ON BLACKNESS AND BOYHOOD: EXPLORING THE EDUCATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL LIVES OF SOMALI MALE YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

While there is a shortage of literature addressing the educational experiences of Somali-speaking students at present, the research that does exist reveals that students of Somali descent show low educational attainment and some of the highest drop-out rates of any minority group within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). My research aims to explore this exact phenomenon by looking to the educational and emotional experiences of boy students who are of Somali descent, and who have at some point during their education been suspended, expelled, and/or labeled as at-risk for academic, emotional, and/or behavioral issues. My goal is to examine how male Somali students represent, understand, and navigate their understandings of education in the context of their experiences of expulsion, segregation, and/or exclusion at school. My study uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews that will draw on both visual and narrative methodologies. Drawing from critical childhood studies, I propose to incorporate visual representation (i.e., drawing) as a way to accompany and deepen my understanding of participants' experiences that are sometimes not easily captured in language alone (Luttrell, 2020). All told, my aims are to gain insight into the ways that Black boys understand and conceptualize a school structure that has historically marginalized them and continues to, and the ways that they remain actively and imaginatively engaged in their own world-making. Overall, this study aims to contribute to existing literature on institutionalized racism within the education system, and it particularly aims to pose relevant implications for topics emerging from the field of postcolonial psychoanalysis. This study is also the first of its kind in that it foregrounds the emotional lives of Somali youth as they lived within social structures of racism.

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it.

How does it *feel* to be a problem?

W.E.B Du Bois, *The Soul of Black Folks*

They see something on the news. They believe the news.

Like if they see one bad Somali, they're going to be like Somali's are killers. All Somalis deserve to be behind bars, like they're all threats. They won't take time to think like maybe there are different Somalis that care about their future.

Ahmed, aged 13

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And finally, this paper is dedicated to the boys of my study. May you always circumvent mis-invention and may you always move about in the world with an innate knowing of what Frantz Fanon said:

"That I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction.

I must constantly remind myself that the real leap consists of introducing invention into life.

[And] in the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself"

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1. Introduction and Question of Research

While there is a shortage of literature addressing the educational experiences of Somali-speaking students at present, the research that does exist reveals that students of Somali descent have some of the highest drop-out rates of any minority group within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). In an effort to address the etiology of this phenomenon, the TDSB launched a task force looking at the educational and systemic barriers that are potentially impeding the success of Somali students. The report found that about 74% of Somali-speaking students, compared to 49% of TDSB students overall, were more likely to be achieving below standard on the Grade 6 EQAO. Furthermore, in the case of older Somali students, both male and female Somali-speaking students were at "higher risk" of dropping out than their cohort TDSB peers overall, with this risk being particularly acute among male students. On average, Somali males are more likely to be suspended, and show a 33% risk of dropping out, in comparison to 17% of Somali-speaking females (2013). Drawing from this important report, there is good reason to think that Somali students are subject to impoverished learning conditions within the school structure; however, there is a lack of research providing nuanced insights into why this may be.

My research aims to explore this exact phenomenon by looking to the educational and emotional experiences of boy students in Grades 5 to 8 who are of Somali descent, and who have at some point during their education been suspended, expelled, and/or labeled as at-risk for academic, emotional, and/or behavioral issues. My goal is to examine how male Somali students represent, understand, and navigate their understandings of education in the context of their experiences of expulsion, segregation, and/or exclusion at school. I opt to interview Somali

boys themselves on the assumption that they are, in fact, the active meaning-makers of their experiences.

As such, my research questions aim to engage with Somali boys and the active ways they relate to (or choose not to relate to) a school structure that has historically marginalized them and continues to. Moreover, my questions attempt to peer into the emotional, inner, rarely expressed, life of young Somali boys as they navigate oppressive social structures.

That is, my research aims to ask:

1) How do Somali boys represent their experiences within school structures that also uphold systems of anti-Black racism?
2) In what way can a study of the emotional world inform understandings of the impacts of racism on young people?
3) How can the perspectives of Black Somali boys inform theories of emotional life?

These questions centred upon the intricate and co-productive relationship between affective states and the wider governing social world frame my choice in utilizing both critical race and psychoanalytic theory as orienting frameworks. Furthermore, these frameworks allow me to draw upon the lived experiences of Somali boys and delve into "their insights into the operation of racism" in the education system and beyond (Rollock & Gillborn, 2014, p. 3 as cited in Mohamed, 2015p. 1).

To investigate these questions, my study uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews that draw on both visual and narrative methodologies. As I will elaborate further on in this paper, during the narrative segment, participants engaged with questions relating to their educational experiences, including their relationships with teachers, peer groups, curriculum, and the disciplinary practices of the classroom. The second segment of the interviews touched upon the

participants' emotional worlds and was meant to be free flowing – allowing for participants to focus on any specific question, story, or encounter that aroused for them significant feeling and/or thought. Drawing from critical childhood studies, I also incorporated visual representation (i.e., drawing) to accompany and deepen my understanding of participants' experiences that are sometimes not easily captured in language alone (Luttrell, 2020). To this end, I invited participants to draw a representation of what their classroom "looks and feels" like alongside a representation of how that same classroom could look different, as they imagine it might be otherwise.

The goal of this visual/narrative structure is twofold: first, I seek to examine the meanings that emerge from the relationship between the narration and drawing, with a particular focus on the tensions between them: i.e., times when what is drawn tells a different story than what is spoken and/or vice versa. All told, my aims are to gain insight into the ways that Black Somali boys understand and conceptualize a school structure that has historically marginalized them and continues to while attending to the ways they remain actively and imaginatively engaged in their own world-making. Indeed, I propose that it is the act of (re)imagination that may be central to breaking down the structures that are holding Black children down, provided we can listen (Walcott, 2016; Brand, 2019). My study works on these two levels, first by giving expression to Black children's experiences and imaginations, and second by exemplifying an effort to listen to and interpret the deep meanings they make of the contexts they navigate.

My analysis weaves findings across each interview segment with the goal of facilitating the construction of a narrative representing how Somali boys describe, understand, and navigate their experiences with institutionalized racism, as well as how they use these experiences to think within and against the structures they inherit. Mirroring the two-part structure of my

methodology, my theoretical framework works at two levels: the first layer is grounded in an intersectional, critical race and gender, post-colonial framework that will situate each subject's description and/or interpretation of their experiences into a wider sociological, historical, and political context. The second layer draws on psychoanalytic concepts that draw together the ways that psychical dynamics including idealization, ambivalence, and apathy are affected by and can themselves affect the social structures surfaced and analyzed from a postcolonial perspective. Overall, this study aims to contribute to existing literature on institutionalized racism within the education system, and it particularly aims to pose relevant implications for topics emerging from the field of postcolonial psychoanalysis. This study is also one of the first of its kind in that it foregrounds the understudied emotional lives of Somali youth as they live within social structures of racism.

As a member of the Somali community, I was born and raised in areas consisting of a concentrated number of first- and second-generation Somalis. I myself have experienced many of the systemic obstacles facing the Somali youth of my proposed study. My hope with this project is to contribute to Black Studies scholarship by bringing the lived experiences of Somali boys to the forefront, with a view to support larger questions of what it means to transform the educational system to redress centuries of anti-Black racism.

2. Review of Literature

Amid a dearth of literature addressing the experiences of Somali diaspora communities in Canada, this section aims to compile relevant academic and grey literature[1] addressing the

[1] Grey literature refers to information produced outside of traditional and/or academic publishing and distribution channels (SFU, 2021).

educational experiences of Somali students – and more widely African Canadian students within Canada, The United States, and Europe.

2.1 Educational Attainment and Somali Youth

For students of Somali descent, educational attainment has been relatively low, cascading into a significant and persistent achievement gap between Somali students and other students under the Toronto District School Board. As noted above, a well-known report, particularly amongst Somalis that was conducted by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), entitled the *Task Force on the Success of Students of Somali Descent* (2013) found that as of 2012, there were approximately 5,616 self-identified Somali-speaking students attending schools in the TDSB (2014, p. 97). Of those students, 50% were achieving at a Level 3 provincial standard (in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics), which is approximately 20% lower than the TDSB average. Furthermore, 74% of Somali-speaking students, compared to 49% of TDSB students overall, fell within one or more following categories: (1) special education; (2) suspended during their school career; and (3) below provincial standard achievement on Grade 6 EQAO results. The data also indicates that while both male and female Somali-speaking students were at "higher risk" of achieving below standard in comparison to their cohort TDSB peers, *the risk among male students is particularly acute.* The report found that the risk of dropping out is 33% among Somali-speaking male students and 17% among females. Furthermore, Somali males are more likely than Somali females to be suspended and achieve below standard on grade 6 EQAO.

In addition to providing substantial quantitative information showcasing the achievement gap between Somali students and TDSB students overall, the *Task Force* report also includes a qualitative component that describes some of the experiential factors that may be contributing to the relatively low educational attainment and disengagement of Somali students.

For example, about 70% of Somali youth said that they are perceived as "troublemakers" because of their cultural heritage (p. 11). In this report, Somali students also reported feeling targeted by the school administration and said that their actions were perceived in a negative light because of stereotypes associated with their cultural heritage. For this reason, participants described feeling isolated and detached in class, as well as a general lack of belongingness within the school. Indeed, the report finds that, for the most part, youth felt:

> …that as a Black minority, they had no sense of belonging; they are seen as distant foreigners and feel different from other Canadians. That they are discriminated against and viewed as violent and not very intelligent; and that many educators and administration do not care about Somali students [and, as] such treats them differently from other students. (p. 11)

In this regard, this report highlights the various perceptions Somali students' have about school, which helps to elucidate potential reasons and deeper context for thinking about their disengagement.

This report further provides a comprehensive list of recommendations at the school and community level to promote Somali student achievement and success, including but not limited to; (p. 1) "ensuring that classroom teachers have the training and resources required to recognize and re-mediate students' academic difficulties at an early age utilizing a variety of differentiated teaching strategies to support students' individual literacy and numeracy;" (p. 2) "giving all students entering Grade 9 the option of being placed in academic stream courses, and provide Grade 8 students the opportunity to upgrade their skills through bridging programs in the summer between Grade 8 and 9" (2013, p. 6). Interventions such as these are important and necessary to document – on the way to redressing – the long-standing and institutionalized anti-

Black racism that has led to disproportionate numbers of Somali students being channeled into special education classrooms, labeled at-risk, and/or who are subject to overly punitive methods, suspensions, and expulsions from school.

The above report and others like it have potentially had an influence on a recent policy change in Ontario that puts an end to achievement-based streaming in Grade 9 and expulsions of students below Grade 3. This alone is a positive step, although as Carl James (2020) reminds us, schools need to go further to ensure Black students are, in fact, welcomed into unstreamed classrooms, too, since anti-Black racism remains part and parcel of school structures. As James (2020) points out, despite the abolishment of streaming in policy, processes of labeling students "actually start much earlier" because of pervasive stereotypes, unfair testing procedures, and pre-emptive learning designations – some of which the report cited above unfolds, too. Thinking with James, my research begins with the idea that policy change both improves school conditions but also exposes more gaps. To this end, my research begins with my observation of one such gap. That is, I consider the experiences of students in Grades 5-8, who are at once older than the Grade 3 protection against expulsion and younger than the Grade 9 intervention to end streaming. In this way, as this cohort of students falls between the cracks of important policy measures, this raises questions about the unofficial forms of achievement-based streaming and punitive forms of discipline they may undergo in their educational endeavours and experiences.

Schooling is typically regarded as a significant factor contributing to the social mobility and integration of first- and second-generation immigrants; however, alienation within schools may thwart this process. In her article, Anne Niitamo (2004; 2002) presents a framework that emphasizes several interconnected factors to elucidate the causes behind the low educational

performance and attainment of second-generation Somali students. Her work was undertaken in Finland.[2] Niitamo's (2004) article explores how a variety of structural barriers may result in low school performance among first- and second-generation Somali immigrant students. Such barriers include the difficulties of first- and second-generation immigrant students having to cope with the "cultural and linguistic discontinuity" (p. 20) within a relatively homogenous Finnish society, which may in turn result in a lack of school preparedness. In tandem, Niitamao (2004) contends that Finnish schools may show a level of unpreparedness to receive students from diverse backgrounds, given that certain schools employ inflexible, monocultural school practices. Her study reminds us that if Somali students experience emotional and educational difficulty, it is not because of an essentialized set of traits belonging to youth but the *social* conditions that obstacle the experiences of Somali students.

Niitamao (2004) finds that Somali students experience a host of social barriers, specifically, involving racism, prejudice, and anti-immigration sentiments. She posits that these barriers may produce feelings of low self-esteem coupled with low social capital, which may have a long-term effect on students' integration into Finnish society. Niitamo (2004) further goes on to speak of the impacts of social barriers experienced by African-Muslims, and particularly her concern with how, "the bonding social capital based on family and kinship, traditionally strong among Somalis" is undermined within unwelcoming contexts of both schooling and society (p. 20). Niitamo (2004) is instructive to my study because her work provides insight into the social factors affecting the school achievement of Somali youth and the strong need for interventions that address several systemic issues in tandem. Indeed, my study

[2] I acknowledge that the school structure within the context of Finland differs to the context that I aim to explore in this study. However, I turn to the results of this article due to a lack of similar research conducted within a Canadian context and to situate some of my own concerns about Somali students' experiences within Toronto schools.

begins with the speculation that many of the issues Niitamo identifies are at play in the context of my study in Toronto, despite the predominant multicultural discourse within Canada. Arguably, the idealized construction of the nation as a multicultural mosaic can silence the racism that Somali and other racially minoritized students do experience, evidenced at the very least in the numbers documented in the TDSB report, and in countless stories told beyond these school measures (Ighodaro, 1997; James, 2012).

Ighodaro's thesis project (1997) surfaces some of these narratives in his study of Somali students in the Metro- Toronto school system. Drawing extensively upon critical race theory, Ighodaro provides an intensive investigation into the debilitating nature of discrimination, and the ways in which it bears upon the aspirations of young Somalis. This thesis is noteworthy considering that his study examines the educational experiences of Somali youth in Toronto – as such it proves useful for the purposes of my own study. Like Niitaamo (2004), Ighodaro recognizes that there is not a solitary source to explain the educational challenges of Somali students, but rather there are multiple interconnected factors. He notes that Somali students encounter a range of problems in the school system, including cultural insensitivity on the part of the system, language barriers, issues to do with cultural adjustment to the school environment, and a lack of understanding from teachers and administrators (Ighodaro, 1997). Both Niitaamo & Ighodaro's work jointly highlight the social conditions affecting the varied educational experiences of Somali youth, as well as the importance and value of attending to the structural qualities and impacts of racism.

2.2. Deficit Stereotypes and the Construction of Black Childhoods

In an influential article, James (2012) unfolds how stereotypes operate in the social construction of African Canadian males, as "at risk" students who are type-casted as immigrants,

fatherless, troublemakers, athletes, and underachievers. James (2012) draws on case studies illustrating how these stereotypes can be taken into the selfhood of young Black males, with a focus on how they work to "categorize, essentialize, and disenfranchise young Black male students as they navigate and negotiate the school system" (p. 8). Through his analysis, James (2012) argues that stereotypes contribute to the racialization and marginalization of Black students, which in turn, limits their learning and social opportunities and educational outcomes overall. Through the conceptual lens of cultural analysis and critical race theory, James (2012) lays bare the ways that stereotypes of gender and race intersect to disadvantage young Black male students as they seek to represent, understand, and navigate a school system that has historically marginalized them.

Racial stereotypes that position Black peoples as outsiders persist despite the long history of Africans' in Canada. As early the 1600s, Black people have lived on the lands currently known as Canada, even while legal discourse attempted to bar their immigration and eventual settlement on the assumption that they would not be able to assimilate into the White, settler culture. Black communities in Canada are also descendants of Black peoples forced onto these lands due to the long and violent routes of the slave trade. While simultaneously stolen as subjects and excluded as citizens, African Canadians have indeed settled in, with 17,500 Africans residing within Canada by 1901. At present, Black Canadians remain diverse communities with complex histories: "they are descendants of slaves, United Empire loyalists, and immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, Britain, and Latin America who settled in larger numbers between the 1970s and 1980s" (James, 2012, p. 8).

It is within this context that James (2012) underlines a cruel and colonial irony that continues to construct Black Canadians as foreigners who are, in his words, "forever immigrants

to Canada" (p. 8). James (2012) contends that Black males' poor educational performance may be attributed to gaps between their own lived experiences and "Canadian educational values and discipline" that refuse their welcome (p. 472). James also suggests that overly harsh disciplinary measures may be compounded, unfairly so, because of the creative resistance of Black students to simply "assimilate" to a culture that otherwise does not regard their lives as meaningful (p. 472). James shows how these gaps may, in turn, result in Black boy's experiencing a sense of alienation, segregation, and exclusion, thereby negatively affecting their educational experience. In this context, James urges educators to recognize and challenge the hegemonic schooling policies, programs, and practices that perpetuate oppressive stereotypes and instead to work to build more critical, positive, and empowering environments for all students.

A truly nuanced exploration operating at the intersections of decolonizing early childhood education and the entanglements of the Anthropocene, anti-blackness, and settler colonial ideologies is the intriguing work of Fikile Nxumalo (2019). One particular article of hers draws attention to how anti-blackness functions within early childhood environmental education. The first is through the salient exclusion of Black children from the privileged space of outdoor preschools and kindergartens, seen primarily through the overwhelming white participation in environmental schooling (Taylor 2013 as cited in Fikile Nxumalo, 2019). The second is in the refusal of racial innocence through the erasure of Black childhood, because innocence is constructed to be the *exclusive* property of White childhood (Bernstein, 2011; Dumas and Nelson, 2016 as cited in Nxumalo, 2019, p.4). Nxumalo astutely points out that this notion of racial innocence is not merely discursive but has *material* effects upon the schooling experiences of Black children. She writes:

> "The construction of Black childhoods as out-of-place in or out-of-touch with natural spaces, without attention to structural inequality, helps enable nature education to be positioned as a form of rescue, such as in improving the developmental trajectories for so-called 'at-risk' Black children (Cairns, 2017). It is not surprising then that while for privileged White children, nature is positioned as a space for play and discovery, for many Black and other children from historically marginalized communities, play, including playful encounters with nature*, is not considered a necessary part of early childhood education and these children are often subjected to extreme restriction of movement and opportunities for play* (Nxumalo, 2019, p.5 my emphasis).

In this way, Nxumalo points out that because racialized children are excluded from the construction of the "natural child" which implies a child that is White, racialized children are not granted the agency, freedom of movement, and curiosity that is afforded to White children, especially in contexts of outdoor play (Nxumalo, 2019). Coupling Nuxmalo's (2019) exploration of racial innocence and Black childhood as being both restricted and constructed in "salvation and deficit discourses" (p.1) –alongside the harsh, exclusionary neoliberal culture of schools (which we will explore fully), we see that education for Black children remains "marked by the *impossibility* of Black childhoods"(p. 5) and this is manifested in dehumanizing and punitive school practices that gradually construct Black children as either "receptacles to be filled" (Friere, 1968, p. 101), or receptacles to be done *away with* via classroom segregation, suspension, or expulsion. In this context, Nuxmalo's (2019) work makes visible the persistent anti-black and colonial formations of environmental schooling and urges towards reimagined pedagogies and school practices that actively embrace the Black child.

2.3. The Impact of Teachers

In a landmark qualitative study, Antoinefte Mitchell (1998) explains how race may affect the kinds of environments teachers create. Mitchell's study is based on interviews eight African American teachers in an effort to understand the relationship between a student's affect and their subsequent behaviour. Antoinefte Mitchell (1998) found that for teachers to establish and maintain student engagement in their classroom, teachers must be aware of their students' feelings – mainly because affective states have a considerable bearing over how one receives and interprets knowledge. Elaborating on this study, Richard Milner (2002) further writes that because Black students bring with them a set of experiences that "have been grounded in racism, inequity, and misunderstanding" the teachers in Mitchell's (1998) study were able to connect with their students and increase engagement because they understood that "the students' behaviors (whether good or bad) were often a result of their out of school experiences" and not some internal flaw or deficit awaiting more education (Milner, 2002, p. 3).

With the above literature in mind, we see the myriad of ways complex and everyday forms of racism are experienced by and levelled upon Black students – whether that be in the forms of structural inequality, inflexible monolithic school practices, Eurocentric curriculum/pedagogies that fail to represent or account for Black students, and/or the routine and normalized practice of projecting harmful stereotypes onto Black boys within the school and beyond. Using this sociological literature as a guide, my project adds an affective perspective by exploring the emotional, phenomenological experience of being young, Black, and male whilst living within, and relating to, structures of racism. Because my study privileges the complex inner lives of Somali boys, it looks to how they use their experiences and encounters to think within or against the structures they inherit. Here, I am thinking with Ladson Billings &

Tate (1995) and their assertion that "[it is] only through *the authentic voices of people of color* […] that researchers can begin to understand educational experiences within these communities" (cited in Guy, 2009, p. 32). That is, my study showcases the emotion-laden experiences of social exclusion and discrimination by featuring the voices of the boys of my study through which they navigate and give meaning to these experiences. Doing so, I argue, can help educators to better *understand* their emotional impacts of educational experiences of racism. From my perspective, it is from this point of deep and meaningful understanding where we will be able to productively support questions of what it means to transform the educational system into a healthier inclusive space for racially minoritized youth.

In the sections to come, I outline my theoretical framework and methodology, which blends narrative and visual methodologies. Through my discussion, I discuss my own positionality as a researcher and share the analytic approach I took in interpreting the data. I also provide brief character sketches of the boys who participated in my study as a way to orient readers to the narratives I feature and present to respond to the research questions framing my paper.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

My study focuses on the emotional experiences of such marginalization and exclusion from the vantage of Somali boys who are, as detailed above, disproportionately represented in the data on suspensions and expulsions. Specifically, my study showcases the emotional experiences of Somali boys, as represented in their narratives about the meanings they make at the affective intersection between their lived experiences and imaginary futures. Drawing on their narratives, my analysis speculates about the affective impacts of growing up within structures of anti-Black racism that are rife with stereotypes. Theoretically, my use of

psychoanalytic concepts enables me to speculate about the deep psychic effects of racism, with a specific focus on dynamics such as idealization, ambivalence, and apathy. My focus on the emotional world therefore builds on existing literature by seeking to understand the internal effects of racism enacted in schools on Somali boys.

3.1 Critical Race Theory & Psychoanalytic Concepts of Emotional Worlds

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) is, arguably, *the* signature text operating at the intersection of critical race theory and psychoanalysis. This book deals with the complex ways in which identity, particularly Black identity, is constructed within colonial systems of unequal power. Using a style of auto-theory, Fanon weaves in his personal experiences of racism alongside a historical critique of the longstanding effects of racism and colonialism on the Black psyche. Among his most interesting ideas is that of colonial violence, and how it operates and exists on two levels. On one hand, Fanon posits that the colonizer commits violence on a material level, with the goal of economic domination. That is, colonization operates with the goal of gradually obliterating the psyche and culture of the colonized. In this way, one of the most enduring aspects of this type of violence is that it works to foster an internalized sense *of inferiority and subordination* in the colonized. On the other hand, Fanon (1963) emphasizes agency and empowerment when he argues that, once the colonized "discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler [..] that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin" (p. 45), the colonized is better able to embark on a journey of discovery and resistance, marked by creative attempts to re-establish their dignity and embody a sense of existence beyond the terms laid down by colonialism.

John Willinsky's book *Learning to Divide the World* (1998) brings education into the conversation by showcasing how the very idea of becoming a subject through schooling is

directly funneled through and into the project of colonialism. Willinsky exposes how education has been and continues to be used as a colonial tool of classifying humanity. Specifically, Willinsky argues that upon the discovery of the 'New World,' colonizers actively adopted a certain language centered upon what he refers to as the "identification of difference" (p. 28). This language was not about honoring and supporting divergent ways of being, including the power of being Black. Rather, it aimed to normalize and hierarchize harmful dichotomies in public discourse – particularly that of 'primitive' and 'civilized,' directly mapped out onto the regions of 'east' and 'west.' Both academic scholarship and public education thus became an avenue through which the imperialist imagination of the world – in which Europe became the center point of human existence – was established. And incidentally, categorization and classification – upon which colonial rule was bent – became a central feature of modern education, and a feature that continues to marginalize racially minoritized students to this day. In this way, Willinsky's text, alongside *Black Skin, White Masks*, provides a theoretical and historical backdrop for my analysis of the ongoing impacts of colonial schooling.

Combining critical race theory with psychoanalytic concepts is also central to my study, in that my research examines the emotional effects of social contexts of racism. Resonant with Fanon's study of the mind, David L. Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han (2020) explore intersections of emotional worlds and colonial ascriptions of subjectivity through case studies of first- and second-generation Asian Americans. Their focus is on how young Asian Americans navigate and experience a range of psychical dynamics that are socially produced by-products of living through racist structures. From Eng and Han's (2020) perspective, psychical experiences such depression, anxiety, and ambivalence are not localizable or even *caused* inside individuals but are rather produced through painful social experiences such as immigration, assimilation,

and displacement. Eng and Han (2020) focus on two distinct psychic mechanisms by which racialized immigrant subjects process socially produced grief in contexts of racism and discrimination: what they describe as racial melancholia and racial disassociation: both concepts that become important for my own analysis in this study.

Racial melancholia draws from Freud's theory of unresolved grief. It delineates a psychic process that exists in response to the trauma of experiencing "histories of racial loss that are condensed into a forfeited object whose significance must be deciphered and unraveled for its social meanings" (2020, p. 9). Echoing Freud, Eng and Han (2020) suggest that the person experiencing melancholia preserves this forfeited object by "incorporating it into the ego and forming and *ambivalent* identification with it" (p. 37). Racial melancholia is thus marked by two qualities: 1) an internal longing with objects of culture that have been stolen and/or refused recognition within dominant narratives of the nation; and 2) an ambivalent relationship marked by both love and hatred for having been abandoned or deprived of this important object. Racial disassociation is a more general feeling of loss, representing "histories of racial loss that are dispersed across a wide social terrain, histories whose social origins and implications *remain insistently diffuse and obscure*" (2020, p. 9, my emphasis). Disassociation, therefore, is a constant feeling of having lost without necessarily a specific referent. I will return to these concepts later on in the paper, but for here, I highlight them as providing a framework for my attempt to understand, describe, and navigate the feeling of loss as a central feature of the psychic and socially facilitated experiences of racially minoritized peoples, including the Somali boys of my study.

My work engages psychoanalytic psychic processes – namely idealization and ambivalence – from the vantage of Somali boys who, under the weight of the racial stereotypes

documented by James (2012), are not typically granted a complex internal world. That is, I consider how social contexts of racism impact, produce, and animate psychical processes, such as idealization and ambivalence, and in turn consider what happens to psychoanalytic concepts of emotional life when they are taken *through the lens* of racialized subjects living within social and cultural contexts bent upon their marginalization and exclusion. In other words, I look to the ways an attention to social identity and difference can shape psychoanalytic concepts in insightful ways. As noted, the concepts that matter most to my analysis are idealization and ambivalence, which I take through a discussion of how young Somali boys embody and explain these processes in ways that reveal the emotional impacts and implications of growing up in a racist world. In what follows, I consider each of these concepts in turn, with a focus on their shifting meanings within psychoanalytic discourse – including how they may be impacted by an analysis of race.

3.2 Idealization

"Teachers are often barely older than their students. Yet it doesn't feel that way to us when we are the students ourselves. Why?" This compelling query was posed in Freud's short text, "On the Psychology of the Grammar-school Boy" (1914) to highlight the power differential that is inherent within pedagogical relationships (p. 355). In Freud's view, this power differential is both material – insofar as teachers really *do* hold power over students, given that they ultimately assess and judge the value of their learning – and affective ways, insofar as students also *project* fantasies of power onto teachers that carry a superhuman quality and that can outweigh the power that teachers, in fact, do hold. In this text, Freud recalls his own childhood to further detail the emotional register of idealization in relationships with teachers:

> …from the outset, we are equally disposed to love and to hatred, to criticism and to *worship of them* […] We wooed them or turned away from them, we imagined sympathies or antipathies in them that probably did not exist, studied their characters and formed or distorted our own on the basis of theirs. They provoked our greatest levels of rebelliousness and forced us into complete submission... we *loved* them very much if they gave us any reason to… (1914, p. 355)

Idealization can be seen in the positive qualities of the above emotional conflicts – *love* and hate, *devotion* and rebellion. However, idealization also matters in the equation because when ideals fail, Freud argued, the fall can result in a stronger presence of the opposite – hate and rebellion. As we will explore, conflicts of student-teacher relationships stem from the conflicts beginning in the first caring relationship, or the parent-child relationship.

Thinking with Freud, we can see that students sometimes use their teachers as sites for the transfer of enduring conflicts produced in early contexts of care. From this vantage, the teacher can be read as a placeholder that students position as a simultaneously idealized figure of love and justice and an adversary or dictator – that is, an object to overcome. As such, students may view their teacher at one and the same time as a kind of hero with whom they can look up to and identify, even as that person can also represent an obstacle to their desires and aspirations. I showcase this second process, or "idealization" as an incredibly important mechanism employed by children and adults alike. To fully understand what idealization entails, I bring prominent thinkers within the field of child psychoanalysis into conversation– namely Freud, Klein, and Kohut and draw parallels between their thoughts and the boys of my study. The question I engage throughout this section is: what is the nature of idealization, and how does it figure into one's educational life as a racialized subject?

Idealization reflects the process by which infants, children, and adults attribute exaggerated, positive, and often admirable qualities to others, thereby detracting from a more balanced perspective (Million et, al. 2004; Jaffe, 2018). The concept of idealization has found a home in several social scientific theories, but within clinical and psychoanalytic discourse, it can be traced to Freud's theory of primary narcissism, which he describes as an infantile condition comprised of the nascent perception of the self (although arguably the 'self' is not yet felt as a separate entity) as the centre of the universe (Tausk, 1919). Idealization therefore begins as an overly powerful, unconscious fantasy of the self as the cause of existence and as the founder of all that is, which is further facilitated by caregivers in a social environment.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, idealization is essential to subject formation – which Freud considers to be the "overflow of libido" (Jaffe, 2018, p. 1). Idealization, according to Freud, and further substantiated by Klein (which I demonstrate later) is the beginning of perception – rooted in a fantasy of the self as omnipotent and that eventually gives way to recognition of the other. From the beginning, infants do not yet cognitively understand that they exist in a state of total dependence upon a known, but simultaneously unknown, other. As infants grow into children, they also grow into the gradual awareness that there has been and continues to be a *caregiver* who feeds them, changes them, and nurtures them. The stakes of this recognition are high – for it involves the disillusionment of primary narcissism and instead noticing that one is *not* the maker of their own existence, and more specifically, that the very capacity to enter and exist as a subject of the world depends upon an *Other.*[3]

This theory of the infant's total reliance on their parents' love, care, and direction comprises a relational theory of existence, even if the baby cannot yet acknowledge this relation.

[3] Sometimes capitalized, and sometimes not – "Other" is used to denote a separate person.

As part of the process of what Margaret Mahler (1958) calls *psychological* birth, children take into themselves an image of the other who was their caregiver, and this caregiving other becomes a kind of structure of the mind. Freud calls this the ego ideal, defined as a mechanism that governs the ways in which one ought to move about the world as a moral subject. As such, Freud's vision of the psychoanalytic child is one that is configured, in a way, as a bundle of agentic and receptive impulses who introjects an external figure as a feature of the self. This process is not necessarily done as an act of love however, but as a form of survival and preservation, or a *defense* against the vulnerabilities and frustrations that arise from the discomforts and disillusionments of growing up.

Anna Freud, the prominent child analyst, and daughter of Sigmund Freud elaborates on the incredibly vulnerable situation of the infant, and links it to one of the most contested, but significant contributions of psychoanalysis – that of the Oedipus complex. Anna Freud (1960) begins by showing how the parent represents the child's whole universe for the first few months of life, such that even if their immediate needs are taken care of, any separation from the caregiver would leave the infant in an existentially anguished state. In her words:

> The child remains for at least a year so completely dependent on its mother that it would perish immediately she withdrew her care. But even after the expiration of this year of infancy the child has not attained independence. It does not know how to procure its food, how to support itself, how to protect itself and ward off dangers of any kind. (p. 27)

The infant longs for their caregiver to be near and feels a unique security in their presence. Gradually, when the caregiver is made unavailable to them – as inevitably must occur – the infant becomes aware of a wider world the caregiver attends to – a world that exists beyond

their immediate perception. This moment is crucial, according to Anna Freud, because through it the child recognizes that their caregiver "does not belong to them alone" (1960, p. 29).

Melanie Klein, a prominent figure in the psychoanalytic community, parallels some of Sigmund and Anna Freud's ideas in her works – particularly the claims that infants and children possess rudimentary, unintegrated egos and rely on the idealization of external objects to support the assemblage of a self. Yet, Klein believed more firmly that children have a dynamic inner life that is comprised of unconscious fantasy, where idealization plays an indispensable role. Beginning with the article "Our Adult World and Its Roots in Infancy" (1959) in the third volume entitled *Envy and Gratitude* (1946-1963), Klein explores fundamental trends in infancy that correlate with emotional states experienced in later adulthood. At the heart of Klein's theory is the difficult idea that newborn babies experience, both in the process of birth as well as in the adjustment to postnatal life, "*anxiety of a persecutory nature*" (p. 1, emphasis added). This anxiety is most palpable when the young infant feels, without consciously being able to articulate it, discomfort emerging from everyday disturbances and/or inconveniences, such as hunger or digestive upset or an awkward physical position. Klein contends that it is only in receiving comfort – by way of the mother's warmth and care, that the infant can experience a sense of "oneness" which becomes the condition needed to tolerate the anxiety of becoming a separate subject. Through this early experience of oneness, the infant experiences and forms the first relation to a person – or what object-relations analysts would regard, an *object* – and that is paramount to the formation of later mental representations; hence, the term object-relations theory. In an excerpt, Klein (1959) delineates the nature of this relationship:

> In the earliest stages, love and understanding are expressed through the mother's handling of her baby, and lead to a certain unconscious *oneness* that is based on the

unconscious of the mother and of the child being in close relation to each other. (p. 248)

Like the views of physician-analyst Margaret Mahler, Klein describes here that infants form and exist within a symbiotic union with an adult close to them. While this union denotes a closeness and a comfort, it is also marked by anxiety, as noted. Above all, Klein regards that the double processes of introjection and projection – internalizing and pushing outward uncomfortable feelings present in the beginning of post-natal life, are indispensable processes for the subsequent creation and proliferation of the ego.

Introjection refers to a process by which the child (and at times, the adult) takes into their inner life and selfhood the outer world and its impact. This includes the situations the infant lives through and the various individuals, or "objects" he/she encounters (p. 2). Projection, which Klein views as occurring simultaneously with introjection, refers to the process by which we attribute our own feelings to individuals external others, feelings of various kinds – specifically that of love and hate (p. 2). Moreover, these feelings when attributed to the mother, reflect a nascent ability to project ambivalent emotions onto external subjects – "hereby making her into a good as well as dangerous object" (p. 3). What is especially noteworthy about the dual processes of introjection and projection is their imperative role in building a complex impression of the external world. In particular, the ability to take into oneself various objects – including people, their character, as well as knowledge and ideas – while holding in mind their existence as separate from the self, showcases the child's growing capacity to interact with, and hold within themselves, *contradictory* fragments of internal and external life. Essential to note here is the role of idealization in this process. What begins as primary narcissism becomes a readiness to recognize the *beauty* of others including flawed things – in other words, that the same person

we love can also be the person who frustrates, and that the beautiful parts of ourselves are accompanied by imperfect and unwanted aspects as well.

The analyst Heinz Kohut takes this concept further by considering the role of the social environment in facilitating and handling infantile idealization through the concept of self-cohesion. In his text, "The Disorders of the Self and their Treatment" (1978), Kohut theorizes self-objects – namely parents, caregivers, loved ones – who are in fact external agents, but are in the unconscious, experienced as a part of the self. The main purpose of self-objects is to help affirm the psychological well-being of the child, which according to Kohut is achieved through mirroring and psychological holding via the environment. In relation to this last idea, Kohut speaks of a "mirroring need" within the child – particularly, the need for self-objects to regard the child and for their "innate sense of vigour, greatness, and perfection" – to see themselves reflected in the "gleam in the mother's eye" (Jacoby, 1990, p.66). This sense of validation, this sense of psychological "holding" as it were, is essential to the development of a self-concept. This view of idealization represents the infant's first act of transference – arising from the need to merge "with a source of idealized strength" to achieve a feeling of calmness and homeostasis (Kohut, 1978, p.413). In this way, Kohut conceptualizes that idealizing the other is the way in which a young person comes to feel stable in their own selfhood.

Drawing on these perspectives, my analysis considers how both idealization and devaluation figure into the emotional lives of the participants of my study. Specifically, in reflecting on the analytic work of Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, and Heinz Kohut, I speculate about how young Somali boys engage the process of idealization as they navigate the harsh terrains of a racist world. In what follows, I demonstrate how the Somali boys in my study showcase a quiet need for an ideal caregiver to internalize and for themselves to feel idealized –

particularly, to feel themselves as validated and supported by the figures that surround them. And, given the general incompleteness and fragility of a young person's identity as argued by Kohut – together with the colonial construction that stereotypes young Black boys as deficient in the wider post-colonial sphere (Fanon, 1967; James, 2012)– I argue that Black boys seek out validating self-objects in parental and school authority figures and rely on these perceived "immense, powerful, and solid" objects to support their own equilibrium, or to put differently: "the sense of support for who they are" (1978, p. 6). The implication of this idea is important beyond a simple notion of having a role model because if idealization is as a forerunner to the developmental achievement of separation and individuation, I argue that, for children who are prone to be 'othered' within institutions of education, idealization is an ongoing and necessary condition: that is, to introject a sense of the self as worthy of feeling right and good in the world. The stakes of this idea are compounded by the fact that idealization is more often denied to children (and people) of colour and is thus impacted by race.

3.3 Ambivalence

Not unlike idealization, ambivalence is a powerful emotional experience. Etymologically derived from the Latin suffix *ambi* denoting both, and *valentia* for strength/force, ambivalence is thought of as the state of being "in" or "of two minds" or known more colloquially as carrying feelings, intentions, or thoughts that are somewhat opposing in nature (Owens & Swales, 2009). Love and hate; care and indifference; a coming towards, yet a simultaneous going away from – ambivalence is captivating largely because it exists as a site of conflict between "two equally strong currents localized in the subjects mind" (Owens & Swales, 2009, p. 23). As emphasized within the psychoanalytic tradition, these currents or forces exist on separate conscious and unconscious terrains that are in conflict (Owens & Swales, 2009, p. 23). One early account of

ambivalence can be traced back to German psychologist Eugen Bleuler who viewed ambivalence and the experience of powerful contrasting affective states as being a tendency of 'pre-schizophrenics' (Beretta et al., 2015). When Freud elaborated the term in the 1920s, he saw it as a non-pathological human experience, whose tensions first become manifest in a child's earliest psychical relation with their parents (Owens & Swales, 2009), as well as within the theory of melancholia which I will explore later.

Ambivalence returns us to the notion of the Oedipus complex. Upon meeting a world that keeps the primary caregiver occupied, often involving a second caregiver for whom the child also feels an attachment, the child then wrestles with a conflict that serves as the basis for the Oedipus complex – which is that of loving and admiring that second person "*and* at the same time hating him" (p. 33, my emphasis). In this way, the Oedipus complex exists as an intense site of ambivalence – the point at which love, which we can regard as a going towards, and simultaneous aggression, felt as a wish to send the other away for good – exists within a subject.

For Freud, ambivalence is a condition of humanity that acts as a catalyst for other psychical milestones, most notably the super-ego which emerges as a compromise formation to conflict. That is, the child transforms feelings of aggression and hatred by internalizing their source – usually the person or people who represent competition for the care of the primary caregiver – as a moral feature of the personality. That is, through their simultaneous love and hatred toward parental objects, as well as the introjection of those ambivalently loved figures, Freud establishes that the child develops a self-critical capacity reflecting social ideals that are gradually instilled by the family, school, and wider society (Segal, 2015). While social ideals can also be normative and therefore feel especially oppressive to those who are thought to sit

outside of their spotlight, ambivalence also refers to the capacity of subjects to make something more of the norms they also internalize, and those norms can also come from non-normative objects. In wrestling with ambivalence, we are able to gradually attune to the wider world – the Oedipus complex results both in the subject's "construction of an external world" and an internally-driven moral faculty (the super-ego), which together inaugurate a greater sense of psychological complexity (Pollan, 2015, p. 2). In this view, ambivalence, although surely uncomfortable, is a necessary experience.

In his signature essay, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Freud provides his greatest account of ambivalence (Segal, 2015). Freud (1917) describes that melancholia reflects a painful response to loss, in comparison to mourning, which he considered to be its more adaptable counterpart. At the core, both processes represent responses to "the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud as cited in Eng & Han, 2019, p. 37). Insofar as melancholia represents a failure to *resolve* or *navigate* ambivalence, this state is characterized by the simultaneous and strong presence of opposing feelings, namely, love/hate, toward the lost object that are prone to splitting. In other words, while melancholia is consciously felt as deep love for the lost other, it harbors an undercurrent of unconscious "fury for having been left behind" (Farley, 2018, p. 24). Under the condition of melancholia, this split can lead to cutting and painful self-directed hatred, in a bid to preserve the beloved lost other via perfect love that does not, in fact, exist. Unworked through ambivalence leads to an aching presentation of melancholia, which is "a painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling" (Freud, 1917, p. 3). Indeed, "in

mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia *it is the ego itself*" (Freud, 1917 as cited in Eng & Han, 2019, p. 38, emphasis added). As such, Freud establishes here, more so than in any proceeding paper, the importance of working through ambivalence towards an internalized lost object (Segal 2015).

Post-colonial scholars have been critical of Freud's construction of melancholia (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003). The reason has to do with the way it fails to acknowledge the specific experiences of people whose histories, languages, and entire generations have been oppressed – and lost – under colonial ideologies. From a post-colonial point of view, melancholic processes that hold onto loss are not pathological, but rather *an* effect of living within a system that has deemed the lives of racially marginalized people as ungrievable. As Eng & Han (2020) highlight "Freud suggests in his essay that melancholia may proceed from environmental influences rather than internal conditions that threaten the existence of the object" (p. 37). In this context, melancholia can be read as an appropriate response to everyday conflicts and struggles with racial discrimination and exclusion and has the potential to identify the many and diverse losses that have occurred in the lives of Black children. With Eng and Han, I think here of the difficulties and misunderstandings wrought in the process of growing up as a racialized subject in a racist world to signify a "paradise lost and regained" (Eng & Han, 2020, p. 63). That is, the reinstatement of the loved or loss object, "in a racist world that would not have them" highlights the potentially productive capacities of melancholia in racialized subjects (Eng & Han 2020, p. 63). It also signals at a sense of possibility – of a hope, of a will, of a moving forward, once the subject recognizes the loss, bears the weight of its unpleasantness, and seeks to restore its presence in a world that otherwise "would not have them."

Particularly in contexts of colonialism, melancholia may be read as a creative response to losses – the loss of language, of culture, of kin, and history – that have been deliberately forgotten, repressed, or never acknowledged under the rubric of the nation. As we will see, ambivalence resulting from loss becomes an important concept for the boys of my study, which I elaborate further in the analytic sections to come. I pay attention to how ambivalence slips and figures into the explicit and implicit forms of communication employed by my participants and I speculate about how their ambivalence may provide important information about their experiences of exclusion in schools and society.

3.4 Psychosocial Methods

The data presented in the following sections of this paper derives from semi-structured interviews conducted with 4 cisgender-identified male elementary and middle school students of Somali descent residing within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) who have at some point during their education been suspended, expelled, and/or labeled as at-risk for academic, emotional, and behavioral 'deficits.' To gain an expansive understanding of the participants' internal worlds in relation to race – or more specifically, the experience of dealing with racism within the school structure – I opted to interview Somali boys themselves, because, along with other scholars in childhood studies, I begin with the assumption that they are active agents of knowledge and the experts of their experiences (Prout, 1998). As Ladson, Billings & Tate (1995) contend, "[it is] only through the authentic voices of people of color […] that researchers can begin to understand educational experiences within these communities" (cited in Guy, 2009, p. 32).

3.5 Positionality

I am a Black adult female of Somali descent enrolled in York University's Master of Education program. I was born in Toronto and was later raised in areas consisting of a

concentrated number of first- and second-generation Somalis. Because of my own life experience, as well as through observing the experiences of boys and men in my community, I feel that I am personally acquainted with the systemic obstacles facing Somali youth on a day-to-day basis, as well as the unique circumstances of exclusion, segregation, and expulsion experienced by Somali males within the school structure. In particular, having witnessed my own brother face at several points in his education – discrimination, exclusion, and in his words, a persistent feeling of not quite belonging in the classroom – I resolved to explore in my research, the complex predicaments experienced by Somali boys, within the school and outside of it. Given that my orientation towards this topic has much to do with the experiences of those around me, I do very much see myself as being 'on the side' of Somali boys. My insider positionality therefore enables me to engage research that actively and intentionally works against the negative ascriptions that Somali boys too often experience. In the awareness of my closeness to the topic at hand, then, I also seek to attend to the ways my own experiences may inform my readings of the data. Having said that, my work, first and foremost, is committed to conceptualize how the *boys themselves* understand and describe their experiences, even while at the same time, I continually acknowledge and work through my implication – as an 'insider' – in the ways I hear, interpret, and present the data.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the phenomena of transference – whereby my own experiences animate what I interpret – is at work in these pages. However, given that my approach is also grounded in a psychosocial framework, I investigate how psychic and social processes operate in tandem, as well as how self/other relations implicate each other, are mutually constitutive, and co-produce knowledge (Frosh, 2014). My approach therefore draws out how psychological and social processes operate dynamically *together* in self/other

relationships within the research relation to produce complex layers of meaning. At no point do I claim to provide an 'objective' account, but rather acknowledge, and even utilize, the interaction between the data and my 'insider' experience to consider what Somali boys might reveal about their experiences when they are interviewed by a person, such as myself, who feels connected, concerned, and responsible to work against stereotypical representations. This dynamic psychosocial relation affects research even that claims objectivity. That is, from a psychoanalytic point of view, all research is affected. As Frosh et al., mentions (2003) while we as humans are entrenched in our own personal subjectivity, there is no notion of "the individual" standing outside the social. In this way, my research takes into plain account the ways in which the dynamic processes I 'find' intersect with each other and my own unfolding story in relation to the subject at hand.

Taken from a critical anti-racist perspective, an interesting question to pose in relation to transference is *who* gets to speak about the experience of others? Andrew Okolie (2005) posits that "we experience and interpret the world from our varying social locations, environments, lived experiences, and worldviews" (p. 2). And, given that these experiences help to shape our identities, anti-racist scholars are increasingly rejecting, what Okolie (2005) refers to as the "positivist and even Weberian" notions of objectivity. Such notions aim to apply natural science methods to the study of social phenomena, in ways that purport to do away with subjectivity in the name of neutrality. However, as noted above, scientific constructions of neutrality are implicated in legacies of injustice and violence. Here we can recall Willinsky who documents how scientific discourses and practices, including classification and objectivity sit at the core of colonial ideology.

My aim is to address complex social issues relating to intersectionality and identity-making, where my personal experiences and identities (which are themselves embedded in marginalized social categories) cannot be removed from my analyses. In light of the aims and ethos of psychosocial and anti-racist research – my experiences, which have undoubtedly challenged and/or influenced the ways I move about in the world – are both welcomed and appreciated. Because I am implicated in the knowledge my study represents, I take the stance that the interpretations I offer are, like identity itself, fluid and partial. My efforts in analysis can therefore be read as *speculations of possibility* that offer for consideration some of the issues, themes, and questions at stake for Somali boys at a given moment in time and space.

3.6 Data Gathering Procedures

The interviews I undertook followed a semi-structured format and were geared towards encouraging the participants to express themselves as freely as they could. To cite Mohamed Wali (2014), "A semi-structured interview is a flexible interview in which the interviewer will not adhere strictly to a formalized list of questions. Instead, a list of general topics is created, called an interview guide" (p. 18). For this purpose, I employed a blend of closed and open-ended questions that were loosely followed to guide the conversation. Questions were accompanied with follow-up how/why questions devised to elicit more detailed responses. The overall goal was to help facilitate the construction of a story or narrative to represent how Somali boys view or understands their experiences (Cartwright, 2004). I also incorporated certain psychoanalytic interview techniques that supported the facilitation of this goal, which I detail below.

First, the goal of psychoanalytic interviews is to create an intensive case study of individual subjects, facilitated through an observation and interpretation of the participant's statements and behaviour (Kvale, 2003). As I interviewed 4 subjects, my goal was to create in-

depth case studies for each participant, through which I was be able to extrapolate larger overarching themes. The main technique, or ethos, I incorporated is the psychoanalytic emphasis upon an open mode of interviewing which would primarily be led by the participant. The purpose of this arrangement is to confer upon participants a kind of respect based upon a theoretical orientation sociologist Avery Gordon (2004) calls a "complex personhood," which recognizes that

> …all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. She goes onto insist that we are all stuck and have the capacity for transformation, come together to act while also disagreeing, and at the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning. (p. 5).

Hence, in using this orientation as a guide, I aimed to produce through these interviews, a deep, meaningful account that represents the nuanced and *complex* predicaments Somali boys encounter and the equally complex personhoods they also create within the school structure.

Additionally, according to Steinar Kvale (2003), "The psychoanalytical interview takes place in the structured setting of the therapeutic hour and proceeds in an open, often indirect manner" (p. 3). The patient's "free associations" correspond with the therapist's "evenly-hovering attention" in which one proceeds "... aimlessly, and allows oneself to be overtaken by any surprises, always presenting to them an open mind, free from any expectations" (Freud, 1963, p. 120). Free associations are roving and even disobedient to the questions an interviewer may ask. A psychoanalytically informed interview is therefore attentive to the value of what one

is *not* expecting to find, and the assumption is that, as a researcher, I am charged to attend to ideas that depart from what I might already think I know or want to know. As I hoped to execute this interview in an unstructured manner, adhering to a set of questions, while being open to where the participant may take or halt the conversation and potentially surprise me, I hoped to generate thoughtful discussions that reflected their own thinking about the topic at hand.

The last technique relates to the adoption of a psychoanalytic interpretation of meaning. According to Kvale (2003) "an essential aspect of psychoanalytic technique is interpretation of the meaning of the patients' statements and behaviour [..] interpretations are open to ambiguity and contradictions, and to the multiple layers of meaning" (p. 3). Psychoanalytic interpretation is also open to the unconscious, an admittedly controversial idea in research. However, in this context, the aim of psychoanalytic interpretations is not to 'psychoanalyze' participants. Rather, the intent is to speculate about some of the *deeper structures* that may be at work in participants' accounts of experience, structures that constitute the 'behind the scenes' of stated beliefs and ideas. Psychoanalytic interpretation does not mean that I am, as the researcher, a proclaimed expert of another's experience, but rather that I lend a 'third ear' to what may be psychically going on and at stake in what participants consciously say, claim, and intend. The goal during both the interviews and their analysis, is to represent deeper, nuanced perspectives from the participant's words, repetitions, hesitance, and gestures.

The interviews primarily utilized a narrative style, relying on the metaphorical and associative nature of language. Duncan Cartwright (2004) posits that "language is […] a metaphor for parts of the self and is always at some level saying something about the self, while ostensibly describing something other" (p. 10). This "something other" of language is as

important as what is spoken in that it suggests that a person is always saying something more than they intend. That is, my study takes seriously the parts of spoken narratives that may seem extraneous to the topic at hand, that lead in a different direction from where it started, and that may lead to contradictions. It is precisely the way in which the participant constructs and *"organizes associations to create narratives"* (p. 10, emphasis added) that is of importance to thinking about the spoken and implied meanings that my study generates. According to Cartwright (2004) such organization includes, but is not limited to,

> the way the interviewee begins to tell me about him or herself and then changes to another subject at a specific point, how the interviewer's tone of voice alters in association with particular subjects, and how things are described in different ways—all of these suggest possible ways in which elements of the dialogue are unconsciously associated. (p. 11)

Given that narrative research prioritizes methodologies aimed at understanding people's complex and layered experiences through the telling and writing of stories – the interpretations I make are attentive to precisely these qualities of language. My aim in so doing is to represent Somali boys' experiences in ways that give expression to complexity: which is arguably the very dynamic of experience that they are more often denied in deficit narratives rooted in stereotypes – of Black male students being, returning to James (2012), "immigrant, fatherless, troublemaker, athlete, underachievers" (p. 1) and that are often popularized and assumed in representations produced through schooling and society.

This study weaves together a sequence of emotional, social, and educational events that provide a representation and/or understanding of Somali boys' understandings of their experiences within the education system. For this reason, I devoted particular attention to the

participant's explicit use of language, their choices of words, metaphors, and examples as well as the implicit forms of communication they may employ pauses, repetitions, stops, and conflicts. In relation to this last idea, I use a Grounded Theory approach in terms of analyzing and organizing data. This approach involves "a search for common patterns (similarities), uncommon patterns (dissimilarities) and satellites (unique information) to provide an overall description and explanation of what is being studied" (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006, p. 220-221). Patterns will be identified by coding similar responses, the most re-occurring comments were organized into the aforementioned themes. At the same time, because of the theory of language undergirding my research, the themes generated also refer to times of conflict and contradiction.

The second part of the study utilized visual representation as a way to deepen my understanding of participants experiences. To this end, I invited participants to draw a representation of what their classroom "looks and feels" like alongside a representation of how that same classroom could look different, as they imagine it could. In particular, I asked participants to use their visual representation of the classroom to tell a story of themselves, their teachers, and their fellow classmates. This prompt, in turn, worked to add a layer of depth, detail, and quality to their depictions. As such, I aimed to couple participant's spoken narratives with visual depictions of their classroom and educational life in ways that are attentive to the "kind of *unexpected* or *unplanned* expressions [..] which betray the unconscious and its ambivalences and resist the often-tidy confines of our conscious telling" (Brushwood Rose, 2009, p. 2 my emphasis). In this sense, the visual and narrative stories constructed by the boys of this study reveal the ways in which telling our stories can function as a way to know ourselves in

relation to wider social structures, whilst also functioning as a resistance to self-knowledge as well (Brushwood Rose, 2009).

3.7 Recruitment and Sampling

This project took place in Metropolitan Toronto with Somali elementary and middle school students. Recruitment primarily took place through the snowballing technique, as well through a utilization of my personal network. A recruitment advertisement created through *Canva* was posted on my social media accounts and as sent to Somali community organizers, who then virtually circulated the advertisement among their networks. Through this technique, I recruited four participants, all aged 13 years and enrolled in Grade 8. All the participants who agreed to be part of this research project were asked to sign assent forms. These were either given in person to the participant or emailed to participants prior to the interview and signed. The assent form outlined the purpose of this study, benefits and risks of participating in this research, the confidentiality agreement, and their rights as a participant. Consent forms were also created and signed by the participants parents and/or guardians.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted over a password protected Zoom meeting. To further preserve anonymity, I provided the password as well as a link to join the meeting through an email invitation. I then enabled the recording feature, which provided a file containing the full audio and video recording of the meeting upon its completion, which was kept confidential, and was stored as a password protected file on my password protected computer. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I did not correct grammar or the use of slang. Transcribing participants' responses verbatim prior to writing down any of my own interpretations was done to help me attend to the words of the

participants themselves. My decision to use verbatim transcription was also to represent complexity, which mirrors the theoretical orientation of my project.

3.8 Character Sketches

Subject 1, referred to hereafter as Ali for confidentiality purposes, was described as kind, funny and quiet by his classmate – but upbeat around his close friends. He enjoys and is passionate about his physical education and hopes to pursue a career related to gaming as well as game animation in the future. In terms of his family situation, Ali's family currently lives apart. His father lives back home in Somalia, and his siblings are split between two homes. Upon first glance, Subject 2, referred to as Ishmael, exudes a quieter, more sensitive disposition. He is passionate about his interests, specifically that of anime, and physical education, and hopes to pursue a career in the science field. In terms of his family situation, he and his siblings were raised by his maternal aunt. Subject 3, referred to as Ahmed, can be described as extroverted and outgoing by his classmates. His favorite subjects are math and physical education, and he hopes to pursue a career in business. His dream is to provide for his family one day and give back to his community. He comes from a big, close-knit family. Subject 4, referred to as Mohamed, said that he is described as extroverted, kind, compassionate, and warm by his classmates. His favorite subjects are math, history, and physical education, and he hopes to be an engineer one day. Similar to Ahmed, Mohamed comes from a large, tight-knit family.

3.9 Kingsview-Westway Neighborhood

Each subject was raised in Metro Toronto, and lives in the Kingsview-Westway neighborhood, which is an area containing a high concentrated number of Somali immigrants. A report conducted by Pathways to Education (2018) – a non-profit organization providing academic support to high school students residing in low-income communities across Canada,

complied relevant census data concerning the Kingsview Village-Westway area. The report describes that the Kingsview Village-Westway area has one of Toronto's lowest median incomes as well as a high prevalence of low-income households. In March 2014, the City of Toronto, through the Toronto Strong Neighborhoods Strategy 2020, identified 31 neighborhoods as falling below the Neighborhood Equity Score and requiring special attention. The Kingsview Village-Westway area ranks among the 31 neighborhoods as a priority neighborhood.

The socioeconomic disadvantages of those living in the Kingsview Village-Westway area include: (1) a high prevalence of immigrant parents; (2) generally low median income and (3) a high prevalence of low income after tax. In their examination of "students at risk" in Canada, Benjamin Levin and Katherine Peacock identified poverty – assessed on the basis of the students' home situation and their neighborhood, "as being a major contributor to, and an indicator of, that student being or becoming at risk" (2004, p. 2). More specifically, living in conditions of poverty are speculated to have social and emotional effects, such as being "unable to work effectively with others; not having a sense of efficacy, autonomy, or resilience" (p. 4). Moreover, living in conditions of poverty can work to increase a child's stress levels, which in turn can lead to the development of a pattern of behavioral responses that, particularly in schools, are met with correction and punishment (P.J Martens et al., 2014). The participants involved in this study reside within the Kingsview Village-Westway area, and I cite it here to provide context and relevant census data addressing the living conditions of my research participants. Thinking about the cultural and geographic contexts in which my participants live, as well as my own social location, I turn now to think through the emotional situations and stakes of their narratives, gathered through my interviews.

4. Why Idealization Matters and the Problem of Devaluation for Somali Boys

"I mean my teacher really understands […] He's a Black teacher and he's went through a lot" – Mohamed, Age 13

As mentioned in my theoretical discussion above, idealization figures into human development as a powerful psychic process that supports the assemblage of a subjects' personhood. In this section, I extend this concept by applying it as a framework to explore the educational and emotional experiences of one Somali boy – through the unpacking of vignettes showcasing the utterances of Ahmed and Mohamed, my third and fourth interviewees, and Mohamed's teacher, Mr. X. I come at the question of idealization from a backward angle. That is, in recognizing the importance of this condition in the formation of subjectivity, I ask what happens if idealization fails to occur? More specifically, how might the failure of an ideal figure affect the experience of a young minoritized boy relating to the school structure? And, in what way might idealization be facilitated and restored as a condition for a more viable education?

Mohamed was asked to reflect on a significant interaction that took place between he and his present/previous teachers. In a noteworthy passage, he speaks quite intensely about how witnessing one interaction that took place between another student and his fourth-grade homeroom teacher has affected his perception of school:

> M: There was this one student named [Tim] who had a problem with another student called [John] So, they both had like an argument that [Tim] stole [John's] money. It was like two dollars. So, when he stole his money, the teacher didn't pay attention to it. And she said "I'm gonna call your parents, but I know you" and was talking to the Black student, "that [..] this is not your money because [Tim] has money, and you don't." And so, she kind of made the student, like, super upset and the student was like this, this is

> not right – how are you a teacher and this is happening? And he was accused of stealing and right now in our country stealing especially with Black people {…} that they are targeting people like us. Let's say, for example, if you just go to a random store and your Black, they are just going to be watching you like you're criminal or something.

Immediately upon hearing this utterance, I recall feeling surprised that Mohamed chronicled this event as though it were happening to him when in actuality, it took place with an entirely different student. I reckoned that because this event felt so immense, so utterly real, that Mohamed spoke of it as though it happened to him, perhaps showcasing the immense psychical powers of introjection (Klein, p.20).

As mentioned earlier, introjection refers to a process of taking inside external objects – both people and their qualities – in the formation of a self. When we move about in the world as young selves, we are privy to observe, experience, and take into our selfhood the outer world and its impacts – especially events that may, in some way, define and give structure to the parts of ourselves that feel unknown. The event that Mohamed observed may not have just been experienced as external but could have been taken into his self "and become part of his inner life" (Klein, p. 20) allowing for him to recall it with such affect and detail. As S. Freud describes, powerful external events have the capacity to influence mental life to such a degree that, "nothing that has once taken shape can be lost, that everything is somehow preserved" (Freud, 1930, p.15). And what messages are being preserved in the psyche by way of this event? I turn to this question next.

Returning to James (2012), Black students often report that they are "routinely stereotyped as "bad" or "troublemakers" (p. 9) and feel as though they are treated differently, and unjustly. In his research, James (2012, p. 10) quotes one Grade 11 male student who

describes that "even at school, teachers treat you differently. … Like if you're a Black kid walking through the hallway . . . they're expecting you to cause trouble or be bad" (James & Taylor, 2010, p. 127). Thinking with James, Mohamed points to a normalized practice of projecting harmful stereotypes onto Black males, formally regarded as racial profiling. To recount Mohamed's words: "[That] if you just go to a random store and your Black, they are just going to be watching you like you're criminal or something." In this way, we see how the language and stereotypes surrounding race operates in constructing racialized youths as "threats to security" (James, 2012, p. 17) and disruptors of equilibrium, to such a degree where the most enduring cultural images that Black males encounter (and internalize) are ones that represent them as *already* adult and culpable criminals in the classroom and beyond (Ferguson 2001, p. 21).

The phrasing used by the participant quoted by James (2012), that "*even* teachers treat you differently" poignantly feeds into the question posed by Mohamed, "how are *you* a teacher and this is happening?" Both questions read as an insightful, if painful observations, about how discriminatory schools can be – such that teachers, who are charged with the duty of care for all students can contradict that very obligation just as schools that promote equity can be misaligned with practices. What's more is that Mohamed's question carries a just sense of anger – what psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1998) calls "just rage" – referring to the pain resulting from the "betrayal of an ideal" (p. 113). Indeed, Mohamed's question reminds us that children deserve ideals as a condition of being able to *eventually* witness the world in all its imperfections. And without this basic condition, Mohamed may be left with a feeling that he doesn't have a place in the world, nor can he exist safely within it.

Given that racist force of the outside world – where Black men and Black boys are "criminalized before they are even criminals" (Walcott, 2016, p. 236), schools that promote

equity and inclusivity seem like safe hideouts.[4] For the boys of my study, and for many subjects who occupy subjugated identities, school may indeed represent a kind of hiding place where they are able to feel their unindividuated selves mirrored, reinforced, and accepted by the idealized adult, who in this case and in many cases, is a White, middle class teacher (Ferguson, 2001). While in schools, unequal relations of power and oppression are upheld through the "elevation of the physical and cultural attributes of Whiteness" (Ferguson, 2001, p. 525). Frantz Fanon posits astutely that Black boys who are made to feel inferior by virtue of their Blackness and their assumed ignorance nevertheless attempt to "*read admiration"* in the eyes of this White other (Fanon, 1967 p. 321). Even with each instance of disappointment – with each instance of recognizing their fragile place in the world – Black boys may still long to *encounter* vestiges of their own praiseworthiness reflected in the eyes of an Ego Ideal. In this way, the rhetorical question posed by Mohamed may reflect a kind of cognitive dissonance resulting from the awareness that his idealized object(s) do not in fact see him (or those who look similar to him) as worthy, vulnerable, or *ideal* subjects – but instead as placeholders "of badness, or strangeness" (Farley, 2018, p 70). Here, the split subject is the *White* teacher who projects onto Black children feelings they do not want to recognize as belonging to themselves. It is within this schism where Mohamed and Ahmed may come to understand that their hiding place – this idealized space of the school, is in no way a safe hiding place, in no way an ideal meant for them.

[4] This concept of a safe hideout is a compelling symbol, one we see explored in Dorris Lessing's poignantly subtle *To Room Nineteen* which centres on a young woman who feels bogged down by patriarchal expectations of what a wife and mother ought to be, and who finds refuge in a dingy hotel room, in room 19, where she spends an hour each day in isolation in the hopes of existing just as herself.

4.1 Idealization as a Condition of Being

In attempting to explore the nature of idealizing needs in Somali boys – and looking towards how the lack of idealization figures into their experience – I believe teachers and other caring adults may be able to better understand the wounds that may arise from feeling mischaracterized and criminalized by, and within, the very school where these boys desire to belong and where they are also active and contributing members. I now look to the contrary position to the above, namely, what happens if idealization goes 'right,' such that the racially minoritized student can encounter an idealizing adult figure within the school. I continue with Mohamed to explore this question.

> S: "So, like the way you described, how does it feel whenever you kind of feel like you're being targeted because of your skin, by anybody you know, people in society, your classmates, your teachers? How does that feel for you?"
>
> M: "Well, my teacher really understands, like, how it feels."

When asked to reflect on his experiences of racism, Mohamed referenced his current teacher, Mr. X, who is also Black and who, like Mohamed, has encountered racial profiling. He described his painful experience to his students in detail, which Mohamed recounted for me:

> He (Mr. X) told us one story in class where he was driving, and he had his emergency lights on, so he went to park his car and then the cops came to his car and asked him if he drank beer and stuff. And then he asked, "why are you asking me that – I turned my emergency lights on to tell you guys, please don't pull me over because my wife is in an emergency" and his wife was at the hospital at that time.
>
> And then after that, […] he told us that the officers were telling him to get off the car for like ignoring what they're trying to tell him. So, my teacher just out of the

> car and listened, and then they called the hospital to see if he was lying or not, and my teacher was frustrated […] he was even answering [i.e., their questions] but he was so mad that just based on his color, they did all of this.

In sharing a piece of his own racial trauma to his students, Mr. X showcases the painful experience of being wrongly type casted, and how this pervasive feeling of being made powerless has followed him even into his adult life. Yet, his ability to stand tall in the present day and share with his students this moment of vulnerability that seems to be called up not from the wound, but from the scar – demonstrates the generous power and potential co-healing that may be found within pedagogical relationships centred upon honesty and trust.

Much has been written about Black teachers, their unique experiences, and the bearing that these experiences have on their teaching in public school classrooms (Dixson, 2002; Foster, 1990, 1997; Holmes, 1990; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Irvine & Irvine, 1983; King, 1993; Milner & Howard, 2004; Milner, 2003; Monroe & Obidah, 2004 as cited in Milner, 2006). In particular, Valerie Pang and Rich Gibson (2001) describe how Black educators are, "far more than physical role models" in that they bring with them a diversity that spans multiple domains – specifically, family histories, values, experiences, and viewpoints that are often omitted from textbooks (p. 260-61 as cited in Milner, 2006). Further to this, Milner (2006) describes that,

> *Black teachers, similar to all teachers, are texts themselves,* but these teachers' text pages are inundated with life experiences and histories of racism, sexism, and oppression, along with those of strength, perseverance, and success. (p. 4, emphasis original)

Black teachers as texts are both informative and empowering (Milner, 2006) – and in this case, their texts have the potential to regard students' experiences, particularly racialized ones, not

only for "inevitable and perilous encounters" but also for their underacknowledged strengths and successes (Ferguson, 2000, p. 113).

Returning to psychoanalysis, Mr. X's act of imparting his affecting "text" onto students who too have experienced the pain of racism may be understood from the perspective of "countertransference." At its core, countertransference works by identification (Calneck, 1970) and denotes the process by which one is able to recognize and introject a kind of similitude in the other – a kind of resemblance or alikeness based on shared characteristics and/or experiences. It is reminiscent, but not entirely similar to idealization which in essence communicates that the other is perfect while countertransference conveys a sense that, "*I am like you"* – that is, you and your circumstances *are* imperfect, and as such, I am like you. To me, this imperfect relationship allows for a shared understanding that James Baldwin (1963) powerfully orates: that occupying the contested identities of Blackness and maleness while simultaneously *existing* – in one's car, in one's school, or whilst in a convenience store – is to open oneself up to being *invented,* as a criminal or whatever other social fiction is convenient. As Baldwin writes:

> If I was a "n***" in your eyes, there was something about *you*—there was something *you* needed. I had to realize when I was very young that I was none of those things I was told I was […] I had been invented. (1963, p. 4).

Ahmed, my third interviewee, echoes this notion of (mis)invention when speaking about how he feels Somalis are being perceived presently: "they see something on the news. They believe the news. Like if they see one bad Somali, they're going to be like Somali's are killers. All Somalis deserve to be behind bars, like they're all threats. They won't take time to think like maybe there are different Somalis that care about their future." Against such constructions of Somali boyhood, Ahmed described that he, and others like him, are *made* to feel "powerless because

when [..] treated like that, I have no say whatsoever in their opinion […] If they think that all Black people are killers, there's no chance that anybody is going to change their mind."

As such, the unwavering 'invention' of Blackness is a projection of one's own hatred outward, which has the effect of criminalizing Black boys who are too often denied the innocence that is characteristic of childhood (Farley, 2018). As such, because *both* Black boys and Black men act as "placeholders for projections of badness and strangeness" they are never met as "complete person(s)" but are instead objects of invention representing a projection of prejudice that protects White privilege and innocence (Farley, 2018, p. 70). In this context of projection, Mr. X is a Black teacher who showcases a commitment to, as well as a deep understanding of, the various predicaments experienced by Black boys, because he has observed, experienced, and understood the world in ways that are fundamentally similar to his students (Milner, 2006, p. 6).

It is with this understanding that I return to Mohamed's later statement: "I mean, my teacher really understands, like, how it feels because he could see it when a student is trying to do something. He could tell, like by the way they're reacting, if they're *OK or not*." I speculate that because Mr. X deeply understood the experiences and the needs of the Black students in his class, he also understands that student behaviour is animated by racist contexts and not an inner deficit to correct with punitive measures, such as suspension or expulsion. Returning to Mitchell (1998), teachers can helpfully remember the social worlds their students engage as key factors in thinking through their responses at school, and to decide 'if they're OK or not.' Recalling the teachers of her study, Mitchell (1998) writes of how they:

> ...recalled situations in which factors outside of the school adversely affected students' behavior. They described students listless because of hunger and sleepy because they

> worked at night and on weekends to help support younger siblings. They described students easily distracted and sometimes belligerent because of unstable living environments. (p. 109)

In reflecting on Mohamed's statement, that his teacher "could tell, like by the way they're reacting, if they're OK or not," we can consider that Mr. X can use context to understand the emotional and behavioural experiences of students, rather than project or assume negative or malintent. Indeed, Mr. X may adopt an empathetic approach because of his critical awareness of the structural constraints his students are up against, and specifically how they are prone, at any moment, to mis-invention. Indeed, with this short glimpse into his pedagogy, we can almost sense a subtle nod to Avery Gordon's (1997) theory of a "complex personhood" briefly mentioned earlier, which recognizes how multi-dimensional, fluid, overlapping, and ever-changing identity can be: that there is always more to a person's story (Dixon, 2017). And this powerful recognition – that there is always more – is what gives students who occupy marginalized categories of existence the permission, or the *right* to be Other, to be unknowable, and to be vulnerable, *and* supremely worthy of the unconditional respect and positive regard that is more often secured by White innocence (Farley, 2018; Vintimilla, 2018).

With this, we have come full circle to my question posed earlier – that what happens if a racially minoritized student is able to "read admiration" in the eyes of an ideal? Mohamed explores this question subtly by mentioning he and Mr. X's backstory:

> M: He was my teacher in Grade 4 and then he became a supply teacher for us. And when he was our supply teacher, he was just telling [us] "you guys are some good students." And, then I was supposed to go to a different class, but [my] teacher, Mr. X said, I'll take this student. I know him really well. He's a nice student. And I'm gonna

take him so he could be in my classroom because I need more kids like him." […]

S: What is the idea of belonging somewhere ... like what does that mean to you?

M: Like you're welcome, like the school's welcome and your free. Like it's a public space.

S: Do you feel that way when you're at school?

M: Yeah, I do.

Under the stringent conditions of schooling (which I link to neoliberalism in a moment), learning can feel like "becoming who you are not" (Farley & Kennedy, 2016, p. 13) and instead being made *fit* for a particular system that at times, functions as a site of violence and dehumanization. However, the creation of genuine relationships with adults can do wonders for young boys like Mohamed and Ahmed because it can inculcate a sense of idealization that leads to a greater sense of worth and belongingness where there was otherwise none. Indeed, thinking with Lisa Farley (2018), who is thinking with Steven Bruhm (2012), I surmise that: because racialized children are split off from the normative assumption of innocence afforded to White children and are rather invented as "counterfeit" subjects who are not regarded as children at all, the processes of *idealizing and being idealized* can be read as a necessary and inspiriting condition from which racialized children can be supported to psychically circumvent the barriers that are upholding their exclusion.

5. Ambivalence: A Meditation on Black Mourning

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
>
> W.E.B Du Bois*, The Atlantic,* 1987.

Ambivalence is a human lived experience and an ever-present psychical condition. As the essayist and analyst Adam Phillips (2015) argues "where there is devotion there is always protest" and "wherever we hate, we love; wherever we love, we hate." (p. 92). In this section, I turn my attention to vignettes that represent the utterances, images, and stories expressed and composed by two participants – Ishmael age 13, and Ali age 13 – with a focus on the ways ambivalence figures into their experiences as racialized subjects who are constantly negotiating their identity in the colonial and racist structures of schooling and society.

5.1 Ishmael

"That's really it," Ishmael exclaimed at the end of most his sentences. Just as he appeared calm and polite, he also seemed to opt for answers that sounded just right. In the end, he would polish them off with statements of certainty: *that's really it* or *that's all it is really* – almost as though he were assuring me of something. As I listened, I couldn't help but wonder about what he was holding back in the context of such certitudes. I later surmised that despite his difficult living and familial circumstances and his frequent suspensions, he may be assuring me that his experiences and feelings were as ordinary and straightforward as he was initially presenting them to be. Yet, as time went on in the interview, Ishmael visibly allowed himself to sit with each question and to soak in what he felt. Even if the entire experience felt "weird" as he later joked, Ishmael's experiences revealed his complex personhood – that is, a *lack* of the straightforward

that he tried to showcase at the outset – and indeed, he embodied a sense of ambivalence that may signal a kind of suffering at the intersection of race and masculinity, and that is in some ways, an enduring, "ever-present condition" of Black male life (Dumas, 2020, p. 2). I explore this complex dynamic by spending sustained time with Ishmael's responses and formulations.

When asked if he generally liked school, Ishmael replied that he did, because he could see his friends and "learn about stuff." Yet when I asked about whether he felt as though he *belonged* at school, he immediately said "no." With a slight tone of surprise at this direct and vulnerable admission, I gently asked why, and he looked off while saying somewhat pensively, "I don't know, I guess, what's it called. I'd rather be somewhere else, but I need to go to school so that's really it." He said this with an air of detachment, as though he weren't admitting to something weighty, and so I then asked what belongingness meant to him. Again, without missing a beat, he answered "it means that you *like* being there" — to which I asked if he ever felt that way in school or *about* school. He broke eye contact again and paused for a moment then said, "I like being there. But I just don't like, *like* being there. I just want to go to school and learn and stuff and then just leave." As such, Ishmael likes and does not like being at school, and while articulating his desire to learn, he also emphasizes a desire to leave.

In the second part of the interview, I invited Ishmael to draw a representation of what his current classroom "looks and feels" like alongside a representation of how that same classroom could look and feel different, as he imagined it could. Knowing that children employ drawing as a form of storytelling and creation (Luttrell, 2020), I invited Ishmael to approach his visual representation of his classroom as though he were telling a story. I was particularly interested in how and where he positioned himself in his current and ideal classroom, and how

the use of imagination could potentially highlight what he, and other boys like him, seek out, yet perhaps do not find, in their classrooms and educational life more broadly.

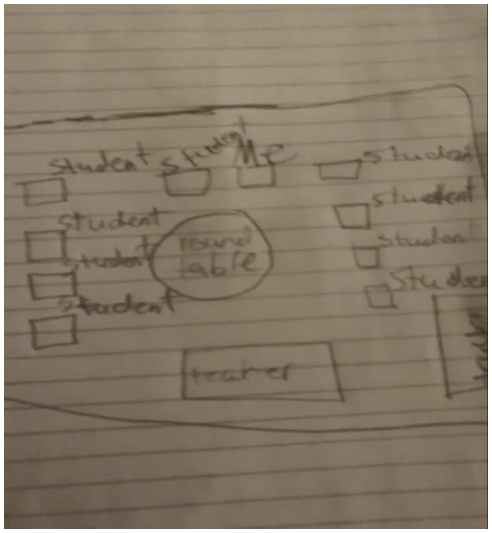

Figure 2. Ishmael's Current Classroom

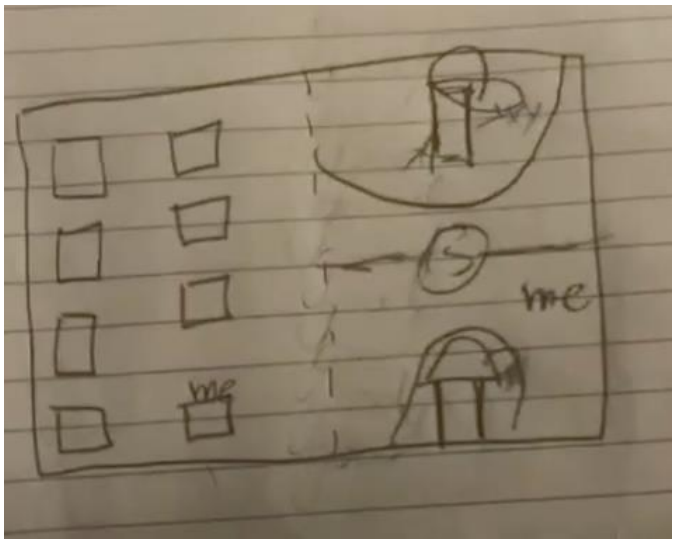

Figure 1. Ishmael's Dream Classroom

Ishmael's drawing of his current classroom depicts a traditional space, rooted in a colonial form of order. A teacher stands at the front, and the eight desks are organized into two columns of four, separated of course due to COVID restrictions. When I asked where he sat, he pointed to the very back, to a desk in front of a round table in the middle of the classroom and said, "right here." I then asked Ishmael to draw a his "dream" classroom – the classroom that he'd wish to occupy and learn in. In his typical straight-shooter fashion, he said "I don't have a dream classroom." I further probed, and emphasized that he could draw anything – "a classroom that is the most ideal […] *the classroom where you would come in and you would love to learn and you would be most happy in, what does that classroom look like?"* He paused and asked energetically, "Can it be a gym?!" In response, I smiled and assured him that it could be anything he wanted. He returned, with a much brighter disposition, and had with him a drawing of a half-classroom,

half-gym. I asked him to walk me through it, and he immediately shared that in the classroom section, he would be sitting at the very front, and when he chooses, he would be on the basketball court. He emphasized that in this classroom, he would be surrounded by his friends and the people with whom he felt he belonged.

There is a stark contrast between Ishmael's actual and ideal classroom, where the hard lines of the former stand in juxtaposition with the hybrid space Ishmael created in his imagination. For Ishmael, there might be something valuable in allowing seemingly contradictory activities to occur alongside each other – where he can exercise his mind and body at once, where he can belong in the classroom and decide to leave for the court. Even more so, his emphasis on movement and choice may be contrary to and *a conduit out* of the of the enclosed, colonialized space of the classroom that emphasizes stringent order and restricts the freedom and agency of Black children (Soyonjer, 2021; Willinsky, 1998; Nuxmalo, 2019). As we previously learned from Nuxmalo (2019) Black children are rarely ever afforded the innocent curiosity that proceeds movement and play. In this way, Ishmael's images illustrate the ambivalence he feels about school and incorporates this feeling into its very structure. They give expression the contradictory feelings he holds underneath his expressions of certitude in language. In so doing, Ishmael teaches us that contradiction has everything to do with schooling, and that schooling itself may be a contradictory site of both desire and refusal, of belonging and leaving, and of movement and stillness.

5.2 Ali

Ali, hailing from a large family of 13, started out his education with an energetic, lively disposition. Student's in his class had witnessed him getting into every kind of classroom debate. Yet by the fourth grade, he was branded as the classroom troublemaker, and was frequently

found in the office. One significant day, he found himself embroiled in a classroom controversy, and sadly had the entire issue pinned on him. He was later seen crying in the office. Fast forward a few years, and Ali is now a quiet, more reserved 13-year-old. He seemed somewhat apathetic to the questions I asked, yet like Ishmael, there seemed to be an entire backstage of anxiety and frustration hidden behind the things he would say and not say.

Starting with a general question, I asked Ali if he liked school overall. After a brief pause, he replied that he didn't. I smiled at the honesty, and while nodding I asked why. "There's just too much work." Like many students, at the time of our interview, Ali was enrolled in the Toronto District School Board's emergency online education form of programming and had been pursuing his classes through e-learning since the beginning of the global pandemic. He complained of lengthy assignments that felt unbearable, next to the feeling of isolation due to being surrounded by "people he didn't know." I began to inquire – "what exactly about the work did you not like, or what about the work felt too much?" Ali responded thoughtfully that because he couldn't understand the work immediately, he felt he was "just wasting time," which left him feeling frustrated. I wondered then what happened when he felt frustrated with his work – in particular, I asked him if he would try a different way, consult his peers, or perhaps, consult his teacher? He said, a bit hurriedly, "*I don't know, I just don't think about it."* Wondering if he felt this way about a certain subject, I began to ask if this feeling, which at the time I assumed was apathy was specific to English, math, or science? "I don't like any of them, but it's whatever." I nodded, and then asked if he could think of any positive memory related to his learning, both early and recent, and he responded: "nah, I don't have any memories. Just go to school and do my work."

About halfway through the interview, we eased into the topic of misbehaving, and I invited Ali to share his earliest memory of getting into trouble at school. Despite saying earlier that he didn't "have any memories," Ali paused in reflection and shared that he was about 10 years old when he got into a heated argument with his teacher. I asked if he could share what happened, and he began recounting the story. "Well, she said something and then I said something. Then she told me to be quiet, and then I said something else, and then she made a joke, and then I said it back to her, and then I got in trouble." I found the circular manner with which he shared this incident to be comical, so laughingly, I asked how that event made him feel. "Mad, just mad," he said certainly and shrugged. I wondered then if he felt the punishment was a fair one, and he agreed instantly that it was. I finally asked why he felt the need to repeat the joke back to the teacher – to get the last word in as they say, and he said quite seriously, "because I was mad, I don't know who she was trying to impress." That line stayed in the air, until I asked about how he felt about this event in the present: "I feel whatever" he said, somewhat casually, "it's in the past."

In watching and re-watching both Ishmael and Ali's interviews, and reading through the transcripts, both separately and together, I noticed a thread of apathy and detachment running through their words, tones, and gestures – that is, the *whatever*. I then wondered loosely if choosing to explicitly focus on this pattern, or building an argument with this pattern in mind, would reproduce a stereotypical narrative about young Somali boys that is rooted in negativity, or deficit thinking – in essence, a narrative that feels all too familiar. Yet even while I designed this study to explore the experiences of Somali boys who have a history of being reprimanded *and* mistreated within the school, I wondered if my alignment towards the "good" could be my

own defense against ambivalence, one that works to hide the bad – the difficulty, the struggle, and the unbearable.

I came to recognize that *not* fully accounting for these narratives or opting to read them in an overly positive way could be its own defense against the trouble of representing difficulty in research while also working against deficit narratives of Somali boys. After all, the boys of my study did, in fact, exhibit both ambivalence and apathy towards school. They are also prone to be labelled as defiant, and, while wishing to understand their schoolwork, they may feel a lack of motivation to do so. To return to Ishmael, these are boys who may "like" school, and may like learning more broadly, but who do not necessarily *like* school in its current structure. Thus, this section does not stay solely with "good" feelings and experiences, but rather recognizes those that accompany dislike and apathy, and further considers why ambivalence might be an important concept for thinking in more generous ways about their experiences in school. More specifically, I begin with the question of what these feelings/states can teach us about Somali boys and their ambivalent experiences with a school structure that has historically marginalized them and continues to do so.

5.3 Ambivalence as Wake Work

"The condition of being black is one of mourning" – Claudia Rankine

In thinking with Ishmael and Ali and reflecting on their experiences of engagement and disengagement with school, we must first recognize that creating an equitable educational space for Black learners begins with embracing the truth of Black life (Dumas, 2020). Which simply put is that suffering is *a constant* in the Black lived experience of antiblackness and schools continue to insist upon this through what Chezare Warren (2021 p.4) calls the gradual and insidious "spirit murder" of Black children. As such, the work of many thinkers in the context

of critical race theory ask what it means to mourn this metaphysical murder, and to consider how Black children can be inspirited to claim ontological space in a world that seeks to deny it (Sharpe, 2016). More specifically, within the setting of the school, through what Christina Sharpe calls (2016) "*wake work*" (p. 53), I speculate about the role of melancholic suffering, wrought as it is with ambivalence, in Ishmael and Ali's stories, utterances, and non-utterances. In some ways, the unasked question that lives behind my exploration is: how do Ishmael and Ali actively claim, and/or (de)claim, ontological space in a school setting that has historically wrecked ontological violence upon them (Todd, 2001)? In thinking with the boys of my research, I use this question to consider how melancholia manifests in their responses – more specifically, what may it look like and what may it sound like? With Ishmael and Ali in mind, to these questions do I now turn.

5.4 Ambivalence as a True Response

To recount and juxtapose Ishmael's two assertions – that he'd rather "be somewhere else" but that he nonetheless "*needs* to go to school" versus that he "likes being there" but just doesn't "like, *like* being there [..]" – points to the ambivalence of wanting to "like" school, and even of liking learning broadly, but simultaneously expressing the desire to "*be* somewhere else." Stephanie Swales and Carol Owens (2019) speak of this notion of the "superegoic imperative" – that is, the superego's command to exist, and to present oneself, as a certain kind of subject. I speculate that Ishmael's initial persuasion that he indeed "likes being there" can be read as the socially produced and even a 'superegoically' facilitated desire to present himself as invested in the institution of school, which may further delineate that Ishmael is a kind of morally upright

subject. Because having "our likes" helps to establish "*what we are like*," a subject[5] who "likes" and "cares" about their education is one that is sensibly invested in the economic well-being of their future (Ahmed, 2010, p. 24).

This superegoic imperative to like school was also articulated by my third interviewee, Ahmed, who stated somewhat pragmatically: "I like school for like *a reason,* you know, because if I want to have a good future, education is my key to that future." Mohamed, too, remarked "*why I like* school is because if you don't do school you can't get *anywhere* in life." Accordinougly, when asked to define in one word, the type of future he imagined for himself, without pause, Ahmed said he'd like a wealthy one. He spoke at length about wanting to become a businessman, and of course, "school plays a big role in that future because everything I need mostly is in school. So basically, school and money – because I need education to have the knowledge that [I'll] be using on the job [..] and I need the money to hold myself up." With this financially strong future, Ahmed desires to remain in service to his family, as he described "I could be able to pay money back to my parents, you know, take care of my siblings, and stuff like that, help them when they're down." As such, the economic language surrounding what these interviewees call "a good future" is one in which school plays an indispensable role in social mobility and financial freedom. However, even this value carries an ambivalent and potentially anxious underside that is perhaps connected to a restrictive, neoliberalist, marketization of school as a commodity – and which is further inflected with articulations of race and class violence.

[5] And even more so, this particular orientation towards school is strongly reinforced for students of immigrant parents and students of colour, as such students experience enormous pressure to succeed academically (R. Sy et., al 2011).

Neoliberal principles that advocate for human capital, competition, and social stratification have for some time seeped into institutions that were "formerly reserved as *public* such as schools, some medical services, or prisons (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002, p. 1, as cited in Parekh et al, 2010, my emphasis). As such, the adoption of neoliberal policies into wider school structures has actively worked to promote an educational framework that is in direct tension with principles of equity, diversity, inclusion and that schools are thought to espouse (Parekh et al, 2010). More specifically, as Gillian Parekh et al, (2010) posit, "…when a Ministry of Education or publicly governed school adopts market values as the overarching principles driving its education policies, a harsh and competitive, socially stratified environment is created for students" (p. 4). Not only do neoliberal policies materialize in a harsh school culture, but in an exclusionary school structure as well, one that:

> …fosters individual achievement (above everything), inter-student and inter-school competition, standardized and compulsory testing, narrow measures of performance, and exclusion from resources for lower-performing students. (Parekh et al, 2010 p. 4)

Importantly, the students for whom the education system is not fully structured to support or account for – such as students from low-SES families, racialized students, and students with disabilities, fall through the cracks. Students who *do* manage to succeed in academic terms– who were likely fed a range of neoliberalist and meritocratic ideals – were "made fit for the educational system" and not the other way around (Biesta, 2014, p. 22).

Thinking back to Freud's notion that melancholia implies a subject who knows not "*what* they have lost in the lost object" – together with Ishmael's ambivalent answer of "I like school, but I just don't like, *like* school" – I speculate that he may be grappling with the loss of a sense of himself, or a sense of who he *could* be, that is tied to school. Indeed, Ishmael's ambivalence

may be read as an effect of his position within a schooling system that wrecks ontological violence upon students in the name of learning and service to sociality. When students are thus made to undergo a kind of self-annihilation to become good or happy receptacles, then going to school becomes a matter of being "other than what one is" – and gradually "becoming who you are not" (Todd, 2001, p. 2; Farley & Kennedy, 2016, p. 13). Furthermore, because "education reproduces multiple forms of violence," this process is further intensified for racialized students who experience a particular vulnerability in schools (Sojoyner, 2017, p. 3).[6] It is within this dilemma where Ishmael's answer of "no" when asked if he felt as though he belonged at school could be understood. After all, belongingness in such an environment would entail a loss of selfhood for Ishmael and students like him, and where the stakes of that loss *are more acutely felt* for students who regularly do not see themselves reflected or regarded in representations of curriculum and pedagogy. Indeed, Ishmael's ambivalence may therefore be read as a psychic effort to hold onto a sense of himself, and the future, in a context that he may not want, and he feels does not want him.

Schools may well be the site of ontological violence, as Sharon Todd (2003) argues, in part, because they are also places where children *are made to go*. That on one hand, children go to school to acquire the knowledge, information, and skills upon which the economic security of their future depends. Yet this is simultaneously the place that frustrates and wounds, a place that estranges racial subjects from their own subjectivism in the name of order and sociality, all under the promise (and guise) of belongingness. Hence, Ishmael's statement of liking school (for the future it may afford) while also acknowledging that he doesn't "like, *like* being there" as a Black

[6] Indeed, Black boys, Black girls, and Latino boys continue to be disproportionately disciplined in terms of expulsions, suspensions, and in-class segregation (O'Connor et al., 2017).

masculine subject, is a poignant statement of feeling torn between worlds, where he may know practically that school can serve him well, but only if he gives up a part of who he is and wants to be. While this demand may be true of most children, in that they (and we) *do* need to compromise aspects of the self in the name of the social world, Ishmael's ambivalence reminds us that this demand is felt particularly harshly and unevenly for racially minoritized children, such as himself. Hence, in thinking with Ishmael, and the lived realities and grapplings that percolate behind his utterances, I wonder about the powers of ambivalence in exemplifying and grasping firmly at the complexity (and sufferings) of young racially minoritized life. In acknowledging and allowing for Ishmael, and children like him, to be vocal about their ambivalence – I feel there is power in supporting children to work through the anxieties, frustrations, and grief of living and learning in a world that is unwelcoming. However, when I think of this notion – that there is a world *out there* that is unwelcoming and as such we ought to fear this world – I recall the wise words of Dionne Brand (2019) "you have been living in the world and surviving, and you know what the world is and that there is no world outside waiting for you. You are living in it and have plans in it; plans that may be curtailed because of racism, because of sexism [..] and how these determine class and condition – you know all this." Yet, she urges that the panacea lies in imagining a different world, in acting outside of our inherited world(s), and in faithfully gesturing towards our version of utopia – inside the school and beyond it, in whatever way we can.

5.5 Ambivalence as Resistance

"I don't know, I just don't think about it" – to recount, Ali said this in response to my question about how he feels when he feels frustrated and/or can't seem to understand his schoolwork. To go deeper, when asked to recall any positive or negative memories attached to

the school, Ali simply said, "Nah, I don't really have any memories, just go to school, do my work and go home." To have such a disengaged attitude towards one's work and school life may, on the surface, hint at a lack of conscientiousness commonly presumed to be "the fault, the affliction" of the student (Mintz, 2007, p. 129). Yet to me, his response signals detachment, which, as Eng and Han (2020) suggest, can sometimes be utilized by a racially minoritized young people, including students at school, and more loosely, when dealing with the outer world.

In "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self" (1960; 2018) D.W. Winnicott helps us think more deeply about why a person may feel detached from the world. Winnicott describes that in acting on cues from the environment, and in response to the demands the social world can and does place upon us, a false self can emerge. The false sense refers to a "rigid psychical organization" that protects the inner, true self "by complying with the other's desires" (Farley & Kennedy, 2016, p. 13) and by maintaining a detached character "as a way of guarding the infantile ego's fragile existence" (Eng & Han, 2020, p. 119). In contrast, the true self is marked by feelings of authenticity, spontaneity, and aliveness that at once signal the "psychic health and growth" of the subject (Eng & Han, 2020, p. 119). To bring Kohut (1978) into conversation, he speaks of the presentation of the disassociated, under-stimulated self, which is like the false self in that it congeals around a lack of environmental responsiveness and can result in a self-state that is lacking in vitality. Kohut (1978) describes that such self-states are experienced by the self and others as apathetic and detached from their surroundings, which can be a form of protection from an unwelcome or hostile environment. We can catch a glimpse of such protection in two of Ali's quotable assertions: i) "I don't know, I just don't think about it" and ii) "I don't have any memories, just go to school and do my work."

Not only do such statements signal indifference towards schooling in general, but they also point to a dispirited self-state that may potentially be the by-product of existing with an inflexible, intellectually imposing and monolithic environment "where students often feel bored, alienated, and unseen" (Olson, 2009, p. 22). Indeed, while Ishmael's orientation towards school is wrought with ambivalence, Ali's statements suggest an apathetic, forfeiture of will – one that is in line with Winnicott's notion of a false self-state that may exist in response to an overly harsh, competitive environment of the school that is not kind or welcoming to Black male youth.

More to this point, Damien Sojoyner (2015) describes the concept of Black fugitivity as "acts or flights of escape and practices of refusal" that operate alongside outward demonstrations of disengagement with oppressive social structures (p. 3). Indeed, the structural inequities present within the educational paradigm are inequalities wrought with "the forms of racial, gendered, sexed, and class violence" that are inherent within the neoliberal state project (Sojoyner, 2015, p.13). Ali's disengagement can thus be read as a psychic refusal to invest in a structure that supports and reproduces multiple forms of violence upon him and others like him. And in this light, Ali's acts of absence, non-communication, and resistance towards these structures may hold redemptive power – as such psychical states paradoxically signal, according to Winnicott (1963), at "*being, in fact, alive*" (p. 13).

To juxtapose this dispirited self-state with Ali's story of the verbal escalation with his teacher, on the surface is the profile of a stereotypical, "at-risk learner" who is oblivious to their grades and who creates disarray within the classroom. Yet, in her exceptional book, *Wounded by School*, Elizabeth Olson (2009) writes that such learners are often seeking mirroring. She writes: "teachers often fail to recognize the embarrassment, consternation, and defensiveness that is at

the root of at-risk, rebellious behavior" (p. 43). Indeed, Ali's statement that he doesn't "think about it" when he grows frustrated over his work can be read as a kind of psychical "cover up strategy" – for indeed "not caring is better than" losing something you care about – including a sense of himself as a desiring, capable person (p. 48; emphasis added). Further to this, because I maintain that the educational setting can be "*violent* [..] in its expectations about children's" behaviours, learning and so on (Vintimilla, 2018, p. 4), learning difficulties, lack of curiosity or appetite for knowledge, and instances of simply not getting it, may in reality be psychic resistances to learning that are rooted in feelings of fear, guilt, and exclusion (Klauber, 2009).

One implication of these interpretations is an invitation to teachers and educators to look below the surface of disengaged or rebellious behavior. Ultimately, the challenge is to look beneath the false persona youth may put up in defense against an unwelcoming outside world and instead to examine the underlying dynamics that might be at play. In so doing, it may be possible to create conditions that can generate more enriching, inclusive environments in which both teachers and young people can be curious about feelings as offering clues about the unjust worlds we experience and embody (Olson, 2009). In other words, we might read ambivalence – and even apathy – as psychic effects of social exclusion.

6. *By Way of Conclusion*

Throughout this paper, I have showcased the ways in which emotional processes of idealization, ambivalence, and even apathy materialize the socially-produced hazards of being young, Black and male. I have argued that idealization is a necessary condition in the formation of the self that, while begun in our earliest relations, continues into later relationships with figures of care and authority at school. When this condition is denied, particularly as it is for so many racially marginalized children in school settings, there can be a feeling of lost interest and

belief in the self as a worthy, meaningful subject. I have also shown how idealization can be a generative condition of pedagogy when teachers can represent their own challenges and survival of moments and breakdowns around race and racism, such as the case with Mr. X. This can sometimes mean that students and teachers share experiences – such as in the case presented in this paper, where Mr. X and Mohamed could identify with each other – however, I also reckon that teachers can serve as a placeholder for students' projection of ideals in a broader sense, such as in acknowledging their positionality as racialized subjects. That is to say, when teachers can connect their own experiences of oppression and privilege to the larger systems that have harmed and benefited them, then students may be inspired to use these experiences as a way to foster their own complex personhood within those same systems, and gradually work to counter deficit narratives that otherwise locate struggle inside individuals.

My paper has also shown how the boys of my study use ambivalence and express apathy towards school, which I interpret as an appropriate response of being embodied within an educational paradigm that reproduces inequities that remain rampant within society. While Mohamed, through his strong sense of idealism and the positive relationship he has cultivated with his current teacher, and Ahmed through gazing sharply upon the future he pictures for himself in which school plays an indispensable role, were able to outwardly invest in the learning structure despite previously being made to feel unsafe in their Blackness and masculinity, Ishmael and Ali's ambivalence may be read as a subtle form of resistance to school structures that fail them. In thinking with Soyonjer (2015), I do not believe that the questions to be posed by those invested in Black student life are ones that are solely centred upon how to improve Somali student engagement and educational attainment – that is, questions that seek solutions vested in the goal of 'making' Somali students a better fit for our current social structures.

Rather, in thinking of Ali and Ishmael, I wonder how Somali boys can truly begin to negotiate or enter into a positive relationship with "an entity that on multiple levels has proven detrimental" to their self-determination, personhood, and humanity (Soyonjer, 2015, p.20). The answer will never be a simple one but echoing Ishmael's drawing of his ideal classroom that in no way represents a traditional neoliberally conceived classroom, a good and enriching education for all might thus entail a radical transformation of schools as we know them to be. After all, it was only within this transformed setting that Ishmael assuredly placed himself at the front – showcasing that this classroom will not function as a hiding place or a place to *hide from*.

With this humble contribution, my aim has been to shed light on the real-life experiences of Somali boys as they navigate and negotiate the school system. Underpinning my wish to represent both the mundane and intricate experiences of Mohamed, Ali, Ishmael and Ahmed was this notion of mattering – that in spite of the troublesome labels that have followed them, in spite of the many moments of painful mis-invention they've experienced, Somali boys' do in fact matter. That is, their moments of contradiction, their apathy, their non-communication, their just rage, as well as their unabashed joy and connection, matters. And with this simple but transformative notion that carries with it this sense that Somali boys are already enough, solutions vested in the difficult question of how to revolutionize the very social contexts that have othered them feels more within reach.

What then should be made central to our educational policies and programs is this acknowledgement and appreciation of the validity of racially minoritized life – as such orientations will univariably lead to the differentiated approaches that are not only attentive to, but *privilege*, the complex lives of Black Somali boys.

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