UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

https://helda.helsinki.fi

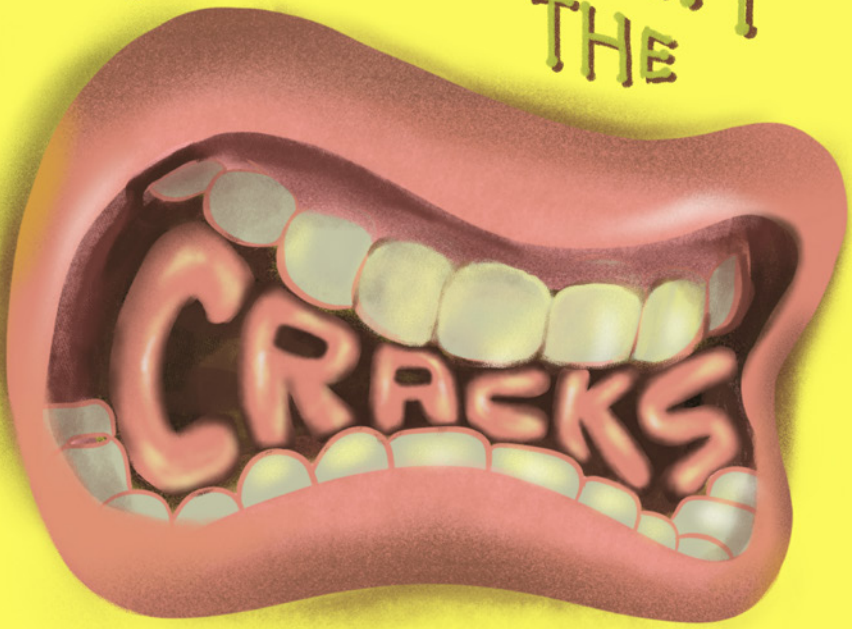
Through the Cracks: Young People’s Stories from the Edges of Student Support Services

Kurki, Tuuli

2025
Kone Foundation
http://hdl.handle.net/10138/597002
Kurki, T & Singh, S 2025, 'Through the Cracks: Young People’s Stories from the Edges of Student Support Services', MadEnCounters: Visibilising Counter-Stories of Mental Distress blog.

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository. https://helda.helsinki.fi
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.

THROUGH THE CRACKS



Young People's Stories from the
Edges of Student Support Services

This visual essay is based on the article Coloniality of Student Support Services: Young People's Lived Experiences at the Intersection of Race, Disability, and Mental Distress by Tuuli Kurki and Anna-Maija Niemi, published in the Nordic Journal of Pedagogy & Critique – Nordisk Tidsskrift for Pedagogikk og Kritikk.

Original text: Kurki, Tuuli & Niemi, Anna-Maija (2024) Coloniality of Student Support Services: Young People's Lived Experiences at the Intersection of Race, Disability and Mental Distress. Nordisk tidsskrift for pedagogikk & kritikk, 10(3), 218-234. https://doi.org/10.23865/ntpk.v10.5370

Through the Cracks

Young People's Stories from the Edges of Student Support Services

Text By Tuuli Kurki,
Illustrated by Shambhavi Singh

Introduction

Imagine walking through the halls of a school, entering spaces designated for student support – spaces you expect to help with schoolwork and learning or with mental health and well-being. Imagine sitting in the waiting area, surrounded by posters that promise help to all who seek it, and preparing yourself to meet with professionals you can only hope to be trustworthy. But beneath this welcoming exterior, something feels off. On the surface, the support services seem open, inclusive and supportive, yet you sense that support may not be extended equally to all. Gradually, you realise that receiving help comes with an unspoken expectation: you must shed parts of yourself – your language, culture, race – to fit the mold of the "ideal student" to be listened, to be cared for. As someone with skin a shade darker than white, these spaces intended to provide support, suddenly do not feel supportive at all.

This visual essay steps into the worlds of four young people – Aaliyah (16), Alicia (18), Oliver (17) and Thao (18) – to explore how student support services have, for them, become a more of a puzzle, marked by experiences of misunderstandings, mistrust and silence. Building on the analysis presented in the original text (Kurki & Niemi 2024), this essay uses both words and images to visibilise these young people's experiences with student support services, illustrating how services intended to help may not actually be accessible and supportive for all.

Moreover, the experiences of Aaliyah, Alicia, Oliver and Thao show that colonial ways of thinking are not just part of the past but are present in today's schools in Finland. These experiences, unfolding in the present, reveal how colonial ideas continue to shape how young people of colour are treated in "spaces of whiteness" (Mirza 2018), often resulting in inadequate support. The young people describe encounters with school staff who, even if well-intentioned, offer "help" that feels more like being cornered and silenced rather than genuinely supported.



Aaliyah and Alicia:

Experiences of cultural incompetence and resistance within accommodation

When seeking help from student support services for mental health, Aaliyah, a young Black woman, had a simple hope: to share her distress, hoping adults at school would listen. She had wanted to talk about her family, her faith, her sexuality, her frustrations. But the professionals she encountered in student support services seemed uncomfortable with the topics, constrained by a narrow view of who Aaliyah was and what her (visible) identity represented.

"Why don't we talk to your parents?" one of the professionals had suggested, as if a simple conversation at home could resolve everything. Aaliyah felt her heart sink. "No," she thought. "It's not that simple."

In an interview with Tuuli, Aaliyah explained how in her eyes the professional's "solution" revealed not only a failure to grasp the complexity of her distress but also a boundary shaped by white normativity. The professional's assumption that Aaliyah's culture and religion were the root causes reduced her struggles to mere "problems at home." Faced with this misunderstanding, Aaliyah began to retreat, learning to say she was "fine" while forcing herself to suppress her distress in silence.



For Alicia, another young Black woman, the boundaries imposed by white normativity felt even harsher. She had tried to speak to adults at school about domestic violence; to share the heavy burden she carried for years. “Don’t kids talk about other things besides violence?” she wondered, confused by how adults at school never seemed to notice her constant references to it.

Once, she had even confided in a teacher, disclosing the abuse she faced at home. “Oh, that’s cultural,” the teacher had responded dismissively, reducing her pain to a racialized stereotype by suggesting that “in many cultures,” such things were common. Alicia was stunned. School was supposed to be her safe space, her refuge from the insecurity at home. Yet, the teachers and staff of student support services turned away, treating violence as if it were an inevitable part of Alicia’s world, her culture. To them, she wasn’t a young girl seeking help, but a piece of a narrative filled with stereotypes they thought they knew. Through these repeated moments of dismissal, Alicia started to feel forced to learn the language of silence.

Thao and Oliver:

Experiences of coloniality and resistance through representation

Then there was Thao, a young man born to East Asian parents, who could not quite understand why he had been placed in a special education class. In an interview with Anna-Maija, Thao acknowledged facing some language challenges during his studies but struggled to see why his teachers believed his Finnish skills were "poor".

"I have a visual-perceptual difficulty," he told in the interview, "but I don't even know what that really means." Throughout his time in comprehensive school, he had stayed in a small study group, yet his questions about his placement there were never fully addressed. When he eventually discovered that some teachers had believed he could have succeeded in a mainstream class, he wondered who was to blame – himself or the teachers who had placed him onto this path. Thao's quiet reflections reveal the confusion and disorientation of a young person of colour navigating a support system that he and his family later came to suspect was never truly designed for someone like him.

Similarly, Oliver, a mixed-race young man, found himself placed in a special education class, uncertain whether it was due to his concentration challenges or because his teachers saw something else – a difference that set him apart from others. Years later, he still questioned that decision.



“Was it the right choice?” he wondered in the interview. “Did I really need to be there?”

His experience in special education had left a lasting impression, shaping his sense of being “different,” a label that followed him into adulthood. However, within that difference, Oliver had also found purpose. Now working as a substitute teacher, he had realised that his background – both in special education and as someone with a parental migration history – offered him a unique perspective in his work.

“They see me,” he said of his students, young people of colour in special education classes who shared stories like his own. He felt that in his presence, his students saw possibility, a reminder that they, too, could overcome the limited expectations of those who might not fully understand their worth.

Conclusion

The stories of Aaliyah, Alicia, Oliver and Thao highlight quiet misunderstandings, muted judgments, but, within these, also small but powerful acts of resistance. Their experiences reveal a school support system that, despite its intention to help, often reenacts an old colonial script: the Other as deficient, the Other as needing correction, the Other as understandable only through simplistic stereotypes and narratives of "culture" or "special needs."

Yet, their stories carry a quiet strength—the strength to navigate systems that neither see nor hear them. In these stories, we hear echoes of a history of exclusion but also clear signs of a new future emerging. These young people are not passive; they resist the system in ways both subtle and profound. They hold firmly to their identities, embracing their mother tongues, traditions, and sense of self, even in the face of silencing, mistrust and rejection. Weary from the relentless pressure to assimilate, they surrend parts of themselves, adapting to white norms and distancing from their roots in pursuit of belonging. Yet, in every act of compromise or defiance, coloniality is exposed – revealing a system that fails to see these young people as they truly are, instead reshaping them into what it wishes them to be.

The stories of Aaliyah, Alicia, Oliver and Thao remind us that schools – also in Finland – are spaces where colonial ideals continue to shape practices and encounters, underpinned

by unspoken beliefs about what "support" means, who it is for, and on whose terms, it is offered. They show us that coloniality does not belong to the past; it persists within the structures and practices of schools that we may easily believe to be neutral, equal, and supportive for all.

By sharing their experiences, Aaliyah, Alicia, Thao and Oliver illuminate how for some students, stepping into student support services feels like entering a space where their distress is acknowledged, while others' distress remains in the shadows. Yet, within these stories, we see not only the shadows but also the light and power of resistance – a force that the support system fails to recognise but that continues to thrive, nonetheless.

The production of the zine is funded by Grafia Ry

Author: Tuuli Kurki & Illustrated by: Shambhavi Singh