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Talking (and not talking) about race, social class and dis/ability: working margin to margin

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In this article we examine some of the omnipresent yet unacknowledged discourses of social and economic disadvantage and dis/ability within schools in the US. First, we document ways that social class, race, and dis/ability function within schools to further disadvantage and exclude already marginalized students. Next, we show how particular ways of talking about student ability and achievement rarely addresses this important connection. We then illustrate specific ways that race, social class, and dis/ability are elided even within more critical academic discussions. Finally, we argue for a more critical and sustained scholarly engagement that would necessarily entail reaching out margin-to-margin in order to fully understand and interrupt the myriad ways that race, economic disadvantage and dis/ability work to justify exclusion and inequality in schools.

Keywords: disability studies in education; social class; race

Social class has long played an important, yet often unacknowledged role in the social construction of dis/ability[1]. From mid-nineteenth century freak shows exploiting both corporeal and racial difference, to eugenic ideologies linking social class to feeblemindedness in the 1920s and 1930s (Franklin 1987), to cultural deficit and culture of poverty discourses in the 1950s and 1960s (Ladson-Billings 2006b), to contemporary discussions about the achievement gap and the overrepresentation of students of color in special education (Losen and Orfield 2002; Harry and Klingner 2006), economic inequality, race, and dis/ability have been entangled in an ongoing, complicated, and vexed relationship.

Despite the pervasiveness of this dynamic, however, social class remains surprisingly under-analyzed within both disability studies and critical race studies. Race and social class play particularly paradoxical roles in educational discourses, where class is often conflated with race and vice versa. Moreover, educators rarely acknowledge how social and economic inequality,

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like race, influence both dis/ability classification and the outcomes associated with various dis/ability designations.

In this article, we first examine how social and economic disadvantage and dis/ability function in schools[2] to further disadvantage and exclude already marginalized students. Next, we examine how particular ways of talking about student ability and achievement rarely address this important connection. As Ladson-Billings (2006b) notes, teachers and teacher educators often rely on catch-all terms, like 'culture,' to pathologize poor students and to uncritically explain 'everything from school failure to problems with behavior' (104).

We then illustrate specific ways that race, social class, and dis/ability are elided even within more critical academic discussions by, for instance, conceptualizing dis/ability and race designations as 'natural' or 'fixed,' whereas class based forms of inequality are perceived as social or historical (Leonardo 2012). Finally, we argue for the need for a more critical and sustained scholarly engagement that would necessarily entail reaching out margin-to-margin in order to fully understand and interrupt the myriad ways that race, economic disadvantage, and dis/ability work to justify exclusion and inequality in schools[3].

Examining the opportunity gap in education

Race, social class, and dis/ability often function within schools to further disadvantage already marginalized students. Of the school-related factors that have been associated with achievement, most are inequitably distributed by race, class, and ability. For instance, poor students of color and poor white students are similarly overrepresented in schools that are underfunded, have high staff turnover, and are underperforming in terms of test scores[4] (Rollock 2007), many of the same factors associated with special education. Access to highly qualified teachers and rigorous curriculum, availability of high quality instructional materials and up-to-date technology, in addition to factors associated with health and school safety are all rare commodities in most under-resourced urban and rural schools.

Furthermore, as schools operate more and more on a market economy, ability has come to function as a central commodity in schools. In fact, ability is constituted as property (Leonardo and Broderick 2011) by some of the most central practices of schooling, such as curricular offerings, academic tracking, standardized assessments, and educational resources – each of which are either unequally distributed or biased toward more privileged students and schools (Brantlinger 2006). In other words, being able to claim ability or normalcy confers social and economic benefits and disadvantages those who are denied this status (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013). Ability as property has also been used to justify segregating students with disabilities, as well as disproportionate numbers of students of color, English Language Learners (ELLs), and poor students (Brantlinger 2006).

Yet, of all of the school related factors, highly qualified teachers are arguably the 'most inequitably distributed resource' (Darling Hammond 2012, 40) in schools and the single most significant predictor of student achievement – having more predictive value than race or parental education level combined. Indeed, many Black students educated in segregated schools prior to *Brown* actually had *more* qualified teachers than students who are taught in urban schools today (Mondale 2001). Similarly, deficit-based remedial instruction focusing on skill and drill and lower-order thinking skills are staples of the curricula offered to poor students, students of color, as well as those identified with special education needs. Poor students and students of color are also more likely to attend under-resourced schools – schools that, again, have disproportionate numbers of students identified as having special education needs. A number of recent exposés have documented some of the many ways that today's 'apartheid' schools are shockingly similar to segregated schools prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*. Ironically, the very conditions that we see in many urban and rural schools today justified the need for *Brown* in the first place, because the 'equal' part of *Plessy's* separate, but equal provision was never honored, nor realized (Darling-Hammond 2012).

Compare, for example, testimony from a 1949 Clarendon County case[5] with more recent testimony. First, from 1949: '[The] facilities, physical condition, [etc.]…are inadequate and unhealthy, the buildings and schools are old and overcrowded and in a dilapidated condition…with insufficient numbers of teachers and insufficient classroom space' (Darling-Hammond 2012, 112). The under resourced schools of today are 'eerily similar' (112). The documentary *Corridor of Shame* (http://www.corridorofshame.com/case.php), for instance, documents the stark conditions in some of the poorest schools in South Carolina. Scenes in the documentary show ceilings that have collapsed, walls that must be sandbagged to keep water out, and hallways with drains that overflow with raw sewage. Books in the libraries predict that someday, man will walk on the moon! A court case, which has bounced around the courts for over 20 years, rests on whether the state of South Carolina is providing what would be considered a 'minimally adequate' education to the students attending these underfunded schools. These plaintiffs[6] in the court case represent economically depressed rural districts[7] along the I-95 corridor in South Carolina. Of course, the shameful conditions of under-resourced schools are not limited to the South, nor are they isolated to rural areas. In Newark, NJ, for instance, the following conditions have been documented:

> [The] degrading…physical conditions in most of the schools…reveal neglect….[There are] holes in floors and walls, dirty classrooms with blackboards so worn as to be unusable, filthy and foul smelling lavatories without toilet paper, soap, or paper towels; inoperable water fountains…schools go unpainted for as long as 14 years, and in classroom after classroom, whole banks of lights are without florescent tubes or light shields. (Darling-Hammond 2012, 125–126)

Unfortunately, conditions like these are commonplace in many urban and rural school districts because of the ways that inequality is built into US schools by virtue of how schools are funded (via property taxes). Inequality has further magnified in recent years because of significant decreases in school funding[8] at the federal and state levels, as well as from growing income inequality in the US (Timar 2012). In the last several decades, for instance, income inequality has increased dramatically along racial and ethnic lines. At the same time, economic segregation has expanded, particularly in urban areas (Campbell et al. 2008). Furthermore, individuals in the US rely on a much weaker social safety net, compared to other industrialized countries. Thus, poor students in the US are more likely to come to school without adequate nutrition, health care, and housing (Darling-Hammond 2012). In fact, the US ranks in the top three of 34 developed countries in terms of income disparities between upper and lower classes (Timar 2012). As a result of these disparities, students who are poor and those from racial minorities often enter kindergarten roughly one year behind their peers who are white and more privileged economically (Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza 2012). Rothstein (2004) argues that inequality associated with social class is so 'powerful that schools cannot overcome it, no matter how well designed' (5) instructional programs are. This, of course, is not to say that schools have *no* role to play in mitigating inequality, but rather that they may not necessarily be enough to overcome these inequities.

Despite the prevailing rhetoric surrounding the achievement gap, which 'is often characterized as a single unyielding gap between white students and…minority students,' it is more accurate to conceive of the issue 'as multiple gaps that fluctuate between racial, social class, and linguistic groups' (Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza 2012, 37). Thus, there are many achievement gaps – gaps between white and black students, between Latino/a and white students, between Native American and white students, and between low-income and more advantaged students within and across racial lines (Kober, Chudowsky, and Chudowsky 2012). Of these gaps, the black/white and Latino/white achievement gaps have narrowed at a faster rate than gaps involving Native American and poor students (Kober, Chudowsky, and Chudowsky 2012).[9]

Moreover, although there has been much attention paid to the nation's achievement gap (both in the scholarly literature as well as popular press), there has been relative silence on what Darling-Hammond has called the 'opportunity gap' (2012, 2) or what Ladson-Billings (2006a) has referred to as the 'education debt' (3) still owed to students who have been (and continue to be) denied access to a quality education. Consequently, discourses about the failure of urban schools and poor students of color, often deflect attention away from society's responsibility for addressing persistent inequalities in education (Brantlinger 2006).

School reform in the US has likewise focused almost exclusively on accountability measures and testing, while countries that have had much more success in closing achievement gaps than the US, have focused on ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to learn (Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza 2012). Moreover, although under-resourced schools like those described above are held to the same high benchmarks for achievement as wealthy, suburban districts, courts have consistently ruled that states are only required to provide 'minimally adequate' educational opportunities for students. Thus, the differences we see in educational outcomes between students 'are at least as much a function of their unequal access to key educational resources' (Darling-Hammond 2012, 30) as they are a function of race, class, culture or disability status.

School funding gaps, as measured by per-pupil expenditures, for instance, between wealthy and under-resourced schools map neatly onto race (Darling-Hammond 2012). Other gaps, as Ladson-Billings, notes warrant much more attention than they typically garner, including inequitable access to health care and a growing wealth gap in the US between the upper classes and the burgeoning numbers of families living in extreme poverty, 13 million of which are children. As Rothstein (2004) states, 'ameliorating the lived conditions of poverty' by increasing the minimum wage, investing in health care, providing more low cost housing, and expanding preschool, afterschool, and summer programs that parallel the experiences of more affluent children might yield more instructional improvement than anything that we are currently doing in the name of school reform (11). In other words, focusing on income inequality and educational opportunity, rather than test scores would likely yield more pronounced and more lasting educational gains. But this would require us to both acknowledge inequality *and consider what* to do about it.

Ways of talking (and not talking) about social class, race and dis/ability

Although there has been a fair amount of research on the intersection of race and gender (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 2000; Sharma 2010), there has been much less attention paid to analyses that take social class into consideration (Dewan 2012) and, more specifically, on the intersections of race, class, and ability. Attempts to detangle race- and class-related related factors associated with achievement gaps, for instance, often use family income as a proxy for social class (Rothstein 2004). When this is done, however, students of color continue to underperform white students, even when researchers attempt to control for social class. Unfortunately, the crude measures of social class that are typically employed in these studies often ignore the fact that black and white families, for instance, who may have similar family incomes often differ in significant ways. For instance, black families who are poor are often poor longer compared to white families who tend to

experience poverty in more episodic ways. Because of disparities in the distribution of wealth, black families may also have fewer accumulated assets and less financial backing starting out (Rothstein 2004). It may also be that social class does not work the same way across other racial differences. For instance, as Rollock (2007) states:

> When you compare black pupils who are disadvantaged or from poorer backgrounds with black pupils who aren't, there is not much overall difference in their results. When you do the same for white pupils, those from poorer backgrounds are four times less likely to do well at school than those from wealthier backgrounds…[In other words,] simply being a 'black' pupil means that you are automatically associated with low achievement and educational failure. This is what some researchers call an 'ethnic penalty' – and what others call racism (5–6).

Thus, as Grubb (2012) notes, 'there is substantial evidence to suggest that at least some part of achievement gaps is caused by mistreatment in schools – mistreatment that is surely worse for racial minority students' (66). Such mistreatment can take many forms, but typically includes persistently low teacher expectations, less positive teacher attention, and more harsh disciplinary actions, as well as disproportionate representation in special education (Grubb 2012)–each of which reveal the interstices of race and dis/ability.

Thus, measures researchers typically use to document social class are largely inadequate and even misleading if they do not also account for race. Moreover, there is a high degree of variability in how social class is measured across various studies (Campbell et al. 2008). Some studies use family income, others use eligibility for free and reduced lunch, and still others use more long-term measures of income. Perhaps this lack of consistency should signal to us that social class is a floating signifier, 'deployed in highly contingent and contradictory ways' (Gillborn 2012, 30) and always exceeding the measures we use to define it (Dewan 2012).

Moreover, because of the intertwined reality of race, class, and ability, attempts to disentangle one from the other are often fraught. Racially segregated schools (except those that are primarily white, of course) 'are almost always schools with high concentrations of poverty' (Darling-Hammond 2012, 36). They are also schools that label disproportionate numbers of students as having special education needs. Concentration of poverty in a school is significant because the average SES of a school has been found to have as much impact on student achievement as a student's own SES (Rothstein 2004; Rumberger and Palardy 2005). In other words, the concentration of poverty in a school has an 'independent influence on student achievement' (Darling-Hammond 2012, 36). Thus, across the board, children who are poor, 'achieve less if the share of low-income children in their school is higher' (Rothstein 2004, 130). Unfortunately, class-based inequities will continue to persist as long as we are 'unwilling to sustain policies

that would permit children of different SES to live in close proximity or attend the same schools' (130).

Yet, it is also true that racial and ethnic differences cannot be fully explained by family background, school resources, or commitment to schooling (Grubb 2012). In other words, the 'knot of inequality' associated with race, ethnicity, social class, and ability persists even when we try to control other factors (66). Yet, although there is a need for an intersectional analysis of race, class, and ability in education, 'to *claim* an intersectional analysis is not necessarily to *accomplish* it' (Gillborn 2012, 31). Moreover, misperceptions often hinder even well meaning efforts to forge meaningful coalitions.

A common misperception of critical race theory (CRT), for instance, is that 'all social inequality, and indeed all situations, are reducible to racism' (Gillborn 2012, 30). This misperception fails to consider that a foundational concern of CRT has been to detail the 'complexity of intersecting identities' and to understand how 'racism works in, through, and sometimes alongside other dimensions of inequality' (30). There are similar critiques associated with calls for materialist or class-based analyses. Here race [and ability] are sometimes perceived as secondary or subsumed into class relations (Leonardo 2012) or placed in a hierarchy (Gedalof 2013). Furthermore, social class is often evoked in ways that inadvertently flatten, ignore, or silence difference, subsuming them all into class. Thus, in theorizing across race, class, and ability, we are, therefore, not arguing for pitting social class against other markers of inequality, nor are we suggesting that class can serve as some kind of 'a re-unifying ground of equality talk' (Gedalof 2012, 12–13). Instead, we would argue again that attending to social class requires that we acknowledge how *class* is lived in, through, and sometimes alongside race, ethnicity, gender, ability, etc.

Still, we are also mindful of ways that scholars, teachers, and some of our own students studiously avoid talking about race altogether (Evans and Hoff 2011). Instead, race becomes ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, culture, nation, and/or even neighborhood, but never race directly. A teacher featured in a study by Collins (2013), for instance, bends over backwards not to discuss race in describing why she sees particular students in her class as having a difficult time fitting in and meeting her expectations. Instead of discussing race directly, the teacher instead labels the student 'emotionally impaired' (33), despite the fact that the student had never been tested nor formally labeled. Given that students of color are disproportionately labeled as emotionally disturbed and given that students with this label are more likely to drop out of school and become the target of the most harsh disciplinary sanctions (Losen and Orfield 2002), this is no innocent rhetorical move. When pressed by Collins, the teacher questions whether the student is 'capable of being enculturated' into her class and, indeed, even into the school. Rather than discuss the obviousness of his racial difference in her

primarily white classroom, she points to what she perceives to be his dysfunctional family background (77) – although you do not get the sense that she has any direct or first-hand knowledge of his family situation. When pressed further, she vaguely explains that he has a lot of relatives, is being raised by his grandparents, and that he could 'easily get caught up in a gang, or in being a bad-ass' (89). Relying on thinly veiled references to race, she also locates the student as a cultural outsider by positioning him as 'urban' and 'impaired.' Never, however, does she discuss race as a factor in her positioning of him on the margins of her classroom or in her characterization of him as emotionally impaired or less capable than his peers.

As Leonardo (2012) argues, 'Bodies are not just material deposits of class relations; they are also racialized bodies' (18) and we would add variously abled bodies. This is why an intersectional analysis necessarily merges a focus on 'subjective experiences and questions of identity' with an accounting of the complex interaction of 'material conditions and social practices' (Grabham et al. 2009, 6). From its inception, however, intersectionality has not been without its critics.

Recently, scholars who are critical of intersectionality, however, have advocated for a 'return' to a class-based analyses. Many of these calls for a return to a materialist analysis explicitly position social class as more foundational to other forms of social inequality. This type of hierarchical thinking is not uncommon in a range of identity studies. In various origin stories about women's studies, for example, the field is said to have begun with a unified category of woman – a first wave 'heroine who is continuous with her past and remains the subject of a familiar present and future feminism' (Hemmings 2011, 191). In these narratives, the category of woman was then fragmented and depoliticized by the need to account for differences of race, ethnicity, nation, sexuality, and ability. Of course, the unified category of woman was always a fiction; 'history is more complicated than the stories we tell about it' (Hemmings, 16). Likewise, social class, race, and some dis/ability categories, such as cognitive or intellectual disabilities, have not been sufficiently theorized in disability studies. Moreover, across various fields, even when difference is evoked, it is often done so in the form of analogic thinking, wherein race is positioned as 'like' dis/ability or dis/ability as analogous to race (May and Ferri 2005).

Thus, in an attempt to get beyond the impasse of false universals and essentialism on the one hand and multiplicity and fragmentation on the other, some scholars have called for a refocusing on social class, 'as something we all have, while gender, race, ethnicity [dis/ability] and sexuality represent the more particular politics of identity,' (Gedalof 2012). Similar claims are common in disability studies (Garland-Thomson 2005), by those who suggest that because we are all either dis/abled or temporarily abled, that dis/ability should be thought of as a universal phenomenon – cutting indiscriminately across race, class, and gender differences. In evoking social

class [or dis/ability for that matter] as the 're-unifying ground of equity talk' (Gedalof, 12–13), however, these analyses tend to undermine and trivialize the salience of other markers of identity and indeed other structural inequalities. Hemmings (2011) further states that motivating the exclusionary push to return to the material as the way 'back' to a universal or singular identity is a problematic desire not to have to deal with difference. Such moves are reliant also on a 'liberal discourse of equity based on sameness' (Gedalof 2012, 17). We would argue that positioning dis/ability as universal functions problematically in much the same way.

The centering of class, or disability we would argue, also serves to re-center whiteness and 'silence the instabilities of difference' (Gedalof 2012, 17). Gilborn (2012) points to 'educational victimization' discourse, which filled the popular press after studies showed that poor and working class male students were 'among the lowest achieving groups' of students in Britain (34–35). The narrative of educational disadvantage of poor and working class white students was pitted against the needs of immigrant and racial/ethnic minority students. In fact, poor white students were characterized as '*victims* of ethnic diversity…and race equality' (40). Of course, left out of this discussions was the fact that the largest achievement gaps were not between different racial groups, but between more affluent white students and poor white students (as much as 32 percentage points). Positioned as 'white, but not quite,' (Allan 2009, 214), Gillborn (2012) argues that poor whites, demarcate the boundaries of whiteness and provide a 'buffer… that protects white middle classes' (52). Moreover, the impulse behind labeling of poor whites as 'not quite' white, was brought into stark relief in the history of Eugenics, when poor whites and certain immigrant populations were both characterized as feebleminded. Today, focusing on the educational disadvantage of poor white students, can justify a conservative political agenda of anti-immigration, as well as neoliberal cuts to welfare and entitlements.

Thus, to argue that social class is 'key to understanding educational inequalities' is to say something important about the 'link between poverty and educational inequality,' but it tells us little about the ways in which educational inequity is experienced via race, gender, and dis/ability (Gedalof 2012). Moreover, as Crenshaw (2000) argues, single axis analyses of discrimination tend to work best for the most otherwise privileged members of any group. If we apply this to disability studies, then, to focus exclusively on dis/ability discrimination to the exclusion of other aspects of disadvantage, benefits those disabled people who are most privileged in terms of race, class, nation, sexuality, and gender. Besides distorting how discrimination actually works, single axis approaches further marginalize those individuals who experience multiple forms of oppression, whose experiences are rendered unintelligible under a single axis framework.

In explaining how a single axis framework (or which she calls a 'but for' analysis) works, Crenshaw uses a metaphor of a trap door:

> Imagine a basement[,] which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age, and/or physical ability. These people are stacked – feet standing on shoulders – with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above[,] which only those who are not disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that 'but for' the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed.…Yet[,] this hatch is generally available only to those who – due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative those below – are in the position to crawl through. (218–219)

In this analogy, only the most privileged within any marginalized group (those just below the trap door) for whom 'but for' one characteristic are like the dominant group, will benefit. Thus, in order to fully address the complexities of race, class, dis/ability (as well as sexuality, gender, and nation), necessitates a more complex and intersectional accounting of the ways marginalization works in schools and indeed society. Such an approach will require us to work across differences and to forge alliances not margin to center, but margin to margin.

Margin-to-margin: addressing inequality in education

Lugones (2006) states that, most organizing against oppression is ineffectual and inadequate because it continues to focus on 'oppression as it affects the particular affiliative group of one's belonging or identity' (75). Here, we understand the oppression of others by looking inward, rather than outward. Thus, even when coalitions are forged, they tend to be shallow rather than deep – based only on a 'coincidence of interests' (76) rather than what Lugones calls a 'double perception and double praxis' (78). Instead, Lugones argues that the key is 'not resistance to oppression per se' (77), but an understanding 'of our own multiplicity' (79). In other words, Lugones states that we must: (1) understand our positioning in relation to not just one margin and one center, but multiple margins and centers; and (2) work to recognize liminality in others – even when their situation is not the same as our own, is not understandable to us (because of our own investments in dominant logics), and even when in contest with our own.

In advocating for margin-to-margin alliances across differences in race, class, dis/ability, sexuality, and gender, we acknowledge that much scholarly work has yet to be done – including rethinking foci, theory, methodologies, analyses, and the implications generated by our scholarly work.

Margin-to-margin work will no doubt shift the focus of how we view major issues involving race, dis/ability, and social class from oversimplification to more complex, nuanced, and expansive understandings. In this section we begin to explore what a margin-to-margin approach might look like and how such an approach might help to change the very limited ways in which, for example, the achievement gap, overrepresentation, and other major concerns have come to be understood.

We first want to acknowledge that some of this work has already begun and can be viewed as building upon provocative research on the intersections of how race and social class impacts disability identification and placement in restrictive settings (Harry and Klingner 2006; Harry, Klingner, Cramer, and Sturges 2007; Beratan 2008). Several recent examples are particularly instructive. For example, in *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts,* Erevelles (2011) proposes an historical-materialist theory of dis/ability that would potentially 'enable transformative possibilities for all bodies located at the intersections of difference' (27). Insisting on an intersectional accounting of difference, Erevelles critiques universalist as well as post-structuralist views of dis/ability and demands a critical examination of the historical, social, and political contexts of dis/ability as lived in and through race, class, gender, sexuality and nation. Defining her method of analysis as a materialist disability studies perspective, she aims to describe how dis/ability 'both as an ideological and materialist construct, is mutually constitutive of race, gender, and sexual orientation within the exploitative conditions of transnational capitalism' (85). Although insisting on a materialist analysis, she carefully avoids flattening difference by forging connections to queer studies, post-colonial studies, and critical race studies. Similarly, Michelle Jarmin (2012), argues that an intersectional analysis requires that we read race and dis/ability (and we would add social class) 'not as equal or competing, but as dynamic social and discursive processes that inform' one another (91). In this way, discourses of race, class, and dis/ability are not interchangeable or analogous, but fluid and shifting, working interdependently to undergird one another.

The value of margin-to-margin work, for example, can also be seen in *Urban Narratives: Life at the Intersections of Learning Disability, Race, & Social Class* (Connor 2008). In this study, the author utilized participatory research with eight young adults in New York City to investigate living life at the interstices of disability, race, and social class. As he notes, 'typical' students in special education in urban settings – learning disabled, Black or Latina/o, working class or poor – are not customarily represented within professional literature. Even though they constitute the largest group, they are in 'a liminal space of alterity' (Rollock 2012, 65), but are therefore qualified to have a perspective advantage as 'their experiences and analyses become informed by a panoramic dialectic offering a wider lens than the white majority located in the privileged spaces of the center are able to deploy'

(Rollock 2012, 65). In brief, the young people's stories speak volumes about the discrepancies in perceptions among students and educators about the centrality of race and social class contributing to their designation as learning disabled (LD) and the instructional limitations placed upon them. Connor's use of disability studies, CRT, LatCrit, and black feminist theories facilitate an analysis of their lives, rendering each participant's understandings of the interrelated phenomena of disability, race, and class in relation to their life experiences both inside and outside of school. As with Erevelles' work (2011), all categories are quite porous, constantly shifting and mutually constituting each other in interdependent ways particular to contexts.

Likewise, Erevelles and Minear's (2010) article, *Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality* argues against the singularity of any issue because the approach oversimplifies the complexities of reality. In this article, the authors argue that, '…the omission of disability as a critical category in discussions of intersectionality has disastrous and sometimes deadly consequences for disabled people of color caught in the violent interstices of multiple differences' (128). By chronicling the histories of three people: (1) Eleanor Bumpurs, a 67-year-old obese, arthritic, mentally ill black woman who was shot to death by police for resisting eviction from her Bronx apartment in 1984; (2) Junius Wilson, born in 1908, a deaf, black, and poor child who was falsely accused of rape at age 17. Deemed 'mentally defective,' he was forcibly castrated and placed in a mental institution for the rest of his life, despite the fact that charges were later dropped; and (3) Cassie Smith, a contemporary black child living in rural poverty who experienced a 'turbulent and tragic educational history' (136) involving eight school placements in eight years. She was the recipient of three dis/ability labels, but experienced a lack of meaningful support within the educational system.

In narrating these three life stories, Erevelles and Minear illustrate the historical consequences of the processes by which '…individuals located perilously at the interstices of race, class, gender, and dis/ability are constituted as non-citizens and (no)bodies by the very social institutions (legal, educational, and rehabilitational) that are designed to protect, nurture, and empower them' (129). All three tales reveal ways in which systems of dis/ability, race, and social class mutually construct one another, co-existing as indivisible entities and positioning each individual at specific interstices that either value or devalue each person. At the 'bottom of the barrel' are poor, black, disabled people who, as Erevelles and Minear point out, are more likely to be viewed as 'non-citizens…no-bodies' (127) and disconnected from society. Invoking Patricia William's (1991) term 'spirit murder,' the authors refer to the systematic lack of actual support for people at the margins of multiple identity categories and their suppression through 'Police brutality, false imprisonment, and educational negligence' (in Erevelles and Minear 2010, 142).

What these works share is more than a focus on race and ability as identity statuses, but explicate how racism, classism, and ableism have at their core interrelated and underlying logics that undergird one another. Gillborn (2012) asserts the need for intersectional understandings of complicated phenomena such as racism, is not simply 'theory for theory sake,' but rather a lens or framework to 'enable us to develop tools/concepts that help us to understand and oppose wider patterns of inequality' (30). To do this, he urges researchers to *detail* the 'complexities of intersecting identities and oppressions' and to account for '*how* categories and inequalities intersect' (183). This, we agree, is some of the important work that has yet to be done. Merging the combined energies of scholars who identity as working in CRT and disability studies, using an additional lens of social class, for example, can offer more nuanced and flexible understandings of how inequality is constructed in schools and in society. More importantly, such analyses may point to what can be done to make changes so others will not be subjected to the experiences documented by Erevelles and Minear (2010). When specific groups continue to fall through the myriad cracks of a fractured society, are (dis)serviced rather than serviced (Ferri 2008), overrepresented (and therefore misrepresented) in educational systems, and perceived as inherently deficient via achievement and opportunity gaps, researchers must begin to conceive of these longstanding historical problems differently. In the next section we will attempt to look at one persistent problem, the achievement gap, from a more intersectional framework.

Beyond the achievement gap

Focusing on the 'achievement gap' in isolation or as a single axis problem largely serves as a distraction from the multiple forms of inequality that circulate in schools and contribute to the persistence of those achievement gaps. Thus, after decades of educational research and school reform, the achievement gap continues to exist. As Timar (2012) rightfully asks (and answers):

> Why have we seen so little progress in closing achievement gaps in 30 or more years of intensive school reform efforts? One reason is that schools have been charged with the full responsibility of addressing student disadvantage, ignoring larger social and economic inequality, which is much harder and requires more complex and more politically difficult solutions (230).

Similarly, Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza (2012) inquire:

> How are we to understand the longstanding expectation that public schools, all on their own, can remedy deep-rooted racial, social class, and linguistic

> disparities in educational opportunity and achievement? Is it indeed the case, as so much discourse surrounding education would imply, that all the work that needs doing can occur solely within the schools?… To continue on this path is to remain complicit in the perpetuation of the very student group achievement gaps that decades of reforms have been framed as being designed to eliminate. (35)

In brief, both Timar (2012) and Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza (2012), point to the persistence of the achievement gap and the unfair and unrealistic expectation that schools must be the sole mechanism by which disparities in social class and inequality are ameliorated. As Timar notes, 'The idea that schools can – and, moreover, should – 'do it alone' is unrealistic and evades dealing with the context of many children's lives, especially poor and minority children who attend low-performing schools' (9).

Indeed, the myth that schools can singlehandedly ameliorate social, historical, and cultural differences via a hyperfocus on educational achievement is misleading and even dangerous, because it justifies the discounting of factors that create such pervasive inequalities. As Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza (2012) point out, 'No more than forty percent of the racial gap in educational outcomes can be attributed to the school themselves (in isolation from other non-school factors)' (54). Furthermore, it is disingenuous to claim that a focus on standardized assessment or accountability is the answer to achievement gaps when 'neither a broad nor empirically rigorous enough research base about the most effective approaches to reduce the achievement gaps' exists (Baker, Griffin, and Choi 2012, 84). Why, then, do lawmakers compel schools to focus on achievement as measured by standardized test scores, when there is little doubt that more powerful and effective ways to eliminate gaps in achievement exist?

We believe that a particular danger in the reification of the achievement gap – as an entity that *can* be eliminated without addressing the realities of simultaneous and intersecting disparities in social class, race, and dis/ability – is that it is these very disparities that contribute to the gap in the first place. Thus, a focus on factors that contribute to multiple gaps at both the macro and micro levels is in order. At the macro level, this work might include examining access to healthcare, strong schools, and safe neighborhoods. At the micro level of schooling, research into 'the instruction gap' (Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza 2012, 48) or factors that lead to gaps in 'college readiness' (Grubb 2012, 63) might shed light on ways that schools teach for or against later success. Of course most of these issues map directly onto interlocking systems of race, social class, and dis/ability. Although we most often talk about the achievement gap in terms of race, for instance, social class is a powerful force in terms of opportunity gaps. Middle-class and white Americans, for instance, tend to live in neighborhoods with low crime rates and high performing schools. They also are

more likely to have access to healthcare and quality nutrition. Middle-class children are much more likely to attend schools with professionally prepared teachers and be expected to attend college. In stark contrast, working class and poor students are disadvantaged before entering kindergarten. The extensive work of Hart and Risley (2003) has shown that a significant 'vocabulary gap' for early learners who are poor that remains throughout their entire school career. Based on this work, Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza (2012) suggest, 'the numbers and kinds of words that children heard varied markedly by social class.… In short, early childhood parenting practices and communication styles matter greatly and are patterned along class lines' (50). It is not our intention to vilify the parenting skills and styles of poor families, but rather to acknowledge the ways early schooling experiences mirror and amplify the opportunities that more privileged children already come to school with based on their economic resources.

It is our contention that although social class plays a vital role in all aspects of American society, including education, its force is rarely acknowledged as such. In her pivotal work *Dividing Classes: How the Middle Class Negotiates and Rationalizes School Advantage* (2005), Brantlinger notes how the central value in American culture is competition and that competition is one of the central ways that schools facilitate middle class agendas. She goes so far as to say, 'Stratified school outcomes are international products of middle class desire(s)' (59). In other words, it is the self-interest of the middle-class that is largely responsible for sustaining educational advantage.

Thus, the 'opportunity gap,' as forged in and through class stratification, is of great importance, yet rarely articulated in traditional special education journals. Social class has profound influence upon not only who goes to college, but also upon who goes to jail. The school-to-prison-pipeline is populated with individuals who are disadvantaged based on the intersections of social class, race, and ability (Karagiannis 2000). Approximately 70% of those incarcerated have learning disabilities or struggle with literacy (compared to 20% of the general population) and 65% of prisoners are racial minorities (compared to a national demographic of 24%) (National Center for Education Statistics 1994). Moreover, many of the incarcerated are still children or barely youth (Wooden 2000). It is clear that some sub-sections of the population are pointed toward educational opportunities, while others are never given a fair start and are without the promise of a level playing field.

If we are, as educational researchers, motivated by the need to earnestly address educational inequities such as those outlined above, we must, we would argue, employ an intersectional approach. Such a disposition runs contrary to the narrowly-focused, scientific approaches that are heralded within official educational reform agendas. An intersectional approach is necessarily expansive, outward looking, simultaneously inter and intra categorical. While social class, dis/ability, and race are recognized as central,

these categories are never 'fixed,' but malleable – constantly influencing the shape of one another and never able to be subsumed within one another.

Fully accounting for the intersection of race, class, and dis/ability requires us to forge critical alliances. Working margin to margin will entail engaging with other critical theorists and discourses. It will require us to move beyond 'but for' or single axis frameworks critiqued by Crenshaw (2000) so that we do not distort the complex ways that discrimination actually works in schools – and beyond. It will also require us to insist on accounting for lived experience and discursive modes of power, while attending to the structural inequalities that shape lives that are located on the margins. In other words, to say that race, class, gender and dis/ability are socially constructed is to engage, rather than to deny, personal and political consequences – both ideological and material (Dewan 2012).

Combining existing critical theories holds much promise. For example, the recent development of DisCrit theory encourages explorations of what can be 'used in relation to moving beyond the contemporary impasse of researching race and dis/ability' (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013, 1) by racializing ability and disabling race. DisCrit is therefore useful as a methodological tool as it '…consider[s] how race and dis/ability are built together in order to recognize that boundaries of only racism or ableism leave out a wealth of experiences without forgetting that other social locations affect how the social world is constructed' (20). However, the introduction of social class would extend and complicate this framework in productive ways.

One such use of DisCrit can be found in Annamma's (2013) research on young women of color labeled Emotionally Disturbed who are on the continuum of the school-to-prison pipeline. Her findings capture the highly complicated lives of young women who – like the people in Erevelles and Minear's work – are positioned in ways in which they are not to be served well by school systems, social services, and institutional facilities. However, instead of deficit-based characteristics featured within the legal definitions of the labels. Annamma found instances of caring resourceful young women who had experienced multiple, long-term crises in their lives that often superseded their educational needs.

Yet, when discussing educational inequities in relation to the achievement gap or other issues of equity in schools, the elephant in the room is often social class – despite its inextricable relationship with race and dis/ability. Even after careful analysis of rich and varied data, Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza (2012) conclude that, 'a knot of inequality…persists' (66). Brantlinger (2003) also notes the disparities between financially investing in an equitable system and concurrently paying people a reasonable salary stating, 'What is lacking in these scholarly and public discourses is mention of a need to equalize school expenditures or raise low-income families' salaries to reduce the disparities in educational and life circumstances' (9).

Thus, what then do we need to consider in our research and advocacy? Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza (2012) suggests that first, we must acknowledge that multiple gaps exist. For instance, there are economic class-gaps, race-gaps, and dis/ability gaps that are all based to varying degrees on the social forces of racism, classism, and ableism (among others) – that collectively influence opportunity gaps that lead to academic gaps. Of course, 'countering non-school sources of achievement requires non-educational policies that are complementary to schooling, that makes the tasks of educators easier rather than harder' (73). The areas might include: affordable housing policies to eliminate the mobility of low income students; urban development policies that counter violence and decay; income support policies that enable citizens to attend college; labor market policies to address extreme variation in salaries; a range of health services, and; family support and child welfare programs. As overwhelming – or even unrealistic – as these broad ranging issues may appear, this is the kind of efforts that will be necessary to support schools in providing equitable education.

Conclusion: further questions going forward

Although we acknowledge an ongoing yet vexed relationship between social class, race, and dis/ability, it is perhaps time to move beyond the current impasse of critiquing the absence of race or disability or social class in otherwise critical texts. Forging dialogues across difference and working margin-to-margin holds much promise not just for forging coalitions, but also to create spaces where we can begin to dismantle some of our most intractable and intersecting oppressions. Yet, when all is said, we are still left with more questions, which we believe are worth further exploration in going forward. An underlying question that is central to any discussion of achievement or opportunity gaps, for instance, is whether educational equality is actually achievable, as we currently understand it? Can we, for example, expect everyone to reach a 'high standard' of academic achievement, particularly since most of the ways we measure achievement are based on standardized measures, which require a certain percentage of the population to fail (Dudley-Marling and Gurn 2010). How do current school reforms reify existing inequalities, justify segregation and exclusion, and cement deficit and ableist notions of ability as property? What would alternative reforms that diminish inequality, promote belonging, and dismantle deficit thinking look like?

Who have been the winners (and losers) of current reform efforts? Who stands to gain when certain schools and school children are constituted as failures by virtue of high stakes testing? Who then benefits when those very schools are coerced into adopting particular curriculum materials to improve their standing? How is this similar to the way power works in other contexts, such as colonialism? Are policies that are driving reforms to address

achievement gaps fueled by actual concerned citizens or a neo-capitalist desire to privatize schools and create profit? How has the corporatization of scientific evidence-based research detracted from much needed social policies and other more emancipatory reforms?

What might we expect to happen if schools were truly equal? Would those in privileged positions simply find alternate ways to maintain their status if reforms that sought to equalize resources were enacted and were successful (Ferri and Connor 2006)? How then should we expect dominant groups to respond to meaningful efforts towards educational equity and equal access? How would parents of suburban schools respond if urban schools were as resourced as suburban ones? How would various groups respond to the elimination of achievement gaps – and would this be celebrated by all groups?

Considering the state of grave inequality in education, what should we be advocating for? Might poor children 'require, not the same education as middle-class children, but one that is considerably better' (Mitchell et al. 2012, 111)? In other words, if we want to approximate the education of middle class children, would we assume that poor children would have to work twice as hard, as evidenced by the extended school day demanded by most charter schools? Even if we were able to equalize high stakes academic scores, would this be enough to change material consequences?

Given what we know about the inadequacy of the ways we designate social class, how can social class and education be more adequately addressed in educational research? In other words, because social class is not merely based upon household income, but also includes all aspects of moving through the world, such as walking, dressing, talking, eating, socializing, using vocabulary, and so on, how do our models of accounting for class take these factors into consideration and what difference might this make to our analysis? Moreover, in terms of research:

- How can the cultural context of research – and researchers – be made more explicit through an acknowledgment of research as a cultural practice (Arzugiaba, Artiles, King, and Harris-Murri 2008)? What if, for instance, research was evaluated for its cultural (in)validity?
- How might social, as opposed to scientific, approaches to educational research be recognized as producing equally (if not more) legitimate knowledge claims?
- How might we encourage margin-to-margin alliances for addressing multiple forms of inequity, at the same time we remain mindful of the problematic assumptions that often undergird calls for coalition? (Ferri 2010)

Finally, how can we address the empty rhetoric of alarmism – from the *War on Poverty* that has left more children poor, to a *Nation at Risk* that

resulted in continued mediocrity on the international stage, to *No Child Left Behind* that has failed to address inequity and has instead punished schools for inadequate academic results, while absolving any responsibility to provide equality of experience or access for poor students, students of color, and students with dis/abilities.

Given the nature of our topic, the range of our questions is understandably large and diffuse. That said, it is our hope that across our various fields within education, we will begin to take a more honest look at how we engage with inequities based on class, race, and dis/ability, even if it means becoming 'liberated from the [current] straitjacket of academic discourse' (Steinberg 2007, 152). A modest place to begin might be to recognize the ways that inequality based on race, class, and dis/ability are intertwined to such an extent that unraveling the knot of inequality of one may only serve to tighten the other. Still, it's a valuable start.

Notes

1. We deliberately use the term dis/ability to illustrate the interdependency of *both* ability and disability, as each mutually constructs each other. Thus, we would argue that whenever disability is being written about, notions of ability are likewise present, although rarely acknowledged. For example, when discussing a learning disability – the process of how learning is defined in a particular context is typically omitted. Moreover, assumptions of normal learning are uncritically taken-for-granted. In using dis/ability we seek to problematize notions of ability that are always already embedded within the construct.
2. Our focus in this article is primarily on US schools, although poverty and social class are issues are factors that influence schooling beyond a US context. Moreover poverty is both an issue that affects individual students, but also because of the ways that US schools are funded through property taxes, can affect whole school districts, particularly in both urban and rural contexts.
3. Patterns pertaining to the nexus of social class, immigration, and disability are evident around the world. A comparative study of Canada, Germany, New Zealand and the US, (Gabel et al. 2009) explored international trends in migration and the globalization of ethnic group disproportionality signaling inequities within education.
4. Although we would certainly question many of the foundational assumptions supporting the validity of test scores for measuring the achievement gains for diverse learners.
5. This was the original petition that led to *Briggs v. Elliot,* one of the cases that were later consolidated into *Brown v. Board of Education.*
6. There are 36 plaintiff school districts and eight featured in the trial. The court ruled that the state was providing a 'minimally adequate education' for grades K-12, but not for early childhood education. The plaintiffs appealed this decision to the State Supreme Court. Final arguments were heard in 2008.
7. The plaintiff districts have 88% minority enrollment, 86% of the student population on free and reduced lunch and drop out rates between 44%–67%.
8. Yet, during this same time there has been a marked increase in funding for prisons (Darling-Hammond 2012).

9. It is important to note that the narrowing of particular achievement gaps have not occurred at the expense of the achievement of white students, which has also improved. Instead narrowing has occurred as a result of across the board improvement (from 2002–2009), but with Latino/a scores, in particular improving at a faster rate, followed by African American students, who have also improved at a faster rate than white students. Even with this progress, the amount of time to close the existing achievement gaps could take a decade or longer (Kober, Chudowsky, and Chudowsky 2012). Moreover, despite the progress made by Latino/a students, graduation rates of Latino/a students remains 'alarmingly high,' nearly twice that of black students and three times that of white and Asian students (Ream, Ryan, and Espinoza 2012, 43).

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