Received: 29 July 2024 | Accepted: 23 August 2025

DOI: 10.1111/1471-3802.70036

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Overlooked and underserved: How inclusive education oversights exclude Black students

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Funding information
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

Abstract

Empirical research about equity in schools seldom investigates how the intersectionality of race and disability shapes Canadian educational trajectories. This article shows how disability-related school procedures impede Black students' learning opportunities. The theory of racialized organizations posits that institutions such as schools reproduce societal racial hierarchies through seemingly race-neutral processes. Using an intersectional lens and the theory of racialized organizations, this article presents the findings of a qualitative study focusing on Black students' experiences. The analysis is drawn from interviews and focus groups conducted with 60 participants in Nova Scotia, Canada between 2018 and 2019. Participants' narratives revealed that school professionals could better support Black students by ending the misapplication of Individual Program Plans (IPPs) and addressing Black learners' learning disabilities and mental health needs through collaborative alliances with caregivers. This article shows that tighter coupling between anti-racist and inclusive education policies and disability-related procedures is needed to achieve equitable access to education.

KEYWORDS
ableism, African Nova Scotian students, Black Canadian children and youth, inclusive education policy, intersectionality, racialized organizations

Key points

- In this qualitative inquiry, the participants shared that some Black Nova Scotian students are overlooked and underserved in public schools because of the loose coupling between anti-racism and inclusive education policies and school disability-related procedures, that is, the gap between existing policies and actual everyday school interventions.
- Participants' narratives reveal three organisational mechanisms that disenfranchise some Black students from learning opportunities during disability-related procedures: the misapplication of individual programme plans (IPPs), the lack of recognition and resources for Black students with mental health challenges, and the insufficient identification of learning disabilities and uneven implementation of accommodation plans.
- The findings of this project underscore the importance of investigating the intersectionality of racism and ableism in the ways in which disability-related procedures are interpreted and applied at the referral, assessment, identification and accommodation planning stages, while also reviewing teacher candidates' formation and teachers' professional development to achieve equitable education.

- The conclusion indicates that future scholars could examine the perceptions and beliefs of school personnel, particularly teachers, about Black students with disabilities (by analysing race and not only immigrant or refugee status), while school administrators could foster collaborative alliances with Black caregivers and engage Black community members to address oversights.

INTRODUCTION

Empirical studies pertaining to equity in Canadian schools seldom examine how disability-related procedures impact Black students' opportunities to learn. Racism and ableism can both respectively impact learners' educational trajectories but are often investigated separately in critical race studies and disability studies (Artiles, 2013; Frederick & Shifrer, 2019). Although a core principle of public education is equity, which entails that schools provide the resources needed to promote the developmental and academic success of all students, some institutional efforts to foster equity have been characterised as performative rather than effective (Sider et al., 2022). Critical race and disability studies scholars alike have primarily siloed their work by investigating a single axis of difference (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Frederick & Shifrer, 2019). Interestingly, both areas of study treat race or disability as a socially-historically constructed category of difference embedded within hierarchies of power (Banks, 2015). In critical race studies, scholars acknowledge that there is only one human race, but that following colonisation and the transatlantic slave trade, the social-political construction of Black people at the bottom of a racial hierarchy has and continues to yield symbolic, social and material consequences (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Meanwhile, disability scholars challenge the medical model that presumes that disability is an individual medical limitation (Artiles, 2013). Instead, they embrace a social model in which disability is a consequence of stigma, discrimination and environmental barriers (Artiles, 2013; Hernandez-Saca et al., 2018). In many circumstances, Whiteness and ability both respectively confer social, political and economic benefits (Annamma et al., 2013). For instance, there is evidence that Black Nova Scotians with a disability, mental health illness, or addiction face ableist and racist misconceptions, under-diagnosis and under-treatment in the health care system (Willis et al., 2021).

Frederick and Shifrer (2019) suggest that researchers should adopt an intersectional lens while studying inequalities experienced by racialized people with a disability. They argue that disability scholars should avoid treating race as an analogy for disability, while critical race scholars should avoid treating disability as a metaphor for racial oppression; rather, both groups of scholars should embrace an intersectional lens of analysis (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019). In fact, belonging to one category of social difference does not confer an understanding or expertise in another one. In the field of education, scholars who work with an intersectional lens often expose why, despite the implementation of inclusive education policies in several jurisdictions, racialized students are underserved and overrepresented in special education. For instance, Banks (2017) observes that teachers are unprepared to teach diverse students and that gaps persist in teacher candidates' professional development. In another article, she also states that: 'There is limited evidence to suggest that teacher preparation programs actively engage preservice teachers in critical dialogues on how race and disability converge to reinforce deficit notions of racially diverse individuals with disabilities (Banks, 2015, p. 573)'. Tefera et al. (2023) encourage the study of historical, spatial and socio-cultural factors that contextualize how the intersectionality of race and disability affects racialized students' experiences of school discipline interventions and disability-related procedures. In some countries, like Canada, the intersectionality of racism and ableism in education remains understudied empirically.

This article aims to address a gap in Canadian educational scholarship by examining the institutional oversights of inclusive education when Black Canadian students experience disability-related school procedures. This analysis is relevant because it demonstrates how, despite anti-racism and inclusive education policies, the uneven implementation of disability-related procedures results in Black students' inadequate access to learning opportunities, accommodations and supports. It contributes to a better understanding of the gaps in inclusive education policies and interventions while demonstrating how schools act as racialized organisations. In a qualitative study conducted in Nova Scotia (Canada) focusing on Black learners' schooling experiences, several participants narratives foregrounded the repercussions of the intersectionality of anti-Black racism and ableism. Using an intersectional lens and the theory of racialized organisations, this article shows that because anti-racism and inclusive education policies that should undergird everyday disability-related procedures are loosely coupled, Black students are overlooked and underserved. Furthermore, this article demonstrates that the intentional application of anti-racist and inclusive education principles could foster the appropriate application of Individualized Program Plans (IPP) and provide ample supports for Black students with mental health challenges or learning disabilities. Thus, if deliberate actions likened to tighter coupling between existing

policies and disability-related procedures are implemented in schools, underserved populations like Black students would benefit from greater effective access to education.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The study of anti-Black racism and ableism in education

Black Canadian students' schooling experiences are heterogeneous, but the literature points to recurrent institutional barriers that inhibit their academic success and positive development across provinces (Ibrahim & Abdi, 2016; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2017). Some scholars point to the lack of diverse curricular and pedagogical practices (Henry, 2017; Jean-Pierre, 2021; Munroe et al., 2019); various manifestations of anti-Black racism including the racism of low academic and intellectual expectations (George, 2020; James, 2012); the insufficient number of Black teachers and role models in school settings (Briggs, 2018; Malinen & Roberts-Jeffers, 2021); and the detrimental consequences of punitive school discipline interventions (George, 2020; Jean-Pierre & Bundy, 2021; Sibblis, 2014). Subsequently, these barriers culminate in Black Canadian students' differential participation rates in postsecondary education (Kamanzi, 2021; Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017). Meanwhile, limited scholarship delves into Black Canadians' experiences of disability-related procedures in education. Some studies examine newcomer youth's experiences and show, for example, that in Quebec, immigrant students are further marginalised from learning opportunities because of exclusionary practices, racism and ableism during school disability-related procedures (Borri-Anadon & Collins, 2023; Collins & Borri-Anadon, 2021). It is noteworthy to underline that although research with newcomer youth can certainly provide insights into the intersectionality of migration status and disability, Black Canadian students' experiences cannot be examined solely through the prisms of integration, culture or even social class (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025; Thésée & Carr, 2016). While many Black Canadian students are from refugee and immigrant families, it is important to acknowledge that there is a significant proportion of Black students whose families have been in the country for two generations or more while others are from historical Black Canadian communities such as African Nova Scotians (Frempong et al., 2025; Jean-Pierre, 2021). Moreover, while Black students are racialised, their experiences cannot be subsumed under the category of 'visible minorities' either since there are major differences in outcomes between different racialised Canadian groups (Kamanzi, 2021; Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017). In fact, many scholars contend that it is paramount to engage in-depth with anti-Black racism because of its singular consequences on people of sub-Saharan African descent following historical processes such as the transatlantic slave trade, forced segregation and the relentless persistence of subtle and overt racism impacting contemporary Black communities (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025; Templeton, 2025).

Empirical studies that delve into the intersectionality of anti-Black racism and disability show that Black learners are underserved in school systems through various institutional mechanisms. Qualitative studies conducted in Ontario and Nova Scotia reveal that some Black parents perceive that anti-Black racism has a lingering effect on evaluation procedures of a disability, and ultimately the over-representation of Black students with individualized program plans (IPPs) (Adjei, 2018; Butler, 2021; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021). A recent qualitative study conducted in Quebec with a focus on disability-related procedures also shows that Black students reported a lack of transparency pertaining to their transfer to special education schools and the persistent use of punitive school discipline interventions after their transition to a school that should officially have more supports for behavioural challenges (Collins, 2024). Meanwhile, in another province, there is evidence that there is internal variation within Black communities during the referral process. For instance, a quantitative study in Nova Scotia revealed that non-immigrant Black students from low-socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to be identified as having a disability than other Black students (Frempong et al., 2024). These studies reveal that Black learners experience institutional oversights because of the intersection of anti-Black racism and disability. Yet, there is a need to gain insight into *how* everyday practices disenfranchise or effectively support Black Canadian students when disability-related procedures are initiated in schools. Untangling *how* is critical, because scholars have highlighted the importance of studying the intersectionality of disability in different countries with different ethnic groups while attending to the way local contexts shape the mechanisms that reproduce inequality (Banks et al., 2025). For instance, a study with Black middle-class parents in the United Kingdom reveals that Black students' existing learning disabilities are under-identified, and that essential accommodations are not consistently implemented despite the family's socio-economic status (Gillborn, 2015). In the United States, Haight et al. (2016) note that collaborative alliances between parents and school personnel are instrumental in providing effective supports for Black children with a learning disability. These empirical studies from the United Kingdom and the United States illustrate the relevance of examining closely *how* anti-Black racism and ableism intersect in everyday disability-related interventions. If these studies were solely about special education, inclusive education or racism, the institutional mechanisms that disenfranchise or support Black students with disabilities would not have been highlighted.

The reluctance to investigate the intersectionality of anti-Black racism and ableism in education

The social construction of an ableist hierarchy of intellectual capacity is intertwined with the social construction of racist doctrines that question the intelligence of Black people. Historically, researchers attempted to demonstrate that Afro-descendant people were intellectually inferior as a justification for Black people's dehumanisation, enslavement and denial of full citizenship (Annamma et al., 2013; Bailey & Mobley, 2019). Today, Black students still experience racist incidents in which their intellectual acumen is questioned or underestimated (Adjei, 2018; Gold & Richards, 2012). Thus, there is a reluctance among many scholars to study the intersectionality of anti-Black racism and ableism in education because it conjures up long-standing racist assumptions regarding Black learners' intellectual capacities and heightens the fear of furthering deficit views of Black students (Proffitt, 2022).

In several Black diasporas, there is a long-held belief that Black people cannot afford to have a physical, mental, sensory, psychiatric, or learning impairment because anti-Black racism is in and of itself a significant burden. Individuals with a social status that marginalizes them in society can perceive the adoption of another stigmatizing identity as a serious threat to their reputation or already precarious status (Campbell & Mowbray, 2016). Therefore, some Black parents tell their children that they must work twice as hard in order to be successful in life, and Black women often repeat the descriptive and prescriptive notion that they must be 'strong Black women' (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Etowa et al., 2017). While these expressions reflect an acute awareness of existing structural barriers and the strength needed to overcome them, they also perpetuate the belief that having a disability is a stigmatizing attribute that a Black person cannot have (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Campbell & Mowbray, 2016). Thus, it is not surprising that some Black Americans living with depression reported a reluctance to disclose their condition or seek services (Campbell & Mowbray, 2016). In education, Gold and Richards (2012) contend that labeling students is harmful and compounds the stereotypical characterization of Black students as 'deficient', 'disruptive', or 'at-risk'. They also suggest that a disability-label can inadvertently instigate a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby learners internalize the expectation of their limitations, and as a result, disengage from activities that they could otherwise accomplish (Gold & Richards, 2012). Along with the self-fulfilling prophecy effect, others point to the impact of 'special education symbolism', which refers to the effects of negative experiences and feelings associated with special education on a student's psyche (Hernandez-Saca et al., 2018, p. 297). In addition, there is a concern that the label of a disability can have negative implications because of the stigma associated with disability and because of the likelihood of being subjected to unfair school discipline practices (Templeton, 2025). To avoid the negative consequences of labeling, Gold and Richards (2012) argue that schools should provide adaptations and services without the attribution of a disability label. Banks (2017) points to how inclusive teaching practices can play a crucial role in alleviating the burden of disability labels. In a qualitative study with African American males, participants revealed that teachers' understanding of learning disabilities and their ability to apply quality differentiated pedagogical approaches enhance their learning (Banks, 2017). Thus, the threat posed by the stigma of disability to the already precarious social status of Black students is significant (Templeton, 2025).

In addition to the threat to social status and the potentially detrimental effects of a disability label, Black caregivers often have genuine concerns regarding tangible access to learning supports and career prospects if a diagnosis of disability is determined. American scholars note that the long-term effect of disability labels often negatively impacts racialized students (Artiles, 2013; Hernandez-Saca et al., 2018). This compounds other pre-existing barriers that racialized students face, such as the influence of race on teachers' perceptions of social and behavioural skills starting from the critical early years of schooling (Redding, 2019; Zimmermann, 2018). Irizarry (2015) found racial gaps in the ways teachers perceive low and high performing Black and Latino students compared to White and Asian students in early childhood literacy assessments. These findings provide a broader context to understand racialized caregivers' hesitancy towards disability-related school procedures like a referral, an assessment, an identification, or the implementation of a modified educational plan. Although proper identification of a disability may seem ideal to secure accommodations, scholars note that the risks of stigmatization, gaps in services and poor educational outcomes remain high for racialized students (Annamma et al., 2013; Skiba et al., 2008). Irizarry (2015) suggests that deficit-thinking regarding certain racialized groups' cognitive abilities plays a role in teachers' perceptions and evaluations. Anti-Black racism affects these perceptions and Covay (2014) found that teachers' perceptions of Black students' academic ability are influenced by students' social and behavioural skills. Meanwhile, in many jurisdictions, access to accommodations and adaptations can be limited if a student's disability is not identified. Thus, in the United States, parents of racialized students often face a dilemma at the juncture of disability-related processes because of the unpredictability of the risks and benefits for their child. On the one hand, the misidentification

of a disability contributes to the overrepresentation of racialized students with disability labels, modified programs and in special education. On the other hand, in some jurisdictions the under-identification of a disability hinders racialized students' access to accommodations (Artiles, 2013).

In sum, the role of ableist tropes in dehumanising Black people, the potential implications of a disability label to the precarious status of Black students, and the uncertainty of the outcomes of disability-related school procedures explain partially why the intersectionality of anti-Black racism and ableism remains understudied in Canada.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Several theories contend with the intersectionality of race and disability such as dis/ability critical race theory (Annamma et al., 2013) or Black disability threat theory (Templeton, 2025). In this article, an intersectional lens combined with the theory of racialized organizations is selected because this conceptual framework aligns most with the substance of participants' narratives. Building on critical race and Black feminist theoretical perspectives, intersectionality can be defined as 'the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities' (Collins, 2015, p. 2). Grassroots movements were already practicing intersectionality (Collins, 2015) when Crenshaw (1993) applied it in an academic context to demonstrate how women of colour's experiences of violence were shaped by gender and race. Intersectionality is an interdisciplinary framework used internationally, and several scholars insist that it cannot be dissociated from the social category of race or conceptualized as 'colorblind intersectionality' (Bilge, 2013; Carbado, 2019; Carbado et al., 2013). Furthermore, Bilge (2010) recommends that scholars operationalize intersectionality as an analytical tool by mobilizing mediatory concepts such as those from organizational theory. Combining intersectionality with the theory of racialized organizations is suitable because Collins (2015) argues that intersectionality holds the potential to expand the analysis of social institutions. Furthermore, Artiles (2013) points to the importance of institutional practices and bureaucratic pressure to comprehend the racialization of disability.

In sociology of education, organizational theory underscores the institutional conditions that facilitate or inhibit change in schools. In recent years, a lot of attention has been placed on loosely coupled organizations, which are defined as having different parts that are minimally linked and relatively independent of each other (Meyer & Rowan, 1978). Schools are loosely coupled meso-level institutions because of the typical gap between policies and everyday practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1978). In addition to its loosely coupled nature, several scholars contend that meso-level organizations, such as schools, are not race-neutral and often reproduce societal racial hierarchies (Ray, 2019; Shifrer & Appleton, 2024; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). In fact, racialized organizations tend to (a) impact the degree of agency of individuals from different racial groups, (b) legitimize the unequal distribution of material and social resources, (c) uphold Whiteness as a credential and (d) result in racialized decoupling (Ray, 2019, p. 27). When members of disadvantaged racial groups work in racialized organizations, they are often required to engage in racialized labor where they address issues pertaining to minority populations (Wingfield & Alston, 2014). In addition, when major changes occur, such as the end of legislation authorizing school segregation in Nova Scotia in 1954 (Saney, 1998), new organizational mechanisms often emerge to maintain racial hierarchies, resulting in unequal integrated schools and racialized decoupling (Ray, 2019). For instance, African Nova Scotians' teachers were not systematically hired in integrated schools after 1954 and the Afrocentric curriculum they had developed over decades was ignored and excluded. Thus, although the end of school segregation was significant to further racial equity, the actual transition resulted in the loss of social and cultural capital that could have supported Black learners' engagement and sense of belonging in integrated schools (Jean-Pierre, 2021). This example illustrates how seemingly colorblind and neutral organizational mechanisms related to school desegregation produce curriculum and hiring practices decoupled from a formal policy such as school integration.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

Grounded in the personal accounts and perspectives of youth, parents, community stakeholders and school professionals, this study initially aimed to investigate Black students' overall schooling experiences and potential alternative non-punitive disciplinary interventions. At different moments during the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, many participants expanded on various aspects of schooling that they found pertinent. In that context, several participants shared observations and experiences in which they identified institutional oversights when anti-Black racism intersects with ableism during school referrals, assessments, diagnosis and the implementation of accommodations and adaptations. In light of the salience of these contributions, the analysis in this article addresses the

following question: How do disability-related school procedures impact Black learners?

Design

This research project employs a cross-sectional qualitative design grounded in the assumption that community members hold valuable cultural capital and a wealth of knowledge regarding the social issues that affect them (Jean-Pierre et al., 2025; Yosso, 2005). Although qualitative data is not generalisable, it provides an opportunity to understand a social phenomenon through the eyes of a population, while gaining insight into the context of lived experiences (Bell et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant when conducting research with a historically excluded and hard-to-reach population, like Black Nova Scotians. The research protocol was approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants

To include a wide range of points of view, recruitment involved a snowball/respondent-driven sampling based on specific criteria, an appropriate recruitment strategy with hard-to-reach populations (Goodman, 2011). The inclusion criteria involved self-identification as Black in Nova Scotian, being 12 years of age and older, with a willingness to volunteer to discuss schooling. The intergenerational sample consisted of students, school administrators, teachers, other school professionals, service providers and community members and parents (see Table 1). Apart from one individual, all the participants self-identified as Black; more specifically, 39 participants self-identified as African Nova Scotians and 20 as Black immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean (see Table 1). More women (34) participated in the study than men (26), and the sample included 12 French-speaking participants from the Francophone minority community in Nova Scotia. All participants received a copy of the letter of information, signed a consent form and parental consent was obtained for youth participants who were under 16 years old.

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of participants.

Characteristics	Participants
Focus groups	$N=43$ from 9 focus groups
Interviews	$N=17$
Gender	Female $N=34$
	Male $N=26$
Age group	12–18 $N=12$
	19–25 $N=4$
	26–40 $N=13$
	41–55 $N=21$
	56 or over $N=10$
First official language	English $N=48$
	French $N=12$
Background	African Nova Scotian $N=39$
	Black immigrants $N=20$
	Caribbean $N=1$
	East African $N=3$
	West African $N=15$
	Southern African $N=1$
	Other $N=1$
Role	Middle and high school students $N=12$
	Postsecondary students $N=7$
	School administrators $N=3$
	Teachers $N=4$
	Other school professionals $N=3$
	Social and human services professionals $N=17$
	Community members and parents $N=14$

Procedures

This study used sequential interviewing, which allows to approach each interview or focus group as a case study, building upon the previous ones until saturation is reached (Small, 2009). The combination of semi-structured interviews and focus groups provides a multi-dimensional and nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of race and disability in schools, with a range of individual and collective perspectives from the participants. These focus groups and interviews occurred virtually and over the phone between 2018 and 2019, with a total of 60 participants. A total of 9 semi-structured focus groups lasting approximately 1 h took place, including 2 focus groups with adolescents aged 14–16 and 7 focus groups with adults aged 24 and older. In addition, 17 semi-structured interviews lasting about 45 min on average took place with 7 youth aged 12–23 and 10 adults aged 24 and older. The interview guides included open-ended questions such as: Are there initiatives to improve school climate that you appreciate? What should teachers change in terms of school discipline and school climate?

Data analysis

Descriptive validity and accuracy of the accounts were ensured by recording the interviews and focus groups (Maxwell, 1992). Thereafter, those 9 focus groups and 17 interviews were transcribed and analysed with the qualitative software MAXQDA (VERBI, Berlin, Germany). Using an inductive approach, the author conducted a thematic analysis to explore the patterns of similarities,

differences and unanticipated insights in the participants' narratives (Nowell et al., 2017). The thematic analysis steps involved familiarisation with the data, the creation of initial codes, a search for themes, a review and the refinement of themes and sub-themes (Nowell et al., 2017). From this process, three themes were identified regarding the intersectionality of race and disability (see Figure 1). The credibility of the interpretation of the findings was verified through a community consultation where questions were addressed regarding the methodology and the interpretation of the narratives (Bell et al., 2023; Kogen, 2024). Pseudonyms are used and identifiers have been removed throughout the article to protect participants' confidentiality.

FINDINGS

Participants' shared stories revealed how Black learners are underserved because of loose coupling or a lack of alignment between existing policies and the everyday practice of disability-related procedures in schools. Their contributions can be summarized in three areas of concern or themes: (a) the misapplication of IPPs, (b) the lack of recognition and supports for Black learners with mental health issues and (c) the insufficient identification of learning disabilities and uneven implementation of accommodations.

The misapplication of individual program plans (IPPs)

In Canada, each province or territory, like Nova Scotia, plans and implements its own public school system and determines its policies in matters pertaining to accessibility. The individual program plan (IPP) is an integral part of Nova Scotia's inclusive education strategy, in which all students attend the same class, with some following a modified programme if they experience academic challenges or if they are gifted (Province of Nova Scotia, 2008, 2019). During a focus group, Dove, a school administrator, explains how at its onset, the Special Education Policy was meant to replace streaming and implement inclusive education for all students. Streaming refers to the separation of students into groups based on their actual or perceived academic abilities for some or all classes. Dove's comment reflects how the Special Education Policy's disability-related procedures are loosely coupled because of a lack of a shared common understanding among school professionals.

> The system had this [streaming] before. It was resolved because parents complained about it. The policies were reviewed, the Education Act was changed, and this Special Education Policy was created to go along with the Education Act. The problem we are having is that the interpretation and implementation of this Special Education Policy is so complex that people are so confused, including the educators themselves, that the implementation is where we are losing the mark. […] Believe me, if you go to 20 different schools, you will hear 20 different versions of the IPP.
>
> (Dove)

Dove notes that the multiple interpretations of the IPPs often diverge from its original intent. Similar to other Black Canadian parents (Butler, 2021), some participants question the legitimacy of disability-related process due to the perceived overrepresentation of Black learners. For example, during a focus group,

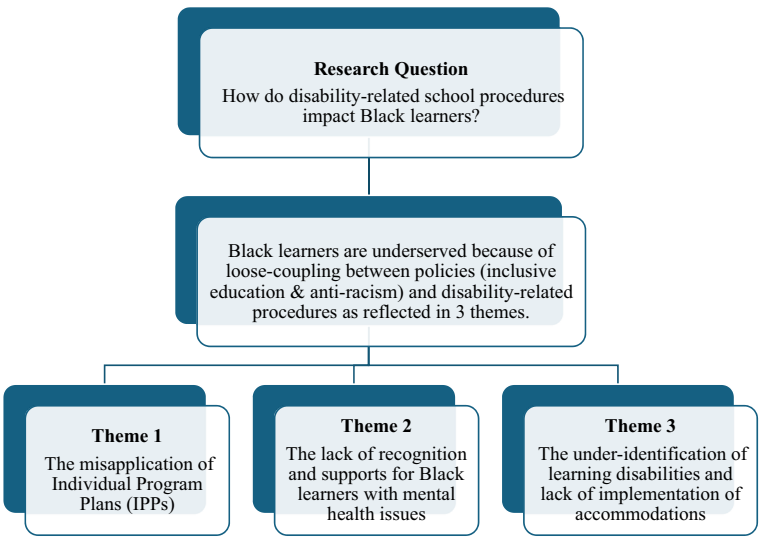

FIGURE 1 Thematic chart reflecting the main findings.

Sterling, a human services professional and parent shares that: 'When you look at IPPs, modified programmes, our numbers, astronomic, it's ridiculous. […] I speak my mind, it's trickery.' During an interview, Agape, a teacher, made the observation that once a modified programme is assigned to a student, there is a blatant lack of follow-up in subsequent years to monitor the plan. She shared an instance where she felt compelled to intervene because of a discrepancy between the in-class performance of Grade 6 Black boys and their IPPs' recommendations. Her subsequent request for a new assessment of these students is an illustrative example of how a Black female teacher engaged in racialized labor in schools.

> Long story short, they ended up being assessed and the psychoeducational assessment was done again in Grade 6, and lo and behold, the outcomes come back, and they are different: above average and average in every part of the assessment. I can speak firsthand about these IPPs or individualized plans. These boys were put on it in Grade 2 and because of their behaviour, they thought the academics wasn't there.
>
> (Agape)

Agape underscores how Black boys' actual or perceived behavioural problems – as opposed to learning predicaments – result in the implementation of an IPP, when in fact a behavioural plan should be implemented if there are behavioural issues. Racist stereotypes of Black boys influence the perception of their behaviours as aggressive or inappropriate (Gold & Richards, 2012; James, 2012; Proffitt, 2022). This is significant given the evidence that social and behavioural skills influence teachers' perceptions of Black students' abilities (Covay, 2014). In contrast, Dove, in conversation with fellow teacher Camilla during a focus group, notes that in some cases, frequent behavioural problems may curtail academic progress:

Dove: Because if a child is on a behavioural plan and part of the plan, or the behaviour is such that the child cannot sit in a classroom.

Camilla: He's always at the [principal's] office.

Dove: Yes, being sent out or being sent to somewhere else, they are missing out on instruction, and that's ultimately what will impact on their progress.

Some participants, like Bertha and Patrizia – who both provide social services in schools – believe that the misapplication of individual program plans persists because it enables schools to avoid accountability when some students perform poorly academically. During a focus group, they explain that students with individualized program plans are excluded from schools' official reports, but students in behavioural programs are still included in school statistics. This creates an institutional incentive to implement IPPs when behavioural issues seem to impact students' academic progress. During a focus group, Haven, a social services professional who supports Black parents as they navigate school, explains: 'If I place that student on an IPP, I no longer have the responsibility to help that student meet the outcomes. So, we need to understand that the IPP benefits the system, because now when I publish those stats, those students aren't in those stats.'

Black students experience unequal access to education related to the inconsistent interpretation of the province's inclusive education policy, resulting in the misapplication of IPPs. For instance, some participants suggest that school administrators assign IPPs to students who may require a behavioural plan because they adopt an institutional logic that prioritises the achievement of favourable overall school performance statistics rather than students' actual needs. The racialised nature of schools as organisations is also at work when Black children's perceived or actual behavioural issues are instrumentalised to assign an IPP, rather than a behavioural plan, with little to no follow-up in the subsequent years. The fact that Agape, a Black teacher, had to intervene to change the IPP status of two Black male learners illustrates the crucial and transformational value of racialised labour in education where racialised school professionals are often expected or are morally compelled to address issues affecting minoritised populations with little or no recognition (Wingfield & Alston, 2014). The misapplication of the IPP reflects how the inconsistent implementation of the inclusive education policy negatively affects Black students.

The lack of recognition and support for Black students' mental health needs

Several participants suggested that because Black learners' mental health issues tend to be under-detected, they are more likely to be misidentified as having a disability or to be subjected to punitive discipline. The underidentification of Black learners with mental health needs is compounded by a mismatch between the resources in place and Black learners' actual needs. For instance, during a focus group, Cedar – a school administrator – contends that Black children are often wrongfully labelled as having ADHD because teachers fail to recognise signs of trauma, and do not grasp the complex circumstances in their lives, including the impact of racism.

> So those traumas, a lot of times, teachers of European ancestry misdiagnose them as ADHD. Because of the trauma and the microaggressions that children are dealing with walking to school, whether they are in a

> foster family, whether they are in an adoptive family […]. So, there's too many dynamics today and where do they teach that? Where do they teach a culture of competencies of how to deal with that as a classroom teacher, let alone [how to] teach our children?
>
> (Cedar)

Tarsilla, a university student, highlights during an interview that difficult life circumstances, combined with a lack of support, affects students' behaviours: 'Folks not having a place to get that counselling support, that emotional support. Oftentimes, students bring with them the baggage from their home life.' In a similar way, during a focus group, Dorothy, a mother and social services professional explains that 'I think our kids are dealing with more. Let's face it.' During an interview, Imelda, a mother and social services professional, similarly believes that teachers are not trained to recognize mental health issues in Black youth.

> I think there is a lack of appreciation for what that looks like in its presentation for Black learners, which can be culturally nuanced. So, anxiety for young Black boys doesn't necessarily always present as, 'I've got butterflies in my stomach.' It presents as, 'I'm really frustrated, and I'm angry, and I feel overwhelmed, and I feel flooded.'
>
> (Imelda)

When school professionals are unable to recognize Black students' mental health needs, they sometimes resort to punitive discipline. During an interview, Phoenix, a social services professional who works with youth, explains that some Black students with unaddressed mental health issues are trapped in a cycle where their misconduct worsens and schools' punitive practices escalate including frequent suspensions.

> This young man […], if he does anything at school, they suspend him right away, five days suspension, two days suspension. So, there's little to no recognition, or understanding, or conversation that clearly, this young man is going through a mental health crisis, and he needs some support, and suspending him is not actually helpful.
>
> (Phoenix)

Across interviews and focus groups, many participants suggested that addressing the lack of mental health services in schools was crucial. During a focus group with Black professional service providers who have daily contact with members of the community and are parents themselves, there was a strong consensus around early interventions and counselling.

Josephine: The social workers that work in the school system, they are basically doing psycho-ed assessments for learning disabilities and there is no counselling, there's no therapy. The guidance counsellor basically deals with the academic curriculum and where a child should go. There's very little resource for a child to sit down and talk to somebody if they are having mental health issues, or if they are having issues at home, or if they are having issues with someone else to really unpack that, try to understand it, and then look at resources to help make it better. So, if we had more of those supports.

Flora: If I was going to speak to the Minister, it would be just that, put more resources in. Yes, cause right now there's nothing there.

Sofia: And that's for the whole province, that's been said for the whole province.

Birch: Get back to those kids quickly.

During an interview, Edith, a mother and social services professional, suggests that part of the problem is the stigma attached to disability and mental health issues and that an intersectional lens is necessary to usher profound institutional change in school environments.

> I think that the problem is that we need to understand intersectionality […] but I think there is that misunderstanding that disability is some type of disadvantage, shush, shush, shush, mental health shush, it's the shush. Unfortunately, our kids are having a hard time going to the mainstream mental health services because they're not really prepared to work with them and then it's a hard time coming to the community.
>
> (Edith)

Edith whispers 'shush' alluding to the stigma-related silence surrounding learning disabilities and mental health issues. This also parallels the belief in many historically marginalized Black communities that disability can further hinder Black individuals' life chances (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Campbell & Mowbray, 2016; Templeton, 2025). The stigmatization of disability is also compounded with Black learners' difficulty in finding culturally relevant mental health resources. In this context, Claudia, a community advocate, proposes during an interview that Black-led resources outside of the school system grounded in an intersectional approach could create a safe space where Black students' learning disabilities and mental health issues can be addressed. Like Gillborn (2015), she acknowledges the primacy of racism in Black people's lives because race is hypervisible, but also believes that it is possible to address several axes of inequality without minimizing the salience of racism: 'When I look at the schools, they're not there yet. But if the support was community-based, and if we had

more authority and more autonomy to make those kinds of decisions, yes.'

Many participants believed that despite an inclusive education policy, Black students who experience mental health challenges are underserved by the public school system. Schools as racialized organizations perpetuate unequal access to education by not detecting and addressing Black students' mental health needs. This situation echoes a broad pattern in health and social services indicating that Black Nova Scotians are underserved in terms of mental health and addiction care (Willis et al., 2021). Schools in effect foster racialized decoupling when they neglect to implement inclusive education policy principles and practices for Black students such as mental health interventions and instead mobilise punitive discipline. Furthermore, the racist stereotypical characterisation of Black students as 'disruptive' (Gold & Richards, 2012; Templeton, 2025) affects school professionals' ability to recognise Black students' mental health challenges and consequently shapes seemingly race-neutral school disability-related procedures. In addition to mental health issues, participants are also preoccupied by the under-identification of learning disabilities.

The insufficient identification of learning disabilities and implementation of accommodations

While some participants express great concern regarding the over-representation of Black learners among students with IPPs, many participants also indicate that some Black students with genuine disabilities are underserved, entrenching inequitable access to education. Many participants report that Black learners and their caregivers are hindered in their ability to access inclusive education at one or several stages of disability-related procedures, namely the referral, the assessment, the identification of a disability, or the implementation of a modified plan.

As in Gillborn's (2015) study of Black middle-class parents in the UK, school professionals miss an opportunity to support Black learners when they do not refer them for an assessment early. During an interview, Athanasia, a former school Black employee with no training in education or psychometry, reports that she was disconcerted to discover that a 15-year-old student with a learning disability had not been referred for an assessment earlier.

> This student was tested for a learning disability, and it came out that she did have one, and here she is, almost at the end of Grade 9. […]. For me, who was coming in with little experience in regard to testing, accommodations, or learning disabilities, to be able to recognise there was some issues or challenges, I'm just like, what the heck? Why is it me that is discovering this? She's 15 years old for God's sake. […] I think sometimes people just think that we might just be stupid, that we're not performing because we're not capable enough, we just don't have the smarts, and they're not looking deeper. […]
>
> (Athanasia)

Similar to Agape, Athanasia's racialized labor was needed to address this Black student's learning disability which had been overlooked for years. Athanasia infers that perhaps the teachers hold stereotypical assumptions regarding Black peoples' intellect (Adjei, 2018) which informs their low expectations of Black learners' academic performance (George, 2020; James, 2012). Thus, Athanasia's story illustrates racialized decoupling related to the racism of low expectations and consequently, the unequal fulfilment of schools' commitment to accessibility for Black students. Neglecting the needs of Black learners with learning disabilities has long-term consequences. For instance, during an interview, Phoenix shares his observation of what he characterizes as low literacy levels among some Black adult service-recipients in a social program following psychoeducational assessments: 'We got young men psychoeducational assessments, and all of them were working between Grade 2 and Grade 4 level education.' Missing the opportunity to provide a referral to an assessment and to implement promptly accommodations impacts negatively these students' literacy skills as they become adults. Meanwhile, during a focus group, some participants reported that they were disappointed that sometimes, parental input is dismissed by school professionals:

> ***Brigid:*** I sat in on the meeting that she [mother] wanted because she had him assessed and the psychologist was there. […] She wanted another test that you could do. Anyway, he [the psychologist] said no. His excuse was that there was a big line-up of people and that she was going to spend a whole lot of money. Unless she got insurance, it wouldn't be worth doing.
> ***Aurea:*** He was just being defiant.
> ***Dorothy:*** That's what the teacher said?
> ***Brigid:*** That's what the psychologist said.
> ***Aurea:*** We'll chalk it up to defiance.

Further in the conversation, Brigid, Dorothy and Aurea mentioned that they believed that racist and gendered stereotypes that characterize Black males as 'disruptive' or 'aggressive' (Gold & Richards, 2012; James, 2012; Proffitt, 2022) influenced the presumption that the child had an 'oppositional-defiance disorder'. On the one hand, Aurea's story illustrates how school professionals do not always welcome Black learners' caregivers' insights, can neglect to conduct comprehensive psychoeducational assessments, and consequently hastily jump to conclusions. On the other hand, other participants

highlight that a psycho-educational assessment holds the potential of informing a strength-based pedagogical approach. During another focus group, school employees Talida (a teacher) and Angel (a human services professional) suggested that a comprehensive psycho-educational assessment, not only focused on learning challenges but also on a child's strengths, can enable teachers to better tailor pedagogical strategies to the abilities and potential of a child. These insights demonstrate the importance of conducting comprehensive assessments holistically and in a culturally-responsive way.

When the time comes to prepare an IPP or a modified plan, some participants note a lack of follow-up and the non-implementation of accommodations which can induce distrust among Black caregivers. Haight et al. (2016) suggest that creating trustful and collaborative alliances with Black learners' caregivers can yield positive outcomes. This finding echoes Canadian research where Black parents highlight the importance of schools working with them to support their children (Jean-Pierre, 2022; Malinen & Roberts-Jeffers, 2021). A collaborative alliance implies accountability on the part of school professionals after an assessment. In contrast, during an interview, Dyonisia, a recent high school graduate, shared that after an assessment, neither her mother nor herself ever learned if she had a learning disability or not. During another interview, Inez, a university student, explained that despite the identification of a learning disability after an assessment, her brother did not receive accommodations. She states: 'He was really popular because he was super-athletic, so he was the main guy in all the sports, super-personable, and never let anything get him down, just an amazing guy. So, he didn't really realize the level of racism that he was experiencing.' Inez believes that school staff encouraged her brother to nurture his athletic skills but neglected to foster his academic development through accessible learning by not implementing his accommodations. This example represents how the stereotype that Black students are predisposed to succeed in sports, but not predisposed to intellectual work is enacted in a racialized organization like schools with detrimental impacts on academic outcomes (James, 2012). In other cases, students are underserved because caregivers are often unaware that a child can access adaptations and accommodations even if they do not have an IPP. During a focus group, Bertha, a social services professional, says, 'You don't need an IPP in place to advocate for those supports […].' In fact, Émeraude, a recent high school graduate and postsecondary student, shared during an interview that teachers could be more proactive by informing parents about assessments and resources by initiating a conversation. Some participants noted that schools do not provide sufficient and explicit information about the range of resources and adaptations available, hindering Black parents' ability to make informed decisions on behalf of their children. Ultimately, during a focus group, some participants like Haven, a social services professional, indicated that school professionals should work collaboratively with caregivers and even assist them in advocating on behalf of their child for accessibility.

> ***Haven:*** […] The school system has a responsibility, and I would say an obligation to help, to ensure that parents understand the tool that they have been given. My point is that we need to help parents have access to the supports needed to make use of these IPPs and even to get second opinions on their IPPs, or even to help them to understand what the IPP means for their own parenting. Because in this province, if you are diagnosed with diabetes as a child, by the time you are six you are drawing your own insulin, you are checking your own blood, you are adjusting your insulin because you have hockey practice in the morning, right? We have a system for educating kids about their insulin. We don't have the same knowledge around ADD. And kids should be getting the same level of education for ADD that the kids for diabetes are getting.

Participants' narratives reveal that in addition to confronting anti-Black stereotypes, Black students with genuine learning disabilities are diverted from inclusive learning opportunities when schools fail to refer them for assessment, to identify their learning disability, to conduct follow-ups, or to implement accommodations in collaboration with their caregivers. In fact, as reported by a participant, sometimes Black school professionals are morally compelled to engage in racialized labor to advocate for an assessment. In other occasions, such as after an assessment, school professionals can neglect to follow-up or implement an accommodation plan, which in turn impedes the academic development of Black students. Schools as racialized organizations also constrain the agency of Black parents and caregivers by not providing critical information pertaining to possible resources and failing to value their insights.

DISCUSSION

Decades after the legal end of school segregation in Nova Scotia, racial hierarchies are maintained and reproduced in education through various seemingly colour-blind mechanisms. Participants' narratives illustrated that when anti-Black racism intersects with ableism, school disability-related practices inhibit Black learners' equitable access to education. Participants' narratives point to several issues associated with the misuse of IPPs, and the under-identification of and lack of supports for Black students with learning disabilities and mental health challenges. These findings are similar to previous studies that reported Black Canadian parents

and community advocates' concerns regarding the overrepresentation of Black students in special education or with modified programmes (Adjei, 2018; Butler, 2021; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021). They also echo a recent study that demonstrated that Black Nova Scotians with mental health and addiction issues reported being under-diagnosed and under-treated (Willis et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this study found a broader range of views regarding disability which is not limited to concerns regarding overrepresentation. Some Black parents and youth are also concerned about the lack of recognition, identification and concrete plans for supports and accommodations for Black students with mental health challenges and learning disabilities. Some participants propose the creation of Black community-led and culturally relevant resources to address Black students' accessibility needs. Other participants suggest that schools should adopt an intersectional lens when they implement inclusive education principles, while taking into account simultaneously anti-racist principles to develop collaborative trustful alliances with Black learners' caregivers.

The theory of racialized organizations stipulates that institutions offer various degrees of agency to different racial groups, upholding Whiteness and the unequal distribution of resources (Ray, 2019). Participants' stories illustrate how schools act as meso-level racialized organizations with examples of practices that constrain the agency of Black parents and learners, as illustrated through unequal access to supports and accommodations, racialized decoupling and racialized labor. These processes are influenced by racist stereotypes such as the perception that Black males are 'disruptive,' as well as the racism of low academic and intellectual expectations. The agency of Black learners' caregivers to meaningfully participate in disability-related school procedures is constrained by the lack of consideration for their input, of limited information regarding possible adaptations and accommodations, and lack of updates regarding their child's academic progress. Allocation of accommodations and supports is inequitable when Black learners' mental health issues and learning disabilities are not fully addressed. Racialized decoupling also occurs through the institutional logics underlying the misuse of IPPs and the lack of fulfilment of the inclusive education policy for Black learners. In some instances, instead of providing services and supports, Black students are caught in a cycle of worsening misconduct and escalating punitive interventions. Finally, participants' narratives also illustrate the invisible, often unrecognized essential role of Black school staff engaged in racialized labor as they strive to compensate for their colleagues' neglect of Black students' academic development.

Although several scholars have argued the importance of adopting anti-racist policies while developing a better understanding of the various manifestations of anti-Black racism (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Ibrahim & Abdi, 2016; James, 2012), the analysis demonstrates the importance of investigating organizational mechanisms with an intersectional lens to fully grasp how Black learners experience unequal access to education to refine our theoretical conceptualization while informing policy and practice. Even though Nova Scotia recently updated its Inclusive Education Policy (Province of Nova Scotia, 2019), it is very likely that the oversights presented are ongoing given that this policy does not address how racism and ableism influence disability-related procedures. Policies and teachers' training should better prepare school professionals to comprehend how racism influences disability-related processes, challenge deficit assumptions about Black students and their parents, and develop their ability to build trustful collaborative alliances with Black caregivers to ensure that they are no longer overlooked and underserved.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings cannot be generalized to all Black students within Nova Scotia or across Canadian provinces. It does not present an exhaustive list of all the organizational mechanisms involved when race intersects with disability in schools. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate how intersectionality sheds light on overlooked institutional mechanisms that Black students' face when they encounter disability procedures. Participants' narratives illustrate how disability-related school procedures can move Black students away from learning opportunities through routine practices. These findings do not diminish the significance or primacy of race and racism but demonstrate that, in the case of some Black learners, a precondition of academic success and educational equity is to address how anti-Black racism and ableism co-construct unequal access to learning opportunities through the uneven application of disability-related procedures. This analysis also illustrates how the theory of racialized organization deepens our understanding of institutional mechanisms that disenfranchise Black students. Future inclusive education policy changes could involve broader engagement with Black community members and even contemplate the creation of community-led resources to provide culturally relevant assessments and supports. The analysis reveals that organizational actions resulting in tighter coupling between anti-racist and inclusive education policies and everyday routine disability-related school procedures could address the existing oversights that affect Black learners. Future research could examine Canadian school professionals' interpretation of inclusive education policies and perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards racialized students with disabilities. Teachers and other school professionals intervene at different stages of disability-related procedures, and adapting teachers' professional development accordingly is paramount for

concrete change. Fundamentally, this study highlights the importance of investigating the compounded effects of the intersectionality of race and disability on historically excluded and underserved populations to enable all students to realize their potential.[i]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Dr. Lorna Erwin for her constructive feedback and support as well as all the participants of this research project.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research project was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)/ Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines (CRSH) under an institutional SSHRC Explore Grant/Subvention d'exploration du CRSH.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support this article are not available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research protocol of the inquiry discussed in this article was approved by the Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) Research Ethics Board (REB 2018–187).

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Endnote

[i]The sample size excludes an adult who withdrew from the study and a youth focus group that was reluctant to participate.

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How to cite this article: Jean-Pierre, J. (2025) Overlooked and underserved: How inclusive education oversights exclude Black students. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 25, 1187–1201. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.70036