginalised within disciplines such as Psychology. In the larger South African context, [Cakata and Ramose \(2021\)](#) maintained that the de-linguaging of Africans was perpetuated within “[c]hurch and schools [which] were instrumental in this replacement by demanding that indigenous children should have, what they labelled, Christian names. This took away the right of parents to name their children according to their cultural norms” (p. 488).

In post-colonial societies such as South Africa, where churches, schools, and government cannot demand that a child be given a white Christian name, the remnants of colonial practices persist today. While during colonialism and apartheid the practice was to have a

second name, such as Nelson, the present-day practices can be seen in what [Cakata and Ramose \(2021, p.488\)](#) identified as Black names assuming a Christian characteristic “such as Nkosikhona (which is a translation of the name Emmanuel) and Nolufefe (a translation of the name Grace)”. [Ngubane and Thabethe \(2013\)](#) attested that naming practices are heavily influenced by socio-political factors, with changes in personal naming practices often reflecting these macro-structural factors, rather than personal culture. Here, we are not meaning to show the problems of the adoption of Christian names. Rather, what is pertinent to this article is the occurrence of nicknaming, renaming, and mispronunciations of Black names that appear to be commonplace, and their consequential experiences of microaggressions. These forms of name-based microaggressions, appear to be influenced by the intransigence of white cultural hegemony, which [Dlamini \(2024, p. 5\)](#) explained as being when “whiteness is the standard to which Black [people] tacitly consent and through which those who enter the [education system] become integrated. The consent is often cajoled, coerced and at times “freely” given, without regard for whether this has a negative impact in society.” White culturally hegemonic societies resemble in many ways their colonial predecessors in that they, consciously or otherwise, tend ‘other’ cultures that do not fit into the dominant forms of whiteness.

Microaggressions in general are a form of racism, as with more overt forms of racism, often have negative effects on the recipient ([Nepton et al., 2025](#)). The cumulative effect of the onslaught of subtle and overt racism may result in trauma for recipients of racism ([Canham, 2018; Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Srinivasan, 2019; Sue et al., 2007](#)). The experience of racism over time serves an “othering” function by white hegemonic structures in society, communicating that the recipient does not belong ([Kohli and Solórzano, 2012](#)). Racism and Name-Based Microaggressions (NBMs), in turn, have a deleterious effect on cohesive identity development and self-esteem ([Canham, 2018; Kim and Lee, 2011; Nadal et al., 2014a; Nadal et al., 2014b; Srinivasan, 2019; Sue et al., 2007](#)). Furthermore, this may impact self-concept and acceptance of oneself and one’s culture within the social world, further negatively impacting self-esteem and creating feelings of exclusion ([Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Nadal et al., 2014b; Ponds, 2013](#)).

The experience of racism has been found to have significant negative impacts on physical health, with recipients of racism reported to show higher risk for medical conditions such as hypertension, various cancers, and cardiovascular disease, due to the associated stress of the experience of racism ([Moomal et al., 2009; Pieterse and Carter, 2010; Srinivasan, 2019](#)). Higher associations between the experience of racism and substance use disorders have also been found ([Nadal et al., 2014a, 2014b; Ponds, 2013; Srinivasan, 2019](#)). Similarly, the experience of racism and microaggressions has been found to increase the risk for psychiatric disorders and symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidality ([Canham, 2018; Nadal et al., 2014a, 2014b; Pieterse and Carter, 2010; Srinivasan, 2019](#)). Finally, the experience of racism may result in trauma-related symptoms, which may increase feelings of distress, helplessness, and hopelessness ([Ponds, 2013; Srinivasan, 2019](#)).

In this article, we intend to elucidate the relationship between white cultural hegemony and name-based microaggressions within contemporary South African society. We specifically aim to illustrate how the occurrence of name-based microaggressions within educational institutions is a function of white cultural hegemony.

We characterise white cultural hegemony within an understanding of an anti-Black world, which [Gordon \(1995\)](#) argued as being a world in which white people are considered superior and therefore whiteness is considered self-justified. That is to say that mispronunciations, nicknaming, and indeed renaming of Black people within hegemonically white education spaces is normalised, regardless of the impact on the person. We primarily focus on how young people who have experienced name-based microaggressions are alienated from themselves and their environment, and the implications of this alienation on their educational and social development.

Name-based microaggressions and white cultural hegemony

The present study is located within the analysis made by [Gramsci \(1971\)](#) on cultural hegemony, in which one group comes to dominate another, not through force but rather through subtle everyday domination, which makes one group normative or standard ([Dlamini, 2024](#)). In the context of South Africa—and perhaps other parts of the world—cultural hegemony should be seen in its racialised sense as *white cultural hegemony*. That is, it is not merely a hegemony of one culture over another/s, but rather it is the systematic dominance of whiteness created through colonialism and apartheid and reinforced in contemporary transformation failures.

These failures to transform South African society, which are fundamentally underscored by rampant corruption at all levels of government ([de Man, 2022](#)), have had a detrimental effect on the education sector. Epistemological transformation at the level of the curriculum has been slow, including the adaptation of multilingualism, and other issues inherent in the education sector, such as under-resourced schools and overcrowded classrooms ([Mzileni and Mkhize, 2019](#); [Mlachila and Moeletsi, 2019](#)). These issues contribute to the continued white cultural hegemony that leads to former whites-only schools being seen as better ([Hiss and Peck, 2020](#)), maintaining the idea of whiteness as an aspirational standard.

White cultural hegemony, as [Dlamini \(2025, p.127\)](#) argued, explains how, in particular, Black people's "traditions, customs, and the like – are regarded as merely to be tolerated rather than embraced." This "tolerance" of Black people reinforces the notion that the public domain is reserved for whites, that Black people have an illicit appearance—a denial of the right to appear—that renders their hypervisibility as invisibility ([Gordon, 2012](#)). White cultural hegemony can thus be seen in the realm of everyday life, in the interactions of people, rather than only in the major political events that often capture headlines. This way of understanding the operation of whiteness is not unlike the ways in which scholars of Critical Race Theory (CRT) have illustrated the occurrence of racism, which is itself partly based on the work of Gramsci ([Stefancic and Delgado, 2011](#)). In this way, white cultural hegemony sits alongside other work that attempts to explicate the ways in which racialised dominance occurs in post-colonial societies. We choose to frame the research within white cultural hegemony, as it offers a way to see the post-colonial world as fundamentally governed through whiteness, or in simpler terms, whiteness is standardised.

The world of white cultural hegemony should then be understood as an anti-Black world. [Gordon's \(1995\)](#) analysis of Blackness as it exists in an anti-Black world is particularly apt in

understanding, first, the persistence of white cultural hegemony and then, second, the occurrence of name-based microaggressions. Taking the first instance of an anti-Black world and white cultural hegemony, the former should be regarded as a world that necessarily considers all things—culture, language, tradition, and indeed physical appearance—that constitute Black lifeworlds as undesirable. An anti-Black world marks the Black lifeworld as something that exists only as a negation of whiteness—white as always necessarily superior and thus can judge what is deemed acceptable (see [Fanon, 1967](#); [Ahmed, 2002](#)). During the colonial encounter, this dichotomy between white and Black was pronounced in all areas of life including where people could live ([The Natives \(Urban Areas\) Act No. 21 of 1923, n.d.](#)); who they could marry ([The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, Act No. 55 of 1949, n.d.](#)); and where they could go to school ([Bantu Education Act No. 47 of 1953, n.d.](#)).

In contemporary post-colonial societies, the markings of white supremacy are often less pronounced, occurring in subtle, taken-for-granted, everyday interactions in society, including educational institutions. [Dlamini \(2024\)](#) illustrated, for example, how in South African higher education, the *lingua franca* is English even though for the majority of South Africans, English is a second or third language. The status of English within education institutions is not something that occurs by chance but rather is a function of the devaluing of African indigenous languages, as un-evolving and not fit for academic purposes ([Nkosi, 2014](#); [Kamwendo, 2010](#); [Segalo and Cakata, 2017](#)). In line with this argument, we contend that the promotion of English as the language of everyday life is due in large part to white cultural hegemony with its historical roots in colonialism and apartheid, which sought to eradicate Black lifeworlds and instil whiteness as standard. We argue that this way of life, marked and defined by white cultural hegemony, in post-colonial societies such as South Africa, is inherently anti-Black and white supremacist.

Leading from the relationship between an anti-Black world and white cultural hegemony, the second of our points on the occurrence of name-based microaggressions within South African education is imminent. As [Oyèwùmí and Girma \(2023, p.3\)](#) noted, "[i]t is axiomatic that we all have names [...] Names are interwoven with the languages, cultures, histories and religions from which they emanate." However, it remains that for Black people in the colonised encounter, that is in the interaction with whiteness, they seize to have a culture, a language, a religion, and indeed a name. The assumption of whiteness as it manifests in its hegemonic sense is such that Black people—or the Black children—are invariably objects to be shaped in a lesser image of itself, thus open to be renamed, nicknamed, or mispronounced. The occurrence of name-based microaggressions within educational institutions, between those teachers racialised as white and students racialised as Black, is predicated on this historically constituted assumption.

The South African educational system remains a mirror of the colonial and apartheid systems that underdeveloped education for Black people, while reserving resources for schools designated for white people ([Spaull, 2013](#)). The segregationist policies of apartheid created a situation in which many schools in historically Black-only areas have been overcrowded and under-resourced, with many schools in rural—and urban townships—areas struggling with necessities such as water, electricity and sanitation ([Mouton et al., 2013](#)). This has meant that for many Black people, who can afford it, to attain the best

education for their children, they have had to put their children in what is popularly known as ‘model-c schools,’ a term used to describe former whites-only schools (Lombard, 2007).

It is within these historical and contemporary factors that lead to the occurrence of name-based microaggressions. An increased number of Black students have entered former white-only schools, taught by white educators, many of whom do not speak African indigenous languages, thus do not know how to pronounce Black names. The realisation of the so-called rainbow nation has not been attained with both economic inequality (Sulla and Zikhali, 2018) but perhaps it is no more evident than in the ways in which “despite the efforts of building a country that is characterized by unity, and collective understanding of nation-building – aptly called the ‘rainbow nation’ – South Africa’s racialized inequality has reinforced the colonial-apartheid structures” (Dlamini, 2025, p.123). In the latter, what we may be observing is how, for the majority of white South Africans, there is simply no need to learn African indigenous languages, thus African indigenous names. The occurrence of name-based microaggressions is within a context of white cultural hegemony, where consent is manufactured through historical structures and contemporary necessities.

We argue that the occurrence of name-based microaggressions in educational institutions in South Africa signals to those students racialised as Black two fundamental ideas about an anti-Black white culturally hegemonic world. First, name-based microaggressions by their very nature disregard the significance of names, within African cultures, rendering the cultural, tribal, and indeed familial meanings that are often imbued within names as also insignificant. Oyèwùmí and Girma (2023, p.2) concede that the issue with the disregard of names as something that is important to African people can be understood within the white Western notion that “names in and of themselves do not hold much worth or meaning beyond their function as labels to distinguish people, places, or things from one another.” In many African communities, certainly within Black communities in South Africa, naming practices do not simply signify a label but rather speak to significant familial, cultural, tribal, ancestral, and religious meanings (Mkhize and Muthuki, 2019). The importance of names is not only within Black or African cultures but can also be found among Asian communities (Kim and Lee, 2011) as well as among people of Indian descent (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012), illustrating how, for the majority world, names are more than just labels.

Secondly, naming practices often denote belonging. In the main, microaggressions of any kind can serve to communicate to the recipient that they do not belong, whether within corporate environments (Mokoena, 2020) or within educational contexts (Canham, 2018). The mispronunciations, renaming, and nicknaming as manifestations of name-based microaggressions also communicate to the recipient their non-belonging (Emmelhainz, 2012). Inversely, names serve to illustrate familial and tribal belonging, thus serving as an important indicator of the proximal and distal relationships between themselves and others (Mkhize and Muthuki, 2019; Oyèwùmí and Girma, 2023). Names are thus not just symbolic labels that hold meaning to the person or their family, but rather stretch out to society to communicate various things; to be named, is to belong.

We took seriously the everyday interactions within educational institutions to illuminate the experiences and effects of name-based microaggressions of Black youth in South Africa. We place the occurrence of name-based microaggressions within white cultural

hegemony because of the historical and contemporary factors in South Africa.

Method

In the study, we aimed to illustrate the occurrence of name-based microaggressions in educational institutions, positing that these occurrences of name-based microaggressions are mainly a function of white cultural hegemony, which positions Black lifeworlds as undesirable. Towards this end, the study employed a qualitative descriptive design, which focuses on ensuring that participants’ descriptions of a real-world experience of an issue are captured as closely as possible (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). In the current study, the focus was on how participants described their experiences of name-based microaggressions as occurring within the education system in South Africa, taking into consideration the dominant cultural problematic occurrence of whiteness in both education and wider South African society.

In line with the qualitative design of the study, data were collected with eight (8) Black students at a university in South Africa, who responded to an advertisement on the university’s message board. Those people who responded to the advertisement were required to meet the following criteria: should have been 18 years or older at the time of the interviews, should have experienced name-based microaggressions in a school context, and should identify as Black, as widely defined. Taking into consideration both the importance of maintaining participants’ privacy and confidentiality, as well as not perpetuating name-based microaggressions, the participants were asked to give a pseudonym that can be used in the reporting of the study. The pseudonyms, as well as the gender and ages of the participants, are reported in Table 1.

From the participants, data were collected using a semi-structured interview format. Semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate method of data collection as they allowed for deeper exploration of the experiences of name-based microaggressions (see Adams, 2010). Participants were provided with the option to conduct interviews in-person or online on video conferencing platforms. All interviews were conducted online in a private space by the first author, and all participants chose a private venue in which to engage in the online interview. After the interviews were conducted, they were manually transcribed verbatim. Transcribed interviews were de-identified, and participant-chosen pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality.

TABLE 1 Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Earle	27	Male
Kelly	22	Female
Akeelah	21	Female
Neil	45	Male
Poloko	22	Male
Busisiwe	21	Female
Kamva	23	Male
Sarah Nomzamo	20	Female

Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA). TA is a flexible method of qualitative data analysis that systematically identifies, organises, and analyses patterns of meaning or commonalities in data into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012). This, in turn, allows for the process of deriving meaning based on the shared experiences of participants. Themes were identified using the steps of TA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): get acquainted with the data and transcribe the recordings verbatim; create initial codes; sort codes into preliminary themes; review and evaluate themes; define, refine, and name themes; conduct the final analysis; and write the report (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

The study received ethical clearance from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee, at the University of Johannesburg, REC-01-071-2021. Participants' informed consent was obtained through a written information sheet, which was sent to them after responding to the circulated advertisement. To ensure that participants were fully informed about the decision to participate in the study, the information was repeated verbally before the start of the interview. The verbal information provided, as well as the written information sheet, explained that participants could withdraw from participation at any time, that their information would be kept confidential, and that psychological services would be available should they require.

Reflexivity

We offer here the first author's reflexivity as they initiated the research and had the first encounter with the participants. We offer this reflexivity not to fetishise difference (Malherbe and Dlamini, 2020), but rather to illuminate the ways in which historically shaped encounters can affect the research process. Before proceeding to present the results of the study, it is perhaps important to note an important aspect that affected to some degree the research process. The first author, who was responsible for the data collection, is a white South African female. Who was born in Kwa-Zulu Natal and raised in Johannesburg. Her positionality as a white female means that this research was challenging in a few ways. First, being white means that by association, I am inescapably privileged. I have never been the recipient of racism, and thus I cannot fully understand the subjective reality of what it means to be subjected to overt or covert forms of racism. Second, this meant that I needed to be particularly careful in how I approached the research and the research participants to ensure that my own innate biases, power dynamics, and privilege interfered as little as possible.

There is an argument in the literature on whether white people should engage themselves in research on racism at all. This was a challenge for me as I felt passionate about conducting the research, but I also had, and continue to have, moments of self-doubt about whether conducting this research is an enactment of my whiteness and another form of the colonisation of Black spaces and experiences. Steve Biko argued that white people need to be very careful in their involvement in Black struggles, and instead of directly involving themselves in Black anti-racist struggles, should work within their white society to educate their fellow white counterparts and build awareness of the manifestations of racism (Matthews, 2012).

Taking cognisance of this information, I decided to approach this research from the perspective that I do not intend to speak on

behalf of Black people because that would mean taking up a position of power and having the innate belief that Black people cannot speak for themselves. Instead, my research approach aimed to attempt to show, as directly as possible, the everyday experiences of Black research participants in the study using their own direct verbatim quotes. Also took the approach that this research can be used as a means of building awareness within white communities and in predominantly white spaces that I usually inhabit as a white person. Very carefully, I can use critical perspectives to think about the manifestations of race and racism in South African society.

One element of the first author's whiteness that I think made the research process challenging was navigating how my positionality would affect the comfort of participants in sharing their honest experiences. The presence of a white researcher navigating the topic of race and racism seemed to be an obstacle to complete openness. Although some participants seemed to feel free and comfortable enough to discuss race and racism perpetuated by white people, others appeared to feel uncomfortable with discussing racism, as indicated by one participant asking permission from the researcher to speak about racism. This further conveys the dynamic that the white researcher holds the power in terms of when racism can be spoken about. This also calls to attention the widespread unconscious expectation on the part of white people that Black people are responsible for the management of white feelings. Discussing racism was central to the work of this research, and thus, a lot of care was taken to build rapport with each participant and co-create a safe space for the discussion of potentially sensitive topics such as racism.

Results

Name-based microaggressions are not isolated, harmless mistakes, but are rather complex interactions that must be understood within the broader context of racism through a critical lens. Name-based microaggressions and racialised renaming stem from the tacit belief that white, Anglo, Christian, European or Northern American names are normative, while African, Arabic, Asian, Latin(x) names are inconvenient or unwelcome in white dominated societies (Srinivasan, 2019). White-sounding names are seen to be more desirable in dominant white hegemonic cultures and thus are frequently primed with positive associations.

Racism is deeply ingrained in society that it becomes ordinary and easily overlooked due to its subtle, nuanced, and covert expression (Bock, 2018; Cobb, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Modiri, 2012; Moorosi, 2020; Pérez Huber and Solorzano, 2015). The white hegemonic structure of society results in white values and expectations being centralised, and Blackness othered, leading to normalisation of whiteness, and by default making anything outside of a white lens seem foreign, different or lesser than (Manganyi, 1984; Liu et al., 2019; Vice, 2010). This notion of whiteness as normative and superior is ever-present in South African society, resulting in Black lifeworlds, including Black names, being viewed as unwanted nuisances (Foster, 1991; Franchi, 2003; Stevens, 1998).

Using Thematic Analysis, the interviews from the participants were analysed, yielding the following themes: name mispronunciations and Black names as an inconvenience, name-based microaggressions

in the educational context, and the effects of name-based microaggressions.

Name mispronunciations and black names as an inconvenience

Black/African indigenous names are often positioned as difficult. Earle highlights the challenges of presenting with a perceived 'difficult' name at school:

"... it was difficult having the name 'Earle', accepting the name was quite difficult... from primary school and whenever teachers would read the register and stuff, kids would laugh at my name and that sort of made it difficult for me to accept it... people are actually surprised at how my name is." (Earle).

Similarly, another participant recounted an experience whereby her teacher struggled with the pronunciation of her name and resorted to publicly ridiculing her in front of her class. This teacher initially engaged in indirect covert racism, a microaggression, and then moved to more overt racism:

"She was calling everybody with the class list. Then it was my turn to go in and she couldn't say my name ..., "Why does your name have so many [letters] like, I don't get it." ... "Don't you have a shorter name?" and I said, "No just say [my name]" and then she pronounced it wrong. But back then, I was unaffected because I got it a lot. I went to like a predominantly white school, so I got that a lot, so I was used to it. But now thinking back ... she even made a comment, and she said, "Why do Black people put so many vowels in their name, why do you guys use all the vowels in your name?" And I didn't have an answer for her back then, ya I didn't know better." (Akeelah).

The above accounts elucidate the function of Manganyi's "making strange," a process that occurs when whiteness is centralised and normalised in society, and thus elements of Blackness are marginalised and made to be strange (Manganyi, 1984). Consequently, through interactions with dominant white culture, racism and racial microaggressions, Black people are forcibly made aware of their societal position, perpetually navigating and accommodating white hegemonic norms and expectations, a process that renders their own identities 'strange' within a white-centric framework. The two extracts from Earle and Akeelah also illustrate that through the process of accommodating elements of the hegemonic white culture whilst allowing for belonging and social survival (Liu et al., 2019), they also have the potential to spawn internalised racism. This may be described as the unconscious acceptance and internalisation of the racial hierarchy of white superiority and Black inferiority, and in turn, an internalisation of the hegemonic values and worldviews of society (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Srinivasan, 2019).

Further analysis of Akeelah's experience highlights the centralisation of whiteness and the assimilative pressure imposed by white people in positions of authority (i.e., teachers). This is substantiated by Srinivasan (2019), who found that participants experienced that the perpetrator frequently voiced preferences

regarding how their own name should be altered, and would assign nicknames or alternative names to participants, assuming it was an acceptable practice as they perceived that it was the participant who had presented with a 'difficult' name. In Srinivasan's study, participants reported that their most difficult interactions regarding their names were with people in positions of authority, such as teachers or employers (Srinivasan, 2019).

While the South African constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination based on race, Modiri (2012) argued that formal institutional changes are not indicative of substantive behavioural changes. Racism may appear different to the nature of offences perpetuated over the last few centuries, but this does not mean that it no longer exists. While racism may be less overt, the work of CRT, and specifically the study of microaggressions, elucidates the reality that racism remains part of the fabric of social interactions (Bock, 2018; Srinivasan, 2019). Over time, as overt racism has been recognised as a social wrong, racially discriminative acts have become more subtle. This is indicated through both systemic racism in societal institutions and through the occurrence of covert racial microaggressions (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo, 2005; Canham, 2018; Jones and Galliher, 2015; Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Liu et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2014b; Sue et al., 2007). Covert forms of racism that continually convey a subtle message that Black people do not belong in white dominated spaces are deeply entrenched in societal institutions, making them, at times, unconscious and difficult to identify (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo, 2005; Kohli and Solórzano, 2012).

In her research regarding the occurrence of name-based microaggressions, Srinivasan found that students reported increased feelings of anxiety and dread during new introductions and in roll call in class, and thus often chose to alter the presentation of their name by using a whiter sounding name, nickname, or middle name to avoid presenting as an 'inconvenience' or 'burden' to others, to avoid possible ridicule, or to feel more comfortable within social interactions (Srinivasan, 2019). Kelly noted that:

"I have two names, so this one and my second name Lebo. Most of the time I don't even use both of them, any of them. That's because people tend to mispronounce Kelly or give me nicknames like shorten my name [to my initials] and I don't like that... they give me reasons cause I've asked them 'why do you not call me my name or give me another name' they say my name is too long, yes, and has too many syllables and ya it's too complicated... most of the time it's non-black people and when it comes to black people it's other cultures like the Zulus, the Xhosas, so you can say that most people get my name wrong." (Kelly).

The extract from Kelly, perhaps corroborates the findings of Srinivasan (2019) where Kelly details the account in which nicknaming was used to make it easier for the other person, but in many ways resulted in othering, as reducing someone's name to a nickname diminishes their identity, stripping away cultural and personal significance in favour of familiarity or convenience (Oyèwùmí and Girma, 2023). Mispronunciation or abbreviations of a name reinforce a sense of otherness and may result in pressuring individuals to alter their name to avoid the burden of correction or the anxiety of exclusion, a notion supported by Srinivasan (2019). This navigation of the role of names in social interactions requires constant negotiation, as Sarah describes having to assess each situation and

adapt by choosing which version of their name would be most acceptable for the societal norms of the situation:

“I would use Nomzamo which is a shortened version of my first name. I used it when I was at work earlier this year. I sort of have to suss out which kind of situation, which kind of name or which name I would use in which situation.” (Sarah).

Sarah’s account is reflective of the perpetual, conscious and unconscious awareness of white hegemonic norms and the need to assimilate to these norms in order to allow for belonging. In particular, Sarah’s extract also illustrates the psychological effects of nicknaming, with a heightened sense of awareness that, on some level, mimics anxiety, demonstrating the continued effects of racism on people who are recipients (Pieterse and Carter, 2007).

Name-based microaggressions in the educational context

White dominant norms may be forcibly learned through innocuous or direct observation or even experiences of racism and microaggressions (Liu et al., 2019; Ponds, 2013). It is through the latter, with the occurrence of name-based microaggressions, that children learn early in their educational journeys how to assimilate into the dominant white culture (Liu et al., 2019). These events frequently occur in the educational context and may evoke strong emotional reactions, which cement learning of underlying white-centric norms to ensure social survival. For instance, Akeelah reflected on the pervasiveness of name-based microaggressions in white dominated societal spaces:

“Okay, people find it hard to say my name, so I’ll just shorten it for them and I say ‘Just say Akeelah’, at school, a lot of the time in high school. Even now at varsity actually yeah, school. So usually if it’s white people. I’ll say Akeelah cause they usually pronounce my name wrong or they’ll complain. Cause I’ve had like scenarios where a teacher complained that my name was too long and she couldn’t pronounce it so I just shortened it for her. But then with Black people, they know, they are okay with saying it, they say it properly, they pronounce it properly so ya.” (Akeelah).

Akeelah’s experience highlights the intensity of the pull to conform to white dominant spaces, reflecting the concept of white cultural hegemony (Dlamini, 2024). In this instance, it is perhaps clearer that through self-renaming, there is coercive consent—through the complaining—to white cultural hegemony that is occurring. As such, there is an acceptance, or perhaps a resignation, to the corrosive idea of white supremacy. Therefore, there is pressure to conform to the dominant white culture, ultimately sloughing off elements of Black people’s identity to reinforce the white supremacist ideology. In self-renaming as well as its stripping of parts of Blackness can prolong survival for the Black person within the white dominant culture while simultaneously negatively impacting feelings of belonging and psychological wellbeing (Ponds, 2013; Srinivasan, 2019).

Busisiwe, in the below extract, perhaps indicates more clearly that the teachers’ mispronouncing her name, or renaming her at school,

solidified the experience of feeling as though she did not belong in her school environment:

“But I sort of kept Themba uh, but then obviously the teachers would just butcher my name. Every time, every time. Uh, and then it was somewhat okay, I was in a Black school and they couldn’t have got it, you know they would try and they would still go with Themba. I think things took a serious turn when I got to a white, well a former white model C high school that had a really good mixture of races, cultures and all those sorts of things. And then there, I realized that firstly, that I wasn’t the only one who constantly struggled with this name thing. That so many other girls at the school had nicknames. Uhm because the teachers just couldn’t, and to certain extents they just weren’t willing. So, they would give you nicknames like for me, usually Busi, Busisiwe they would cut it to that, some would go with Themba, uhm others would – Themba, which is another common female name but that’s not my name, that’s not my name. So ya, you were constantly trying to be convenient, that’s it... It’s a microaggression. It wouldn’t be uhm like a bold statement of “your kind doesn’t belong here” but you sort of sense people’s annoyance. You sort of get the feeling that they are frustrated trying to say your name and things like that, uh where it’s like oh snap. It sometimes makes me feel like maybe I need to shrink my Blackness, why do I have such a bold Black name? Uhm, it feels like I need to assimilate to like I said, a nickname, a more white accommodating or whatever, non-black accommodating name that again I have to say, is more convenient. It does make you feel like you are intruding into a space when it feels like everybody else’s names, including very hard Afrikaans names are pronounced uh quite perfectly and yours is like a struggle. You do feel like sho, I’m not amongst my people.” (Busisiwe).

Educational systems in South Africa are deeply imbued with dominant white ideology, and racial stratification continues to occur within educational institutions today in subtle ways (Canham, 2018; Heleta and Nkala, 2018; Lin, 2018; Liu et al., 2019; Srinivasan, 2019). The school environment is a space where the social hierarchy enforcing white centrality and social norms may be tacitly communicated (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012). South African teachers may unknowingly perpetuate name-based microaggressions within the school context, while others are unwilling to make the effort to learn the correct pronunciation of Black students’ names (Tiwane, 2016). Students in primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions frequently experience racial microaggressions by both peers and educators (Canham, 2018; Kim and Lee, 2011; Nadal et al., 2014b). Black students are frequently the recipients of name-based microaggressions by white teachers, administrators, and peers who consciously or unconsciously struggle, or refuse, to correctly pronounce African names (de Klerk and Lagonikos, 2014; Ngubane and Thabethe, 2013), an experience encountered by most of the participants.

Effects of name-based microaggressions

Participants cited being deeply affected by name-based microaggressions, with many feeling that their culture had been undermined and disrespected throughout their schooling careers,

which led them to feel that their names and their presence were an inconvenience and a burden (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012). Some people wished for a “common name”—understood as white—to enhance the experience of belonging, as the constant experience of perpetrated acts of racism creates the impression that elements of Black identities, such as one’s name, are undesirable and meaningless (Canham, 2018; Jones and Galliher, 2015; Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Liu et al., 2019; Pérez Huber and Solorzano, 2015; Srinivasan, 2019). Participants reported feeling alienated, othered, and ashamed of their identity. This is highlighted in both Busisiwe and Akeelah’s experiences. Busisiwe coped by making use of a “more convenient” name, while Akeelah wished for and requested to go by an English translation of her given name:

“... Which led me to me thinking should I just also go with a, a more convenient name or nickname of some sort, because who am I if audit partners are, are still failing to address matters such as a name. Maybe I am being too pedantic, too picky? I should just you know, ya be happy with [my initials] or whatever that person chooses to call me that day you know?” (Busisiwe).

But you know at some point I did wish that, I told, cause I asked my mom, cause my name means Hope, I asked my mom, ‘Can I just change my name to Hope?’ you know, instead of saying Akeelah. Let’s just make it an English name because then everyone will get it right you know...so I don’t have to correct my, so I don’t have to correct people, they don’t have to ask me ‘What does your name mean’ cause everybody asks ‘What does your name mean’, like ‘How do you say your name’, ‘How is it spelled’, it’s a whole process you know (Akeelah).

The accounts by Busisiwe and Akeelah stress how, for many recipients of name-based microaggressions, the main difficulty involves feeling stripped of identity and heritage, as well as feelings of being a burden due to the presentation of their name in white dominated spaces (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Srinivasan, 2019). Additionally, the pervasive nature of microaggressions requires much cognitive energy for the victim of these occurrences, in constantly processing and evaluating situations to which they can be accepted (Canham, 2018; Srinivasan, 2019). This was further stressed by Poloko, who reflected that he used a shortened version of his name in the past because of his experience of teachers struggling with the pronunciation of his name in primary school. He reported that now that he is older, he goes by his given name and likened this to a greater acceptance of his Black identity:

“Cause when I was in primary school some of my teachers called me [A shortened version of my name], you know just shortening me, because I think they had a problem with the [beginning] part and also the fact that it has three vowels in a row. They found a problem pronouncing it... I felt like, why should I compromise or try to Anglicize my name to make you feel better, you know? To make things easier for you? ... So why do you have to like shorten it or anglicize it or do whatever it is to make it easier for the next person to say it. To make the next people feel comfortable with your name so they feel like they are not offending you. Whereas the mere essence of them trying to make your name into what it’s not, is offensive in and of itself” (Poloko).

Furthermore, white dominated society leaves Black people with no option other than to become consciously or unconsciously “racially innocuous” to fit in, by behaving in ways that come across as unthreatening. This is achieved by softening or neutralising racial and cultural aspects of their identity to fit into the dominant culture and adapt to the standards of whiteness, which are the invisible norm (Canham, 2018; Liu et al., 2019; Pérez Huber and Solorzano, 2015; Srinivasan, 2019).

Kelly’s experience is perhaps also telling, where she reflected on the difficulty of resorting to assimilation by providing people with an alternative name that is more ‘comfortable’ for them when they struggled with the pronunciation of her name:

“I just prolong telling them, correcting them getting my name wrong like, ‘Okay please don’t call me that, just call me Kelly.’ So now I’ve developed this thing that whenever I introduce myself to people especially if I know that it’s gonna be hard for them to pronounce my name, I just tell them that, ‘Okay I’m Pabi but you can just call me Kelly.’ And that way they are always gonna opt for Kelly.” (Kelly).

In this sense, Kelly discards an element of her Black identity to make social interactions more convenient for the other, instead of the other taking responsibility to learn the correct pronunciation of her given name. Names form an essential part of identity development (Wang et al., 2023), particularly in the South African context, where names have important links to the individual’s history, culture, ethnicity, their relationship to others, their wider socio-cultural, and spiritual context (Emmelhainz, 2012; Herbert, 1997; Kim and Lee, 2011; Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Ngubane and Thabethe, 2013; Srinivasan, 2019).

Among many effects, one major implication is acculturative stress. Assimilation becomes challenging in the conflict between adapting to the values and worldviews of the dominant culture while maintaining ties to one’s own culture and heritage (Kim and Lee, 2011; Liu et al., 2019; Srinivasan, 2019; Stevens, 1998). Of necessity, Black people must learn bicultural adaptation to navigate assimilation into the dominant culture without losing ties to elements of their culture and origins (Jones and Galliher, 2015). Busisiwe reflected on the difficulties of navigating between two opposing cultures:

“I’ve gone to a very mixed school so you, firstly which was great cause you get to interact with people from different walks of life. But you also become aware that I am different, right? What happens is, instead of us being, ‘we are all different and let’s all live in our differentness’, we all sort of move in assimilation into a sort of one kind of side and spectrum you know. So, in my very mixed school, literally we were so mixed, I was living a very white-like culture and it was an all-girls school so we were ladies we were posh and quiet and well-spoken and soft and you know, that was our, our culture that we lived there and you didn’t wanna be ‘the loud Black’. You know, so we would keep it very posh. But when I would go home, I have had this experience of what we do at school from seven to like four cause I had extra murals like five days a week. And then you go home to the community where it’s a Black community and now I introduce myself as Busisiwe, ‘I was just talking to my friend and Busisiwe said this... ‘Hmm Busisiwe? Who’s Busisiwe now, why are you being, why are you acting white? You are a coconut.’ Coconut. That’s the term. You are a coconut. So, you constantly have this battle you know at school I’m not white enough I’m too black,

at home I'm, I'm sort of too white for a Black girl you know that sort of thing." (Busisiwe).

Busisiwe's experience perhaps belies the notion of the rainbow nation, in which multiculturalism is celebrated and embraced by all, but rather it is the 'white hues' in which the colours of the rainbow meet that is the focal area (Chikane, 2018). For many, navigating the balance between maintaining their cultural identity and assimilating to the dominant culture becomes a challenge, which can result in acculturative stress due to these challenges in adjustment (Jones and Galliher, 2015; Srinivasan, 2019). Shifting identities between each culture can result in emotional and psychological distress (Liu et al., 2019). This is prevalent in the South African context, where Black people are frequently stereotyped as "Cheese boys/girls" or "Coconuts" for behaving in a way that is seen as too Westernised or white (Bornman et al., 2018). Goodman (2012) argued that the way in which Black people live is in a hybrid 'in-between' space, which results in never feeling a full sense of belonging in either space. Inhabiting two spaces by adjusting your identity to fit the norms of each space can be described as a survival strategy; therefore, the 'Coconut identity' can be seen as a consciousness that allows for increased chances of survival (Goodman, 2012).

Busisiwe noted the psychological implications of name-based microaggressions on her confidence and reflected on the dissonance that she experiences when a name-based microaggression occurs. Busisiwe questioned whether she was expecting too much from others to pronounce her name correctly, and how these experiences were so impactful that she considered changing to her second name instead of her given name:

"I've noticed that it has had a slight impact in my confidence. I have even considered even changing to maybe my second name, which is also a mouthful you know. But I felt like, you know, there's no funny nickname that anybody can call me on that. I thought you know, maybe am I expecting too much? Should I just let it be and maybe just change to a different nickname." (Busisiwe).

This experience highlights the frustration that occurs when name-based microaggressions are experienced and the breakdown that leads to the eventual coercive compliance with, and assimilation into the societal norm. The experience of name-based microaggressions can be detrimental to the healthy identity development of Black South African students, as it communicates that their name, and on a wider level, their whole being, does not belong in white dominated spaces (Canham, 2018; Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Srinivasan, 2019). For some people, the associated psychological effects of anxiety, shame, sadness, frustration, and resentment regarding the lack of acceptance of their given names lead to the association of their names with discomfort rather than pride (Friedman, 2021; Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Srinivasan, 2019). Name-based microaggressions negatively affect the sense of self and worldview of the person and can undermine positive identification with their own cultural heritage and ethnicity. Recipients of name-based microaggressions may feel psychological distress due to social ostracism and rejection and may thus feel doubtful of their place in the social world (Srinivasan, 2019). This can ultimately lead to internalised racism (Jones and Galliher, 2015; Wang et al., 2023; Srinivasan, 2019).

Akeelah's experience highlights the occurrence of self-blame that can occur after experiencing a microaggression, such as

name-based microaggressions. Microaggressions can occur with such subtlety that recipients are often left in a state of confusion as to the nature and meaning of microaggressive communication. Pressure to alter the presentation of your name has been linked to increased psychological distress (Srinivasan, 2019). In some cases, participants felt irritated with themselves when they felt they had not adequately dealt with the perpetrator of name-based microaggressions. Some struggled to correct perpetrators because they were stationed in positions of authority, especially teachers, and thus participants felt it was difficult to defend against the occurrence of name-based microaggressions:

"Now that I look back, I feel like I made myself inferior in that situation, like I took what they thought about me and I just went along with it instead of correcting them and saying no that's wrong, that's not right. I feel like I just kept quiet for the sake of keeping quiet – to not cause a big thing. Now I'm able. I'm able to speak up and say 'Now, this is the proper way to say it, if you can't say it this way, then this is how you'll say it, I'll give you the shortened name, if you can't say the shortened name, then I'll give you my second name.' Now that I look back, I'm like woah that was racist! I didn't know what racism was, I didn't understand the extent to which racism is, right. So, the reason why I didn't stand up for myself is the excuse was, 'You're in an Afrikaans school' you know, it was always 'You're in an Afrikaans school, don't expect a lot'. You know, 'You chose to be in an Afrikaans school, you chose this'. So, it was like, 'Conform or get lost.'" (Akeelah).

The subtle nature of microaggressions means that they require significant cognitive and psychological energy to identify, clarify, and cope with. This creates a baseline of hypervigilance, which some have denoted as "Racial Battle Fatigue" (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo, 2005; Canham, 2018; Srinivasan, 2019). Busisiwe shared her experience at school, whereby teachers struggled to pronounce her name to the point where others would laugh at her when the teacher pronounced her name incorrectly:

"And from an early age I always felt this name was an inconvenience. When I started going to school, I had to go by my official name now, Busisiwe, but the teachers couldn't pronounce it. Or they would try, but some would get lazy and then they would just call me [a shortened version of my name]. And I wouldn't have minded except for this one minor detail, at that time, I think it was about 2006, 2007, oh I'm actually getting a little bit emotional. There was a sitcom in, that played on our local TV station. There was a character there named Busisiwe, the name when you cut my name in short. And he played this funky character who was a low-life and uhm basically just lame, that was it. And so, whenever a teacher would call me [a shortened version of my name], that's what would happen, people would giggle in the class, during breaks now I'm being teased. I was so ashamed." (Busisiwe).

Overall, participants reflected on the strain of assimilating to dominant white hegemonic norms and what that meant for their identity development and experience of belonging in the social world, particularly in the educational context. The experience of microaggressions and name-based microaggressions over time may lead to compromised physical health and mental wellbeing, the latter manifesting as increased anxiety, depression, grief, and suicidal ideation (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Srinivasan, 2019).

Conclusion

In this study, we intended to elucidate the relationship between white cultural hegemony and name-based microaggressions within contemporary South African society. We specifically aimed to illustrate how the occurrence of name-based microaggressions within educational institutions is a function of white cultural hegemony. Racism in the global white cultural hegemony can manifest in various ways, including in the form of name-based microaggressions, the function of which is to “make strange” from the perspective of the dominant colonial gaze. While racism tended to be communicated in more direct methods in the past, white supremacy is communicated more subtly in contemporary postcolonial society. Therefore, the occurrence of microaggressions generally, and name-based microaggressions more specifically, is more widespread.

Mispronunciation and renaming of Black people’s names are deeply entrenched and commonplace. This serves in the infra-humanisation of African language, culture, and elements of identity. Resultantly, Black life-worlds are subtly communicated as undesirable. The occurrence of name-based microaggressions not only disregards the significance of African names but simultaneously communicates the message that elements of Black identities do not belong. Lived experiences of the participants in this article demonstrated that this message also exists in the educational context, whereby white cultural hegemony extends into the classroom or lecture hall, serving a function of the othering of Black South African students.

To meet the aim of the study, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted investigating the experience of name-based microaggressions by Black South African university students and the associated psychological effects of such microaggressions. After data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2012) Thematic Analysis (TA), the following themes emerged: name mispronunciations and Black names as an inconvenience; name-based microaggressions in the educational context; and the effects of name-based microaggressions.

Participants communicated about the difficult experience of navigating social environments dominated by white norms. Participants felt that their Black/African names were positioned as difficult or inconvenient within the educational context. Some participants experienced ridicule for the presentation of their names by both peers and teachers. Participants invested psychological energy in the perpetual awareness of white hegemonic norms and the need to assimilate in different spaces. Learning to accommodate the dominant culture was a way to ensure a sense of belonging and survival in the social world. Stripping away elements of Black identities was a way to be more acceptable and convenient at school. By choosing a white name or nickname or altering the presentation of given names to a more white-sounding name, Black students avoided ridicule and felt less burdensome in school environments. In these experiences of name-based microaggressions, the relationship between white cultural hegemony and name-based microaggressions is revealed in the sense that Black names and elements of Black identities are subtly communicated as undesirable and are othered, while elements of whiteness are communicated as normative. The pressure of this communication results in Black students having to accommodate to white norms and strip away parts of the self that are seen as less desirable.

Children learn through direct observation or direct experiencing of racism and microaggressions within their educational journey, the demands of the social environment and ways to assimilate. This perpetual awareness of white hegemonic norms in educational systems is a way to ensure social survival. Dominant white norms are communicated

consistently, whether consciously or unconsciously, and Black South African students feel the intensity of the pull to conform to white dominated spaces. Participants in the current study reflected on their experiences of being renamed or having their names mispronounced by teachers.

The occurrence of name-based microaggressions, while commonplace, is not an innocent social exchange. Rather, name-based microaggressions can have deleterious effects on cohesive identity development, which may result in negative impacts on psychological wellbeing. Overall, participants reflected on the strain of assimilating to dominant white hegemonic norms and what that meant for their identity development and experience of belonging in the social world, particularly in the educational context. The experience of microaggressions and name-based microaggressions over time may lead to compromised physical health and mental wellbeing, the latter manifesting as increased anxiety, depression, grief, and suicidal ideation (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Srinivasan, 2019).

Participants in the current study reflected that they felt undermined and disrespected at school when name-based microaggressions were communicated towards them. The experience of name-based microaggressions made them feel as though their names were inconvenient and burdensome, which negatively impacted confidence and self-esteem. This often resulted in feelings of shame and alienation, and a wish for a more common or white/English-sounding name, to enhance the experience of belonging. Participants felt the anxiety and pressure to conform to white norms, which resulted in acculturative stress. The experience of name-based microaggressions required much cognitive energy to unpack and respond to due to their subtleness. Some participants expressed that navigating name-based microaggressions resulted in self-blame and questioning whether they were being too pedantic or picky when asserting the correct pronunciation of their name to perpetrators of name-based microaggressions.

While the present study appears to be the first of its nature in South Africa and perhaps raises significant issues as it pertains to race and racism in this context, there are some shortcomings that could be addressed in future studies. First, the study did not directly attempt to delineate experiences of name-based microaggressions by gender; that is, although the participants were asked about their gender and sex, the study did not find any gendered or sexed reporting experiences. This is not to say that there may not be any differences, as Black women may experience intersectional microaggressions (Crenshaw, 2013). Secondly, the study did not include an explicit differentiation across the Black cultural and linguistic groups. It is unclear if such a differentiation would be useful, as the results in this study demonstrated similarities in experience rather than differences.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee, University of Johannesburg. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written

informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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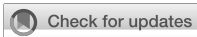
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“Getting rid of systemic racism:” youth of color critical reflections and identified strategies during the twin pandemics

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Black, Latine, and Asian American young people living in the U.S. experienced the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, along with racial traumas and stresses stemming from racial violence and public debates on how to (or not) address racism. Using critical consciousness and social justice youth development frameworks, this study sought to emphasize youth of color responses to the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism and youth-identified strategies for combating inequities experienced by these youth in Louisville, Kentucky. Between April 2021 to January 2022, youth of color (ages 12–24) were purposively recruited to engage in listening sessions. We conducted nine listening sessions on Zoom and face-to-face with 18 youth of color. Youth highlighted the saliency of racism and that they lacked safe spaces to share experiences, gain support, and collectively address and manage compounding issues. They described feeling dismissed by adults and excluded or removed from spaces where they could engage in collective care as a community. Youth suggested increased access to and existence of youth-centered spaces that prioritize youth voice and safety within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and experiences with racism in Louisville. While past research often focuses on youth critical consciousness within afterschool programs or community organizations, our study explores the roles of COVID-19 and racism as dual pandemics and catalyzing events for youth in their building critical consciousness. Through their reflections and their suggested strategies, youth in this study engaged in critical reflection about racism during COVID-19 and moved between critical consciousness awareness at the self and community levels. Future research should explore mechanisms to identify youth strategies for collectivity both inside and outside formally organized programs.

KEYWORDS

critical consciousness, social justice youth development, racism, listening sessions, community youth programs, dual pandemics

Introduction

COVID-19 and racial uprisings in recent years illuminated the effects of racial traumas, oppression, and inequities, as well as mental-health struggles, affecting communities of color (hereafter referred to as youth of color,¹ which include Black, Latine, Indigenous, and Asian American youth) in the U. S. (Devakumar et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, 37% of U. S. high school students reported regular mental-health struggles (Schaeffer, 2022). During 2020 to 2022, youth and young adults were not only exposed to COVID-19-related health risks and mental-health struggles, but also unprecedented disruptions, relocations, intersectional vulnerabilities and stresses, and racial disparities in structural conditions, including economic and educational hardships, job displacement, and police brutality (Conrad et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2023; Samji et al., 2022; Schudde et al., 2022). U. S. Black and Latine high school students experienced unique and acute struggles, including a higher prevalence of attempting suicide compared to White students in 2023 (Verlenden et al., 2024). Black, multiracial, indigenous, and Hispanic or Latine Kentucky 10th-graders had higher proportions of feelings of hopelessness, attempted suicide, race- and culture-related fears, and race-related stresses than their White peers in 2021 (Sanders et al., 2022).

COVID-19 and racism were prominent features of public discussions, forums, and research during 2020 to 2022; however, previous public discourse and social science research tended to focus on youth's COVID-19-related struggles instead of their agentic responses to *both* pandemics of COVID-19 and racism (Conrad et al., 2021; Hoyt et al., 2021; Naff et al., 2022; Samji et al., 2022; Velez and Herteen, 2023). Some recent research demonstrates that Black and Latine youth/young adults² were acutely aware of stark racial and intersectional inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and uncertain times (Carey et al., 2025; Quiles et al., 2023; Schudde et al., 2022). Youth have emerging capacity to initiate and lead efforts toward social change and are often inspired by historical and current moments; even so, their voices can be silenced through conditions of oppression and through deficit-based frameworks relegating their perspectives to the margins (Baldrige, 2019; Briggs, 2024; Ginwright, 2010).

During 2020 to 2022, Black, Latine, and Asian American young people in the U. S. were exposed to the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism involving racial inequities, traumas, and violence toward Asian and Black Americans, along with racial protests and public and political debates on how to (or not) address racism and racial violence (Addo, 2020; Devakumar et al., 2020; Faison, 2023). Young people in Louisville, Kentucky (KY), where we conducted our study, experienced uncertainty and upheaval due to changes to in-person education and youth-focused support systems. Between 2020 and

2022, Louisville's public-school students experienced suspended and then unpredictable in-person educational instruction, creating compounding stresses and uncertainties in conjunction with isolation, quarantining, and health-related risks and traumas. In March 2020, Kentucky state officials enacted restricted hours and closings for community programs, schools, and non-essential offices to prevent the spreading of COVID-19. During that same month, Breonna Taylor, a Black woman living in West Louisville, was killed by Louisville Metro Police Department. Taylor's murder spurred city-wide organizing, protests, and demonstrations, which highlighted the cumulative nature of racial oppression, segregation, and disinvestment and existing tensions between local communities of color and the police in Louisville.

This study occurred as part of a larger project to explore the perspectives of youth of color navigating racial and social inequities, as well as their suggestions for social change, in Louisville, KY. Our study involved listening sessions, both with individuals and small groups, with Louisville youth of color during 2021 to 2022 when the COVID-19 pandemic and racism were in the national and local media and public spotlights. During that time, Louisville youth of color were exposed to daily injustices and inequities, as well as collective action protests and movement-building, potentially shaping their critical consciousness – the process of understanding and responding to patterned social inequities and systemic oppression (Diemer et al., 2016; Freire, 2000; Watts et al., 2011). We employed critical consciousness and Social Justice Youth Development as sensitizing concepts throughout the research process to intentionally foster youth voice and critical reflections and explore the following research questions: (1) How do youth of color discuss and respond to lived experiences with racism, racial inequities, and the COVID-19 pandemic in Louisville, KY during uncertain times?; (2) What are their suggested strategies for mitigating racial inequities and COVID-19 struggles affecting youth of color?; (3) How do these strategies reflect the process of critical consciousness?

Theoretical frameworks

Focusing on one specific theory limits a researcher's perspective to the orientation of the theory being utilized. Applying multiple theoretical perspectives allows for directions to explore and flexibility in examining the complexities of youth of color experiences during the dual pandemics. We used critical consciousness and Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) to develop the pertinent research questions, research design, and study goals. We discuss the specific implementation of SJYD within our methodological practices in the Data and Methods section, including its application to our data collection, research recruitment, and roles as researchers.

Critical consciousness

In mainstream institutions and public discourse, young people of color are often treated as lacking in agency or as facing the brunt of racial inequities in institutions like education, criminal justice, and health care without attention to their responses and critical reflections and actions to facilitate change. Ginwright and Cammarota argue that mainstream youth-development frameworks tend to "obscure our understanding of

1 Our use of the term "youth of color" places emphasis on the shared experiences and reflections of racially minoritized youth who faced racialized hate crimes, violence, inequities, and traumas during COVID-19. We also recognize that the use of this term diminishes the complexity of racialized experiences among different racialized minority groups.

2 Below, we use the broader term "youth" to encompass young people aged 12 to 24, although this study specifically included youth aged 12 to 21.

urban youth of color more than they explain, because they assume that youth themselves should be changed, rather than the oppressive environments in which they live” (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002, p. 85). Ginwright and James (2002) further argue that youth problems result primarily from social and economic patterns in urban communities steeped in “racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic practices” (p. 85).

Growing research demonstrates how youth of color build awareness and capacity for enacting social change outside of conventional and adult-centered forms of civic engagement like volunteering or voting (Ginwright, 2010; Welton and Harris, 2022). Youth of color engage in various forms of activism, protests, social media campaigns, social-justice research, and other activities, actively contributing to and leading racial justice and social change (see, for example, Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Cammarota, 2016; Welton and Harris, 2022). Indeed, adolescence and young adulthood are critical times for developing awareness of the social world and agency within it and contemporary youth actively participate in and shape public dialogue and policy-change efforts (Diemer et al., 2016; Erikson, 1968; Ginwright, 2010; Welton and Harris, 2022).

For urban youth of color who confront daily injustices and inequities, lived experiences and observations can bring about critical awareness of systemic, social conditions and the changeability of day-to-day life, fostering an articulation of collective plights and efficacy through critical consciousness (CC). Freire (2000) defines critical consciousness as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). Others theorize that CC involves critical awareness of systemic, social conditions and movement toward social change, including moving beyond deterministic views presenting social conditions as un-patterned and irreversible or “naturally occurring” realities (Carey et al., 2025; Diemer et al., 2016). CC as a concept offers insights into understanding youth civic awareness and development through multiple stages of critical reflection and action (Bloomer and Brown, 2024). Watts et al. (2011) argue that critical reflections on social conditions in systemic terms are necessary for youth collective action and civic engagement to change existing conditions. Diemer et al. (2016) further expounded Freire’s conceptualization of reflection and action within CC development, identifying three interdependent and reciprocal components of CC: critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action. *Critical reflection* involves a systemic understanding of social inequalities and the surrounding conditions; *critical motivation* “perceived capacity and commitment to address perceived injustices”; and *critical action* is “engaging individually or collectively to change perceived injustices” (Diemer et al., 2016, p. 216). Thus, youth engagement in critical reflection and other critical consciousness processes involves understanding and responding to patterned social inequalities, as well as shared or collective plights (Diemer et al., 2016). Throughout this paper, we use the term praxis to articulate the process of engaging in critical reflection and collective action as youth respond to social inequities.

Social justice youth development

While urban Black and Latine youth are often framed as academically and civically “disengaged” or as “at-risk” based on assumptions about their problematic behaviors (e.g., presumed gang activity and substance use) in mainstream institutions (Baldrige, 2019;

Halpern, 2003; Noguera, 2003), practitioners and scholars have pushed back against deficit-based frameworks using the SJYD framework. Bloomer and Brown (2024) define SJYD as an approach to youth development focused on the adoption of practices by individuals, organizations, communities, and systems seeking to close gaps created by inequities in access and opportunities for youth by: (1) acknowledging and celebrating differences in identities and experiences of youth, (2) working toward youth identified, created, and led initiatives, (3) acknowledging the role of systemic oppression and intentionally and actively working to reduce and eliminate disparities for all youth, and (4) implementing methods that promote radical healing for impacted youth (see also Ginwright, 2010). SJYD places specific importance on CC development for youth, as the cyclical process of seeking praxis undergirds youth capacity and motivation to engage in social change efforts. Additionally, the praxis cycle provides opportunities for youth to progress through the three levels of awareness, similar to socioecological levels: self, community/social, and global (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Cammarota, 2016; Diemer et al., 2016).

Literature review

Youth of color, racism and COVID-19, and critical consciousness

Recent research on youth of color and CC examines the roles of educational or youth programs in youth critical consciousness, suggesting that youth activate their CC within the context of social-justice-oriented youth programs and spaces (Casanova, 2024; Farinde-Wu et al., 2021; Kennedy et al., 2020; Ngo et al., 2017). Importantly, sustained exposure to peer discussions and reflections in afterschool programs can support youth of color critical consciousness and empowerment when they have opportunities and support to critically address and challenge oppression (Casanova, 2024; Kennedy et al., 2020). Research also points to critical reflection, motivation, and action during or in response to informal and everyday interactions, such as experiences of discrimination, or catalyzing political or social events (Kennedy et al., 2020; Tyler et al., 2020). We build on this research and investigate how youth of color might engage in critical consciousness while experiencing stressful, traumatic, and uncertain moments during the COVID-19 pandemic and racial violence and inequities spotlighted in the public.

A few recent studies show that, compared to White young adults, young adults of color, including Black and Latine youth, share a heightened awareness of systemic racism within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and racial uprising years (Quiles et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic provided a generative context for young people to become aware of systemic inequities and to feel motivated to build and engage in supportive communities and movements, including online spaces on social media (Carey et al., 2025; Wilf et al., 2023). For young people of color, experiences with racial discrimination and inequities can influence how they are attuned to systemic inequities and better able to verbalize them. Carey et al. (2025) finds that the COVID-19 pandemic and public racial violence during 2020 and 2021 brought systemic racism to the forefront of the minds of Black adolescent boys, affecting how they came to understand the racialized nature of societal and school inequities. None of these boys participated in street-level protests; however, both the COVID-19 pandemic and

encounters with Black Lives Matter protests through social media and news outlets inspired these Black boys' critical reflections of their racialized social conditions (Carey et al., 2025). Such reflections translated to growths in their critical consciousness development and, for some of the Black boys, movement toward critical actions and capacity-building to push back against systemic racism.

Racism and COVID-19 in the Louisville, Kentucky context

Our study explores the roles of catalyzing events and everyday experiences shaping how youth of color engage in critical consciousness within a city context marked by visible racial activism and inequities. We also examine their shared strategies for addressing inequities affecting youth in a city where youth voices are often overlooked, helping us to understand how youth shared strategies connect to youth critical reflections of inequities. Our study provides insights on how youth of color move to and through critical reflections of systemic inequities and problems, while navigating the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism brought into the spotlight in Louisville – the site of the murder of Breonna Taylor during March 2020 and ongoing struggles with racial violence and segregation. Thousands of protesters, including young activists, protested for racial justice on the streets of downtown Louisville and built a long-term movement for social change in the public spotlight (Doll and McCrary, 2025). Simultaneously, throughout 2020 to 2022, numerous reports and public media brought attention to racial inequities in COVID-19 morbidities and mortalities, violence, housing, health, and economic vulnerabilities, and other outcomes disproportionately experienced by people of color at the national and local levels (Addo, 2020; Clark, 2021; Doll and McCrary, 2025; Heberle et al., 2021). Local and national media and public testimonies and reports demonstrated concrete examples of racialized oppression and disparate impacts, which are institutional decisions and systemic processes that “have the consequence of producing or reinforcing racial disadvantage” often through hidden, indirect, and cumulative effects of seemingly race-neutral policies and practices (Pager and Shepherd, 2008, p. 182). Histories of racial segregation and inequities in Louisville have shaped the local context for youth of color to report on their experiences with structural racism through community-engaged research projects highlighting the impacts of racism on their communities (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Hjelm et al., 2025). For the past 20 years, Louisville youth programs have experienced defunding and challenges to programmatic access due to lack of resources and support from the local city government, particularly in neighborhoods located in West and South Louisville with larger Black and Latine populations (Greater Louisville Project, 2023; McLaren, 2020). Such challenges in the youth-sector became prominent between 2020 and 2022 as Louisville youth of color and youth workers serving them, especially those in West and South Louisville, experienced extreme educational and youth-program disruptions and challenges exacerbated by funding and resource constraints (Bloomer et al., 2021). COVID-19-related school and youth program disruptions perhaps made more visible the impacts of historical inequities and disinvestments affecting youth in Louisville.

Thus, during 2020 to 2022, youth of color in Louisville were exposed to catalyzing moments, unprecedented disruptions, and public spotlights on inequities and oppression within the context of a city marked by racial activism, violence, inequities, and disinvestment. Given the catalyzing events of COVID-19 and racism and the saliency of youth of color challenges within the Louisville context, our study examines critical reflections and shared strategies among youth of color for developing collective care and possibilities for youth-directed spaces and actions in Louisville. This study offers insights on how youth of color may express agency and develop critical consciousness when offered the opportunity to share reflections and suggested strategies within a context where youth of color have exposure to multiple catalyzing events simultaneously.

Data and methods

Throughout 2021–2022, we worked with Louisville Metro's Office of Youth Development (OYD) at the time to purposively recruit youth/young adults of color, including Black, Latine, and Asian American youth/young adults, between the ages of 12 and 24 who resided in Louisville. Our larger project sought to understand the perspectives of youth of color and youth workers of color on racial and social inequities and potential modes of change in Louisville during the twin pandemics. We distributed IRB-approved recruitment fliers using the OYD email listserv for youth- and young-adult-serving organizations in Louisville and OYD's social media. We had 27 youth and young adults complete a consent form and an online (or paper) demographic survey involving questions on age, pronouns, zip code, highest education level, and gender, sexuality, and racial/ethnic identities. All youth were enrolled in K-12 or higher education schooling during the time of our study.

In total, we facilitated 11 (six) individual interviews and (five) group interviews as listening sessions with 27 adolescents and young adults of color aged 12 to 21 (about half were 15- to 17-year-olds and almost all remaining participants were 18- to 20-year-olds). For this article, we removed two in-person (group) listening sessions conducted with interpretation provided by a community partner organization with nine Spanish-speaking youth who were not fluent in English. After completing these two group sessions, we had concerns about power dynamics resulting from organizational staff presence and potential impacts on authentic engagement of youth voice. In all English-speaking sessions, organizational staff were not present; however, staff provided interpretation for Spanish-speaking youth in these two sessions. Therefore, we focus here on 18 (14 girls; 4 boys) English-fluent youth of color who participated in nine sessions: six online (Zoom) individual interviews and three group sessions (one online and two in-person at local community organizations) conducted during April 2021 to January 2022. All identified as Black (14) and/or Latine (3) except for one Asian American youth. A couple of the youth identified as both Black/African American and “Hispanic” or “Mexican” or “Central American.” Over one third of our sample identified as LGBTQ or did not identify their sexuality. The three group sessions involved small groups ranging from two to five youth participants in each session. Our initial intention was for all to be listening sessions in a group format; however, due to scheduling issues and barriers experienced by youth shaping their

scheduled participation, we conducted six online individual interviews using the same guide and list of questions for the group listening sessions. We also used the same structure for the online and in-person sessions, although we added Zoom guidance at the beginning of the online sessions.

Listening sessions, often used in community-engaged projects, offer opportunities for community members to voice their ideas and concerns for the development of programs, policies, and practices and addressing specific issues in their community in a semi-structured environment (Ardoin et al., 2022). In the listening sessions (both with individuals and groups), we asked a series of prompts including questions on challenges faced by young people of color and local youth organizations, how their lives have changed during or been affected by COVID-19, support needs in managing challenges, concerns about and experiences with racial inequities and racism during recent years, and strategies or priorities to address those challenges and barriers. The use of a general guide with questions allowed flexibility for participants to direct the conversation, ask us and one another questions, and discuss and address community issues, programs, and policies as they desired. We offered \$20 e-gift cards to each youth for their participation.

Participants chose or, in cases where youth-chosen pseudonyms were unavailable, were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. All sessions lasted for ~45 to 75 min, were recorded (with consent), and transcribed verbatim. Each of the authors facilitated or co-facilitated at least three sessions (in pairs for the in-person group sessions). For the individual sessions, we paired interviewers of color with youth of color to support trust-building. A team involving four graduate students helped with facilitating remaining listening sessions, transcription, and data cleaning.

Social justice youth development in the research design

In this study, we integrated key components of Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) in the research design and goals by situating youth of color in relationship to their specific social, political, and economic conditions (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2006). As noted, SJYD conceptualizes youth in tandem with their social, political, and environmental forces, guiding research practices and offering a framework for direct service with youth and within youth ecosystems (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002). Using SJYD in the research design allowed us to engage in data collection and analysis in ways that responded directly to the social marginalization of youth of color (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2006). Our demographic survey and interview questions specifically focused on gaining deeper understandings of their social identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, pronouns, and ethnicity, and lived experiences. Recent research on youth critical consciousness also demonstrates that youth reflections on systemic issues and catalyzing events are useful for youth navigating difficult times. For example, Maker et al.'s (2022) study reveals how critical reflections of inequities during COVID-19 were associated with greater wellbeing or hopefulness among marginalized college students, such as LGBTQ+ students.

Using SJYD in the design of the study, we advertised the purpose of our study to understand youth of color perspectives on COVID-19, racial inequities, and racism (and their intersections), and we designed questions focused on power imbalances producing inequities. As noted, most of our listening sessions were facilitated by interviewers of color to support trust-building and to address power imbalances between researchers and youth. In the beginning of each session, we made it clear that these listening sessions provided opportunities for youth to voice their ideas, concerns, responses, and suggested strategies regarding addressing racial inequities and the COVID-19 pandemic in Louisville. We also informed youth participants about our intention to use research findings to inform policy and practices and bolster youth voice in the city. Later, we followed through with our goals by working with youth in publishing and sharing widely in Louisville a policy report based on this study's listening sessions (Gast et al., 2023).

Reflexivity

We recognize that our social identities and experiences influence data collection and analysis processes. The first author is an Asian American woman faculty member who, despite being born and raised in the U. S., has been profiled as a "brown" immigrant and, thus, is phenotypically viewed as both Asian American and "brown." The second author identifies as a White female faculty member with roots in rural and urban Kentucky. The third author identifies as a Black woman faculty member raised in the southern U. S. with both Black American and West African ethnic backgrounds. All have practical expertise in youth- and community-based spaces. Other research team members involved Black and White faculty and graduate students. We all identify as social-justice-oriented scholars seeking to center marginalized voices in academic work and policymaking. In the listening sessions, we sought to develop trust by, first, engaging youth in discussions of shared session norms and concerns and, second, by cultivating informal conversations with youth and between youth. For online sessions, youth also had the option to turn off video and to mute as needed. We also understand that we represent faculty at predominantly White, research universities and that we do not share age and other positionalities with youth participants.

Data analysis

We used Dedoose (2023), a web-based qualitative analysis application, to organize, manage, and store transcripts for this study and act as an analytic tool for transcript analysis. De-identified interview transcripts were loaded into Dedoose for initial and subsequent coding. We coded and analyzed the entire set of listening session transcripts (for both individual and group interviews) together. Transcripts were divided between the three authors for initial line-by-line inductive coding, with each researcher completing their own independent initial codes. We employed inductive line-by-line coding to stay close to the data and the voices of the youth (Charmaz, 2014), while also looking for patterns indicating categorical or conceptual themes from initial analytic engagement (Saldaña, 2025). We drew on our theoretical frameworks as sensitizing concepts, which allow for conceptual references, background ideas, and guidance for

explorative directions, rather than specific, fixed prescriptions, to be applied to empirical instances (Blumer, 1986; van den Hoonaard et al., 2012).

The three authors then met together to compare and discuss initial codes and assess areas of consensus and disagreement. When areas of dissent occurred, researchers engaged in conversations that prioritized the positionality and experience of individual researchers and collective knowledge to adjudicate codes. A codebook was established and applied to the full set of listening session transcripts. The coding process began in March and concluded in June 2022 with frequent (weekly or bi-weekly) meetings to create and then adjust the codebook as needed. Excerpts were discussed as a team to discern potential need for code adjustment, definition modification, or application of new codes. Focused or later-stage codes were applied to all transcripts with data checking and consensus building occurring along the way (Saldaña, 2013). Supplementary data sources included the audio recordings, field notes, and analytical memos, which helped to provide and document additional analytical context and ensure that we accurately captured observed data, researchers' thoughts, and notes concerning the study.

Research findings

The listening session format served as the foundation to explore youth responses, challenges, and suggestions for city change through dialogue promoting critical reflection. Through our inductive analysis, the following three themes emerged in relation to our research questions on how youth of color discussed lived experiences and suggested strategies in response to racism, racial inequities, and COVID-19 in Louisville: (1) youth of color elucidated both individual and collective experiences, indicating their developing awareness of the impacts of systemic problems and inequities; (2) they understood the saliency and systemic nature of racism and racial discrimination and violence; (3) they shared strategies emphasizing collective care and community spaces, reflecting their understandings of the roles of community-initiated action and change. It is important to note that the themes presented below are intertwined and cannot be neatly separated out by research question. Our findings point to the intersecting and catalyzing roles of dual, co-occurring pandemics (COVID-19 and systemic racism) in shaping critical reflections, as part of critical consciousness, among youth of color in Louisville, KY.

Dual pandemics and critical reflections: developing awareness of systemic problems and inequities

When asked about recent challenges faced as young people in Louisville, young residents of color spoke first about COVID-19-related closures, uncertainties, traumas, and stresses, in conjunction with a host of worries and stresses connected to racial inequities. In doing so, they brought up their own and their friends' or peers' COVID-19-related stresses and experiences, including experiences of minoritized and vulnerable youth, indicating an awareness of the collective and racialized nature of these feelings and experiences. Bria, an Asian American youth, summarized in an individual session: "Well,

this past year of COVID, it has more been about my mental health... I've just been really stressed, and I could tell some of my other friends have been really stressed [too]." When asked more specifically about the experiences of COVID-19-related stressors, Bria mentioned both individual stresses and a host of uncertainties and conflicts experienced collectively by herself, her friends, and vulnerable youth:

Just like the safety of others,... social media – it's been a really toxic place... there's so much conflict, so that stresses me out. And then, school especially,... we tried to do in-person..., but something went wrong, and we always had to go back online, and then go back and forth, and then the masks and the six feet a part was also stressful.

Bria used terms like "the safety of others" and "we" to discuss the collective experiences of "toxic" social media and constant shifts between online and in-person education; her repeated use of the pronoun "we" indicates her recognition of shared experiences by youth during COVID-19.

At other points, Bria also recognized how the voices and experiences of youth in Louisville were dismissed by adults and that those dismissals and lack of opportunities for obtaining youth-centered support represented shared struggles among youth:

Just recognize that we are going through mental health and like, we have feelings and issues, and that we are valid. Because I know a bunch of adults, they just brush off teenagers' opinions and feelings. We just want to be recognized as actual people... We have adult responsibilities, but we are also viewed as a child, as a kid still.

To Bria, these mental-health issues and tensions between having "adult responsibilities" and being "viewed as kid[s]" represented the shared status of teenagers, which also translated to a need for recognition of youth collective voice. Later on, Bria also mentioned the need for "more opportunities... where people can voice their opinions ... and everyone could just come together." She wanted to know that "Louisville [as a city] is taking action... [given] everything that's been caught on fire, COVID, and all of the injustice[s]." For Bria, shared youth struggles during COVID-19 and a heightened sense of injustices, including racial injustices as she later discussed racial segregation, stereotypes, and violence, correlated with how she highlighted the need for greater opportunities for youth collective voices to be heard and to collectively "come together" as part of necessary actions in the city.

Alex and Batman, both Black youth in the same listening session, discussed individual stresses and anxieties during COVID-19, but also collective and racialized youth experiences and systemic problems, such as those affecting emerging bilingual youth of color. Alex felt that her wellbeing was negatively impacted because "in quarantine, I was, like, left alone with my own thoughts." Alex went on to discuss how COVID-19 uniquely and negatively impacted her cousins who "do not quite understand English." "There wasn't like a person there to help them, to translate, so they could understand." Alex connected her cousins' experiences to institutional deficiencies in language resources for emerging bilingual youth of color. She also used the term "we" to describe the collective struggles of students during COVID-19 because of institutional, systemic deficiencies: "Most of the student did not know, like where to go... We were not getting the help we used to get when we were in-person compared to [online education]." Similarly,

Batman explained both personal and shared experiences during COVID-19: “*Personally, I would stay awake until like 2 a.m.... alone time.*” Batman further described how her friends shared those same struggles: “*Seeing like other people experience the same thing. Like, my other friends, because they had the same things [struggles].*”

Kella, a Black youth in an individual session, detailed how constant uncertainties and stresses during the past 2 years were exacerbated by pandemic-related closures and limited spaces for mental-health support: “*I did not expect this [pandemic] to still be going on, and then, during the COVID times,... that was a really tough time for my mental health. I was going through like some depression and anxiety.*” While Kella first connected COVID-19 to her individual depression, she quickly moved to discussing systemic problems related to COVID-19: “*Another big one was that it [COVID-19] kind of made me start questioning things, such as the systems in order, even my religion. It just made me more aware of the things going on around me.*” Kella directly used words like “*systems,*” “*questioning things,*” and “*things going on around me*” to indicate her developing awareness of systemic and collectively experienced social conditions and problems. While COVID-19-related closures, traumas, and stresses exacerbated youth feelings of individual isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty, youth of color also connected youth shared experiences and struggles in Louisville to the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic disempowerment, including adult marginalization of youth of color and lack of public-school and city resources, especially for emerging bilinguals and youth of color, which we further discuss next.

Racial violence, discrimination, and critical reflections on systemic racism

Louisville youth of color also highlighted the saliency and widespread nature of racism, racial discrimination, police violence, and other racial injustices during 2020 and 2021. They described experiencing and anticipating racism and policing both individually and collectively. Amber, a Black youth in an individual session, described how her and her mother recently went to the ATM at a bank, when a White woman waiting at the ATM saw them and locked her car. Then, the woman looked at them again and went inside her car to wait. To Amber and her mother, it was clear that the White woman viewed them as threats. Amber connected this experience to systemic racism affecting Black people as a group: “*I never in my life have I seen anything so clear to me. Like I knew oppression, prejudice, and, you know, some people hate Black people.*” Amber further underscored the emotional and physical pain tied to experiences with racism, but also the shared nature of these experiences by those with similar skin color:

It hurts! Because, like all my life I thought people would, you know, view me as a good person if I looked the part, if I dressed the part, if I spoke the part. But I mean, it shows that even then, people still will not trust you due to your skin color. And, I mean, that hurts... It really does. It's like, it's like no matter what you do, like, people just aren't going to trust you.

Here, Amber explains anti-Black racism where Black people are collectively viewed as threats and mistrusted, regardless of their

professional dress (“*dress[ing] the part*”), because of judgments toward Black “*skin color.*”

Repeatedly, these youth indicated the pervasiveness and structured nature of racism, which was at the forefront of their minds. Billy, a Latino young adult in a group session, detailed how “*racism is like, ingrained within our society... It's just the way our society is set up.*” Butterfly, a Black young adult in a group session said, “*[Racism] is everywhere we go.*” When asked in that same group session about what should be a city top priority, Dee Dee, a Black youth, went straight to discussing racism but also questioned if the city would ever make addressing racism and racial inequities priorities: “*What makes you think that they really want to do that [address racial inequities in the city]?*” Dee Dee went on to explain that older White adults hold power and are racist, preventing meaningful city changes: “*Because..., it's older people,... Caucasian older people. There's still racism in this community. You gonna hear people call Black people porch monkeys and stuff.*” Dee Dee reflected on both power inequities in the city and deeply felt personal harm by racism. She offered visceral responses when discussing racism in the city: “*It makes my skin crawl.*”

George, a Black youth in an individual session, directly said that Black people’s experiences with everyday racism have been brought to the forefront during and after COVID-19: “*Now, after COVID, [we] are more well-equipped to handle different racism interactions and racism in general.*” George further spoke of the systemic nature of racial inequities and discrimination and how, during the Trump administration, people in power ignore or get away with racial discrimination:

America, ... it's sad uh where we are right now as a country uhm because uhm ya know Donald Trump says 'make America great again' – America was never great and we are, we are uhm, I would not say we are in a better place now. We're in a different place... It just takes a different form now. Uhm, people aren't blatantly racist you know on the news, calling people the n-word and stuff. [Changes direction] But uhm they can call someone the n-word and still get uhm and still have uhm you know millions of dollars in their account, still own multi-, like multiple businesses. Uhm, they do not get uhm, they do not get punished for like harassing Black people.

During this discussion about systemic racism, George also pushed the city to engage in conscientious efforts to support and provide safe spaces for youth and communities of color: “*Just opening more uhm community buildings in these different predominantly Black communities – predominantly colored communities – opening more buildings that allow access to the youth in these communities to where they can just go... feel safe and be away from all the trash that is America.*” George understood that city and institutional resources were necessary to counter ongoing forms of racism and to address the collective struggles of youth and communities of color.

Sara, a Black youth in an individual session, further connected what she called “*racial tensions*” to the lack of public-school teachers and mentors focused on youth of color. Like other participants, Sara used the pronoun “*we*” and noted the shared nature of these experiences by youth of color:

Because of, I mean, racial tensions, we do not know if we are going to find someone who is a mentor that has our best interests at heart or understands where we are coming from, because to guide and

mentor a minority student, that mentor is going to have to understand the problems that the student is going to face, because they are not the same problems that our White counterparts will face. I'd say the issues that I face as a young adult in Louisville are definitely rooted in racial tensions.

At another point, Sara clarified that youth-of-color-focused support would be helpful in Louisville, but that systemic changes were also necessary: “I do not know if it will ever really be enough. I think it’s a start. I do not think it’s enough. I think enough would be getting rid of the systemic racism that remains in all institutions...especially schools and stuff.” To Sara, the city needed to engage in systemic changes and dismantle systemic racism to preclude the existing necessity of youth-of-color-focused support: “That would get rid of everything that, that would get rid of the need for support for things like that.”

Louisville youth of color also spoke of anxieties related to police violence, as well as structural analyses of power inequities and policing in the city. We heard statements about personal fears and anxieties, like: “[police] could kill you for no reason, ... and then you are just dead. You’re just another number.” Another Black youth said, “Every time I see police, I feel scared.” Furthermore, participants observed and deeply felt the collective tolls of policing, racism, racial violence, and power inequities. Pizza, a Black youth in a group session, felt that the city response was inadequate following the murder of Breonna Taylor. He felt like “the mayor did not really do anything to hold the police officers accountable even though he had the power to do so. Feeling like more could have been done to, like, hold them accountable, structurally.” Kella also expressed that “the biggest problem right now in Louisville is the police force...they are not held accountable for their actions.” Youth of color noted fears and shared struggles related to police violence and power inequities independent of any prompting in that direction. Furthermore, these responses came after general questions about COVID-19 or racial inequities in Louisville, indicating that youth participants reflected on the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism simultaneously.

Youth suggestions emphasizing collective care and community spaces

Louisville youth of color sought greater opportunities to engage in collective strategies of care while navigating the complexities of the twin pandemics. However, these youth also described lack of safe spaces or being excluded from these opportunities based on accessibility, racial identity, and city disinvestments. All respondents wanted greater access to and the availability of safe, community spaces for young people to obtain mental health and social support, to share voices and concerns with peers, and to engage in collective care and support. Isaiah, a Black youth in a group session, described needing “a place to go... [to] get more human interaction.” He went on: “It’s been kinda hard these past couple of [years], what, this past year, actually... Maybe something like, where you can like... you know just talk to people.” Billy in the same session agreed that Louisville needed more safe, accessible youth spaces: “Like [to] go [to] or to like vent emotions or frustrations and stuff... Like somewhere where they can just go and feel safe.” He went on: “Where people can just like hear your voice and your opinion on topics and things. To be able to talk to someone and then see those, see those changes happening in the

community.” These young people sought greater opportunities to share their struggles and concerns and to support other young people, especially youth of color, and the broader community to engage in individual and collective healing and productive community changes.

During the dual pandemics, youth of color described their experiences with isolation, and longed for the opportunity to engage with peers in a safe context. These youth made calls for organizational outreach and recognition to support youth mental health: Bria desired “[that] some people or some organization that basically reaches out to,... ideally, everyone, every teen... to just recognize that we are going through mental health, like, we have feelings and issues, and that we are valid.” As mentioned above, youth like Bria felt dismissed by adults and city officials in Louisville and believed that adults did not prioritize youth spaces and possibilities for youth to engage in collective care as a community of young people.

Despite challenges in achieving collective care and supportive interactions in traditional contexts, youth found ways to fill gaps and support one another. Youth described ways in which they had created collective care communities virtually or through curated in-person meetings. Collective care meant collective acts of caring for and sharing with each other to build community, show respect, support each other, and create positive change. Bria relied on her friends who were “very supportive of each other and basically giving kind of therapy sessions or just ranting about the world and what’s going on.” Bria and her friends created these “therapy sessions” to support each other’s mental health and reflections during COVID-19, but also to collectively share dialogue on systemic issues and problems. Above, we noted how Bria prioritized spaces for youth to “just come together” and work through “COVID and all of the injustices.”

Thus, youth suggestions for action were not limited to personal experiences or individual-level needs. Youth identified unmet needs related to youth community and collective care while also understanding the need for community-wide outreach and support for sustainable community change. Billy, for example, wanted his voice heard and be able to “talk to someone,” but also desired to “see those changes happening in the community.” Youth made calls for collective recognition and outreach, as well as opportunities for youth of color voices to be heard. As Bria noted above, youth voices need to be heard “to just recognize that... we have feelings and issues, and that we are valid.” In these ways, youth participants demonstrated self and community levels of awareness in relation to their own critical consciousness development. Youth participants repeatedly emphasized that the city did not prioritize or cultivate youth spaces for sharing and obtaining catered support, and that they were ready and motivated to engage in collective care and support. This demonstrated youth of color building momentum but facing challenges toward development of critical motivation through their critical reflections on the dual pandemics.

Discussion

Public discourse and legislation surrounding youth and young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic focused largely on COVID-19-related struggles and health concerns and recovery, often failing to account for cumulative stresses and anxieties affecting youth of color due to social problems and traumas during the dual pandemics

of COVID-19 *and* racism. Our study examined youth of color responses to lived experiences with racism, racial inequities, and the COVID-19 pandemic in Louisville, KY during 2020 to 2022, as well as their suggested strategies for mitigating racial inequities during COVID-19 as potential components of the process of critical consciousness.

Louisville youth of color highlighted the saliency and widespread nature of racism, police violence, and other racial injustices during 2020 and 2021, in conjunction with a host of stresses and challenges related to COVID-19-related uncertainties and inequities. In doing so, they reflected on individual and collective experiences and connected those experiences to the impacts of systemic problems, violence, and inequities, indicating their critical reflections or systemic understandings of social inequalities and the surrounding conditions as part of critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2016). These findings connect to our research questions one and three. Additionally, in connection to research question two, youth of color felt that Louisville youth were often excluded and not heard, and they voiced their sense of agency and suggested strategies, which included the need for increased access to and funding of youth-centered spaces and conversations prioritizing youth voice, collective care, and safety within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and racism in Louisville. We employed Social Justice Youth Development in the research design to center these youth voices and to emphasize youth-identified strategies for combating inequities and marginalization.

We connect findings from our study to two areas of literature: previous studies highlighting the psychological tolls endured by youth during the COVID-19 pandemic and scholarship on the critical consciousness and responses of youth of color (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Carey et al., 2025; Casanova, 2024; Conrad et al., 2021; Hoyt et al., 2021; Samji et al., 2022). COVID-related closures in Louisville, our study's city context, diminished access to existing youth spaces that traditionally provided opportunities to collectively discuss, manage, and address these issues and anxieties, and youth of color faced unique, multifaceted challenges during this time (Briggs, 2024; Carey et al., 2025). While past research often focuses on youth critical consciousness during participation in social-justice oriented afterschool programs or community organizations (Bloomer and Brown, 2024; Casanova, 2024; Ngo et al., 2017), our study explores the roles of COVID-19 and racism as dual pandemics and catalyzing events for youth in their building critical consciousness. We highlight the voices and perspectives of youth of color with limited access to youth-centered spaces while navigating intersecting and generative moments in Louisville, KY – the site of the murder of Breonna Taylor and racial uprisings – and COVID-19-related closures, after March 2020.

Requests for safety were a salient request for youth of color within the context of the city of Louisville, which saw a spike in homicide deaths between 2019 to 2022, with most homicides occurring in Black neighborhoods experiencing historical disinvestment. As violence surged in the city, total funding for youth-focused departments fell by 38% (Greater Louisville Project, 2023). The reduction in funds resulted in fewer spaces for youth of color to share and act on their growing concerns and anxieties amidst the twin pandemics and increased community violence. Through their reflections and their suggested strategies, youth in this study engaged in critical reflection about racism during COVID-19 and moved

between critical consciousness awareness at the self and community levels. However, youth participants also highlighted the lack of institutionally supported spaces and adult recognition of youth voice to intentionally center youth-focused issues of concern, which perhaps limited how these youth developed critical motivation or plans to interrupt cycles of oppression.

Limitations and future directions

For this study, we engaged Louisville youth of color in dialogue that promoted critical reflection on experiences with the twin pandemics. Outreach for study participation occurred through a Louisville Metro office listserv of youth and young adult organizations and programs, resulting in youth participants with prior experience in or contact with community-based youth/young adult programs. As such, the emphasis on prioritizing those programs and funding may have been greater for these youth as compared to other youth of color within the city. Our study findings also reflect the voices of Louisville youth of color who selected to share their experiences and thoughts in in-person group listening sessions or online sessions, which included small group or individual sessions. Therefore, our sample reflects youth who perhaps sought out the listening session experience and were ready to voice their experiences, reflections, and suggested strategies for change.

Our sample also reflects youth of color with the economic or institutional advantages of internet and technology access. Some of the youth in our study noted how they cultivated and responded to social media and communities online. Because most of our listening sessions occurred online, this meant that those youth participants felt comfortable and able to access wi-fi and technology. As noted above, all the youth in our sample were enrolled in K-12 or higher education schooling during the time of our study. However, due to salient racial and economic segregation in Louisville, youth residing in historically Black or Latine and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods during 2021 and 2022 faced constrained infrastructures for digital access. The twin pandemics highlighted inequities in regular access to technology, including smartphones, computers, and internet availability in the city of Louisville, even among those enrolled in educational institutions. Future research should examine the role of online communities for youth of color as they develop critical consciousness. Our work also suggests that scholars could compare youth reflecting on catalyzing moments within and outside of organized youth spaces. Ultimately, future research should explore mechanisms to identify youth strategies for collectivity both inside and outside traditional structures or formally organized programs and to build critical consciousness among youth of color in response to catalyzing moments.

Conclusion

We showcase the agentic ways in which youth of color engage in critical reflections on their own, offering insights on the potential for the development of critical consciousness outside of organized programs. Our findings suggest that youth of color seek their own spaces to collectively reflect and engage in collective care, while also wanting

greater opportunities to access culturally sensitive, institutionally funded, and safe organized programs. The COVID pandemic, public spotlights of racism, and racial uprisings catalyzed youth of color in Louisville to recognize and make connections across preexisting disparities and inequities embedded in micro and macro structural levels. Exposure to catalyzing events can fuel critical understandings of shared struggles and the need for collective care and action; however, repeated exposure to traumatic and unprecedented events may also desensitize youth to injustices or inequities, making it more difficult to reach critical consciousness praxis. Recent trends showing reductions in youth-centered spaces and related funding are not unique to Louisville. As more cities experience problems with funding disinvestments and non-profit youth program struggles and closures, it is important for future research and policy-makers to understand mechanisms to foster critical consciousness praxis for youth of color. Our study underscores the need for more opportunities for youth of color to find praxis in self-guided or non-traditional contexts, as less accessibility to programmatic spaces looms on the horizon.

Data availability statement

Due to anonymity and confidentiality agreements with respondents, the raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will not be made available by the authors.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Institutional Review Board at University of Louisville. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants or their legal guardians.

Author contributions

MG: Formal analysis, Project administration, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. RB: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Data curation,

Conceptualization. AB: Formal analysis, Project administration, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Investigation, Funding acquisition.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

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Political economies of education and violent public protests in conflict zone: narratives of youth from iNanda and KwaMashu townships, South Africa

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Protests accompanied by increasing violence are prevalent in the townships of South Africa. These violent protests often arise from community dissatisfaction with service delivery, which in some cases leaves residents without basic necessities such as water and electricity. As a result, learners and students are left without access to schools, colleges, and universities, disrupting education programs. This study draws on Novelli and Cardozo-Lopez's framework, which identifies a tool that can aid in alleviating poverty. This study also considers both physical and structural forms of violence and examines how the everyday experiences of youth are shaped by these dynamics. In conflict zones such as the iNanda and KwaMashu townships, education suffers whenever violent events take place. This study is framed by Political Economy Analysis (PEA), which was used to explore how the intersections of politics, geographic location, history, and class shape experiences of both formal and informal education. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with 16 participants and two focus groups involving youth and learners aged 19 to 35 years. Findings from the thematic analysis, as guided by the 4R's framework (recognition, redistribution, representation and reconciliation), indicate that (1) violent protests are directly linked to dissatisfaction with service delivery, which negatively influences the education system, and (2) youth in conflict zones are deprived of formal education, often becoming exposed to adults who teach or engage them in criminal activities; and (3) communities in the iNanda and KwaMashu townships deem community dialogue and the Ubuntu approach as possible solutions to protect youth from the consequences of various forms of violence. The study concludes that since no community in the world is immune to physical or structural violence, education can serve as a powerful vehicle for promoting social justice among youth in conflict zones.

KEYWORDS

youth, formal education, townships, violence, violent public protests

Background

In February 2024, violent protests erupted in the iNanda and KwaMashu townships, leading to the closure of schools, places of employment, libraries, and malls. Protesters blocked roads, making it impossible to access or leave the townships. The protests were not the first; in July 2021, South Africa witnessed protests and looting incidents in the townships of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces. These protests occurred 27 years after the country gained independence and involved acts of violence and looting. In the majority of areas, the protests

were believed to have been sparked by the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma. The former president was convicted and imprisoned for 15 months. Studies by Ngcamu (2019) and Ngwane (2011) revealed that public protests are common in South Africa and often turn violent. Where and/or under what conditions do protests turn violent? Public protests become violent at different points and at different levels, creating a *continuum of violence* for learners at school and youth located outside of formal education, which implies that some are not in the education system or are unemployed. At the physical level, the burning of tyres, barricading roads with rocks or wooden locks, or community members physically blocking the roads, adversely affect access to schools for these learners. Furthermore, violence exists in both structural and symbolic forms through the curriculum and the ways in which township schools are under-resourced relative to former Model C schools, which were previously reserved for white people only by the apartheid government, and private schools in South Africa. Both the curriculum and the lack of resources in township schools are directly linked to the apartheid history of the country, as gaining independence in post-apartheid South Africa did not bring about change to the education system.

The continued use of past policies that shape the current curriculum perpetuates exclusion with little to no change in resources, such as the renovation and maintenance of school structure/building and the lack of computers and Wi-Fi for the majority of schools in iNanda and KwaMashu, including the iNanda Seminary School and the J. G Zuma High School, which was only relocated to a new building in 2023. According to Ngwane (2011), the rise in public protests in the country is linked to economic disparities resulting from increased unemployment and poverty. In this study, service delivery refers to the government's inability to provide basic services to communities, resulting in public protests. According to a study by Ni et al. (2020:238), "post-traumatic stress disorder prevalence ranges from 4 to 41% in riot-affected areas." Theorists Ngcamu (2019) and Ngwane (2011) add that individual participation in the protests affects their mental wellbeing, with the prevalence of major depression rising when violent protests occur, which is a significant demonstration and indicates community spillover effects.

Reviewing literature

Political economy analysis (PEA) and education access

Political and economic factors influence education, and as an integral part of the social structure in communities, events outside the education system impact how education is shaped (Selenica and Novelli, 2020). Violent protests have become increasingly common in the post-apartheid South African university landscape due to student struggles over financial access. Unlike in 1976, when youth in township schools initiated peaceful protests inside school premises, affecting students like the iconic Hector Petersen, township protests that impact education usually begin at the community level. Nonetheless, events and resurgences of community protest violence inevitably affect access to education for many young people living in townships. Using political economy analysis (PEA) helped connect ways in which politics and economic factors impact education at Nanda and KwaMashu townships. Political economy analysis is a tool

used to understand the interaction of political and economic processes in a society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals and the processes that create, sustain, and transform these relationships over time (Novelli et al., 2017).

PEA also highlights ways in which youth outside of the formal education system and those who are unemployed participate in violent protests, engaging with party politics, where they campaign and promote protests through social media platforms and secret meetings. They recruit for different roles in the protests, such as those responsible for cutting off electricity and water pipes in specific areas or organising syndicates that will start burning tyres in different parts of the community, causing major damage to existing infrastructure, such as schools, roads, factories, and businesses around.

Youth outside formal education, in an effort to address socio-economic issues faced by communities in iNanda and KwaMashu, become socialised into the intricate ways of conceptualising, building, and implementing protests. These protests often turn violent due to their exclusion from the formal schooling system.

The entanglement of youth outside the education system and contact with the older generation play two significant roles in that the youth both get an opportunity to engage with people who were present and participated in violent protests that took place during the apartheid struggle. This, in turn, creates and nurtures a growing political consciousness experience that much formal education would otherwise not offer. This political consciousness produces a unique civil identity for the youth exposed to the 'street curriculum.' The negative influence of this knowledge is that it is sometimes deployed in instrumental ways that exacerbate violence in the community protests, causing myriad damage to marginalised populations, as occurred with the communities of iNanda and KwaMashu. Thus, violent protests function as a site of informal political education, a curriculum of the street, or a direct consequence of historical and ongoing educational inequities, as protestors block access to schools and steal or damage educational resources. Those in the formal education system are then exposed to different layers of violence that are made manifest via structural and institutional resources, which are directly linked to historic and ongoing educational inequalities. Inequalities related to public services that make it impossible for learners to reach schools, along with inequalities rooted in apartheid, contribute to disparities in the quality of education and knowledge taught in schools. Additionally, material and epistemic differences in student care are perpetuated within public versus private schools in South Africa.

Therefore, politics and economics intersect, fuelling community protests into events of violence. The Political Economy Framework helped understand the complexities of political and economic systems and their intersection with education, influencing how those within the formal education system experience schooling. However, the study is also interested in the experiences of youth who are not within the formal education system but rather experience a different form of curriculum that is informed by socio-economic inequalities in iNanda and KwaMashu townships. This, in turn, shapes their educational experiences in various contexts. In relation to race, the economy, and education, the history of South Africa is an important factor in understanding the current trends and phenomena surrounding these categories.

The Population Registration Act of 1950 segregated South Africa into four racial groups: White people, Indian people, Coloured

people, and Black African people, with Black people being at the bottom of the economic hierarchy. Racial classification determined the area where individuals lived and the schools they attended. From this perspective, PEA reinforces [Du Bois' \(1903\)](#) and [Fanon's \(1967\)](#) arguments on the enduring afterlives of racialised systems for oppression, which permeate both the macro and micro dimensions of social life. Apartheid laws and policies naturalised and reinforced the marginalisation of Black communities, which continues today. [Gordon \(2018\)](#) argues that the marginalisation of Black communities is not a thing of the past; it is still present. The violent protests that leave devastating results, which directly influence how youth at iNanda and KwaMashu experience education, must be read against this recalcitrance of race and racism in the post-apartheid context.

According to [Rutherford et al. \(2007\)](#), violence is a worldwide challenge that requires constant attention because of its fluid nature. Their study focused on understanding violence as a public health issue and did not specifically target students. However, their study is relevant to the proposed study because it highlights the need for researchers to broaden the definition of violence. Other scholars have argued that for a full understanding of the meaning of violence, we need to understand that violence is not a single entity; it takes different forms, and the different forms or levels intersect with each other, which is why we need to broaden the definition ([Bowman et al., 2015](#)). Additionally, [Rutherford et al. \(2007\)](#) state that we need to broaden our definition of violence because it is a complex phenomenon made up of many parts. Based on these scholars, the current research examined violence in terms of both its physical and symbolic manifestations. It also explored how these elements come together or divide to produce a specific educational experience for youth in both formal and informal forms of education. The paper argues that violent protests that are rooted in the country's political and economic inequalities create a continuum of violence. Using the PEA allowed the application of the 4Rs that Novelli employs to study the impact of political and economic factors in conflict zones. Initially coined by Fraser as a lens that helps with the understanding of the root of violence in conflict zones, the 4Rs framework refers to recognition, redistribution, and reconciliation.

To better understand the political economies of the iNanda and KwaMashu townships, the historical continuum of marginalisation is relevant here. The apartheid system marginalised Black people and left a legacy of poverty by excluding them from participating in economic activities. The only way Black people took part in the economic system was when they worked as employees to earn meagre wages. Through the same systems, Black people could only live in particular areas far from their white counterparts through the system of othering, where Black people are considered as outsiders; therefore, they do not deserve the same privileges enjoyed by whites ([Steyn, 2014](#)). The geographic location was organised according to the race discourse. Geographic locations are important to understand because they are not just a matter of terrain; they determine everyday life in terms of behaviour, what we are exposed to, and how we move.

Thus, geographies shape experiences of existence ([McKittrick, 2006](#)). Educational institutions, as part of the broader infrastructure, mirror the same racialised structure and are therefore physically and structurally affected by public protests over service delivery. These disruptions affect both youth in the formal education system and those outside it. Power remains deeply embedded in South Africa's

social hierarchies, normalising racial privileges that continue to shape everyday experiences ([Steyn, 2014](#)).

The apartheid system-based social welfare service programme was based on race and geographic location, with Black people and whites not experiencing the same access to service delivery ([Patel, 2012](#)). Inequalities and discrimination are the foundation of the tension and frustration that often explode in the form of public protests and looting incidents we see today ([Patel, 2012](#)). A common feature of protests in the South African context is dissatisfaction with the government's failure to meet the basic needs of the communities and deliver basic services to people residing in townships such as iNanda and KwaMashu township. [McKittrick \(2006\)](#) states that "landscape, our surroundings and our everyday places are the vessels of human violence" p. xi, and that service delivery, race, and geographic location determine the kinds of services they receive from the government. The paper's focus is on how violent protest influences the experiences of youth and their interactions with formal and informal schooling processes.

Methodology

A qualitative methods approach was applied to capture and analyse participants' lived experiences of Black African youth from the townships of iNanda and KwaMashu. Their education system continues to be directly and indirectly affected by violent public protests, helping answer the research question ([de Vos, 2005](#)).

The study explored how both formal and informal education systems influence youth perceptions of how violent forms of public protests affect access to education. A qualitative approach aided in understanding the participants' social processes and everyday lived experiences ([Babbie and Mouton, 2016](#)).

I was able to engage with participants' stories, using Experience-Centred Narratives (ECN), a research design that considers the contexts in which stories take place. Therefore, for this reason, it was vital that the timing and violent events, both visible (barricading, shooting and burning tyres) and invisible, which are structural, such as the townships (not having water or electricity) for more than three weeks, as well as the ones that were still active (attacks between political parties), be included in the study because they give us the context in which participants' experiences occur ([Boonzaier and Van Schalkwyk, 2011](#)).

To avoid misrepresentation of the research participants' voices, the first author adhered to ethical principles and ensured trustworthiness by reviewing recorded interviews with participants and analysing notes taken during the interviews by both the first author and the research assistant. I picked up codes and themes that we deemed significant. Lastly, the data was analysed using NVivo version 15 to process the final reports presented in the report results, and these were compared to other methods used. Supervisors were involved throughout the process, ensuring the trustworthiness of the results and preventing biases or misrepresentations of the true meaning of the data.

The focus on lived experiences is central to the qualitative approach, and it can assist in giving participants a voice. The experiences of the iNanda and KwaMashu took place within a specific political and socio-economic context. The experiences could also be attributed to the timing of the protests. First, it was two years after

the July 2021 protest and looting that left hundreds of people dead, and both townships were impacted by the 2022 floods that left them without water and electricity. The interviews for this research took place just two months before South Africa's national elections; there was an intersection of three protests that were still active when the data was collected. Therefore, I engaged with participants in a way that created a space conducive to this context. Allowing participants to interpret events and experiences according to how they understand them.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 16 participants, which helped the study to gain an in-depth understanding of how service delivery-related challenges influence youth from iNanda and KwaMashu townships in relation to education. Additionally, I conducted two focus group discussions of eight to ten participants. Bringing the group together became helpful as it facilitated a conversation between people of a similar age group who share the same or similar experiences and exposure to violent public protests and other forms of violence and have firsthand experience with being within and outside formal education.

I used [Squire's \(2008\)](#) Everyday Centred Narrative (ECN) as the study's design to engage with semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Using ECN as a design meant that I could conduct interviews with participants at different times about the same topic. This approach goes beyond analysing the words uttered by also considering body language, facial expressions, and even hesitations and silences as forms of "paralanguage" ([Squire, 2008](#)). This helped in gaining an in-depth understanding of how the participants feel about certain phenomena and experiences. Finally, an ethnographic study was included in the data collection after the first author learnt that protests had started at the targeted research site. I was aware of the traumatic nature of the 2021 protests and had been informed that an elderly lady had lost her life and two of our participants had been attacked by unknown individuals whilst they were sleeping during the period we spent with the community when we collected data in 2024. [Squire \(2008\)](#) warns that the retelling of a traumatic story may trigger participants. A psychologist was on standby for anyone who might need therapy after. The therapist spoke isiZulu and had offices in KwaMashu, making it easy for clients to access her without worrying about transport costs or paying for the sessions, as she offered free sessions to all participants.

Upon arriving, I discovered that major violent protests had just taken place the previous day; as a result, we could see roads being barricaded, tyres burning, and some community members cleaning. After spending a week in the area, attending community meetings, and participating in various locations, fires were started. This time, community members blamed municipal workers for preventing access to water and electricity, leading to another two-week-long protest. The protest forced schools to close their premises because both learners and teachers could not pass the protestors. Unfortunately, some community members also believed that they were targeted because nearby Phoenix, which is a predominantly Indian populated area, had lights and water ([Kiguwa, 2021](#)). This perception led to racial tensions; however, there was fear from communities of iNanda and KwaMashu that if they were to protest against Indian people, more people would die. This idea stemmed from the violent protests and looting event in 2021, during which schools in the townships had to close for up to three weeks.

As I had already established relationships with a community gatekeeper, I had been warned in advance by the informant on days when it would be dangerous to be on site; however, I got to experience the violence that took place when we went days later with dustbins spilt all over, making it difficult to breathe, burning tyres, broken glasses and the sombre mood as an elderly person had passed in one of the wards because an ambulance could not reach her on time. The volunteers I joined prioritised clearing parts that allowed learners to access schools and health facilities. However, the community still had no water three weeks after I arrived on site, and I left without experiencing a drop in any of the water taps around the office used to conduct the study.

Purposive sampling was used because it allowed for the selection of participants based on their experience or knowledge about the phenomenon being studied. In South Africa, a child is defined by the Bill of Rights and the Children's Act as "a person under the age of 18 years" [[Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, Section 28\(3\), n.d.](#)]. Youth is defined as individuals aged 15–34 years; therefore, participants in the study were between 15 and 34 years of age, as this is the age the government recognises as legal age. [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) describe thematic analysis as a method to systematically identify patterns in qualitative data. The researcher employed this approach to trace how themes emerged across both datasets.

Data analysis and discussion

The three major themes will be discussed in connection to Novelli's 4Rs to trace progress made by the government post-apartheid in iNanda and KwaMashu townships, as both are among the areas previously marginalised by the oppressive government systems.

Reasons for protests and influence on communities

Novelli's PEA connects politics, economic power, and education in conflict zones, arguing that education suffers during conflict. The study's findings indicate that participants are concerned about experiencing unequal access to essential services and infrastructure, such as roads, water, and electricity supply. The participant importantly compares the need for infrastructure development with other improved residential areas, as mentioned in the quote below.

"Yes. As committees in the community, we look at that. We can't even report anyway, or even at meetings with our officials. You see how the roads are at Westville and Mhlanga Rock? That's what we want too. When I report, I'm usually reporting the same thing. I also want our informal settlement roads to be fixed, but they aren't being fixed. When they report in other areas like Westville, Newlands, and Mhlanga Rocks, their concerns are addressed promptly. Our grandfather lived here back then, but the road still hasn't been fixed." (Participant 10)

In this regard, the need for infrastructure development calls for protest action as a sign of the need for the right to live in dignified conditions. Though the quote mentions roads, the damage to them

directly affects learners' ability to access educational institutions, as they need to travel from their homes to schools. Others travel to universities and colleges both in and outside the townships. Additionally, education in this context is described as a tool of empowerment for the youth, as different levels of education offer employment opportunities for the youth (Novelli et al., 2017).

Participants also indicated that violent protests interrupting educational programmes are rooted in frustration with the slow improvement and/or lack of maintenance of infrastructure in the iNanda and KwaMashu communities. Participants expressed disappointment with the current government, which underdelivers towards community needs. Subsequently, although community members may vote for a gullible government, they still protest to demonstrate its ineffectiveness, hoping to influence future voting decisions and bring about change. This is indicated by participant 4 from the focus group:

"I think that sometimes the community protests... uhm people vote right? They voted for that government, so when they protest, they sometimes want to show how useless it is. They are not delivering on what they promised."

"So, for us to show how useless they are, we must protest, then maybe the next time we vote, we vote for a different government, so that there might be a change, maybe. That's what I think."

Results also indicate that youth that is not in school or those who could not finish school due to reasons related to socio-economic standing experience are unemployed, with many having lost their jobs during the 2021 violent protests and looting event. Therefore, high unemployment rates significantly contribute to protest actions in the community. Most youth are unemployed and lack stable income, leading to heightened frustration and desperation, especially since many individuals in the community have studied to obtain qualifications to improve their livelihoods. Simultaneously, when a community has a high number of unemployed individuals and youth, they often resort to committing crimes to sustain their lives, which then affects innocent individuals. Subsequently, the lack of education or qualifications obtained through education leads to increased unemployment rates within the community. This situation fuels protests as unemployed individuals voice their dissatisfaction and need for economic relief to community leaders and authorities, hoping to be recognised for change. Below, participants share their sentiments:

"Unemployment plays a big part... It is the reason why there's so much poverty and crime in this area." (Participant 2)

"Yeah, some of them went to school but are sitting at home with their qualifications. So, these are the challenges we are facing... But the main reason people protest is unemployment. Should people get employment, they'll be fine." (Participant 2)

Results also indicate that a major driver of the community protests is the failure of authorities and community leaders to sustain and provide essential services, such as clean water and electricity, in the community and the surrounding schools. Learners are sent home when there is no water, and those attending universities or colleges outside the two townships also miss lectures. Therefore, basic needs

such as water not only leave community members stranded but also put the education system in a desperate position. Subjects such as computer science require electricity for teachers to conduct lessons, making it impossible for them to do their job when the community has no electricity.

"Oh, the protest. What can I say? The cause of the protest is the power cut. So, the community, due to anger and frustration, decided to protest." (Participant 10)

"We have a water and electricity issue; electricity can be out for a whole week, and water too. That upsets the community, leading to the vandalism. However, even after the vandalism, the water and electricity don't come back, so it's a waste of time and energy." (Participant 13)

Based on the above, the current government fails to bring *Reconciliation* to these communities. It continues to fail to deliver basic services that make it possible for youth in iNanda and KwaMashu to benefit fully from the current education system. Though tensions brew outside of educational institutions, the failure to meet basic community needs affects youth in the formal education system. The research argues that for youth in schools, a double form of violence exists, as the curriculum in schools can be challenging; for example, the use of English in a community that speaks isiZulu as their main language of communication, or the lack of basic needs in the school is structural. This shows how learners remain excluded from policies that influence their learning; thus, the representation of diversity in language in South Africa is missing in schools. The voices of learners are missing in policymaking. The same learners experience the same challenges outside of school because the majority of them come from the same neighbourhoods that were protested and blocked from attending school.

Youth participation, education, and violent protests

Research shows that youth in conflict zones are forcefully removed from school due to rising tensions, and in some cases, schools are destroyed or vandalised. Participants shared various reasons they believe push youth to protest or engage in risky behaviour. Participant 10 highlighted that influence and boredom at home are significant factors, suggesting that young people may be driven to protest due to a lack of activities or direction. Participant 2 pointed out the economic struggles many youths face, explaining that without job opportunities or support from the government, some resort to crime as a way to survive. Participant 5 reflected on the emotional toll of challenging circumstances, such as losing a parent, which can lead to a sense of hopelessness, resulting in substance abuse or disregard for authority, even among those from supportive families.

"I think maybe it's influence and not having anything to do at home."

"Old people are at least covered because they get a grant, but we, the youth, don't. When we ask for jobs from the government,

nothing is done, then we go into crime because we don't know what else to do."

Participant 14 echoed this sentiment, emphasising that the absence of employment opportunities leaves many young people with nothing productive to do. Participant 2 pointed out that for those who have completed their schooling, the frustration of not securing a job often leads them to drugs and other destructive behaviours, as they struggle to cope with the lack of prospects.

"There are no jobs, the government needs to create employment opportunities for people like us (those who could not make it to matric) because some just sit around in the street. Some even end up using drugs and sleeping in abandoned houses."

Novelli's representation supposes that education should play the role of creating fundamental freedom for previously marginalised groups; therefore, unemployment, which is considered a tool for employment, fails to offer economic freedom. The above findings show that learners excluded from the formal education system, regardless of the circumstances, become unemployed and end up participating in violent protests. Therefore, the research argues that excluding learners from accessing education does not lead to true representation post-apartheid.

Participants also highlighted that protests are largely driven by young people, with minimal involvement from the older generation. Participant 9 expressed uncertainty about whether the youth see protests as a trend, noting that older community members rarely take part. Similarly, Participant 8 described their role as minor compared to the youth. Participant 4 elaborated that many participants are between the ages of 12 and 18, with some in their early 20s, emphasising that many are still in school. They also raised concerns about the use of young children in protests, particularly when demonstrations escalate to burning tyres and road blockages, which disrupt the community.

"It is usually the youth who are at the forefront of protests. I don't know if they think it is fashionable or not. The older generation is not usually part of it."

"I'm talking from the age of 12 years old till about 18 years old. Some are older, maybe in their 20s, but it's mostly children who are still in school."

"Burning of tyres, roads getting blocked. We get affected there because...and what's worse is that those who were protesting used the youth, young children."

They further explained that children may not understand the consequences, believing that the actions of others are justified. Participant 6 added that a 12-year-old child might be influenced by seeing others participate, wanting to join in without fully grasping the implications of the protest.

"Sometimes you see a nine-year-old get excited at the sight of burning tyres and likes during a protest. When they see a group of people going on an assassination, they think it's right."

A participant expressed deep concern over the exploitation of youth in protests, particularly when they are involved in violent actions. One participant pointed out that when adults use young people to carry out violent protests like burning tyres, they are taking advantage of their vulnerability and compromising their future. They stressed that children should not be put in these situations, as it hinders their development and understanding of what is right. Another participant shared their experience at a recent protest, where they saw mostly young people involved and suspected they were being influenced by adults who did not want to face the consequences themselves. There was also mention of alcohol, with some youth possibly being encouraged to participate in vandalism in exchange for a drink. This concern shows how vulnerable the youth are to being manipulated in these situations, with long-term effects on their well-being.

"When you use the youth in violent things, such as violent protest, because you have certain intentions, how do you expect them to grow? Their rights get infringed on because we expect them to grow up well, knowing the correct things, so they can build their future." (Participant 4)

The views above show that public protests produce negative results for youth who are not within the school system; therefore, violent protests prevent access to education as well as positive outcomes, including qualifications that result in youth's employability (Selenica and Novelli, 2020).

Community divide, unity, and resilience

The findings indicate that the community endures hardships that impact their daily lives, indicating the inability of the government to *reconcile* injustices for the iNanda and the KwaMashu townships. However, despite the challenging circumstances and the violent demonstrations, the individuals strive to succeed. The participant pointed to the lack of ubuntu, citing that this disrupts unity. Some participants view protests as essential for holding government accountable and advancing community interests, while others see them as disruptive, considering the challenges they present to everyday life. The discourse of Ubuntu fosters solidarity and ethical behaviour, emphasising the need for more thoughtful and responsible ways to address grievances without harming others. Ultimately, this theme reveals the complex dynamics of protest, with a focus on how these actions are shaped by both individual and collective needs.

One participant shared their journey of immense loss and perseverance. In 2005, they faced the tragic deaths of multiple family members, including their parents and close relatives, all within a short span of time. Despite missing significant time at school to attend funerals, they remained determined to continue their studies. Even with the emotional toll and the challenge of catching up on missed lessons, they refused to let these hardships derail their education and were resolute in sitting for their matric exams.

"I did my matric in 2005. In March of that year, my dad passed away. In April, my mother passed away, and then in June, my maternal grandmother also passed away. Next, my aunt passed away too. One month went by, then in September, my uncle passed away.

On the Friday that we buried my uncle, his son passed away too. In October, I had to go and write my matric exams. When my parents passed away, I had to miss days at school to go home to Pietermaritzburg. Even with everyone else who passed away, I had to miss school. You can imagine how hectic it is to catch up on one missed day at school. I do not know how, but I just told myself that I will not let myself get affected by what has happened."

One participant explained how the pressures of life led them to drop out of school. At the age of 20, they felt compelled to enter adulthood quickly to support their child. The immediate responsibility of raising a family pushed them to leave their education behind in order to focus on providing for their child's needs. This decision highlights the tough realities some young people face when balancing education with family obligations.

"Eish, the situation forced me to. I rushed to engage in adult activities, like I said, I have a 22-year-old. I had him at around 20 years old and was forced to drop out and provide for my child."

In some cases, personal and family challenges have a significant impact on the educational aspirations of individuals. For instance, despite excelling academically and earning a matric exemption, one participant found their home environment difficult to navigate due to growing tensions within the family, which ultimately influenced their future educational choices. This led them to reside in an area they did not wish to, despite having the qualifications for further study (Participant 15). Similarly, for another participant, the tragic loss of both parents resulted in them having to abandon their education at Grade 10, an uncontrollable circumstance that stunted their educational progress (Participant 1).

"To an extent, I passed my matric very well and obtained an exemption, which meant I qualified for whatever bachelor's degree I wanted to do. But the situation at home was not okay at that time. My home was okay, very okay, it's just that there was a period that comes in every family where we just started not getting along at all. Right now, I live in white city, not because I wanted to."

A participant shared their experience of unemployment and exploitation, describing a job they had at a hotel where they were paid only enough to cover transport costs. They received R85 (\$4.95) per day, but with transport costing R50 (\$2.90) daily, they were left with very little. This exploitation led them to leave the job, as the compensation was insufficient to meet their basic needs.

"It's really not. I got a job at a hotel, but it was so bad there because I was only getting paid enough for transport. I got paid R85 per day, and transport was R50 per day. I ended up leaving that job." (Participant 3)

Some participants expressed concerns about the decline of Ubuntu within communities. One participant reflected on how, after moving from their home village, they had hoped to find a sense of family in their new environment. Instead, they encountered a society where people only focus on themselves. Another lamented that Ubuntu no longer exists, attributing its loss to increasing selfishness. Others believed that if Ubuntu were still present,

communities would handle issues differently, suggesting that protests would be peaceful rather than disruptive. In Africa, the concept of ubuntu refers to the way in which communities are designed as communal living, acknowledging the connectedness of the community. The concept's approach translates to 'I am because you are'.

"Our Ubuntu is lost. These days, people only focus on themselves. When I moved here from my home village, I didn't move with any family members. I told myself that I'll find a family where I'm going. But now people have the mentality of people who don't share the same DNA with them not being their family." (Participant 2)

Participant 1 shared that open discussions are essential for bringing the community together, as they help avoid individuals working in isolation. They expressed that a lack of listening to one another is part of the problem. Participant 12 also spoke about the importance of community meetings, suggesting that they provide a peaceful space for people to discuss their issues before approaching the relevant authorities. They pointed out that attending such meetings can prevent unnecessary protests born from misunderstandings, as some people might not know the reasons behind issues like water or electricity outages, which would help address issues of *Redistribution*. While acknowledging that the ward councillor's efforts may not always be appreciated, they emphasised that he consistently works hard to help resolve the community's problems.

"Yes, it is because discussing things builds as if they were individuals doing our own thing, but now the problem is that we don't want to listen to each other." (Participant 1)

"I think maybe having a meeting where the community get together peacefully and discusses their issues and then goes to express their concerns to the relevant department. Attending community meetings also helps because some people act without a proper understanding of what's happening, for example, some strike without knowing the reason for the water/electricity outage, maybe due to not attending community meetings. I don't want to lie, not because I'm in the office, but the ward counsellor really helps a lot and he tries every possible way, it's just that as a person you can't be liked by everyone." (Participant 12)

In the discussion, a participant shared a perspective that politicians often focus more on personal financial gain than on the well-being of the community. They mentioned that the mentality of "minding one's own business" has contributed to this issue, noting that if politicians truly embraced Ubuntu, they would better understand the struggles of living without electricity. This, in turn, makes it difficult for children to study properly for crucial exams like their matric.

"What kills Ubuntu with us is that we have the 'mind my own business' mentality. So, politicians go for these top positions just for money. If they had Ubuntu, they would understand that it's not nice to live without electricity, where your kids can't even study properly for their matric exams."

Public protests result in the fragmentation of communities; however, some community members believe that they are necessary as they give community members a space where they can raise grievances to the government.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how physical and structural violence intersect to shape experiences in both formal and informal education. The study used the lens of EPA to analyse how everyday politics influences the way the community in a conflict zone lives and conducts itself daily. The study indicates that tension exists between the state, a formal institution, and the communities it serves. A lack of responsiveness by the state to the needs of the community results in protests, which are used by communities to voice their dissatisfaction with the lack of service delivery.

Williams et al. (2007) posit that formal institutions do not always work as intended. This was evident in our study, where the lack of service delivery and basic necessities such as water and electricity was evident in these communities. The failure of the state to provide services gave rise to informal institutions that collectively engaged in physical and structural violence. Occurrences of these protests have recently been witnessed in South Africa and Uganda (Mbazira, 2013), the United States of America (Chenoweth et al., 2022), and other parts of the world. As our study demonstrated, the protests start as nonviolent physical marches, but the way the government reacts causes violence to break out. Power dynamics also exist inside the protesting groups, creating and perpetuating various forms of social inequality.

According to our research, criminality and disruptions in formal education are caused by the community's economic struggles. Because of their physical prowess, the younger generation is also used by the elderly to engage in criminal activities. Economic difficulties are worsened by the interruption of educational progress. This was demonstrated by the high unemployment rate among research participants, caused by diminished employment opportunities and economic choices due to their lack of formal education.

I have, however, observed that the affected communities overcome their hardships and do not allow them to dictate their daily social and cultural survival. Their adherence to the Ubuntu ideal is responsible for their tenacity and collectiveness. This, in addition, influences the community's own development. We see community dialogue and the Ubuntu approach as possible solutions to protecting youth from suffering as a result of different forms of violence. According to Hudson et al. (2016), political contexts are fluid; thus, they are based on a specific context and change regularly.

The study provided considerable insights into the relationship between violence and social inequalities. Although power dynamics and social inequality have received a lot of attention, the state's lack of response needs closer examination. Everyday Political Economies posits that when the environment is healthy, leaders collaborate with communities to establish the community's needs and allocate resources for their intended development. Additionally, when community members are recognised and treated equally, a healthy political environment is created. Thus, development and transformation can be visible. Whilst an unhealthy political environment creates the opposite, communities are not consulted. The Ubuntu method and community discussion are two potential remedies to shield young people from the harm caused by many types of violence.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the University of the Witwatersrand Ethics (non-medical). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

NS: Writing – original draft.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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