# Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and the Primacy of Racism: Race, Class, Gender, and Disability in Education

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## Abstract

The article explores the utility of intersectionality as an aspect of critical race theory (CRT) in education. Drawing on research with Black middle-class parents in England, the article explores the intersecting roles of race, class, and gender in the construction and deployment of dis/ability in education. The author concludes that intersectionality is a vital aspect of understanding race inequity but that racism retains a primacy for critical race scholars in three key ways: namely, *empirical primacy* (as a central axis of oppression in the everyday reality of schools), *personal/autobiographical primacy* (as a vital component in how critical race scholars view themselves and their experience of the world), and *political primacy* (as a point of group coherence and activism).

My title today will displease many people. For some, it will be too provocative; any attempt to place race and racism on the agenda, let alone at the *center* of debate, is deeply unpopular. In the academy we are often told that we are being too crude and simplistic, that things are more complicated than that, that we're being essentialist and missing the *real* problem—of social class (cf. Maisuria, 2012). In politics and the media, race-conscious scholarship is frequently twisted 180 degrees and represented as *racist* in its own right. By focusing on racist inequity, and challenging a colorblind narrative that sees only millions of individuals engaged in meritocratic competition, critical race theory (CRT) is itself accused of racism. This argument was most dramatically played out in the disgusting posthumous attacks on Professor Derrick Bell, in March 2012, when recordings of him and (the then student) Barak Obama were paraded in the U.S. media in a shallow attempt to smear the President. Initially broadcast by the right-wing web-based "news" site Breitbart.com (Adams, 2012), the story was rapidly relayed by *Fox News* (Martel, 2012) and picked up internationally, for example, by Britain's most influential national newspaper, *The Daily Mail* (Keneally & Gye, 2012). The blogosphere echoed to entries such as "RECORDS SHOW RACIST BIGOT DERRICK BELL TWICE VISITED WHITE HOUSE IN 2010" (http://tundratabloids.com/2012/03/records-show-racist-bigot-derrick-bell-twice-visited-white-house-in-2010.html), while *Fox News* featured Bill O'Reilly describing Bell as "anti-White" and Sarah Palin calling him a "radical college racist

professor."[1] Similar attacks have been rehearsed by academic detractors keen to portray CRT as peddling a view of White people—*all* White people—as universally and irredeemably racist. The following is from a university professor and prominent educational commentator in the United Kingdom:

> For all its supposed academic credentials, critical race theory boils down to one simple claim: "If you are white you are racist!" . . . Critical race theorists will dismiss my claim as absurd, but that is because they avoid saying what they really think. The fact that their basic, shared assumption is never stated—that is, if you are white you are racist—allows their views to be promoted . . . (Hayes, 2013)

For scholars capable of more nuanced understanding, this article's title may still cause unease; isn't it contradictory to link the idea of "intersectionality" and the "*primacy*" of racism in the same sentence? In the first part of this article, therefore, I address the notion of intersectionality and its relationship to CRT. I then use qualitative research with Black middle-class parents in England as the empirical site to explore the intersection of numerous bases of inequity

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(including race, class, gender, and dis/ability).[2] Finally, I set out the arguments for understanding the primacy of racism, *not* as a factor that is the only or inevitably the most important aspect of every inequity in education, but in terms of racism's primacy as an empirical, personal, and political aspect of critical race scholarship.

## CRT and Intersectionality

There is no single unchanging statement of the core tenets and perspectives that make up CRT but most authoritative commentaries identify a similar set of characteristic assumptions and approaches (cf. Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2010; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 2009); key among these perspectives is an understanding that "race" is socially constructed and that "racial difference" is invented, perpetuated, and reinforced by society. In this approach, racism is understood to be complex, subtle, and flexible; it manifests differently in different contexts, and minoritized groups are subject to a range of different (and changing) stereotypes. Critical race theorists argue that the majority of racism remains hidden beneath a veneer of normality and it is only the more crude and obvious forms of racism that are seen as problematic by most people:

> Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture. Formal equal opportunity—rules and laws that insist on treating blacks and Whites (for example) alike—can thus remedy only the more extreme and shocking forms of injustice, the ones that do stand out. It can do little about the business-as-usual forms of racism that people of color confront every day. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi)

CRT challenges ahistoricism by stressing the need to understand racism within its social, economic, and historical context (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). Scholars working within CRT place particular emphasis on the experiential knowledge of people of color and challenge common assumptions about "meritocracy" and "neutrality" as camouflage for the interests of dominant groups (Tate, 1997, p. 235). Similarly, CRT adopts a view of "Whiteness" as a socially constructed and malleable identity:

> "Whiteness" is a racial discourse, whereas the category "white people" represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin colour. (Leonardo, 2009, p. 169)

White-*ness*, in this sense, refers to a set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that place the interests and perspectives of White people at the center of what is considered normal and everyday. Critical scholarship on Whiteness is not an assault on White people themselves; it is an assault on the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of White identifications, norms, and interests (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). It is possible for White people to take a genuine, active role in deconstructing Whiteness but such "race traitors" (Ignatiev, 1997) are relatively uncommon. A particularly striking element of CRT (and one seized upon by conservative critics during the Breitbart attacks in 2012) is its understanding of *White supremacy*. In contrast to commonsense understandings of the term (which denote the most extreme and obvious kinds of fascistic race hatred) in CRT White supremacy refers to the operation of much more subtle and extensive forces that saturate the everyday mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of White people (see Ansley, 1997).

For all of its emphasis on the central role of racism in shaping contemporary society, many CRT scholars are keen to explore how raced inequities are shaped by processes that also reflect, and are influenced by, other dimensions of identity and social structure: This is where the notion of intersectionality is crucial.

"Intersectionality" is a widely used (and sometimes misused) concept in contemporary social science. The term addresses the question of how multiple forms of inequality and identity inter-relate in different contexts and over time, for example, the inter-connectedness of race, class, gender, disability, and so on. The term originated in the work of U.S. critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) but has been deployed widely across the social sciences to the point where it is sometimes viewed as a "buzzword," whose frequent iteration often belies an absence of clarity and specificity (Davis, 2008). In an attempt to bring some clarity back to the discussion of intersectionality, it is instructive to look at how Crenshaw has applied it to real-world problems. In addition to being a professor of law at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Crenshaw is co-founder and executive director of the African American Policy Forum (AAPF; http://aapf.org/) and the AAPF's (n.d.) approach to intersectionality is especially useful:

> Intersectionality is a concept that enables us to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias.

> For example, men and women can often experience racism differently, just as women of different races can experience sexism differently, and so on.

> As a result, an intersectional approach goes beyond conventional analysis in order to focus our attention on injuries that we otherwise might not recognize . . . to 1) analyze social problems more fully; 2) shape more effective interventions; and 3) promote more inclusive coalitional advocacy. (p. 3)

So, intersectionality—as envisaged by Crenshaw and other critical race activists—has two key elements: first, an *empirical* basis; an intersectional approach is needed to better understand the nature of social inequities and the processes that create and sustain them (i.e., to "analyze social problems more fully"). Second, and this connects to CRT's earliest roots as a movement of engaged legal scholars, intersectionality has a core *activist* component, in that an intersectional approach aims to generate coalitions between different groups with the aim of resisting and changing the status quo.

The AAPF's concise and direct statement on intersectionality is valuable in cutting through the layers of debate and obfuscation that often surround the concept. In particular, the AAPF highlight the importance of intersectionality as a tool (of analysis and resistance) rather than as an academic tactic or fashion. Similarly, Richard Delgado (like Crenshaw, one of the founder's of CRT) has highlighted the need to remain clear sighted about our goals rather than become engaged in never-ending academic games of claim and counter-claim. As Delgado (2011) notes, intersectionality can be taken to such extreme positions that the constant sub-division of experience (into more and more identity categories) can eventually shatter any sense of coherence:

> . . . intersectionality can easily paralyze progressive work and thought because of the realization that whatever unit you choose to work with, someone may come along and point out that you forgot something. (p. 1264)

As Delgado points out, identity categories are infinitely divisible, and so the uncritical use of intersectionality could lead to the paralysis of critical work amid a mosaic of never-ending difference. In contrast, I want to return to a more critical understanding of intersectionality—as a tool of critical race analysis and intervention. To understand how racism works, we need to appreciate how race intersects with other axes of oppression at different times and in different contexts, but we must try to find a balance between remaining sensitive to intersectional issues without being overwhelmed by them. In an attempt to explore this further, in the following section I draw upon empirical data gathered as part of a 2-year qualitative investigation into the educational strategies of the Black middle classes.[3] The analysis explores the day-to-day life of Black parents and children as they negotiate the social construction of dis/ability within education and, in particular, the processes of labeling in relation to so-called "special educational needs" (SEN).

## Researching Education and Black Middle Classes

The empirical data in this chapter are drawn from a 2-year project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and conducted with my colleagues Stephen J. Ball, Nicola Rollock and Carol Vincent.[4] The project began with an explicit focus on how *race* and *class* intersect in the lives of Black middle-class parents. This focus arose from a desire to speak to the silences and assumptions that have frequently shaped education research, policy, and practice in the United Kingdom where middle-class families are generally assumed to be White, and minoritized families—especially those who identify their family heritage in Black Africa and/or the Caribbean—are assumed to be uniformly working class (see Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, & Ball, 2015). By interviewing Black parents employed in higher professional and managerial roles, we hoped to gain a more nuanced and critical understanding of race–class intersections.[5]

The project sample was limited to parents who identify as being of Black Caribbean ethnic heritage. This group was chosen because the Black Caribbean community is one of the longest established racially minoritized groups in the United Kingdom, with a prominent history of campaigning for social justice, and yet they continue to face marked educational inequalities in terms of achievement and expulsion from school (Gillborn, 2008; John, 2006; Sivanandan, 1990; Warmington, 2014). At the time of the interviews (2009-2010), all the parents had children between the ages of 8 and 18; a range that spans key decision-making points in the English education system. As is common in research with parents, most interviewees were mothers but the project team also wanted to redress common deficit assumptions about Black men (McKenley, 2005; Reynolds, 2010) and so we ensured that a fifth of the sample were fathers. All the parents are in professional/managerial jobs within the top two categories of the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) and most live in Greater London (although we also included parents from elsewhere across England). Parents volunteered to take part, responding to adverts that we placed in professional publications and on the web. Once our initial round of 62 interviews had been completed, utilizing a technique that has proven successful in the past, we then re-interviewed 15 parents chosen to facilitate greater exploration of the key emerging themes and questions. In total, therefore, 77 interviews provide the original data for the project.

Our interviews explored parents' experiences of the education system (including their memories of their own childhood and their current encounters as parents), their aspirations for their children and how their experiences are shaped by race/racism and social class. The project team comprised three White researchers and one Black researcher; respondents were asked to indicate in advance whether they preferred a Black interviewer, a White interviewer, or had no preference, and those preferences were met accordingly. Following the interviews, around half (55%) felt that interviewer ethnicity had made a difference and almost all of

these felt that rapport with a Black researcher had been an advantage. The team is split evenly between men and women, and two of us have a declared dis/ability.

## "Special Education" and the Intersection of Race, Class, Gender, and Disability

The terms "race" and "disability" have a lot in common: Both are usually assumed to be relatively obvious and fixed, but are actually socially constructed categories that are constantly contested and redefined. Historically both have operated to define, segregate, and oppress. Received wisdom views both "race" and "disability" as individual matters, relating to identity and a person's sense of self, but a critical perspective views them as socially constructed categories that actively re/make oppression and inequality (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Beratan, 2008; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). In the United States, for example, Christine Sleeter (1987) has argued that the category "learning disabilities" emerged as a strategic move to protect the children of White middle-class families from possible downward mobility through low school achievement. Whereas *some* labels might be advantageous, for example by securing additional dedicated resources, it is clear that certain other dis/ability labels are far from positive. In both the United States and the United Kingdom, there is a long history of Black youth being over-represented in segregated low-status educational provision, usually disguised beneath blanket terms like "special" or "assisted" education (Tomlinson, 2014). Some of the earliest critical research on race inequities in the English educational system focused on the intersection of race and dis/ability (Coard, 1971; Tomlinson, 1981) and, despite the decades that have passed since those pioneering studies, the issue emerged as a key element in the interviews with contemporary Black middle-class parents: 15 of our interviewees (around a quarter) mentioned dis/ability or related issues during their interviews and some important and disturbing patterns became clear. In the following sections, I review our key findings in relation to three simple questions: First, what processes lead to a "special needs" assessment being made? Second, what happens after the assessment? Finally, whose interests are being served by the schools' reactions to, and treatment of, Black middle-class parents and children in relation to the question of dis/ability? My concern, therefore, is to understand the experiences of Black middle-class parents and their children as they encounter labels being used against them or alternatively how they attempt to use labels to access additional resources; I am interested in how racism intersects with other aspects of oppression (especially class and gender) in the processes that *make, assert*, and *contest* the meaning of dis/ability in schools.[6]

### Assessing "Special" Needs

The British government's advice for parents of children with disabilities (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2009) describes a series of stages that should lead to a child's needs being assessed and met:

- The parents and/or school identify that the child is having problems.
- An assessment is arranged through the school or the local authority.
- The nature of the child's needs is identified and adjustments are recommended.
- The school then acts on these recommendations and the student is better able to fulfill their potential.

In our data, there is only a single case that comes close to this model, where the school expressed concern to the parent, and they worked together harmoniously throughout the process. In every other case, it was the parent—not the school—who identified a problem and sought an assessment. This involves parents drawing on both their *economic* capital (to finance expensive specialist assessments) and their *cultural* and *social* capital (often using friendship and professional networks to help negotiate the system). In each of these cases, the school seemed content to assume that the students' poor performance was all that could be expected: Here, Rachel[7] describes how her son was criticized for not paying attention:

> I took [my son] to get him educationally assessed and they said that he had dyslexia . . . I took him up to Great Ormond Street [Hospital] to get his hearing tested and they said he can't hear half of what's going on. So when the teachers are always saying "he's distracted and not paying attention," he can't hear . . . they were just very happily saying [he] doesn't pay attention, [he] doesn't do this, [he] doesn't do that, but, you know, *he can't hear* . . . (Rachel, Senior Solicitor, Private Sector)

According to official guidance where there is a sharp discrepancy between a student's performance on different sorts of task, this can be seen as indicating a possible learning difficulty (Developmental Adult Neuro-Diversity Association [DANDA], 2011). In our research, where Black children's performance was at stake, schools seemed happy to assume that the lowest level of performance was the "true" indicator of their potential.

> A discrepancy was emerging, in that she would get a B for a piece of work that she had spent time doing [at home] and then she would get a D or an E even [for timed work in class]. So I then contacted the school and said, "look there's a problem here." And they just said "well, she needs to work harder." So they were actually not at all helpful and I ended up having a

row with the Head of Sixth Form because she accused me of being "*a fussy parent*." And what she said was that my daughter was working to her level, which was the timed essay level, she was working to a D. (Paulette, Psychologist)

Following an independent assessment (that revealed dyslexia) and a move to a private institution (that made the recommended adjustments) Paulette saw a dramatic improvement in her daughter's attainment. In her A (Advanced) level examinations at age 18, Paulette's daughter went from gaining two passes at Grade E and one ungraded (fail) result, to three passes, all at Grade B.

In our interviews, there were two cases where the school made the first move to initiate a formal assessment for special educational needs in a way that shocked and angered the students' parents. In both cases, the school's action served to divert attention from racism in the school and refocus attention on a supposed individual deficit in the Black child. For example, when Felicia told her son's school about him being racially bullied the reaction was initially encouraging:

> the Head of Year was quite shocked and quite encouraging in terms of our conversation; calling and saying, you know, "Really sorry. We've let you down; we've let [your son] down; we didn't know this was happening" . . . But nothing happened . . . My son's class teacher had said to my son that I'm asking *too much* but not to tell me . . . I got this telephone call out of the blue one Sunday afternoon, from his class teacher, suggesting that he have some *test*—I can't remember exactly how this conversation went because it was such a shock; it was five o'clock on Sunday afternoon—that there might be some reason for his under-performing: not the racism at the school that I told them about, but there might be some reason, that he might have some *learning difficulties*. (Felicia, Senior Solicitor)

Similarly, Simon described how his son was expelled for reacting violently to racist harassment. In a situation that directly echoes previous research on the over-representation of Black students in expulsions (Blair, 2001; Communities Empowerment Network, 2005; Wright, Weekes, & McGlaughlin, 2000), the school refused to take account of the provocation and violence that the young man had experienced at the hands of racist peers and, instead, chose to view his actions in isolation and Simon's son was labeled as having "behavior and anger management" problems:

> . . . someone called him a "black monkey" and he responded by beating him up . . . I just don't think the school really understood the impact, or how isolated pupils can feel when they stand out physically, and that's just something that I don't think they get. (Simon, Teacher)

On two occasions in our data, therefore, Black middle-class parents complained that schools had wrongly taken the initiative in seeking a SEN assessment as a means of shifting the focus away from racism in their institution and onto a supposed individual deficit within the Black child. In both instances, the child was male. In contrast, schools proved reluctant to support an assessment in every case where Black middle-class parents themselves felt that their child might have an unrecognized learning difficulty.

## Schools' Reactions to SEN Assessments

Having used their class capitals to access formal SEN assessments, despite the inaction of their children's schools, Black middle-class parents in our research then faced the task of making the schools aware of the assessments and seeking their cooperation in making any reasonable adjustments that had been suggested. In a minority of cases the school simply refused to act on the assessment but in most cases the school made encouraging noises but their actions were at best patchy, at worst non-existent. For example, when Nigel's son was diagnosed with autism, the recommended adjustments included the use of a laptop in class. Nigel was prepared to buy the machine himself but the school refused to allow its use: "We had a long conversation with the head [principal], who we were very friendly with, and they said that it would set a precedent" (Nigel, Human Resources Manager). Although disappointing the school's reaction to Nigel's request was at least clear; Linda's experiences were more typical. She found that, although adjustments were agreed with a senior teacher (the "Year Head" in charge of the relevant age cohort) and the specialist SEN coordinator, not all teachers knew about them or accepted them. In several cases, the school's lack of action started to look like deliberate obstruction (despite their kind words). Similarly, Lorraine feels that she lost 2 years of education struggling to get her daughter's school to deliver on their promises:

> I have a daughter who now has been diagnosed with autism, I actually do want to get much more involved in the school and how they deal with her. But I think for the school it's easier if they don't get involved with me. So, for instance, going in and having meetings; her Head of Year says "oh, you know, I understand now, we'll do this, we'll do that" and then that just doesn't happen . . . there were *constant* visits to try to get them to take some kind of action to help . . . You know, at first I thought it was me not being forceful enough, but as I said, I was accompanied by a clinical psychologist who tried to get them to help as well and they failed. (Lorraine, Researcher, Voluntary Sector)

Our data suggest, therefore, that Black parents—even *middle-class* ones who are able to mobilize considerable class capitals (both social and economic)—have an incredibly difficult time getting their children's needs recognized and acted upon. In contrast, schools appear much more ready to act on more negative dis/ability labels. As Beth

Harry and Janette Klingner (2006) note, in relation to the United States, Black (African American) students face much higher levels of labeling (what they term "*risk rates*") in SEN categories "that depend on clinical judgment rather than on verifiable biological data" (p. 2). These patterns have a long history and they continue today: The most recent comprehensive study of SEN demographics in the United Kingdom (Lindsay, Pather, & Strand, 2006) revealed that rates of Black over-representation are especially pronounced in the category defined as "Behavioral, Emotional, & Social Difficulties"; where Black students are more than twice as likely to be labeled as their White peers.[8] This category of student are often removed from mainstream provision and placed in segregated units. One of our interviewee parents visits such units as part of her work. She reported her distress at witnessing what she described as the "brutalization" of Black boys in segregated provision within a state-funded secondary (high school): Here, we can see the intersection of gender (the all-male grouping) alongside race, class, and dis/ability:

> I don't know for what reason [but] they were in a kind of different [part of the school] . . . they weren't in the main school building . . . The class was predominantly Black, not many students but they were really unruly, and I was really shocked at how unruly they were . . . the SenCo [special needs coordinator] said to me, she said, "well, that's what you get." (Paulette, Psychologist)

In a direct parallel to the racialized impact of tracking in the United States (Oakes, 1990; Oakes, Joseph, & Muir, 2004; Watamabe, 2012), in the United Kingdom as students move through high school, they are increasingly likely to be taught in hierarchically grouped classes (known as "*sets*") which are known to place disproportionate numbers of Black students in the lowest ranked groups (Araujo, 2007; Ball, 1981; Commission for Racial Equality [CRE], 1992; Gillborn, 2008; Gillies & Robinson, 2012; Hallam, 2002; Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Tikly, Haynes, Caballero, Hill, & Gillborn, 2006). Paulette was in no doubt that the cumulative impact of these processes had a dramatically negative impact on the Black boys she observed:

> . . . the boys are in sets from the time they come in and those boys are in the bottom sets. And the bottom set has been written off as boys who are just not going to get anywhere. And literally they kind of turn into animals, they really had, because of the way that they had been treated and because of the expectations . . . And I just felt that there was something that that school— you know it sounds crazy—but something that that school did, actually *did*, to particular Black boys . . . And I just think, I just thought that what it is, is that maybe the school just brutalizes those children, *unintentionally*. Am I making sense? (Paulette, Psychologist)

Paulette went on to describe the fate of a Black student whom she had known for some time. Despite prior attainment in primary school that was "good" to "average," the high school interpreted the SEN label as automatically signaling a generic and untreatable deficit:

> because he had dyslexia they had put him in bottom sets for everything, even though he was an able student. So from year seven [aged 11], what do you do? He just became completely de-motivated, completely disaffected. He had completely given up. And that was such a shock to me, it was such a shock. (Paulette, Psychologist)

This boy's fate is particularly significant. Many young people achieve highly despite dyslexia; indeed, it is exactly the kind of learning disability that—as I noted earlier— Sleeter (1987) views as an explicit part of attempts to protect the educational privilege of *White* middle-class America. Under the right circumstances (with sensible adjustments to pedagogy and through the use of simple assistive technologies), the student might have had a very different experience. But in this school, the combination of SEN and race seemed to automatically condemn the student to the very lowest teaching groups where his confidence and performance collapsed.

## The Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Dis/ability: Whose Interests Are Being Met?

> All children with special educational needs should have their needs met. (DCSF, 2009, p. 5)

The British Education Department's official guide for parents is unequivocal about whose interests should be at the heart of the system but this is *not* happening and *racism* is deeply implicated. Drawing on data gathered as part of the largest-ever qualitative study of the experiences and perspectives of Black middle-class parents in England (Rollock et al., 2015), I have shown that when it comes to understanding *when* and *how* certain dis/ability categories are mobilized, in the case of Black British students from middle-class homes, it is not the needs of the Black child that are being served but the interests of an institutionally racist education system. Let me recap on the evidence to this point. On the matter of assessment, Black middle-class parents generally had to make their own arrangements for formal assessment in the face of school indifference or opposition. The most striking exceptions to this pattern were two cases where, following racist incidents of aggression against Black boys, the schools suggested an assessment and shifted the focus onto the individual student who suffered the abuse and away from institutional failings.

Numerous qualitative studies have revealed chronically low teacher expectations for Black students to be the norm in many British schools (cf. Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Gillborn, Rollock, Vincent, & Ball, 2012); consequently, when faced with a sharp discrepancy in performance on different tasks, rather than view this as a potential indicator of a learning dis/ability, our interviewees reported that teachers were generally content simply to accept the lower level of attainment as indicative of the students' "true" potential. When Black parents attempted to rebuff these assumptions, by producing privately financed assessments, the schools' most common reaction was to sound welcoming and interested, but to behave in ways that are at best patchy and, at worst, obstructive and insulting. Unfortunately, this obstructive attitude does not reflect a *general* reluctance to mobilize dis/ability labels, rather it seems to apply to particular labels (specific or moderate "learning difficulties") that might positively benefit the Black child by seeing them access additional resources. In contrast, labels that apply "behavioral" judgments within a SEN framework continue to be applied with disproportionate frequency against Black students and this was reflected in the interview data, often leading to segregation from the social and academic mainstream, and ultimately decimating the students' academic performance.

Despite the reassuring and inclusive tone of government rhetoric, and in contrast to the often encouraging initial verbal response from schools, in reality the Black middle-class parents' experiences suggest that the needs of the Black child go largely unmet within a system that uses dis/ability labels as a further field of activity where racist inequities are created, sustained, and legitimized. The field of "special" education has long been recognized as complex and fraught area where race and class influences can significantly shape students' experiences (cf. Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Oliver, 1996; Tomlinson, 2014). The data reported here suggest that *class advantage fails to protect in the face of entrenched racism.* Despite their considerably enhanced social and economic capitals, for Black middle-class parents, the field of dis/ability and SEN appears to be a context where they are excluded from the potential benefits (of legitimate adjustments and dedicated resources) but remain subject to the disadvantages of low expectations, segregation, and exclusion.

Gender has not featured in this article to the same extent as the other principal axes of differentiation (race, class, and dis/ability), but it has been a constant presence in the background. In particular, Black middle-class parents expressed particular concern for male children who could fall foul of heightened surveillance in schools and the attentions of police and gang members on the street (cf. Gillborn et al., 2012). In the present account, gender is also an important part of the context whereby it was male students who made up the segregated and "brutalized" bottom set in isolated provision away from the mainstream school building (reported by Paulette) and it was boys who were referred for assessment following their racist victimization by White peers.

## Conclusion: The Primacy of Racism

> The challenge underpinning any serious analysis of *race as a social relationship* is how to understand its false dimensions while refusing to relegate race and racialisation to the epiphenomenal dog-kennel. For critical race theorists, race is not reducible to false consciousness; nor is it mere "product" or "effect." (Warmington, 2011, p. 263, emphasis in original)

Dis/ability (like race and gender) masquerades as natural, fixed, and obvious: I recall teaching a masters' class, where most students were schoolteachers, when someone argued that although certain forms of identity and inequity can be complex, "disability is *obvious*." I was tempted to challenge this assertion by asking whether the student realized that I was dis/abled? He would probably have been shocked to learn that, having spent more than four decades of my life hiding the painfully slow rate at which I can read and process written information, I had recently been formally assessed as having a "specific learning disability." Despite the assumptions that are schooled into us, social identities and inequities are socially constructed and enforced. As the "social model" of disability has made clear, even the most pronounced so-called "impairments" only become disabling when confronted by socially constructed problems and assumptions, for example, "not being able to walk or hear being made problematic by socially created factors such as the built environment . . . and the use of spoken language rather than sign language" (Beratan, 2012, p. 45). Consequently, critical social researchers, whatever dimension/s of identity and inequity they wish to grapple with, are faced with making sense of the constant mutability and complexity of our social worlds. As I hope I have made clear to this point, an *intersectional* understanding of the social can be a distinct advantage when trying to understand how particular inequities are re/made in places like schools. Drawing on a study of the educational strategies of Black middle-class parents in England, I have argued that even a brief exploration of their experiences of dis/ability requires some appreciation of the intersecting dimensions of race, class, and gender. This is not the same as the kind of intersectional trap that Richard Delgado (2011) warns can ultimately paralyze activist work. It is in relation to that danger that I wish to conclude by addressing the primacy of racism for critical race scholars.

From the very beginning of CRT as a recognizable movement, and through to the present day, detractors have sought to misrepresent the approach (Crenshaw, 2002;

Delgado, 1993; Gillborn, 2010; Warmington, 2011). To try to avoid any further misunderstanding, therefore, before explaining what I mean by the "primacy of racism," it may be useful if I begin by explicitly stating what I do *not* mean. I do not assume that racism is the *only* issue that matters (this should be obvious from my statements about intersectionality and the experiences of the Black middle-class above), neither do I believe that racism is *always* the most important issue in understanding every instance of social exclusion and oppression that touches the lives of minoritized people. Similarly, I am not suggesting that there is some kind of hierarchy of oppression, whereby members of any single group (however defined) are assumed to always be the most excluded or to always have a perfect understanding of the processes at work.

So, what *do* I mean by the primacy of racism? My argument is that there are at least three ways in which racism unapologetically remains a primary concern for critical race theorists.[9] First, there is *the empirical primacy of racism*; that is, when we study how racist inequity is created and sustained, racist assumptions and practices are often *the* crucial issue when making sense of how oppression operates. Racist inequity is influenced by numerous factors (including gender, class, dis/ability), but we must not shy away from naming the central role that racism continues to play. The case of SEN and race in England is instructive; here the most personal and supposedly individual issues (dis/ability and impairment) are revealed as not merely *socially* constructed, but as *racially* patterned and oppressive.

Second, there is the issue of the *personal or autobiographical primacy of race*, that is, the dimension of the social world, of our lived reality, that we as scholars foreground in making sense of our experiences and shaping our interventions and agency. Many scholars who view themselves as working from a critical and/or activist perspective can identify an issue that touches them most deeply, often viscerally (see Allan & Slee, 2008; Orelus, 2011). Some begin with social class inequity, others with gender, sexuality, or dis/ability: Critical race theorists tend to start with race/racism. This does not blind us to other forms of exclusion and we surely have as much right as any other critic to begin with the issue that—for us—touches us most deeply and which generates our most important experiences and ambitions for change. In the words of Zeus Leonardo (2005), critical race scholars "privilege the concept of race as the point of departure for critique, not the end of it" (p. xi). This may sound unremarkable but, as John Preston and Kalwant Bhopal (2012) have noted, race-conscious scholarship is frequently challenged to defend itself in ways that other radical perspectives are not:

> When speaking about "race" in education, many of us have been faced with the question "What about class/gender/sexuality/disability/faith?" whereas rarely are speakers on

these topics ever asked, "What about 'race'?" A focus on "race" in analysis is indicative, for some academics, as a sign of pathology or suspicion. (p. 214)

A third way in which racism remains a prime concern for critical race scholars relates to the activist component so central to the founding of the movement, that is, the *political primacy of racism*. As Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. (1995) argued in one of the foundational CRT texts, for many critical race scholars, *resisting* racial oppression is a defining characteristic of the approach:

> Although Critical Race scholarship differs in object, argument, accent, and emphasis, it is nevertheless unified by two common interests. The first is to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained . . . The second is a desire not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to change it. (p. xiii)

If we are to change the racial (and racist) status quo, we must refuse the growing mainstream assertion that racism is irrelevant or even non-existent. A shared analysis of the racism that patterns everyday life can provide a powerful point of coherence for activism and political strategy. We live at a time when racist inequities continue to scar the economy, education, health, and criminal justice systems (Equality & Human Rights Commission [EHRC], 2010) but when merely *naming* racism as an issue is sufficient to generate accusations of "playing the race card"—the supposed "special pleading" that Derrick Bell's "rules of racial standing" analyze so brilliantly (Bell, 1992, p. 111)—or, worse still, we are judged to be acting in ways that are racist against White people. At this time, it is more important than ever that we take our cue from Derrick Bell and have the courage to say the unsay-able and follow through in our actions. We can *use* intersectionality, but we must not be silenced by it. Bell's legacy demands nothing less.

## Author's Note

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

1. These are verbatim transcripts from excerpts included in a feature where Professor Bell's widow answers the claims: Video available at http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/2012/03/derrick_bells_widow_speaks_about_outrage_against_h.php

2. I follow Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013) in using "dis/ability" to highlight the way in which the traditional form [disability] "overwhelmingly signals a specific inability to perform culturally defined expected tasks (such as learning or walking) that come to define the individual as primarily and generally 'unable' to navigate society. We believe the '/' in dis/ability disrupts misleading understandings of disability, as it simultaneously conveys the mixture of ability and disability" (p. 24).

3. School students categorized as "Black" (including those officially listed as "Black Caribbean," "Black African," and "Black Other" but excluding those of dual ethnic heritage) account for 4.4% of those in the final stage of compulsory schooling in state-maintained schools in England as a whole but for 32.3% of children in inner London, 21.3% of London as a whole, and 11.3% of Birmingham, England's "second city" (Department for Education [DfE], 2012, Table 3).

4. "The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes" was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC RES-062-23-1880): Professor Carol Vincent was the principal investigator.

5. We restricted our sample to people whose occupations place them in the top two categories of the eight which make up the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC); an occupationally based classification that has been used for all official statistics and surveys in the United Kingdom since 2001 (Office for National Statistics, 2010).

6. I am *not* asking questions of over- and under-representation, as if there were some objective *real* notion of dis/ability into which Black middle-class students should gain rightful admittance or avoid wrongful categorization (see Annamma et al., 2013).

7. All interviewee names are pseudonyms.

8. The most recent major study of these issues found that, relative to White British students, Black Caribbean students are 2.28 times more likely, and "Mixed White & Caribbean" 2.03 times more likely to be categorized as behavioral, emotional, and social difficulties (BESD; Lindsay, Pather, & Strand, 2006, Table 5a).

9. I do not presume to speak for all critical race scholars nor do I seek to mandate a single "CRT" (critical race theory) position: My purpose here is help arrest the slide into endless meaningless sub-divisions of intersectionality and diversity ad infinitum and re-state the courageous and bold determination that characterized the beginnings of the movement.

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