
“They See My Skin Colour First”: African-heritage Australian Students Navigating Racialized Learning Spaces

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ABSTRACT: African-heritage students in Australia often encounter racial scrutiny shaped by media and political narratives that link their communities to youth violence. This paper explores the racialized schooling experiences of three students—Abeba, Aken, and Maua—using in-depth qualitative interviews. Their experiences reveal four key challenges: racial slurs, curricular non-(mis)representation, low teacher expectations, and being framed as disruptive or threatening. Despite these barriers, the students draw on personal strengths and supportive relationships to navigate and resist racialized learning environments. The paper highlights implications for education policy and school practice, calling for systemic change to create more inclusive and equitable schools.

KEYWORDS: African-heritage students, Australia, secondary schools, racialized learning spaces, refugee education

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Racialized spaces are environments—whether social, institutional, or physical—where racial hierarchies, power dynamics, and structural inequalities shape everyday interactions and norms. These spaces are produced and sustained through historical and contemporary processes of racialization, where race is ascribed social meaning that influences individuals' experiences of inclusion, exclusion, privilege, or marginalization (Lipsitz, 2007; Oakes, 2005). In predominantly White societies, anti-Black racism is often deeply ingrained in institutional structures and everyday discourses. As Moreton-Robinson (2023) asserts, Whiteness functions as a 'regime of truth,' producing discourses that position Blackness as deficient. Within schools, these racial ideologies manifest in the stereotyping of Black students as disruptive, dangerous, or academically inferior (Lamont et al., 2016). Racialized learning spaces take multiple forms, including Eurocentric curricula, heightened surveillance, and punitive disciplinary

measures that disproportionately impact racialized students (Gillborn, 2008; Oakes, 2005).

Australia, despite its self-image as a successful multicultural nation, is not exempt from these racial dynamics. This paper focuses on the experiences of African-heritage students with refugee backgrounds. While often perceived as a recent presence, people of African heritage have lived in Australia since the arrival of the first European settlers (Chingaipe, 2024; Pybus, 2006). Chingaipe (2024) notes that at least 15 people of African descent were among the 732 convicts who arrived at Botany Bay with the First Fleet in 1788. However, due to racially exclusive immigration policies, Black Africans were largely prohibited from resettling in Australia until the late 1970s (Molla, 2024). Since the mid-1980s, with the consolidation of multiculturalism as a guiding political framework and the expansion of Australia's humanitarian migration program, forcibly displaced people from sub-Saharan Africa began arriving in greater numbers. From the 1990s onwards, Australia has welcomed refugees from Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, and Somalia, among other nations (Molla, 2024). For these communities, resettlement in Australia has provided safety from conflict and persecution, alongside opportunities for refugees to rebuild their lives, contribute to society, and secure a future for their children.

One of the most notable demographic shifts in Australian schools has been the increasing presence of African-heritage students. There are now more than 400,000 African-born people living in Australia, representing over 6% of the overseas-born population. Notably, more than two-thirds of this population (68%) have arrived within the past 25 years (Prout Quicke, 2023). Consequently, the proportion of students of African heritage has grown significantly in Australian schools. These students bring rich cultural knowledge, multilingual capabilities, and diverse lived experiences that can enhance classroom environments (Miller et al., 2024; Molla, 2021, 2023). However, their presence is often met with racialized scrutiny. The racialization of youth crime—fueled by sensationalist media narratives and political discourse—has intensified discrimination against African-heritage communities, with many observers noting that these public narratives negatively shape school perceptions of African-heritage students. Additionally, marginalizing learning environments mean that African-heritage students are not merely disengaging but, in many cases, are being pushed out of school, as evidenced by their overrepresentation in the youth justice system (Molla, 2025; Shepherd et al., 2022). Given these challenges, it is imperative to investigate how these students experience racialized learning spaces and the strategies they use to navigate them successfully.

This paper addresses the research question: *How do African-heritage secondary school students in Australia experience racialized learning spaces, and what factors help them navigate these environments?* To explore this question, the study draws on the accounts of three African-heritage secondary school students with refugee backgrounds, examining their lived experiences of racial othering in schools and the navigational resources they employ to overcome these challenges.

This research is both timely and significant. As student demographics in Australia continue to diversify, ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students—regardless of racial or ethnic background—remains a critical priority. While policy discussions frequently emphasize multicultural inclusion, there remains a gap in understanding the specific experiences of African-heritage students and the strategies they employ to navigate school spaces that are not always welcoming or affirming. By centering student voices, this paper contributes to a more nuanced and critical discussion on race, education, and belonging in Australia. The study aims to inform school leaders, teachers, and policymakers about the urgent need for structural changes that foster safe and supportive learning environments for all.

The paper is structured into three main sections. The first outlines the analytical framework and methodology. The second examines four dimensions of students' experiences in racialized learning spaces: facing racial slurs, negative curricular representation, low teacher expectations, and being framed as disruptive and threatening. The third explores the navigational resources African-heritage students employ to counter racial othering and achieve academic success. The paper concludes with final reflections.

Analytical Framework and Methodology

This section outlines the analytical framework and methodological approach guiding the study. I begin by discussing navigational agency as the conceptual lens for understanding how African-heritage Australian students negotiate racialized schooling contexts. I then describe the methods and data that inform the analysis, followed by an overview of the participants whose experiences ground the study. The subsequent subsection details the data collection and analysis processes used to generate and interpret the findings. Finally, I reflect on my positionality, acknowledging how my social location and assumptions shaped the research process.

Navigational Agency

People do not simply act within given structures but navigate through them, often making calculated decisions to overcome or adapt to social barriers. Navigation is an essential part of life. In the context of social spaces such as schools, *navigation* refers to the capacity of individuals to interpret, respond to, and strategically maneuver through social, institutional, and cultural structures that shape their opportunities and constraints (Appadurai, 2013; Claassen, 2018). Drawing on the capability approach, Claassen (2018) describes one's navigational agency as the ability to interpret social environments, respond effectively to structural opportunities and constraints, and make strategic choices. To navigate

is to interpret, adapt to, and strategically engage with the social, cultural, and institutional landscapes that shape one's opportunities and constraints.

When schools are racialized social spaces, students from marginalized backgrounds must navigate complex terrains of devaluation, discrimination, and domination that shape their educational experiences and future opportunities. For racialized students navigating the racial minefields of schools, *navigational agency* is essential for managing the complex social and institutional landscapes that often shape their educational experiences. These students must make informed choices about how to respond to racial othering, whether through direct resistance, strategic adaptation, or alignment with supportive networks. They encounter barriers such as racial stereotyping, low academic expectations, and exclusion from key opportunities, all of which require them to develop critical awareness and proactive strategies to secure equitable educational outcomes. In school settings, navigation entails students developing strategies to engage with institutional norms, counteract racial othering, and mobilize support networks to enhance their educational trajectories.

Claassen (2018) argues that an individual's ability to navigate their social environment is shaped by their access to essential resources such as education, social capital, and institutional support. In enacting those navigational strategies, racialized students draw on support systems, high aspirations, and strategic resistance. Support can come from both home and school environments, providing students with the resources, encouragement, and advocacy necessary to overcome obstacles. Parental engagement with schools is particularly influential, as it connects students' home experiences with their school lives, ensuring they feel valued and supported. When parents are actively involved, whether by attending school meetings, advocating for their children's needs, or fostering an educationally supportive home environment, students are more likely to feel empowered and capable of navigating the challenges they face.

Further, racialized students who set and maintain high academic and career goals can use these aspirations to counteract racial devaluation and negative stereotypes that may be imposed upon them. Appadurai (2013) argues that aspirations are not merely personal desires but are shaped by the social structures and opportunities available to individuals. Drawing on resources, networks, and strategic agency, individuals leverage their cultural, social, and economic assets to overcome systemic barriers and pursue their goals. By envisioning a successful future—whether through higher education or professional achievement—students can push back against the biases that might otherwise confine them to lower expectations (Appadurai, 2013). A lack of these resources can result in limited horizons for aspiration, leading students to internalize societal expectations of their limited potential. Finally, strategic resistance involves the formation of alliances with others who share similar experiences of racial discrimination, which empowers students to confront and challenge systemic inequalities collectively. When racialized students come together to share their experiences and work towards common goals, they build solidarity and collective power, enhancing their ability to challenge institutional biases (Yosso, 2005). Strong social networks—

whether through family, peer groups, or community organizations—serve as crucial resources that offer emotional support, practical advice, and opportunities for cultural and academic development (Yosso, 2005). Strategic resistance also helps students navigate hostile or exclusionary environments by creating a support network that validates their experiences and provides a platform for advocacy and change.

In essence, the navigational agency of racialized students is shaped by a range of interconnected resources that enable them to negotiate, resist, and challenge hostile learning environments. These resources can be broadly categorized into social relations and internal capacities. Supportive relationships with family members, peers, and community mentors serve as crucial navigational resources, providing emotional support, advocacy, and guidance in navigating school systems that may not always be inclusive (Carter, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Relatedly, racialized students often cultivate internal capacities such as aspirations, critical racial awareness, and self-efficacy, which empower them to recognize and interpret racial discrimination rather than internalize negative stereotypes (Hope et al., 2015). Developing a strong sense of identity and resilience enables students to persist in their education despite systemic barriers. These capacities enable students to seek institutional support, engage in counter-storytelling, and excel academically—to resist deficit narratives and assert their agency within school environments.

Before closing this section, a brief conceptual clarification is warranted. I invoke the terms racism and racial othering depending on the issue I want to highlight. While racism encompasses oppressive belief systems that link physical characteristics to moral, intellectual, or social worth (Taguieff, 2001) and is sustained through structural power that enforces these beliefs via institutions, laws, and everyday practices (Mills, 2017; Omi & Winant, 2015), racial othering foregrounds the relational and interactional dimensions of these dynamics within social spaces (Molla, 2024). In the context of schools, for example, racism may underpin discriminatory policies or biased curricula, while racial othering manifests in peer interactions, teacher expectations, and social practices that signal who belongs and who is marginalized. Together, the concepts highlight both the structural roots and the relational enactments of racial inequality, showing how systemic beliefs translate into lived, embodied experiences in educational settings. Relatedly, the intention behind framing schools as racialized learning spaces is to emphasize that schools are not neutral backdrops but socially constructed spaces in which racialization is actively produced, enacted, and experienced (Blaisdell, 2016). In conceptualizing schools as social spaces of practice, my goal is to highlight how interactions, routines, policies, and the organization of the physical and social environment collectively shape experiences of race.

Method and Data

The broader national project from which this paper stems employed a multistage, multimethod qualitative case study design (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015; Yin, 2018), an approach well suited to uncovering the contextual conditions that shape meaning and action. The case was defined by an interplay of themes and contexts, including school disengagement, school practices, and the experiences of African-heritage students and their refugee-background parents. This paper focuses on the second phase of the study, which examines African-heritage students' experiences and perspectives on school engagement. Central to this study are the voices of students, which provide invaluable insights into the lived realities of their educational experiences. A qualitative case study approach is particularly well suited to capturing these narratives, offering a nuanced exploration of how students interpret and make sense of their schooling experiences. Given that narratives serve as a means through which individuals construct their identities and situate their actions within broader contexts (Gabriel, 2016), they are indispensable for research seeking to illuminate the deeper, subjective dimensions of school disengagement. In this context, students' narratives reveal not only the specific incidents and behaviors contributing to their disengagement but also the underlying factors and personal interpretations that shape their withdrawal or disinterest in education.

Participants

Following ethics approval from my university and research permissions granted by the Departments of Education across involved Australian states, students were invited to participate in the study voluntarily. A total of 53 students from three Australian states were interviewed. This paper draws specifically on the experiences of three Year 11 female students of African heritage—Abeba, Aken, and Maua—who attend public schools in different states. The accounts of Abeba, Aken, and Maua were selected for analysis because of the richness of their narratives and their direct relevance to the focus on racialized school experiences. Access was gained through the broader research project, which involved partnerships with schools and community networks. Their accounts offer critical insights into the complex racial and systemic challenges African-heritage students encounter in secondary schools, particularly the racialized landscapes that shape their educational experiences and sense of belonging. To ensure confidentiality, the students have been assigned pseudonyms.

The first participant is Abeba. She is an ambitious Year 11 student and was born in Egypt to Ethiopian parents who resettled in Australia as refugees. She arrived in the country at the age of four and is the third of five children. Growing up in a multilingual and culturally rich household, she speaks both English and

Amharic. Despite their limited formal education, Abeba's parents place a high value on education and are deeply invested in her academic success.

The second participant is Aken. She is a highly motivated Year 11 student and was born in Melbourne to South Sudanese parents who arrived in Australia as refugees. She is one of eight children and speaks both Dinka and English at home, maintaining strong cultural ties while navigating the expectations of Australian schooling. Aken's father holds a graduate degree, and her mother completed secondary school. Their aspirations for her are high, with expectations that she will attend university and pursue a successful career.

The third participant is Maua. She is a determined Year 11 student and was born in Brisbane to Congolese parents who resettled in Australia as refugees. She is one of five children and speaks four languages—Swahili, Kifuliiru, French, and English—reflecting the rich linguistic and cultural environment she navigates daily. Her father, who completed primary education, works as a landscaper, while her mother, who did not attend school, undertakes occasional casual work. Maua's parents prioritize financial security and view education primarily as a means to that end.

All three students attend public schools characterized by high cultural and linguistic diversity and low socio-economic status. The experiences of these three students are shaped by intersecting factors, including their gender, refugee backgrounds, and racialized identities as Black African students in Australia. They contend with the dual challenge of striving for academic success while confronting racialized experiences in predominantly White school environments. Their narratives expose the racialized obstacles African-heritage students frequently encounter in secondary schools—enduring racial slurs, experiencing cultural erasure within the curriculum, being subjected to low academic expectations, being stereotyped as disruptive or threatening, and facing racially biased disciplinary practices. Their confidence and resilience are evident in the strategies they employ to navigate these adversities. As young women from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Abeba, Aken, and Maua also shoulder substantial responsibilities beyond their schooling, working outside school hours to contribute to their families' financial stability. Despite these pressures, they remain resolute, enrolling in university entrance subjects and working towards careers in health, sustainability, and other fields.

A focus on the narratives of three students of African heritage with refugee backgrounds is both a deliberate and methodologically sound approach, yielding rich, nuanced insights into the racialized learning spaces these young women navigate. While some may critique the limited sample size, qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, allowing for a granular understanding of lived experiences that cannot be captured through larger-scale quantitative studies. These three students, drawn from different Australian states and schooling contexts, offer diverse yet thematically connected perspectives, illustrating the systemic nature of racial stereotyping in Australian schools while highlighting individual agency and resilience. Given their academic engagement and ability to articulate complex experiences, their narratives provide valuable counter-stories

that disrupt dominant discourses about African-heritage students and refugee-background learners. By foregrounding students who have successfully navigated racialized school environments (these students had advanced to 11th grade with strong academic performance and enrollment in academic tracks—a significant marker of persistence and achievement given that many African-heritage students from refugee backgrounds leave school or move into vocational pathways after 10th grade), this study moves beyond deficit perspectives, offering critical insights into strategies of persistence and success with broader implications for policy, practice, and future research on race and schooling in Australia.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each interview, lasting approximately one hour, was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. To establish a conversational tone, students were asked broad introductory questions such as, “*How do you feel about school?*” and “*What do you enjoy most and least about it?*” The interviews covered demographic details, instances of disengagement, and students’ perspectives on the causes of disengagement. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. In making sense of the accounts, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was employed to interpret the data. While preliminary analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, the formal coding process involved deep immersion in the students’ personal accounts. Each interview transcript was de-identified and then subjected to systematic, color-coded thematic analysis. This iterative process facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and key themes within the data. The thematic coding was informed by both existing conceptual frameworks and emergent insights drawn from participant narratives. This process yielded four overarching themes that underpin the findings: hostile learning environments, negative learning experiences, unrealistic parental expectations, and belonging uncertainty. The coding process enabled the systematic organization of meaningful data segments, which were then analyzed to substantiate and refine these thematic categories (Wertz et al., 2011).

To ensure that participants’ voices remained central to the analysis, extensive direct quotations were incorporated, allowing their perspectives to be authentically represented. The stories of the three students presented in this paper illustrate how African-heritage youth navigate racialized school environments with resilience, agency, and determination. Their experiences reveal not only the obstacles imposed by racialized structures but also the strategies they employ to assert their presence, claim their voices, and remain engaged at school.

Positionality

In conducting this research, I acknowledge the role of my positionality in shaping both the research process and its outcomes. As a researcher of African

heritage, my lived experiences inevitably inform my understanding of the phenomena under investigation. This perspective enables me to engage with the subject matter with cultural and contextual sensitivity, fostering a deeper appreciation of the structural and experiential dimensions of school disengagement among African-heritage students. My multidisciplinary research orientation further shapes my approach, drawing from insights across sociology, social psychology, and education to construct a more comprehensive and intersectional analysis. By integrating diverse perspectives and methodological approaches, I seek to provide a nuanced and critical examination of the educational challenges faced by African refugee-background students, ultimately contributing to the development of more equitable and inclusive educational policies and practices.

Facets of Racialized School Experiences

The concept of *racialized learning space* encapsulates the hostile, exclusionary, and inequitable terrain that many African heritage students must navigate in secondary schools. African heritage students frequently encounter negative racialized perceptions that frame them as threatening, disruptive, or excessively loud. Such stereotypes shape how teachers, administrators, and peers engage with them, leading to differential treatment in classroom management and disciplinary policies (Gillborn, 2008). These assumptions influence the extent to which African heritage students are perceived as deserving of educational support, with many being prematurely labelled as troublemakers rather than as individuals requiring care and encouragement. The internalization of such stereotypes can have profound consequences on students' self-esteem, aspirations, and engagement with learning.

Accounts of the three students suggest that navigating racial minefields in schools involves encountering facets of racial othering and exploring opportunities to overcome the challenge. Their stories highlight four aspects of racialized learning spaces: pervasive use of racial slurs, negative curricular representation, low teacher expectations, and being stereotyped as disruptive and threatening. In what follows, each theme will be discussed in brief.

Racial Slurs

A significant and deeply harmful component of the racialized learning spaces that African heritage students navigate is the pervasive use of racial slurs, including the N-word, by peers, teachers, and even within curricular materials. The casual and, at times, malicious use of these terms creates a school environment where anti-Black racism is normalized, reinforcing the dehumanization of African heritage students (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). Among peers, the use of racial slurs often takes the form of both overt racial harassment and 'joking' banter, which

pressures students to either tolerate the abuse or risk social alienation if they resist (Hope et al., 2015). When teachers either participate in or fail to challenge this language, they contribute to an institutional climate where African students' dignity is routinely compromised, and their right to a safe and respectful learning environment is denied. In some instances, educators invoke racial slurs in the classroom under the pretext of historical or literary study, such as reading aloud from texts that include racist language without providing appropriate critical framing or considering the impact on African heritage students (Bissonette & Glazier, 2016).

Experiences of racial slurs in school settings can leave lasting emotional and psychological impacts on students. Abeba articulated her experience of being subjected to anti-Black racial slurs as follows:

It was last year in my HASS class, so humanities and social science. So, I was with my friends, so, in my friend group, me and this other Black kid, but we all like each other, there's nothing wrong. So, I was talking to my friends, having a great time and there's this one student, White, who said it [the N-word], and that was, I guess, the first time someone has called me an N-word.

In racially diverse school environments, the persistence of unchallenged racial slurs can shape how students experience belonging and safety. The uncritical reproduction of such language in textbooks and assigned readings reinforces racial trauma, as it places African students in situations where they must either endure the demeaning language in silence or risk disciplinary action if they object (Molla, 2025). The psychological impact of this constant exposure to racial slurs is profound, often leading to feelings of alienation, anxiety, and school disengagement (Rigell et al., 2022). Research has shown that racial slurs, especially the N-word, carry a historical weight rooted in slavery, segregation, and racial violence, making their use in educational spaces particularly damaging (Lester, 2013). For African-heritage students, being repeatedly subjected to such language—whether through peer interactions, teacher insensitivity, or uncritical curricular practices—reinforces a message of inferiority and exclusion. Without institutional accountability and explicit anti-racist policies, the unchecked use of racial slurs within schools remains a powerful mechanism through which African heritage students experience systemic racism and emotional harm, further entrenching educational disparities.

Negative Curricular Representation

Another aspect of the racial minefield is the systemic erasure or misrepresentation of African cultures and histories in the curriculum. The absence of African contributions to global history, literature, and science, or their framing solely through the lens of slavery, colonialism, poverty, and war, sends a powerful message that African heritage is peripheral or deficient (Dei, 2008). This curricular

invisibility or distortion fosters a dissonance between students' lived realities and the knowledge being validated in the classroom. When African heritage students do not see themselves reflected in their schooling experience, their academic engagement may suffer, as the curriculum fails to acknowledge their histories, identities, and potential contributions. Moreover, where African people are represented, they are often depicted through deficit-based narratives that reinforce racial hierarchies and diminish their sense of pride and belonging (Ladson-Billings, 2021). This exclusion is a form of epistemic violence that undermines the legitimacy of African ways of knowing and learning.

Schools play a critical role in shaping discussions on race, yet the way racial content is presented in curricula and pedagogy can sometimes reinforce rather than challenge racial marginalization. Aken reflects on the use of racial slurs in educational materials, particularly in English literature, questioning the inconsistency in how offensive language is handled in schools:

I feel like schools really – they try and put racism and stuff into the curriculum. They're using the N-word in [English] books. [...] So, like I was saying, they will bleep out a sexual slur, something to do with sexuality, they will bleep that out. When it comes to the N-word, they're so quick to say it, which really confuses me. They're so quick to use demeaning terms when it comes to Black students. Why are they all saying the N-word, [...], you should just have a little sense. What sense does it make for a white person to say the N-word.

Aken's account reveals the emotional burden placed on African heritage students when racial slurs are repeated in educational spaces without critical engagement. The confusion and discomfort they express stem from a perceived lack of sensitivity from teachers, who appear to disregard the impact of such language on Black students. As a result, in racialized schools, the curriculum and classroom environment become exclusionary.

When asked whether they felt positively seen in school, Maua expressed a deep sense of alienation, highlighting how her experiences and identity remain unacknowledged in the educational content, saying, "I guess I've always felt like the odd one out. I've never really felt as if my own experiences are reflected in the content we're taught at school. It's always been – I've always been on the outside." Maua's words—"*I've always been on the outside*"—capture the persistent feeling of marginalization that can result from a lack of visibility in learning experiences. The absence of representation not only affects students' ability to connect with their learning but also reinforces a sense of otherness, making it difficult to fully engage in the school community. This sentiment reflects the broader challenge of ensuring that education affirms and validates the experiences of all students rather than positioning some voices as central while leaving others on the periphery.

Low Expectations

Beyond the curriculum, African heritage students frequently contend with low teacher expectations that undermine their academic potential. The assumption that African heritage students are more suited for athletics than intellectual pursuits exemplifies a racialized sorting mechanism that limits their educational trajectories (Gershenson et al., 2016). These biases can manifest in tracking decisions, where African students are disproportionately placed in lower academic streams or vocational pathways with fewer opportunities for university preparation. The impact of these low expectations extends beyond individual students, shaping school cultures where African heritage youth must work significantly harder to be recognized as academically capable. This structural discrimination not only affects students' motivation and aspirations (Molla, 2025) but also has long-term implications for their access to higher education and professional careers.

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' academic experiences and sense of belonging in school. Low academic expectations from teachers are not always overt but are conveyed through backhanded compliments and surprise at academic competence. Maua recounted her experience as follows:

Virtually on a daily basis, there'll always be some underhanded comment. Especially when it comes to supply [substitute] teachers coming through and they're being, "Oh, guys, what are you doing this semester?" Then I show them the work and there'll always be something so backhanded, like, "Oh, I didn't expect for you to be able to do this. I'm so happy that you're smart." And I'm, like, what's the intention behind it? More often than not, that's the reality of it. [...] I realize that people will treat me differently regardless if I'm right or wrong, just based on the color of my skin.

Maua's account underscores the persistent microaggressions that racialized students encounter in educational spaces, particularly from authority figures such as teachers. The student's reflection reveals how seemingly innocuous remarks—framed as compliments—carry implicit biases that reinforce low expectations.

Sharing her experience of being ignored in the classroom by teachers, Abeba reflected:

So, what annoys me is how we are - particularly the teachers or the school, we have this image where the stereotypes and how we can get loud, aggressive and we are not capable of doing stuff because I've noticed that, out of the Black students in my year, only four of us are doing ATAR [Australian Tertiary Admission Rank] while the rest are doing TAFE [Technical and Further Education].

Abeba's account speaks to the broader issue of racialized tracking in schools, where implicit biases shape the academic opportunities afforded to students. The distinction she draws between ATAR and TAFE participation suggests that these perceptions may inadvertently steer students towards certain educational tracks, reinforcing systemic inequalities. The pervasive myth of low expectations, rooted

in racist stereotypes, detrimentally impacts students' career aspirations, limiting their perceived potential and shaping the opportunities available to them (Turner, 2020). Internalizing these limiting narratives can lead to reduced self-efficacy and motivation, further entrenching cycles of disadvantage.

Being Framed as Disruptive and Threatening

All three students recounted incidents of being stereotyped as disruptive and threatening. This stereotype of framing Black students as inherently more aggressive, unruly, or dangerous compared to their White peers is rooted in historical and systemic racism (Epstein et al., 2017; Gillborn, 2008; Skiba et al., 2014). As a result of the negative stereotypes, Black students are more likely to be subjected to stricter behavioral monitoring, disproportionate disciplinary actions, and punitive responses for behaviors that are overlooked in their White peers (Gillborn, 2008; Skiba et al., 2014). For Black students, assertiveness in classroom discussions or frustration in response to perceived unfairness may be interpreted as hostility, whereas similar behaviors in White students may be viewed as confidence or self-advocacy (Chavous et al., 2003). In more extreme cases, Black students are disproportionately referred to police for minor infractions, such as schoolyard scuffles, which would likely result in a simple warning for White students (Skiba et al., 2014). Findings of a study in the U.S. indicate that Black students, for example, face disproportionately higher rates of school discipline compared to their White peers, often due to biases that misinterpret their behavior as defiant or aggressive (USGAO, 2018). Another study in the U.S. shows that racial stereotypes against Black female students persist even when controlling for actual behavior, highlighting the role of racial bias in shaping disciplinary outcomes (Epstein et al., 2017). These disparities reflect broader racialized constructions of discipline and respectability, wherein Black students are more likely to be criminalized rather than supported.

In Australian schools, where Whiteness dominates institutional norms, Black students—particularly those of African or Indigenous backgrounds—are frequently subjected to stricter disciplinary standards, misinterpretations of their behavior, and lower academic expectations due to these racialized perceptions (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010). Negative stereotypes that frame Black students as disruptive and threatening restrict their ability to form supportive peer connections. When Black students gather in groups, their presence is often viewed with suspicion, leading to heightened surveillance and intervention from teachers. This differential treatment undermines their sense of belonging, making social interactions feel scrutinized rather than natural. As Abeba describes, while large groups of White students can congregate without interference, Black students are frequently questioned about their intentions, reinforcing a sense of alienation and the perception that their presence is inherently problematic:

So, sometimes, when I'm with my fellow African community students like with my friends, I feel like teachers can get very hostile and judgmental if we're all

in one group together. So, I understand the stereotypes—how we can be viewed as aggressive and stuff but sometimes we just want to sit down and be together and then it's just when the teachers start coming and saying, "What are you guys up to? What is happening?" They suspect something is going on when we're all together. Some [White] girls in my school have 10 to 20 people in one group, but the teachers don't go up to them or bother them.

One time, when we were discussing in a group, a White teacher came and told us that we were making other students uncomfortable with our presence because there were a lot of us in one group, and we got really confused because we didn't know what we did wrong. So, obviously, we had to disperse and separate ourselves. I felt like I was being oppressed and disrespected. That's not how it should be. We should be allowed to be in one group together in peace.

As Abeba's accounts illustrate, the mere presence of the African students in groups is often met with suspicion, leading to heightened scrutiny and intervention from teachers. The message conveyed is that Black students' collective presence is inherently problematic. The teacher's assertion that the African students' presence made "other students uncomfortable" reinforces a racialized power dynamic in which White students' comfort is prioritized over Black students' right to exist and socialize freely. Such interactions send a powerful, exclusionary message—Black students are not only surveilled more closely but are also expected to modify their behavior to accommodate the unfounded discomfort of others. The student's response—feeling "oppressed and disrespected"—reveals the emotional toll of such encounters. Beyond being an isolated moment of discrimination, experiences like these contribute to a broader sense of alienation, where Black students internalize the notion that their very presence is unwelcome.

The disproportionate application of punitive disciplinary measures against African heritage students is another defining characteristic of racial minefields in secondary education. Research consistently shows that Black students receive harsher punishments for the same infractions compared to their white peers, a pattern evident in various educational systems worldwide, including the United States (USGAO, 2018). African students are often disciplined not only for their own behavior but also for actions attributed to them by association. These disparities contribute to the racialization of school discipline, where African-heritage youth are more likely to be suspended, expelled, or referred to law enforcement, effectively pushing them towards the school-to-prison pipeline (Oluo, 2018). The subjective interpretation of student behavior means that expressions of frustration, self-advocacy, or cultural communication styles are often misconstrued as defiance, further exacerbating the cycle of punitive discipline (Taylor et al., 2023).

Aken shared her experience of facing what she felt was an unjust disciplinary action at school, highlighting the disproportionate response she received for defending herself. In recounting the incident, she emphasizes the way her actions were framed as aggressive and intimidating, reflecting how Black students often face biased interpretations of their behavior. She explained:

I had an issue with one of these White students over something. One of them hit me with her phone. They were completely in the wrong, completely in the wrong. Obviously, I retaliated, but it wasn't physically retaliated, but I retaliated, like just screamed at them or something like that. But basically, what happened was I got suspended for defending myself. [...] I got suspended because I was intimidating and because I was aggressive. They love to use the terms 'aggressive' and 'intimidating'. [...] And when I was there for standing up for myself, none of these – none of the White girls got punished for this at all, mind you. And they were the people that started this, all this.

Aken's account sheds light on the complexities of navigating school environments where her responses to provocation are met with punitive measures, reinforcing the challenges she faces due to racialized perceptions.

Racial othering also manifests in what can be referred to as an *adultification bias*, where African-heritage students are denied the innocence and protection typically extended to other children (Epstein et al., 2017). Studies reveal that Black children, particularly Black girls, are perceived as older, more responsible, and less in need of nurturing compared to their white counterparts. This perception can lead to harsher treatment and fewer opportunities for developmental support for Black girl within schools and reinforcing the dehumanization of African youth. The failure to acknowledge the emotional and developmental needs of African students results in them being treated as inherently more capable of handling adversity, which, paradoxically, increases the likelihood of them receiving punitive rather than supportive interventions. The denial of childhood innocence further entrenches educational inequalities by stripping African heritage students of the empathy and second chances afforded to other children.

The following quote from Aken captures the emotional impact of adultification bias, where Black students are often treated as more mature and less in need of emotional care than their peers:

They treat you like an adult. They don't care about your feelings at all. And I think, even though some people might think, "It's just because you got in trouble." But no, seriously, I don't know if I could really explain how it feels, or how it really is, unless you've gone through it all, unless you're Black and you can actually experience these types of struggles.

Aken's words underscore how holding Black youth to higher behavioral expectations than their White peers leads to diminished empathy from authority figures and harsher disciplinary responses. Adultification bias also shapes how schools respond to the needs and well-being of Black students. It can lead to a lack of recognition for their emotional and psychological struggles. Reflecting on this institutional neglect, Aken notes, "When you're Black, they don't really see your mental health as seriously as a White person." This perception highlights how racialized assumptions can result in inadequate mental health support, reinforcing feelings of invisibility and exclusion within educational spaces.

Furthermore, the psychological toll of being constantly perceived as a threat leads to *stereotype threat*—a phenomenon where students underperform academically due to the fear of confirming negative stereotypes (Steele, 2010). Black students may internalize these labels, leading to disengagement, self-doubt, or even behavioral escalations in response to unfair treatment (Cohen, 2022). Excessive disciplinary measures not only disrupt students' educational experiences but also contribute to a cycle of marginalization and reduced opportunities, feeding into the school-to-prison pipeline (Oluo, 2018). Framed as disruptive and threatening, African heritage students often find their accounts of events dismissed or minimized, especially when challenging unfair treatment. This leads to a situation where their perspectives are systematically invalidated, resulting in *epistemic injustice* (Fricker, 2007). Negative expectations toward Black students can also lead to self-fulfilling prophecies, where students disengage due to feeling unwelcome or unfairly targeted. This phenomenon, in turn, reinforces stereotypes and contributes to *school disengagement* (Howard, 2019; Molla, 2025). Framing African-heritage students as disruptive and threatening also perpetuates *racial microaggressions* that diminish students' sense of belonging (Sue et al., 2007).

Low teacher expectations also manifest the act of reducing students to their racial identity, instead of seeing them as individuals with unique strengths, aspirations, and experiences (Marx, 2017). Aken reflects on the significance of teacher relationships, highlighting both the need for a supportive learning environment and the ways in which racial identity affects their interactions with teachers:

I feel like teachers really, really do affect how students perform in school. For me especially, I'm someone – I don't feel like I'm a stupid girl, but I'm someone that I need clarification; I'm someone that, just in general, even if I'm studying on my own, I need – I need to feel comfortable with a teacher. And I feel like, for me, at my school, the older I get, the better they treat me; but it's like I myself have to become aware that this is just how they're going to treat me. My color comes first, and I just have to remember that. I'm Black. They see my skin color first.

As Aken navigates the school environment, she must adjust her expectations to align with the racial biases imposed on her, leading to the internalization of negative stereotypes about her capabilities. In the statement, "*My color comes first, and I just have to remember that,*" Aken emphasizes the painful reality that her racial identity is the primary lens through which teachers perceive and respond to her.

Navigational Resources

Despite the numerous challenges outlined above, the three students interviewed for this study – Aken, Abeba, and Maua – are not merely enduring but

actively thriving in their schooling. They are undertaking university entrance subjects and balancing rigorous academic demands with work commitments outside school hours. Their aspirations extend beyond secondary education. They are determined to attend university, earn their degrees in health sciences and sustainability, and secure meaningful careers. What, then, accounts for their success despite the adversities they face? While it is difficult to pinpoint a single causal explanation, students' accounts highlight a range of factors that enable them to navigate and persist in racialized learning spaces.

The literature shows that navigational agency, the ability to make free and autonomous choices regarding one's participation in social life (Claassen, 2018), is made possible through both supportive social arrangements and personal commitment (Appadurai, 2013; Yosso, 2005). For African-heritage students to strategically maneuver through school environments that often marginalize them—or to exercise their navigational agency—they must draw on a combination of internal resources as well as familial and community support. I frame those enabling factors—or navigational resources—as *relationships* and *internal capacities*.

Navigational capacity is a skill refined through lived experiences, exposure to real-world challenges, and sustained support from trusted networks (Appadurai, 2013). Meaningful and supportive relationships play a crucial role in nurturing this capacity, as they provide the encouragement, guidance, and affirmation necessary for individuals to navigate complex social environments (Taysum & Ayanlaja, 2020). For racialized students, particularly those from refugee and migrant backgrounds, relationships with family members, mentors, and community networks serve as vital sources of strength. These connections not only help students interpret and respond to racialized encounters but also instill a sense of belonging and resilience, enabling them to persist and succeed in educational spaces that may otherwise feel exclusionary.

For the three students in this study, parental encouragement emerged as one of the most significant pillars of support. When asked about the key factors that enable her to thrive despite experiencing racial othering at school, Maua highlighted the unwavering encouragement she receives from her parents. Their support is deeply rooted in a belief that education serves as a pathway to success, reinforcing her commitment to academic excellence. This parental affirmation helps counteract the negative messages she encounters in school, fostering a sense of self-worth and determination that strengthens her ability to navigate racialized learning spaces. She reflects:

From my parents, I get a lot of encouragement. Because they also believe it's either education or nothing. [...] Being supported is reassuring. The reassurance to be, like, yeah, you're on the right track. You've got this. If you don't – I feel really dejected. What's the point in this, then I fall into bad habits. Then, I'm, like, okay, if you don't care, then why should I care? I kind of just laze into things and I focus on different things instead of the things I need to focus on right in the moment.

Maua's reflection highlights the profound impact of being supported, emphasizing how reassurance from her parents helps her stay grounded and focused, particularly when faced with racial othering. The sense of being encouraged and affirmed by her parents and their support that she is on the right track and capable of success provides Maua with emotional stability and motivation. Without this reassurance, she recognizes the risk of falling into feelings of dejection and disengagement, where the lack of support could lead her to question her efforts and lose focus.

Aspirations, confidence, perspectives, and self-awareness represent the internal capacities that enable the students to navigate racialised learning spaces. All three students aspire to earn their degrees and secure careers in health services and sustainability areas. Their aspirations act as a motivating force, helping them to focus on long-term goals despite the immediate challenges posed by a racialised environment. Their ability to imagine and pursue alternate futures supports Appadurai's (2013) idea that the capacity to aspire is "a navigational capacity" (p.188). Relatedly, confident students, particularly those from racialised backgrounds, are more likely to challenge stereotypes and resist external pressures to conform to discriminatory norms (Kyere et al., 2021; Steele, 2010). This confidence, built on a secure sense of identity and supportive relationships, allows Black students to stand firm in their values and navigate spaces that may otherwise feel alienating or hostile. Reflecting on the strength that enables her to successfully navigate racialised learning environments, Abeba comments:

So, my strength, I guess I could say I'm confident so I know who I am, I know what I can offer in life. I'm not easily - I think the word is push-able, if people want me to do something, obviously if I don't like it, I will obviously fight back because I know where I stand, I know where I belong so I'm very hard-headed.

Abeba's determination to stand firm in the face of external pressures demonstrates the power of these internal strengths. Her words encapsulate the sense of self-assurance that allows her to assert her place in the world and resist forces that attempt to marginalize or diminish her voice. This confidence becomes an essential tool in navigating the challenges of racialized learning environments, empowering students to remain steadfast in their sense of self-worth and their aspirations for the future.

Relatedly, internal capacities such as perspective and purpose can also serve as navigational resources. Understanding education as both a privilege and a valuable opportunity fosters a sense of purpose, reinforcing students' commitment to learning and personal growth despite the challenges they encounter. This resilience is evident in Maua's account:

I always have to remember, hey, there are people who are just not going to school because they can't. There are people who walk into the gates of their school and, instantly, it's like a warzone for them. And it's just so difficult to be able to get to a school and come back every single day. The importance

of education, for me, it's a must, it's a necessity. There are so many children around the world who just don't get access to that.

Having parents who fled war and instability, Maua understands the profound value of educational opportunities—opportunities that many in her home country are denied.

Further elaborating on the role of self-awareness in providing racialized students with a sense of grounding and self-assurance in environments where they may face bias and discrimination, Maua reflects:

I'm glad that I learnt from an early age that I can't be a delinquent like the rest of the kids in my school. That I have to disassociate myself with that because if I do, then their penalties might not be the same as my penalties. As a Black girl, I get held to such a high standard compared to a White girl, which is entirely so unfair, just talking about it.

From a young age, Maua understood that, as a Black girl, her actions were more heavily scrutinized and the consequences of her behavior would be harsher than for her White peers. This awareness comes from both lived experience and observation of the treatment of other Black students. It is a survival strategy that allows her to preserve her dignity and avoid the penalties that disproportionately affect students like her.

Similarly, Aken uses her understanding of the racialized expectations placed on her as a coping mechanism:

And I feel like, for me, at my school, the older I get, the better they treat me; but it's like I myself have to become aware that this is just how they're going to treat me. My color comes first, and I just have to remember that. I'm black. They see my skin color first.

As she matures, Aken becomes increasingly aware that her racial identity is the primary lens through which others perceive and treat her. The phrase, "my color comes first," highlights the reality that, regardless of her individual merits, aspirations, or abilities, the dominant racial gaze prioritizes her skin color, which can either limit or shape her opportunities and experiences. Likewise, Maua passionately conveys her desire for others to look beyond superficial judgments, stating: "This is who I am as a person, and you have to start seeing me instead of my skin tone." Both Aken and Maua long for genuine recognition and fair treatment, rather than being subjected to assumptions or biases based on appearance. Stereotypes about Black students also restrict access to advanced learning opportunities and reinforce racialized achievement gaps.

The phrase "they see my skin color first" suggests that the student believes that racial identity is the primary lens through which she is perceived, before her abilities, personalities, or aspirations are considered. This reflects W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of *double consciousness*, a term he coined to describe the internal conflict experienced by Black individuals who are forced to view themselves through the dominant (White) gaze. According to Du Bois (1903/2015), this duality creates a tension where Black individuals must navigate their own identity while

simultaneously contending with how they are viewed and judged by the dominant culture. In educational settings, this tension can distract engagement and learning.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the experiences of African-heritage secondary school students in Australia as they navigate racialized learning spaces within a multicultural society. Drawing on in-depth interviews with three African-heritage female students with refugee backgrounds, the study identified key aspects of racialized school experiences, including exposure to racial slurs, negative curricular representation, low teacher expectations, and stereotyping. Despite these challenges, the students demonstrated resilience by drawing on navigational resources, including useful relationships—such as supportive peers, family members, and educators—and internal capacities, such as critical racial awareness, self-determination, and academic persistence. These findings underscore the ways in which racialized students actively resist marginalization while striving for educational success in a nation that prides itself on multiculturalism yet continues to grapple with deeply embedded racial inequalities.

Schools play a crucial role in upholding the principles of multiculturalism by fostering safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments. However, in the absence of equity policies and committed school leaders (Brooks et al., 2015; Feldman & Winchester, 2015), harmful language, negative curricular representations, and racially biased expectations persist unchecked. Policymakers must acknowledge racism as a significant barrier to school engagement and equitable learning outcomes, ensuring that multicultural education policies extend beyond rhetoric to tangible, structural change. Addressing racialized experiences should be a priority, with targeted initiatives to combat both overt and subtle forms of discrimination that perpetuate inequity. School leaders and educators must develop racial literacy, actively fostering inclusive pedagogies that reflect the diverse identities and histories of students. This includes critically revising curricula to better represent Australia's multicultural reality, challenging racialized expectations, and ensuring that school policies affirm the identities and aspirations of all learners.

Ultimately, fostering an equitable and inclusive school system requires addressing not only individual instances of racial discrimination but also the broader institutional structures that sustain racial inequities, ensuring that multiculturalism in education is meaningful, transformative, and just. The insights from this study carry important implications for educational researchers, as well. To capture the breadth and patterns of racialized experiences across diverse school contexts, large-scale studies are needed to build a more comprehensive evidence base that can inform policy development and drive systemic change to address inequities in education.

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