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‘I was the special ed. girl’: urban working-class young women of colour

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Recent criticism of the over-representation of minority students in special education do not adequately account for gender, despite the fact that urban special education classrooms in the USA are largely populated by young men of colour. In fact, we know very little about how being female shapes the experiences and understandings of young women of colour labelled disabled in schools. Using an interdisciplinary framework informed by Black feminist studies, disability studies, and class studies, we analyse autobiographical portraits of five young women of colour who received special education services. Focusing on their perspectives of life in and out of school, we examine how they understand and negotiate multiple subject positions and actively and creatively work to resist these constraints.

Keywords: gender; disability; race; class; disability studies

Youth crisis and the ‘girl problem’

Today’s media is saturated with cautionary tales about how youth are in dire trouble. Like the phrase ‘failing schools’, the terms ‘youth’ and ‘crisis’ have become so intertwined that it is difficult to think about one without the other. Untangling discourses about youth in crisis, however, reveals highly gendered and racialised notions of risk. The 1990s, for example, ushered in a decade of worry that White middle-class girls were being victimised by a girl poisoning culture and, as a result, were losing their voices, self-confidence, self-esteem, and even their very selves (Brown and Gilligan 1998; Orenstein 1995; Pipher 1994; Shandler 1999). Against this backdrop of concern about White middle-class girls, a distinct form of youth crisis emerged focusing on urban youth of colour. Capitalising on White middle-class fears about Black male violence, hypermasculinity, and gang culture, on the one hand, and unregulated Black sexuality targeted at young Black women, on the other, further bifurcated discourses of danger emerged (Bettie 2003).

Although widely disseminated in popular media, alarmist accounts of an urban youth crisis rarely tell the whole story. These accounts typically ignore factors such as dwindling economic and employment opportunities, vanishing urban youth programmes, dilapidated urban schools, ballooning prison industry, and regressive welfare reforms (Collins 2004). Likewise, conversations about school violence frequently downplay various forms of institutional violence and inequality, as well as...
the effects of racism, sexism, ableism and homophobia. In other words, such accounts wilfully overlook social conditions that make schools inhospitable for poor and working-class urban youth. Moreover, although the struggles experienced by urban youth today mirror the struggles of generations before them, this connection is also conveniently ignored (Bettie 2003, 7). Finally, these studies fail to account for diminishing social networks, which have decimated the ‘deeply textured web of family, churches, fraternal organizations, school clubs, sport teams, and other community organizations’ that help urban youth ‘navigate the challenges of social inequality’ (Collins 2004, 121).

Solutions targeting the ‘youth crisis’ also differ radically depending on social class and race. White girls are most often positioned as passive victims, poisoned by an inhospitable culture. As a result, White middle-class girls are encouraged to reclaim their voices and embrace ‘girl power’, a highly superficial, depoliticised, and individualistic notion of feminism (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005). Conversely, Black and urban youth are pathologised, defined as the problem themselves. They are not positioned as victims of social inequality and oppression, but rather as threatening symbols of cultural or individual pathology. Whether focused on White girls or poor women of colour, both discourses focus exclusively at the individual. Thus, the solutions posed do not advocate cultural or political transformation or the eradication of structural inequalities: rather, they focus on individual empowerment, in the case of White girls, or individual blame, in the case of urban youth of colour of both sexes.

As W.E.B. Du Bois noted over a century ago, people of colour who face or are ‘associated with a set of problems … [often] become those problems’ (in Gordon 2000, 69). Today, urban youth of colour are pathologised to the point that they are equated with failure and risk (Gordon 2000; Mutua 2001). Over time, as adult anxiety has escalated and as middle-class White youth began co-opting the music and culture of inner-city youth, so too has the discourse regarding young White women shifted from the problems plaguing girls to the ‘problem girl’ (Gonick 2003, 3). Worries about young women running amok spurred a new discourse about girls as cliquish bullies or wanton sluts (Simmons 2002; White 2002; Wiseman 2002).

Although girlhood garners a lot of attention, the disabled girl largely remains an ‘invisible presence … [struggling] to claim recognition at the discursive boundaries of girlhood’ (Erevelles and Mutua 2005, 254). Likewise, the ‘urban disabled girl of colour’ is virtually non-existent in professional or popular press. We therefore focus on ‘urban special education girls’, not only because their ‘lives, bodies, relationships and selves do not conform to … dominant forms of girlhood’ (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005, 3), but also because they are a paradoxical absent presence across the range of alarmist youth discourses as well as in the literature on the over-representation of students of colour in special education.

**Over-represented, but MIA: where are the special education girls?**

The intransigent problem of over-representation of students of colour in special education in the USA has been well documented in the literature (Ferri and Connor 2006; Harry and Klingner 2006; Losen and Orfield 2002). Although compelling, data do not explain why so many special education classrooms, particularly at the secondary level, contain so few young women. Disabled girls represent a dwindling presence in the special education classroom where young males make up on average two-thirds of the special education population (Mitchell 2006). Recent reforms aimed at curbing youth
violence, preventing drop out, and boosting achievement focus on males (Osler 2006). Thus, girls who withdraw from learning and from school often fall under the radar of many of these programmes and resources.

Longitudinal studies, including the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS), also report significant gender disparities in special education placement and post-school outcomes (Wagner et al. 2006). Moreover, gender differences in special education placement have remained stable over time and constant across race and ethnicity (Oswald et al. 2003, 233). Thus, whatever forces ‘influence gender disproportionate, they act on all racial/ethnic groups in a similar fashion’ (Oswald et al. 2003, 233). Researchers also document poorer transition outcomes, lower wages and employment, and earlier parenting responsibilities among young women who receive special education services (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005; Blackorby and Wagner 1992).

Yet, we actually know very little about what it means to be ‘the only girl in [the special education] class’ (Mitchell 2006, 12). Even the recent interest in girl culture and girl power has done little to shed light on the experiences of disabled girls or disabled young women. How then does disability status complicate the ways that young women negotiate the ‘conflicts, contradictions, and ambivalences of femininity’ (Gonick 2003, 6)? If girlhood, as an idea, emerges within particular cultural, material, and discursive contexts (Gonick 2003), how does the space and place of special education complicate these ideas?

We also aim to identify how participants resist these social forces and create spaces for oppositional knowledge claims and practices. We attend therefore to ways that participants negotiate the ‘inevitable contradictions’ (Kane 2006, 675) between hegemonic norms and their own lived experiences. Thus, we are also interested in how young women of colour in urban special education programmes ‘rewrite the cartographies of girlhood’ (Erevelles and Mutua 2005, 255) and enact strategies of ‘creative resistance’ (Bettie 2003, 5).

**Participants and method**

Our data are culled from a larger study of urban Black and/or Latino(a) youth from working-class backgrounds who had been labelled learning disabled (LD)3 (Connor 2008). The five female participants from that group, all aged 18–20, were involved in a post-high school vocational programme in New York City aimed to prepare them to work as special education paraprofessionals (see Table 1). In targeted readings of each participant’s narrative we document their awareness of hegemonic norms of gender, race, ability and social class, as well as tactics they used to subvert these normative expectations. In the remainder of the paper we document their situated knowledge about how economic, political, educational and ideological forms of oppression work together (Collins 2000), as well as ways in which they resist these forces.

**School spaces: privacy and positionality**

Despite guarantees of privacy, schools regularly convey students’ disability status in direct and indirect ways. The derogatory names given to accessible busses (i.e. ‘the short bus’ or the ‘tard bus’) illustrate how the stigma associated with special education spreads even to the physical structures of schools (Goffman 1963). Many of the
young women in this study talked about how parts of the school building came to be associated with special education. This unofficial marking off of special education zones within schools underscores the level of segregation students who receive special education services experience on a daily basis. In addition, commonplace artifacts such as schedule cards, report cards, and diplomas often reveal a student’s disability status. Participants shared various strategies for countering what they perceived as intrusions into their privacy.

W.G., for example, recounted how friends would look at her schedule card and ask about classes that were not on their schedules. Rather than disclosing that she was in special education, she would respond to their inquiries with a ‘little lie’. Others also talked about various ways they avoided such intrusions – saying things like, ‘I don’t know. They screwed up my schedule’. W.G. explains that once peers know about a special education label, ‘They treat them different than the way they treat their other friends’. Participants also found that teachers’ perceptions of them changed. As Chanell writes, once teachers get special education documentation,

They think less of me, like she’s not gonna do this, she came from the third floor. And, it hurts, it’s mad sad. I would try and show them more, like I can do this, I’m cool, cool regular – I can do the same thing, but it still felt different. No matter how much I tried to put my all in, I still feel like that.

Queer theorists have written extensively about living with and managing an aspect of identity that is often an ‘open secret’ (Sedgwick 1990). This paradoxical phrase conveys how the status of an individual marked by a stigmatised aspect of their identity can be widely known, although not publicly acknowledged as such. In the following story told by Chanell, we see how the phrase resonates for students who live with certain disability labels, particularly those that are not readily visible.

I remember … I was talking to this boy, he was in regular ed. … He didn’t know that I was in special ed. and every time he would come around me I would … meet him by the stairs … He would ask me am I in that class? I would say ‘Hell, no!’ … I was just feeling really nervous, and shy … He’d say, ‘Why are you –?’ or ‘Are you –?’ I’m like, ‘No, no, no’, but he’d always see me there. I was, ‘I know somebody there. I got a friend there’. But he would see me sit down; he would walk past. I’d move back, trying to hide … or I would stand up, act like I’m talking to somebody and I’d walk down the hallway and go to the bathroom, and he’d say ‘Are you in that class?’ and I’d say, ‘No, I was just talking to somebody…’ I was like, he already knows, coz he’s asking too many questions. I was ‘Oh well, if he know, he know’, and as long as he don’t come out with it … As long as he’s always asking the questions, and I can deny it, it sounds real good … he didn’t know I was part of the other side … We’re all trying to hide something … me? I was running. I was on the run … I would look at him and say to myself, ‘You know my secret’.

Table 1. Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade labelled LD</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chanell</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precious</td>
<td>‘In elementary’</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>3rd or 4th</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W.G.</td>
<td>‘Earlier than 8th’</td>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this everyday interaction, we see the complicated world that Chanell navigates. Although she realises that this boy most likely knows that she is in special education, she takes care to avoid verbally confirming this fact, regardless of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Strategic manoeuvrings such as giving erroneous accounts as to why she would be seen in a special classroom (claiming to be visiting friends), or carefully positioning her body either inside the classroom or in the hallway, Chanell counters the boy’s assumptions. Universalising her situation, she explains that everyone is ‘trying to hide something’. Yet, she understands the absurdity of the situation and the roles that each of them must play in order for her to maintain her social status and desirability.

In examples like these participants enacted various forms of deflection in order to maintain social status. Seeing no room within the restrictive norms of ability from which to forge an acceptable identity, they instead chose to evade or deflect their peer’s curious probing. What should we make of this reluctance to be seen as the ‘special education girl’? We contend that their responses suggest that passing, rather than signalling an internalisation of stigma or self-hatred, serves as a tactic for negotiating what is perceived as an invasion of privacy and for refusing ableist assumptions.

Typical of the majority of young women with disability labels, many of the participants in this study were the only girl in their special education classes.4 In the following example Michelle vividly recounts her first day in special education:

The first time I felt different was my first day in special ed. It was a Tuesday morning … [I]t was a second period class and when I got there I felt so bad that I almost started to cry. But I was holding it in. I was saying to myself, ‘Why did I do this?’ I was in a class with only boys and the teacher was a man too. I could not even look up because if I did I was going to cry … I felt shy being the only girl in class and the other girls in class did not like me … What bothered me was that I was the only girl in every class I would go to. The class was mostly guys. There’d be maybe two girls and then the rest were guys. I felt so uncomfortable.

Michelle’s retelling, down to the day of the week and period of the day, illustrates how alienated many of the girls felt in special education classrooms. The few girls Michelle encounters do not seem to get along. It is not surprising, however, given the diminished social capital associated with special education status, that the girls in this group did not seem to develop a sense of pride or solidarity around this identity? Rather than seeing one another as potential allies or friends, they seem to have internalised the view that people in their situation are less desirable, even as friends.

Alternatively, the reluctance to be associated with special education may reveal other forces at work. A male student in the larger study, for example, talked openly about how although girls in special education tended to ‘like the guys in special education’, that boys he knew widely regarded ‘special ed. girls’ as either undesirable (‘they weren’t attractive’ or ‘the horror ones’) or sexually promiscuous (‘they’re easy’). These statements, only attributed to ‘special ed. girls’, suggest that the social stigma of special education may operate differently for boys than for girls and be more long lasting. According to Schur (2004), women with disabilities are less likely to be married or living with a partner than disabled men. Girls exiting from special education are also less likely to be employed or enrolled in post-secondary education and they earn lower wages. They are also less likely to be married or living with a partner than their male counterparts (Jans and Stoddard 1999).

The level of concern that participants express about others knowing about their disability label illustrates what Steele and Aronson (1995) call a ‘stereotype threat’ or
a pervasive fear of being negatively perceived because of one’s social identity. Negotiating two, maybe three, social identities that have been associated with negative stereotypes, it is no wonder many of the participants sought to manage this threat.

The self in relation: ‘Being there for other people’

When asked to describe their strengths, we were struck by how often participants defined themselves in relation to others or according to very traditional gender roles. For example, Chanell characterises her strengths as ‘writing, drawing, and communication. Talking to people, like dealing with other people’s problems’. Michelle says that she excels at ‘cooking, cleaning, being on time, Math, [and] being there for other people when they need it’. W.G., too, lists her strengths as being able to ‘crochet, make blankets. I can cook. I’m a good listener’. Even Vanessa, who describes several academic strengths, including reading, math, writing, and drawing, describes her self in terms of ‘being positive, in other words, keeping focused on school, work, family and friends’. And, finally, Precious notes that she is good at ‘explaining how I feel, dance, [good] behaviour, and good hygiene. I can work’. Disabled women are often perceived as asexual and are disqualified from many of the cultural scripts associated with femininity. Although it is easy to read participants as buying into oppressive gender roles, it could also be said that they are refusing ableist assumptions. Unlike male participants in the larger study who never mentioned parenting, the young women openly worried about the impact of LD on their ability to parent. As Vanessa explains,

Will I be able to read things to my kids? Will they have the LD? What if my kids want me to help with the homework, and I don’t want to do it? What kind of person, role model would I be?

Although priding themselves as being there for others, participants do not expect others will be there for them. Participants did not reveal their LD status even to close friends or partners, illustrating how the threat of ableism extends even into interpersonal relationships. Michelle remarks, ‘I wouldn’t tell my boyfriend. It’s true’. Michelle fears that her disability status will come to define her, even in her most intimate relationships:

I think he might think that I’m not able to do things, even though I that I know what I put my mind to, reading things, writing things. If I would tell my boyfriend, he would look at me in a different way.

Chanell, too, says, ‘I don’t think people treat me any different until they find out that I have a learning disability’. She elaborates, ‘…once they find out, then they’ll try to treat me like I’m slow, or they’ll make it easier for me’. Chanell shares,

Even if you know that they’ll accept anything you’ll tell them, and they’ll be there for you … It’s just that … you would think that you’re giving them a thought in their heads, like there is something to think about.

‘Trust’, remarked Chanell, ‘That’s what makes you tell people, or if you’re comfortable with yourself’. Lamentably, there seems to be few people in her life that she trusts and few places where she feels comfortable. She states, ‘Boyfriends, I never want them to come to my school because I wouldn’t want the kids who say, ‘Oh you’re special ed.’. Ultimately she worries that her ‘boyfriend would think that I’m stupid’.
When talking about her current girlfriend Chanell comments, ‘I found out she was in special ed. too. And she asked me was I? And I said “No”’. Given the opportunity to share common experiences, Chanell still cannot risk disclosure. In the most disheartening example, Chanell explains why she did not even tell her aunt that she had an LD. After her mother died and Chanell moved in with her aunt, she shared:

My aunt, I wouldn’t ask her to help me with anything, I didn’t want her to know that I was in special ed. and everything. I didn’t want my family to know. And at first she didn’t know until they started to send those damn IEPs [individualised educational plan]. I was like, Dag! That’s when she found out, and she was like, ‘Oh!’ She didn’t know how to look at me … coz her daughter, she’s in regular ed. She’s a regular ed. person.

Vanessa also shared an experience riding the subway when an older woman, reading over her shoulder, asked Vanessa, what an LD was:

I’m like, ‘It’s learning disabled’. She goes, ‘You look normal to me’. I’m like, ‘Yeah, but everyone has a weakness or something wrong with them’. She was like, yeah, and then she came out with it, ‘I have an LD too’. She was telling me, ‘I’m a secretary … and nobody at my job knows that. Not even my husband, and I’ve been married to him for 40 years’.

Although Vanessa tells the woman ‘everyone has a weakness’, she nonetheless concurs, ‘My boyfriend to this day doesn’t even know I’m in special ed. He thinks I graduated with a regular ed. diploma. He doesn’t know. He thinks I’m intelligent, mad smart, just a regular person, and I am’. Yet, Vanessa confesses, ‘Sometimes, I think he knows’.

In this and many other examples, participants do not deny that they have trouble with various learning tasks, but they do not buy into the taken-for-granted assumptions that other people have about LD. As Chanell explains, ‘A learning disability sounds like we can’t learn’. She argues that people who are smart or have general education diplomas do not always succeed – highlighting ways that the label itself is misleading and fails to account for other attributes that may be more important to a person’s success. What these examples illustrate is how disclosure, or coming out as a disabled person, rather than being seen as an emancipatory act, could also reflect a tacit acceptance of the social meanings of LD. Thus, by choosing not to disclose participants maintain a certain degree of control over how they will be perceived by others as well as how they define themselves. They, too, are challenging hegemonic notions of ability, intelligence, and success.

Moreover, although passing is not typically associated with an oppositional consciousness, Vanessa recalls a time when she was watching a movie and her boyfriend commented, ‘Oh, that guy, I think he was in school for special ed. or something’. This prompts her to ask, ‘What you got against that? … Because that’s criticising people … when people criticise like that it gets me really offended. What, you got something against them? Coz then you got something against me’. Without disclosing, Vanessa communicates that ableism is not okay with her and places herself in solidarity with other’s who experience disability-related discrimination.

**Closing doors: IEP diploma as gatekeeper**

One aspect of disability-related discrimination experienced by the group had to do with graduation requirements. Under the Individuals with Disability Education Act
(IDEA), students with disabilities who do not pass graduation requirements, but have spent a minimum of 12 years in school can graduate with an IEP diploma.5 However, this diploma does not carry the same weight as a standard diploma and it severely limits a student’s post-school options. Most of the participants (and their parents) did not fully understand the long-term consequences of receiving an IEP diploma. W.G. flatly states, ‘you can’t go nowhere with an IEP [diploma]’ . Vanessa concurs, adding, ‘A high school diploma means a lot, but not a special ed. diploma’. Only Michelle, who actively sought out special education services in high school, disagreed with this sentiment, saying, ‘I have nothing against it, coz it’s a diploma’.

In many respects, college is seen as the stepping-stone to a better life, including professional possibilities associated with the middle class. Participants view college as a way to gain access to ‘codes of power’ (Delpit 1996) and therefore to wider options. Chanell comments, ‘If you don’t go to college, then, you’ll not understand middle-class people unless you know big people and they can give you a ride’. Here, she shares an understanding that there is social capital in just being able to associate with people of a different class and gaining access to their connections. She also knows these connections will be denied her if she only has an IEP diploma. She vows to change her situation, stating, ‘I’m going to get my regular ed. diploma’. W.G. thinks along the same lines, ‘so first I can go to any type of college and to put the special ed. business behind me … if you have an IEP diploma, that’s going to remind you that you were once in special ed.’.

Vanessa also worries about being haunted by her special ed. past. She shares her early aspiration to be an obstetrician:

That was like my main goal … but I started to think about it. I can’t go to college with an IEP diploma, to be in medical school and all that. They’re not going to accept me.

Vanessa realises that her goal is out of reach without a ‘regular’ diploma, but questions what she sees as arbitrary academic gate-keeping practices.

I think delivering babies is one of the most easy things … When I be watching videos and stuff, I be, ‘I can do that’. Yeah! I can learn how to do that. It’s real easy.

Although underestimating the complexity of delivery, Vanessa questions the assumption that childbirth necessarily requires medical expertise. Knowledge about childbirth, even into the beginning of the twentieth century, was considered to be the purview of women, particularly midwives, yet it is now a highly technological event in which women’s experiential knowledge has been usurped by the medical discourse. In valuing practical and experiential knowledge over the ‘official’ and propositional knowledge, Vanessa aligns herself with the knowledge claims of midwives, which were also discredited by the rise of obstetrics in the twentieth century (Dalmiya and Alcoff 1993). Ironically, the medical model discourse, upon which her educational label and placement are based, now presents multiple obstacles for Vanessa, who knows that she has little or no chance of becoming an obstetrician despite her dreams of doing so.

Gendered experiences at work: ‘It’s different for men and women’

Although enrolled in a post-secondary training programme, most of the participants began working in high school. Many worked in fast food restaurants, earning minimum
wage and working long hours in hectic conditions. Participants know first-hand of the slippage between the American myth of endless possibilities and the often circumscribed prospects for working-class urban youth as they transition from high school. W.G. views employment opportunities along gendered lines. She explains,

It’s different for men and women, coz let’s say a male and a female, they both got similar resumes and they both got the same job. Let’s say the boss is a male, and let’s say the boss likes the woman for some reason, or he doesn’t think she’s effective enough, he won’t give her the job. He’s going to give the job to the male.

Chanell, too, agrees:

It’s pretty much if you’re a guy, with the boss y’all cool buddies and everything, go out for some drinks, you know, … and you’ll pretty much climb to the top. But with women, we can’t do that, go out with our boss. It’ll be … like, ‘Oh yeah. You’re going out with your boss. I wonder how fast you’re going to get to the top?’ You could have a girl boss that likes you too. Believe me, I know.

Both recognise how gender and sexuality must be constantly negotiated across lines of power in ways that often disadvantage women. Tellingly, these themes were completely absent in the male participants discussions about work in the larger study. Vanessa, however, recognises this power dynamic, but claims that women can use their sexuality as leverage:

a girl could flirt with the boss and try to persuade him to get the job. A guy can’t do that, he’s gonna think I’m not going to be flirting with the boss, I’m not gay or anything like that … A girl can try any way she can. She can wear a little button-down shirt, boobies showing.

Insisting that she wields a degree of power, it nonetheless comes at a cost in terms of sexual objectification. As Chanell explains,

Men in general, they like sex and … coz we have what they want, so and we can pretty much get anything we want, but for a price. It’s easy and it’s hard. I don’t know no other way to explain it.

Interestingly, across almost all of their stories about work, they posit the role of manager as either exclusively male or, in one example, a sexually harassing female. As such, their experience with female authority or power was quite circumscribed.

This paucity of females in positions of authority did not go unnoticed by participants. W.G. comments, ‘You never see a female business or administrative president or executive. It’s mostly in schools that you see a female principal’. Vanessa, too, is acutely aware of male dominance both in working-class contexts as well as in positions of authority. She states,

We haven’t seen a female president yet … a female mayor. It’s like the men own this world, they own things a female can’t own … They probably think … ‘Oh, a woman [at] war’? [spreads hands incredulously], ‘What is she gonna do, get mad? PMS! I’m so mad I’m going to pop my crunchie!’

Questioning patriarchy and lampooning perceptions of females as moody and incompetent, Vanessa also notes, ‘Being female, its kind of hard, coz females are exploited
everywhere’. At the time of the study, Vanessa was working in three low-paid jobs. She remarks,

> Working for a living, it’s so hard. I’m too young. Thank God I ain’t got no kids. All I do is make sure I have a roof over my head and put food in my mouth. That’s it. I don’t care ‘bout anything else.

Despite obvious exhaustion, Vanessa’s drive may reflect, in part, a desire to move out of her neighbourhood. She shares, ‘I’m tired of the ghetto, I want to have finer things in life. I want to be smarter’. Although she links living in the ghetto with not being smart, Vanessa does not see ability as innate, but rather linked to opportunity and access to middle-class comforts. Although girls in our culture may be ‘educated in romance’ (Bettie 2003, 47), Vanessa resists this romantic ideal, learning another lesson entirely. The future she envisions includes being independent, having some of the privileges of middle-class life, and getting an education. Pragmatically, she knows that that when it comes to taking responsibility for children, she cannot rely on anyone but herself, and having children early would likely trap her in a cycle of poverty from which she is working hard to escape.

In addition to the obstacles that pregnancy and motherhood pose, participants also identify low-wage employment as another dead end. As a high school dropout, for example, Precious knows the stress and drudgery of fast food jobs that begin to feel like a trap:

> It was hard, it was stressful … That’s when I was like, I need to go back to school and stuff. And you know I was 18 or 19, thinking ‘No, I don’t wanna be like my sister or brother, because they didn’t graduate’. I wanted to be the one that graduated from high school.

The participants question whether their low-paid employment or high school training will lead to any lasting economic stability. Their aspirations for the future are tempered with a sinking feeling that they are not getting the kinds of opportunities that other, more privileged, people enjoy.

**Intersectionality: ‘They live in a better world’**

Participants have an acute sense of the ways that they were positioned along multiple lines of gender, race and class, and how these forces impact their life chances. Consider the following examples:

> Well, being a Black person in the world means that you have to work even harder to get what you want. Also, being a Black woman, people expect to see less in you. (Chanell)

> Even though I’m sitting with somebody exactly like me, and she’s White and I’m Hispanic, they’re gonna treat us different … Why? Coz she’s White and I’m Hispanic. They’ll treat her better than they’ll treat me. (Michelle)

> Being Black and Latino is hard these days because we don’t get taught how White people get taught. I notice that they live in a better world than we Latinos and Blacks do. It is more job opportunities for them and better education … I notice that Black people, it’s really hard for them … and White people … it’s that they know everything, it seems like. They’re smarter in everything … [But] nobody’s born that way, Mmp-hmm. Because
most White people, they’re in private school, they learn more stuff, they get taught differently because they have better books, it seems like. They get better education. It’s like a struggle for Blacks and Latinos. (Precious)

Participants sense that White and middle-class people occupy two different worlds, one made up of middle-class people, who are assumed to be White, and another made up of working-class people, who are assumed to be Black or Latino. Attending overcrowded and under-resourced schools, they have a vague sense that middle-class White kids have a completely different educational experience – one that makes them seem ‘smarter at everything’. Precious is careful, however, to reject any biological basis of intelligence. Instead, Precious reformulates the definition of intelligence, defining it as access to resources and privileges rather than innate ability.

Participants also talk about how one form of privilege can mitigate another form of disadvantage. Chanell notes:

[I]f you have money, you can like do practically anything … You can hire a tutor to go to your house, you can hire somebody – shit! You can even pay somebody to do your tests for you! So nobody really know if you have a learning disability or not because … you’re always hiring somebody to do things for you. I’d love to have a lot of money, somebody to do some things for me. I’d be lazy, ñ’real.

Chanell notes that disability is not a singular or universal experience because social class, for example, determines how disability is ultimately experienced. Because social class determines access to services, Chanell suggests that disability is in part a function of social class. If we connect this idea to the earlier discussion about how social class can influence how ‘smart’ you seem, social class can also mitigate how disabled you seem.

Signs of resistance: ‘Show me some R-E-S-P-E-C-T’

Subjugated knowledges ‘develop in cultural contexts controlled by oppressed groups’ (Collins 2000, 286). Collins argues that the interplay between oppression and activism is forged along interconnected domains of power, which are responsive to human agency. Thus, the world is not fixed, but rather a dynamic place where multiple lines of power and resistance are always in play. The very existence of oppositional standpoints ‘suggests that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be’ (Collins 2000, 290), conveying a certain degree of optimism about one’s ability to make change. Empowerment, according to Collins, is the ability to value one’s own knowledge in a world that is often perceived as inhospitable and alienating.

Participants’ lived experiences complicate official knowledge of learning disabilities and intelligence, offering more nuanced understandings, particularly in relation to race, class, and urban life. Chanell draws on popular culture to question ableist assumptions and reframe disability. She explains,

That movie, ‘I am Sam’. He learned differently from other people. He still had common sense, still knew what was wrong and what was right.

She also writes that ‘There’s some people who can be smart, but they just don’t do anything, they’re lazy’. She views common sense and hard work as evidence of intelligence. Many of the participants took pride in their ability to work hard and to get
along with all kinds of people. In so doing they counter deficit model views of what it means to be a working-class urban youth with a disability.

Our goal is not to romanticise the resistance of participants, but to understand how ‘resistance clarifies the way power works’ (Vogel 2001, 13). All of the participants, for example, were critical of the education system. They characterise special education curriculum as ‘baby work’ and describe IEPs as irrelevant ‘junk mail’. Questioning high-stakes testing, Chanell writes, ‘I guess they want you to think like them … It’s like they want you to be like everybody else, that’s what they give you those tests for’. Michelle concurs, saying that high-stakes tests are made ‘for White people. It’s a White person that makes it, so it makes it harder for a Black or Latino to pass it … Made by a White person, is for a White person’. Viewing standardised tests as racial gatekeepers, Michelle’s critique echoes many educational theorists who question the validity and inherent bias of standardised tests (Heubert 2002).

Participants used various strategies to manoeuvre within the limitations of the system. Michelle actively requested to be placed in special education late in her school trajectory to ensure that she would have more time to pass graduation exams. In so doing, Michelle illustrates Collins’ (2000) notion that power is never total. Exercising a degree of agency, she uses the systems of special education, however, she will likely graduate with an IEP diploma.

Participants also push back by rejecting the lowered expectations that people have of them. Chanell writes powerful poetry, demonstrating a depth of thinking that remains largely uncultivated in most high school classes, particularly those designed for students with LD. All were working toward gaining access to better employment by earning their general education diplomas and pursuing advanced vocational training. Yet, this is not to say that they do not and will not experience continued barriers or that their futures will be secure. For example, the teaching assistant positions that they were being trained for are not likely to lead to middle-class existence, particularly in New York City.

Participants also expressed racial pride, but were nonetheless aware of ways that schools were embedded in a larger racially and ethnically biased system. As previously mentioned, high-stakes testing, for example, was simply seen as another tool of the dominant group to keep them in their designated ‘place’. Several participants also talked about ‘acting White’, which usually refers to situations where minority adolescents are ridiculed for ‘engaging in behaviours perceived to be characteristic of whites’ (Fryer 2006, 54). Yet, participants also allude to circumstances when they purposefully ‘act White’, when applying for jobs or negotiating social situations involving unfamiliar Whites. In these instances, the ‘performance’ is intended to bridge perceived differences; however, the risks inherent in ‘acting White’ include a negation of one’s identity in order to ‘pass’. Depending upon the context, ‘acting White’ can also be seen as the ability to code switch, simultaneously operating in multiple, striated worlds often dysconscious to Whites (McIntyre 1997). Interestingly, Chanell exemplifies how the meaning can shift between ‘acting White’ as a tactic to gain access to employment and as a tool to deride middle-class Black people.

Finally, participants are acutely aware of social class and have a cautious, even anxious view of the future. Although the prospect of further education is never ruled out, they know getting into college would be the first of many difficult steps. Vanessa fears not being ‘financially stable’, and ‘getting things wrong in college’. Chanell believes that because people from different social classes rarely intermingle, if working-class or poor individuals do not go to college then they will ‘not understand
middle-class people’. Not having access to college is seen as limiting possibilities and potential economic and social movement. Identifying as working class, participants took pride in being able to work hard and be self-sufficient, yet they understand the very real barriers they face in trying to gain access to college and financial independence. Nonetheless, by pursuing further education and training, they seek to exert some control over their future.

**Pushing back, making choices**

In some shape or form, participants counter the adverse aspects of their positionality. When peers inquired about why she was in special education, Chanell swapped labels, claiming to have a behaviour problem rather than a learning disability. A tactic called on to save face among her peers, Chanell survives a potentially humiliating social situation. Yet, she simply swaps one set of stereotypes for another, both of which are saturated with problematic ideologies of race and gender. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Chanell disrupts the assumption that she might be learning disabled (LD) or mentally retarded (MR), but inadvertently reinforces problematic assumptions that contribute to Black and Latino students being disproportionately labelled as either emotionally disturbed or behaviour disordered (E/BD) (Losen and Orfield 2002). Unfortunately, in all three of these categories (LD, MR, E/BD) students of colour continue to be over-represented in US schools (Losen and Orfield). Interestingly, the social acceptance among peers of being labelled as behaviour disordered is preferable to being stigmatised as learning disabled. To many students, behaving badly is a form of resistance to the practices and values of schooling (Danforth and Smith 2005) and not a disability.

Vanessa, despite not explicitly ‘coming out’ as LD to her boyfriend, berates him for ridiculing special ed., thereby declaring, albeit indirectly, her alliance with other people who have been labelled. After leaving school, moving into a group home, and beginning to work in a fast food chain, Precious summons the will to return to school and to be the first in her family to graduate. She also is an avid reader of self-help books. Despite having difficulties in memory and reading comprehension, she seems to take a certain pleasure in the idea of reinvention and self-improvement – of seeing herself as a work in progress.

It must be noted that all participants survived a public school system that is not particularly accommodating of students labelled LD, particularly those who are Black or Latino(a). Nevertheless, they have all elected to stay within this system and pursue careers working with students who are labelled as autistic or emotionally disturbed. For most of the participants this choice was largely pragmatic, influenced by a lack of other opportunities. It did not necessarily represent their first career choice.

In navigating multiple discourses of disability, gender, race, and class, participants rewrite what it means to be successful. Relying on themselves, none are waiting around for someone else to change their lives. Many have developed mechanisms that are also self-sustaining: Chanell produces creative writing; Michelle expresses an ‘I am who I am’ attitude and genuinely likes her internship job working with children; Precious is determined to work in a hospital; Vanessa is inspired by a paraprofessional who recognised her abilities; and W.G. drives herself to succeed academically and understand her own abilities, despite lack of support from her family.

We close this section with a poem by Chanell in which she positions her own struggles as rooted in the enslaved Black female experience. Speaking of oppression, containment, and the natural desire to be emancipated, she creatively samples historical
and cultural sources as diverse as Sojourner Truth, Negro Spirituals, Aretha Franklin, and Shakespeare. By invoking an ancestral voice, she makes connections between histories of oppression and her own lived experience.

_A Slave Woman’s Voice_

Hear me and hear me good for
Which I, the woman is speaking.
Take these shackles off my legs (!!!)
Which you have installed upon me
Let me be free to talk, run and play with my
People for which I am human just like you.
If you cut me, don’t I bleed?
If I am sad, don’t I cry?
If I’m happy, don’t I laugh?
Don’t I have feelings just like you?
So take these shackles from my feet
Open up these doors
Show me some
R-E-S-P-E-C-T
For we the women
The creator of all of you,
and God’s the creator of all.
So I say with my last breath
Take these shackles off my feet.
Open the gate and let me free.
Free.
Let me free.

In this poem, Chanell positions herself among a legacy or genealogy of Black women who have survived positions of seeming powerlessness and the direst of consequences.

**Conclusion**

Because of their dwindling presence in special education, schools do not seem to be a likely place to foster an environment where a collective or community of young women with disabilities might emerge. In fact, this study marked the first time many of the participants had ever had a conversation with other young women about their LD. The information shared from this group offers insights into the complex positionalities of young women who negotiate gender, race, social class, and disability. Given the experiences and reflections from these five young women, we are still left with the question, ‘Who constitutes the special ed. girl in urban life?’ To answer this question we modify an idea from Gannon, a scholar interested in ‘women’s transgressive writing practices’ (2001, 790). By melding the experiences and thoughts of all five participants, we create a composite image, a ‘collective girl’, who represents the paradoxical absent presence, residing on the margins of urban schools, unrepresented in the discourse on girlhood, and neglected in educational research.

In bringing her into focus, this special ed. girl feels left out on many fronts – in everyday interactions as well in terms of access to the general education classroom, to secure employment, and college. She manages her LD in private, despite being ‘outed’ in relentlessly public ways by a blasé school system. She does not trust her friends or boy/girlfriend, fearing ridicule, rejection, and a loss of an already tenuous status that may never be fully recovered. The label of LD, along with economic disadvantage, sexism, and racial prejudice, has planted seeds of doubt that have taken
root, creating a sense of anxiety about the future. She wonders, ‘Will I ever get to college? Will I be a good mother? Will I move from my neighbourhood?’ And, yet, she is proud. Proud of her race and her ability to work hard. Proud of managing to get where she is. Proud of not giving up on herself. Proud of figuring out the world in her own way: critical of how society, educational advantage, and power works; conscious of her assigned position within these multiple systems; and, pragmatically strategising what she can do about all of it.

Notes
1. ‘Girl Power’ is a slogan that was adopted by the pop group the Spice Girls. Its more edgy counterpart, ‘Riot Grrrls’ originated in punk rock circles. Both celebrate self-empowerment and self-expression. Largely dominated by White, middle- and upper-class young women, both movements have been criticized as superficial and individualistic (Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998; Wald 1998) and for being far less transgressive in terms of race or nation (Wald 1998, 590).
2. In the most recent reports, Black students are the disproportionately labelled group in the three high-incidence categories: learning disability, mental retardation and emotional disability. These categories are highly subjective in terms of definition and eligibility criteria. Latina/o and Native American students also experience over-representation and once labelled are often placed in highly segregated classrooms (Fierros and Conroy 2002).
3. The term learning disability in the USA describes specific difficulties in oral or written language, arithmetic, reasoning, or organisation. Dyslexia, or difficulty with reading, refers to a specific type of learning disability. In contrast, the same term in the UK denotes cognitive delay.
4. According to the US Department of Education, males make up two-thirds of the students enrolled in special education (Jans and Stoddard 1999).
5. All students who are eligible to receive special education services are given an IEP, an individualised educational plan. This document is supposed to be developed in conjunction with parents, although this is often not the case.
6. Precious, and the others, often conflate Whiteness with middle-class status. Because of segregated schools and housing, students in the study tend to see very few, if any, poor or working-class White people and, similarly, few middle-class Black and Latino people either in their schools or in their neighbourhoods. Oftentimes, the only White people with whom students interact with regularly are their teachers.
7. We wish to acknowledge our insightful reviewers for their excellent feedback on this article and for helping us to draw out this point, in particular.

References


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