

Black feminism may offer more inclusive approach to special education

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Special education offers many services to students with disabilities, but the field would benefit from embracing the diverse perspectives

espoused by Black feminist scholars, according to a Penn State College of Education researcher.

"People with different abilities offer so much to who we are as a society," said Mildred Boveda, associate professor of education (special education). "People with disabilities at the intersection of cultural and linguistic differences are inherently valuable. Black feminism helps us make sense of how we get to the point where labeling a student with a disability is not helpful but turns into something hurtful and marginalizing."

Black feminism is a key example of intersectionality—the sociological analytical framework for understanding how groups' and individuals' social and political identities result in unique combinations of discrimination and privilege. Examples of these factors include gender, race and sexuality.

Boveda developed an intersectionality framework to help others implement this more inclusive approach to special education. She published the [article](#) in a special issue of *Theory Into Practice*.

In the article, Boveda first underscored the potential Black feminist thought offers educators of all social identities who advocate for affirming specialized education programming. Second, she drew attention to the insights Black feminists give practitioners who support students with disability who may also be dealing with racism in addition to ableism.

"My research agenda is focused on intersectionality," Boveda said. "When I became a special education scholar, I was really interested in its Black feminist influences."

Boveda drew from Black feminism and Black feminist scholar Audre

Lorde's theorizing about difference to present a framework for educators who advocate for specialized education programming that affirm student differences. Lorde—a member of The Combahee River Collective credited for generating an intersectional shift in feminist discourse—called on the creative use of difference to push back on the marginalization of multiply-marginalized women.

An overarching theme in the article is that special education should be neither dismissed nor put on a pedestal. While special education programs can benefit students with disabilities, Boveda said, they often fail to recognize intersecting identities of students and reinforce societal stigmas surrounding deviations from [cultural norms](#).

"There's a way that people talk about Black people, and racialized people in special education, that's very reductive," Boveda said. "Are [white students](#) with disabilities facing the same obstacles as students of color with disabilities? Absolutely not. ... Black feminists like Audre Lorde say we should embrace differences. Instead of seeing that differences are wrong, what we should really look at is what we ascribe to differences."

To prepare teachers to think about intersectionality and to facilitate difficult conversations that disrupt deficit orientations toward difference, Boveda developed the [Intersectional Competence Measure](#), which captures educators' awareness of how sociocultural markers of difference simultaneously intersect within the P-12 school context, and a series of [publicly available protocols](#).

Boveda and her collaborators encourage educators to talk about cross-cutting education equity issues by asking questions such as:

- How are you made aware of the diversity represented in your classroom?

- For example:
 - Do your students have individualized education plans?
 - Do your students participate in free and reduced lunch programs?
 - Has a student or their family shared anything about their [cultural background](#) that distinguishes them from their peers?
 - Do any students have multiple needs that might make their educational experience more challenging?

Boveda emphasized that [special education](#) is a unique and challenging career path and that teachers need to be prepared to look within themselves in addition to addressing the individual needs of their students.

"How do we talk about our own differences, our own internal stories, our own relationship to schooling and our identities?" she asked. "It's far less frequent for teachers to talk about their own identities and backgrounds, and how it shapes their attitudes towards learning and teaching. ... Black feminism gives tools for us to talk about our identities. Our differences can help us come together and find solutions, especially for our students."

More information: Mildred Boveda, What's a Black feminist doing in a field like special education?, *Theory Into Practice* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/00405841.2024.2355816](#)

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