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What's a Black feminist doing in a field like special education?

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ABSTRACT

Special educators are increasingly drawing from intersectionality and Black feminist theory to make sense of the disproportionate deleterious outcomes experienced by racialized students labeled with disabilities. While intersectionality gains a stronger hold in special education discourse, agencies like the Florida Department of Education are misrepresenting Black feminist theory and intersectionality as “ranking people” based on their social identities. Audre Lorde—a member of The Combahee River Collective credited for generating an intersectional shift in feminist discourse—called on the creative use of difference to push back on the marginalization of multiply-marginalized women. Lorde asserted that explicitly attending to the diversity within human experiences challenges harmful attitudes that frame differences as markers of inferiority, deviance, or failure. In this article, I draw from Black feminism and Audre Lorde’s theorizing about difference to present a framework for educators who advocate for specialized education programming that affirm student differences.

Special educators are increasingly drawing from intersectionality and Black feminist theory to make sense of the disproportionately deleterious outcomes experienced by racialized students labeled with disabilities (Hines et al., 2021). While intersectionality gains a stronger hold in (special) education discourse (e.g., Annamma & Winn, 2019; A. Artiles, 2013), representatives from agencies like the Florida Department of Education have misrepresented Black feminist theory and intersectionality as “ranking people” based on their social identities (Diaz, 2023). As the (mis)use of this once academic term increases in (special) education discourse, it is not only critical to understand what the concept truly means, but also why its Black feminist origin matters. In this article, I draw from Black feminism(s) more broadly, and Audre Lorde’s theorizing about difference more specifically, to present a framework for educators who advocate for specialized education programming that affirm student differences. This framework focuses on equipping educators and students to face the material consequences of their differences within an intersectionally oppressive (i.e., ableist *and* racist *and* classist *and* otherwise marginalizing) society.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, I underscore the potential Black feminist thought offers educators of all social identities who advocate for affirming specialized education programming. Researchers addressing equity and inclusion must contend with the historical exclusion of minoritized people from accessing academia and defining

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dominant research agendas. By focusing on the oft ignored contributions of Black women and Black feminists in the field of special education, I demonstrate how multiply-marginalized people's contributions diversifies the epistemologies considered viable for the (special) education research informing policy and practice. These contributions hold potential for countering entrenched educational inequities. Second, I underscore what insights Black feminisms give practitioners who support students with disability at the intersections of multiple diversities. Primarily addressing Black feminist theorizations of intersectionality and Audre Lorde's conceptualization of difference, I counter the dominant deficit-oriented discourse that confines conversations about race in special education to the question of disproportionality. I begin with a brief review of Black feminism to explicate the conceptual grounding of the recommendations offered in this analysis.

Understanding Black feminist origins: conceptual grounding of framework

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Black women in the United States (e.g., The Combahee River Collective, 1977) and Europe (e.g., Carby, 1982) insisted that those gendered as women within patriarchal and sexist societies could not separate their experiences from that of being racialized as Black, especially if those same societies upheld racism and white supremacy. US scholars drew from this discourse to complicate how their respective scholarly communities addressed systemic challenges related to race and gender. For example, when legal scholar Crenshaw (1989, 1991) conceptualized intersectionality, she acknowledged the different sociocultural identity markers used to categorize people, while also focusing on the political and oppressive forces associated with being marked multiply-different. Similarly, Collins (2000) description of the matrix of domination serves as a frame to examine how power is organized in society, the complex ways multiple categories of identity coalesce, and the interconnectedness of privileged and oppressed social positions.

Throughout this article, I use the term *markers of differences* or *markers of diversity* (A. Artiles, 2013) to discuss minoritized and marginalized categories of sociocultural identities. In discussing markers of difference in education research, I do not intend to reify categorizations such as race, gender, and disability. I understand the argument of those who espouse what McCall (2005) described as anti-categorical approaches to intersectionality and who caution that "fixed categories" are "simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences" (p. 1773). However dubious biological, social, and cultural categorizations of human differences are, I deem it critical to attend to the values ascribed to them (e.g., Boveda & Aronson, 2019). As such, I turn to Lorde's (1984) theorizing about the necessity of acknowledging differences within coalition-building work that brings multiple marginalized communities and advocates together. I then briefly trace the genealogical and geopolitical usage of intersectionality in academic discourse before contextualizing the usage of intersectionality in educational research about *p*-12 schooling.

Lorde's theorizing about difference

The Combahee River Collective (CRC, 1977), a Black feminist lesbian group that mobilized in the 1970s and 1980s, is often attributed as generating the shift in feminist discourse that led to the conceptualizations of intersectionality (Collins,

2019). These thought leaders were not just concerned with the best interests of Black lesbians or Black women, but argued “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (p. 215). Many members of the CRC were in collective struggles with other oppressed groups. Audre Lorde, for example, worked with several US activist and intellectual circles (e.g., the writers supported by the publishing house Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press). Lorde’s activism also took her abroad, where she helped found feminist groups throughout the Caribbean, Europe, and in South Africa (Byrd et al., 2009). Within her influential books and often cited speeches, Lorde emphasized the importance of acknowledging differences to strengthen humanizing interactions between those seeking to advance a just society.

In what Olson (1998) describes as her “implicitly rhetorical theory of language” (p. 450), Lorde (1984) called on the creative use of difference to push back against the marginalization of multiply-minoritized women. She rejected the idea that the identification of differences only serves those intending to weaponize or exploit vulnerable people. Instead, Lorde repeatedly asserted the need to highlight the value of intra- and inter-group differences. She argued that explicitly acknowledging the diversity that exists within humanity challenges assimilationist ideas that point to differences as signs of inferiority, deviance, or failure. Furthermore, she expressed that acknowledgments of differences can serve to strengthen coalitions and collaborations among those espousing distinct equity agendas. Ignoring nuances within and across oppressed people

runs the risk of providing a convenient blanket of apparent similarity under which our actual and unaccepted differences can be distorted and misused. This blanket would diminish our chances of forming genuine working coalitions built upon the recognition and creative use of unacknowledged difference, rather than upon the shaky foundations of a false sense of similarity. (as cited in Byrd et al., 2009, p. 96)

Lorde (1984) warned of efforts to essentialize all oppressions and cautioned those who encouraged silences about intragroup differences. Lorde, moreover, admonished the hypocrisy she witnessed within prominent feminist circles. Often comprised of white women situated in academia, she critiqued the erasure of differences:

As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change . . . But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist. (p. 112)

With Lorde’s theorizing about differences in mind (Preston, 1995), and how coalition within activist spaces were central to Black feminist mobilization, I remind the readers to examine the epistemological, activist, and advocacy origins that brought about special education (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 1998), and interconnectedly its research community. Naming this historicity (Boveda & Annamma, 2023) allows for clarity about intentions, reduce distortions about how to approach and talk about differences within and across intellectual communities (e.g., disability studies in education, bilingual special education, special education) and facilitates coalition-building and collaboration.

Observations of Black women's contributions to special education

Since 2005, when I first decided to pursue a career in special education, I started to pay attention to the Black women shaping this field. Yet even before my chosen professional path, I understood Black and Afro-descended women as pedagogues. I am a Black Afro-Latina, born and raised in a working class, Caribbean and African American neighborhood in Miami, Florida. Most of my teachers in Miami were Black women too (Boveda, 2021). Like my aunts and cousins, I grew up with strong transnational ties to the Dominican Republic. I grew up with 1 cousin with autism. He was about 8 years older than me, did not speak English, and knew everything about the television show *Lost in Space*. His mother was the wife of my mother's cousin. A daughter of a teacher, she taught my older siblings when they went to school in Santo Domingo. Her teaching credentials, however, were not recognized in the United States. I remember hearing her tell my mother that her son's teachers did not "believe her" whenever she met with them to discuss his progress. The contrast of her status in her home country and that as a parent of a child receiving special education services in United States was jarring.

When I became a teacher, most of my colleagues were Black women (Cormier et al., 2021). Today, I am one of the very few Black or Afro-Latina women in most professional spaces I navigate. To my knowledge, there is only one other Dominican scholar who examines specialized education services in the United States, María Cioè-Peña (2017). I hope to meet and support others.

I have previously written about the challenges I faced as I first became socialized into the special education community (see Boveda & McCray, 2021). I sought the confident Black women sisterhood I grew accustomed to in other spaces. But it was not until DaShaunda (Day) Patterson and Andrea (Angie) Jasper took me in under their wings after accidentally walking into a Diversity Caucus meeting at Council for Exceptional Children caucus that I found the support I sought. For one, there are not a lot of us, and secondly, we are often the only one in our institutions or organization (e.g., McCray, 2019). In a forthcoming paper with Erica McCray where we present the findings from interviews with a critical mass of our colleagues, we uncover other reasons why Black women are isolated in special education. These conversations elucidate how Black women navigate special education, the marginalizing forces that have subjugated their motivations and contributions, and what sustains Black women's advocacy, pedagogy, and research activities within the predominantly White field of special education.

In this article, I show love to 80 Black women I am aware of as informing special education research, practice, and policy. Figure 1 includes their names, while making space for those I have yet to learn about. In loving all who desire to dismantle multiple oppressions — because as hooks (2000) taught us, it is *All About Love*—I will continue to confront the lack of attention to Black women and their ways of knowing in special education. While not all Black women are Black feminists, Black feminisms make space for the diversity of experiences and expertise all Black women offer. That is, although only a few of the women included in the heart shape figure make claims to Black feminist thought, I argue that their contributions exemplify the need for greater applications of Black feminist epistemology in special education research, practice, and policy.



Figure 1. Black women contributors to special education. Informed by the #CiteBlackWomen ethos (Smith et al., 2021) and in honor of hooks (2000), this image represents approximately 90 Black women I have come across my work in special education. Created with a word art software, I inputted the names in no particular order and organized them to create a heart shape. The empty space in the middle represents all unnamed and unacknowledged Black women who have shaped the knowledge production regarding the provision of specialized educational services for children with learning differences.

From Black feminist theory to special education practice: simultaneously addressing racism and ableism

Drawing from Black feminist conceptualizations of intersectionality and affirmations of difference, I offer a practical framework for how research grounded in Black feminist thought can support specialized education that is disruptive of racist and ableist structures.

Intersectionality as conceptualized by Black feminists

Black feminist scholars and activists demand the explicit attention to diversity beyond 1 or 2 sociocultural markers of identities (e.g., Annamma, 2021; Collins, 2015). Black

feminism contributes concepts like *intersectionality* to explain how an individual or a group experiences multiple discrimination. Beyond simply listing social identities, intersectionality frames how systemic marginalization happens to those who are considered different (i.e., “diverse”). It provides a lens for examining how systemic oppression enacted on those with diverse and marginalized identities—e.g., ableism, ageism, classism, colonialism, heterosexism, imperialism, nationalism, patriarchy, religious bigotry, and white supremacy — interconnect in nuanced and complex ways (e.g., Cho et al., 2013).

Intersectionality was first coined by a legal scholar who explored patterns of injustices experienced by women of color (e.g., Black, Puerto Rican, Dominican women) within the US legal system (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). These intersecting and systemic challenges also exist in the PK-12 and higher education contexts. Legal scholar Natapoff (1995) evoked intersectionality in a rejoinder analyzing the legality of the educational services provided to Deaf children from non-English speaking households. She argued that the decision to privilege special education services over bilingual education neglected pedagogical considerations for students who simultaneously require multiple educational support. Connor (2006), a disability studies in education scholar, later drew from intersectionality to analyze the challenges experienced by students of color in special education. Since then, dozens of empirical and conceptual papers have used intersectionality to explore the experiences of multiply-marginalized students with disabilities.

Approximately 20 years since the term intersectionality was first coined, my colleague and I noted the significance of its emerging use in research about special education (Boveda & McCray, 2021). For example, an article (King et al., 2018) grounded in intersectionality reported the suicide rates of “non-heterosexual” students with disabilities and was featured in the premier special education journal *Exceptional Children*. The fact that neither race nor gender were central to this application of intersectionality is a testament to the versatility of intersectionality. Intersectional studies scholars, however, bring up concerns that the lived experiences of Black women — which forged the conceptualization of intersectionality — continue to be relegated to the margins, even within intersectional studies (e.g., Alexander-Floyd, 2012). As Black women scholars situated in a field contending with the paradox of its social activists’ roots *and* vestiges of eugenicists’ influences (A. J. Artilles et al., 2016), I similarly have concerns about how Black women’s epistemologies are seldomly acknowledged in the special education literature. The academic gaze has fixed its attention to the growing diversity within the *p*-12 classroom but has insufficiently examined the sociocultural identities of those positioned as experts in the field.

To prepare teachers to think about intersectionality and to disrupt deficit orientations toward difference, I have developed a measure (Boveda, 2016) and a series of protocols to facilitate difficult conversations (Boveda & Weinberg, 2020; Weinberg & Boveda, 2021). These protocols are publicly available and especially designed for collaborative usage. For example, the Intersectionally Conscious Collaboration Protocol for Educator Preparation requires that different stakeholders come together to consider the intersectional experiences their shared students are contending with (Weinberg & Boveda, 2021). My collaborators and I encourage educators to talk about cross-cutting education equity issues by asking questions such as:

How are you made aware of the diversity represented in your classroom? For example,

- Do your students have Individualized Education Plans?
- Do your students participate in free and reduced lunch programs?
- Has a student or their family shared anything about their cultural background that distinguishes them from their peers?
- Do any students have multiple needs that might make their educational experience more challenging?
- Who do you collaborate with to help you better understand and respond to students' diverse needs?

But it is not enough to figure out what diversity is represented in the classroom. My research encourages teachers and teacher educators to think about their own identity and response to difference. For example, we ask educators to

Describe an instance when the discrimination of a marginalized group by a dominant group was challenged/criticized/confronted in an educational setting.

- How did you feel about this?
- How did you act?

Describe an instance when you perceived that others were receiving benefits due to diverse identities.

- How did you feel about this?
- How did you act?

In other words, in creating tools to scaffold educators' understandings and recognitions, we work to not only help teachers recognize intersectionality, but also encourage them to disrupt oppression.

Embodied understandings

Black women engaged with special education have first-hand experiences with the marginalizing effects of the White, patriarchal hegemony and have endured racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue in their advocacy on behalf of vulnerable students (e.g., Boveda, 2019; Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2021). In centering the voices and experiences of Black women, I prioritize those who have been relegated to the margins of dominant education discourse and research agendas. This effort serves an important step in opening theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical insights of Black feminist transformative possibilities.

The critical roles Black women advocates played in calls for educational changes has long gone understudied. Not until recently have scholars foregrounded Black girls and women's involvement in the litigations leading to *Brown vs Board of Education* (Loder-Jackson et al., 2016). Similarly, the historical roles Black women had in shaping special education and its field of study are not understood. For example, the activism of Willie Mae Goodman on behalf of her daughter Margaret who was once at the infamous Willowbrook State School in

New York, has gone largely unacknowledged (Valldejuli, 2022). Some Black women researchers' entry point to the field was as mothers with children with disabilities and they have shared their stories of contentious special education processes (e.g., Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2021). Harry (2010) described her transnational journey of making sense of her daughter's disabilities, a journey replete with complex racialized, gendered, ableist, and class-based experiences across the Caribbean and the United States. While well regarded as a special education scholar, Harry's personal narrative is less frequently cited.

Black feminists have citational politics which uplift the oft denied contributions of those embodying multiple markers of difference. I, for example, seek to foreground the largely hidden contributions of Black women to special education. Just as I highlight the contribution of Black women and Black disabled people (Audre Lorde had a visual impairment), PK-12 and teacher educators can disrupt ableism and racism by highlighting people of color with disabilities in the classroom (see the third tip offered in Boveda, 2022).

Revealing structural inequities in special educations

The discourse about Black stakeholders' relationship to specialized education services is often superficial and reductive, limited to questions about the disproportionality of racialized students. This narrow approach to Black and other racialized people's experiences with special education problematizes demographic divides without sufficiently interrogating the kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing privileged in *p*-12 settings or the higher education institutions charged with preparing educators to work with multiply-marginalized students. Most students with disabilities spend 80% of their school day in the general education classrooms and students with disabilities are increasingly entering postsecondary education. Considering the greater diversity that exists in students when compared to those considered experts in education, Black feminists' understandings of how educational systems are entangled in social inequalities is critical both at the higher education level and as it relates to children in PK-12 settings (Boveda & McCray, 2021).

The 1966 amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which first provided federal funds for students with disabilities in public schools, will serve as an anchoring point for my exploration of existing literature about Black women and special education. Shortly after the passing of the amendment, Dunn (1968) published an oft cited article critiquing the large percentage of "racially and/or economically disadvantaged children" in special education (p. 9). Furthermore, 1966 falls between 2 critical educational eras — the 1950s cases leading to the *Brown vs. Board of Education* landmark decision and the 1970s Congressional enactment of a federal act that eventually became known as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Blanchett (2009) explicates how special education as we know it today is greatly influenced by the legal strategies and activism Black people employed during the Civil Rights Movement. The emphasis on desegregation resulting from *Brown vs Board of Education* informed parents and disability activists to push against the hyper-segregation of students with disabilities. Although special education emerged from social activism catalyzed by the Civil Rights and Disability Rights movements, scholars have nonetheless critiqued how its practices and research aggravate racial inequities (e.g., Connor et al., 2008).

Understanding the activist's roots of special education, as well as the multiple and interrelated ways schooling is implicated in social inequities, can disrupt the negative outcomes experienced by students of color with disabilities (Cruz et al., 2021).

Reframing attitudes toward difference

Lawmakers from my home state have considered passing bills banning conversations about race, nationality, and gender that “make while students feel discomfort” (Simonson, 2022). Clearly, these laws do not focus on the feelings of discomfort that racialized, gendered, and otherwise marginalized students’ have in schools. Moreover, ignoring difference is a strategy that even the most well intended teachers think would make students’ feel more included. Black feminist writers, however, have warned about the dangers of ignoring diversity. “It is not our differences that divide us,” Lorde (1984) once said, “It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” Black feminists remind us that “diversity,” a too often misused and increasingly milquetoast term, is simply another way to describe social differences. In a predominantly white teacher workforce that too often hides differences due to the fear of stigmatization, Black feminist affirmations of difference are a much-needed intervention.

For decades, Black feminist thinkers have rejected standardized practices that centered normativity. Instead, they argue, we should embrace complexity and center the most vulnerable people in society. Among the dozens of Black feminist books authored by bell hooks, she wrote 6 children’s books. *Happy to Be Nappy* celebrates Black children’s hair. *Skin Again*, has been used to facilitate conversations about race with young children. These books, which disrupt anti-Blackness, are now being targeted, even banned in some states. Beyond teaching students about the contributions people with disabilities of all races make to our society, Black feminist ways of being allows framing that makes it possible to challenge those who equate ability and racial differences with inferiority.

Discussion

As a Black woman with familial roots in Latin America and professional roots in the relatively new field of special education (Boveda, 2019; Boveda & McCray, 2021), I have repeatedly turned outside of my field to affirm my Black feminist epistemology. Yet instead of seeking out these affirming ways of being and knowing, in this article I look into how Black women’s engagement with special education in the United States has shaped — and will continue to inform — the field’s theories, policies, and practices. The experiences of Black researchers, pedagogues, mothers, and advocates are not sufficiently centered in my field, even as the disproportionality of Black children in special education continues to dominate conversations about race. Contributions from Black feminist scholars help a predominantly white teacher workforce understand the complex needs of a diverse student population. It also makes space for those whose perspectives have not received the same credibility as those who do not personally contend with racism, ableism, and other intersectional oppressions.

Considering the greater diversity that exists in students served in *p*-12 schooling when compared to those considered experts in education, educators’ understandings of how educational systems are entangled in social inequalities is critical both at the higher

education level and as it relates to children in PK-12 settings. Ultimately, my hope is that the application of Black feminist thought in education scholarship and praxis will push the field of special education toward the exploration of critical epistemologies, the fostering of intersectional consciousness, and the uplifting and sustainment of Black women and other multiply-marginalized humans in this field.

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Additional resources

1. Connor, D., & Ferri, B. A. (2021). *How teaching shapes our thinking about dis/abilities: Stories from the field*. Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

The stories of several Black educators are featured in this anthology. The authors of this text were invited to reflect on their experiences with children and youth labeled with disabilities, in the context of their classrooms and schools and in collaboration with parents and administrators. In their narratives, the authors unpack how the realities of their classroom shaped their understanding of ableism and its intersections with other systemic oppression.

2. Hines, D. E., Boveda, M. & Lindo, E. (Eds.) (2021). *Racism by another name: Black students, overrepresentation, and carcerality in special education*. Information Age Publishing.

This anthology includes numerous authors who apply qualitative, quantitative, and auto-ethnographic methods in their sensemaking of the overrepresentation of Black children in special education. Each chapter centers the material realities of Black students who are isolated, whether in separate or general education classrooms. Drawing from Critical Race Theory, DisCrit, Critical Race Feminism, and other race-centered frameworks this book challenges dominant norms of schools that reinforce inequality and racial segregation in

special education. Each chapter concludes with practitioner-based notes and resources for readers to expand their knowledge of how Black students, their family, and guardians advocate for themselves and their children.

3. Harry, B., & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, L. (2020). *Meeting families where they are: Building equity through advocacy with diverse schools and communities*. Teacher College Press.

Uplifting and celebrating the history of parent advocacy in the United States since World War II, this text applies a cultural-historical lens to explore why individuals with disabilities are stigmatized in the US context. The authors demonstrate how the intersections of different stigmatized identity markers, have produced negative interpretations of "difference." The book highlights how privileged identities shape which parent voices are heard in the special education process. The authors propose collaborative approaches that can produce what they describe as authentic and representative advocacy.