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1. Introduction

In an era ruled by identity politics, we indulge in fantasies of identification. Coined by Ellen Samuels (2014) our fantasies of identification disclose our societal longing for definite (bodily) identities, categorizing people through ostensibly objective and seemingly scientific means. I see it, therefore it is. A rhetoric deeply embedded in the scientification of knowledge based on Western epistemes (Mbembe, 2021), leaving no space for the intangible, the invisible, and the personal. Our image-driven society continuously sustains the hegemony of the visible, making visibility a token of authenticity. Therefore compelled by certainty, we classify individuals in pre-constructed categories when their identities are essentially unstable and ever-changing. Among these labels, the disabled. The disabled as the “embodiment of true physical difference” (Samuels, 2014, p.3) reassures and comforts us. Their divergence seems un-deceiving, measurable, rational. Their struggles are indisputable and so is their pain, we think. Our rigid collective imaginary crystallises our fantasies into the archetype of the disabled person: a man in a wheelchair. Disability appears as a scientifically proven marginalization because of its visibility.

During the past few decades, the topic of invisible disabilities has emerged from inclusive initiatives and the disability rights movement, disrupting our fantasies of identification. Non-apparent disabilities reveal that the body can be deceiving, pain hidden and difference concealed. Perhaps also because of how non-apparent disabilities question our identity projections, they long have remained marginalised in DEI. However, in 2012, long before mental health gains prominence and becomes a national challenge in certain European countries, the Invisible Disabilities Association reported that among the 26 million Americans living with severe disabilities, 19 million were identified as having invisible disabilities (Invisible Disabilities Association, 2012).

For a long time, disability rights movements have been centering white experiences (Acevedo, 2022) ignoring the intersectional realities of many individuals around the world. Despite the emergence of the Disability Justice movement, a movement that aims to bridge diverse experiences of marginalization in an intersectional network to dismantle multiple systems of oppression (i.e. ableism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy etc.), disability analysis have remained primarily focusing on White males with physical disabilities. The dismissal of diversity among people with disabilities (McDonald et. al, 2007) lead us back to the man in the wheelchair archetype. However, even if the claim of universality in disability studies can be contested (Meekosha, 2011), disabilities remain intersectional in essence, as anybody can be disabled.

In our collective imagination, we tend to forget it and certain communities end up left out of inclusion initiatives in various fields as a result. Education is no exception and even though the topic of inclusion in educational practices is prominent, the Western world is far from acknowledging the diversity of children, experiences and learning-styles that exist in schools. Our fantasies of identification, sometimes personal, sometimes collective, prevent us from holding space for different narratives of disability, from acknowledging disabled children with intersectional identities, especially when their disabilities are hidden.

In that context multiple questions arise, including: **how do cultural narratives shape the recognition and support of non-apparent disabilities for non-white girls in Western schools?**

For the remainder of this piece, the term *non-apparent disabilities* will be used, instead of invisible disabilities. This term has been recently advocated for by various disability rights advocates, as it better grasps the reality and authenticity of disabilities that are not always observable. Moreover, the word invisible could be misleading as individuals with visible disabilities can often experience invisibility in their marginalisation, as invisibility extends beyond the detectability of the disability itself (S.Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025). This paper draws on existing literature related to inclusion, non-apparent disabilities, ableism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, etc., as well as the expertise of various professionals in the fields of disability rights, disability recognition, intersectionality, gender, and multiculturalism.

The issue of recognition and support for non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities is particularly relevant at a time when educational systems and the concept of inclusion in schools are being challenged globally (Shutaleva et al., 2023; Leijen, 2021). Their experiences reveal how multiple, intertwined systems of oppression operate within Western schools. At a time of *racial evaporation* (Goldberg, 2006), when racism operates in less overt ways and the belief that it belongs to the past is increasingly widespread, it is important to consider the lasting effects of racist stereotypes. From an academic standpoint, non-apparent disabilities generally receive less attention than visible disabilities in disability studies (McLeod, 2023). Moreover, intersectionality and diversity in relation to disability have been largely overlooked, as early analyses were predominantly shaped by the perspectives of white males with physical disabilities (McDonald, 2007). Focusing on individuals with multiple minority statuses is essential for acknowledging the diversity of populations in the West and for developing a richer understanding of what disability means today. Addressing this issue goes beyond advancing academic understanding. It is crucial for shaping more

equitable societies and support systems that genuinely reflect the diversity of student experiences in schools.

2. The Intersection of Ableism, Racism, and Gender Bias in Cultural Narratives

2.1. Non-apparent Disabilities and the Internalized Burden of Ableism

Non-apparent disabilities can take many forms and their effects vary immensely, from neurodivergence to chronic pain or autism. Although we acknowledge that notions of disabilities continuously change over time, this paper is based on the following medical definition of a non-apparent disability: “a physical, mental or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person’s movements, senses, or activities” (Invisible Disabilities Association, 2012). From a sociological perspective, Oliver’s 1983 *social model of disability* allows us to understand how non-apparent disabilities exist within a society that marginalises disabled people, making disability a dimension of inequality (McLeod, 2023).

In addition to the systemic barriers imposed by society, individuals with non-apparent disabilities wrestle against internal barriers, as they are exposed to the constant pressure to prove that they do have a disability (Ysasi et al., 2018). “One of the greatest barriers for people living with non-apparent disabilities is the stigma they face.” (Concept Care, n.d.) Indeed, having non-apparent disabilities means defying expectations from both the majority of able-bodied individuals, but also the disabled communities. Individuals with non-apparent disabilities can have their disability question as they tend to be amalgamated with abled people and as a result can experience rejection from the disabled community, especially from members who have severe visible disabilities. This kind of exclusion constraints people with non-apparent disabilities to conceal their disability to avoid negative attitudes and stigma. This deliberate concealment results in a variety of internal struggles ranging from emotional stress, self-doubt and lack of belonging (Ysasi et al., 2018) as people with non-apparent disabilities feel less empowered to identify as disabled explains Dr. Sami Schalk, a professor of Gender and Women’s Studies specializing in Disability Studies and Black Feminist Theory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 4, 2025). Similarly to white passing people of colour, they can be “stuck between two worlds” (M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025).

Due to the deeply ableist nature of society, individuals with non-apparent disabilities face disadvantages across various domains (notably in education), eventually pushing them to the margins of society that is not made for them, with lower employment rates and higher social isolation (McLeod, 2023). As they feel less empowered to identify as disabled, they are thus less inclined to ask for the support and accommodations they would need. According to Dr. Sami Schalk (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 9, 2025), people of color with non-apparent disabilities, in particular, tend not to identify as disabled. Primarily because their disability is not their main identity — unlike many white disabled people who may identify strongly with their disability, as it can be their only marginalized identity — but also because non-white populations often face limited access to diagnosis.

2.2. The Impact of Racial and Gender Stereotypes on the Recognition of Non-Apparent Disabilities

Multiple cultural narratives and stereotypes impact the recognition of disabilities among populations of colour especially for women and when the disability is non-apparent. Girls with non-apparent disabilities are at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression: ableism, racism, and patriarchy. Their various stereotypes projected on them tremendously affect the recognition of their disability and amplify their marginalisation.

In the West, people of color with non-apparent disabilities have greater difficulties in getting diagnosed or are undiagnosed. This phenomenon can be explained by the interdependence between racialization and lower socioeconomic status (Sønderlund et al., 2022), as well as by the pervasiveness of medical racism and structural violence. During the past few years, many studies have revealed how racism as a systemic social structure can be reproduced through health care practices that often go unnoticed. Although the issue remains underexplored in empirical research — largely because discussing racism within medical professions is challenging due to the strong ethical ideal of *do no harm* — racial bias and disparities in care have been widely reported by minority patients (Hamed & al., 2020). In Hamed's (2020) study on racism in European health care, on top of the silencing or belittling of their suffering because of cultural stereotypes being projected onto them, a common complaint from care users of color was how little they were involved in the medical process and the how they were addressed with condescension by medical personnel. Even though the study did not look at any kind of disability diagnosis, the experiences of these ethnic minority health care users allow us to grasp the extent to which structural violence permeated the medical field and can potentially hinder the recognition of disabilities, especially when they are non-apparent. Shanaaz Majiet (personal communication, April 14,

2025), a seasoned and values-driven South African leader specialised in public institutions explains:

“The idea of whiteness has been such a privilege for both access to resources, access to early intervention. (...) So there were unequal access to opportunity, to resources (...) late interventions that have exaggerated the nature of the disability that could have been, mediated earlier on. (...) Politics of race has always been a strong marker for persons with disabilities. The intersection of race, gender and geography, all of those are extra hurdles for girls to survive and battle.” (S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025)

Consequently, the negative experiences of many populations of color in medical facilities generates general mistrust of medical institutions in the West, that further complicates the diagnosis and support of non-apparent disabilities among non-white girls. In the United States, this mistrust is even more ingrained, especially among African-American communities. Dr. Sami Schalk (personal communication, April 4, 2025) explains:

“Racism and like white supremacy mean that for a lot of people of color, there's a strong resistance to being identified as disabled because it's an additional harmful layer, right? It's another way of, um, creating systems of harm, potentially, again, like institutionalizing, pushing someone out of a job out of school. And so a lot of folks are resistant to that.”

Beyond race or ethnicity, gender deeply impacts the way non-apparent disabilities get diagnosed and supported as disabled women are highly stigmatized. According to McDonald (2007), cultural expectations about disabilities amplify pre-existing negative narratives about women such as their weakness or dependence. On top of these exacerbated pejorative stereotypes, disabled women also have to face cultural narratives based on their disability which question their femininity, sexuality, ability to work or to be a mother. Besides, in our patriarchal societies, the concept of shame is central to the way women with non-apparent disabilities experience their disability and can be an obstacle to access diagnosis (M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025; S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025). In certain cultures both indigenous to the West or not, disability remains taboo and a lot of it stems from religion. Indeed, according to Corneliu (2025), in certain religious communities in Romania, disability is seen as a curse or a punishment on the family, especially if the child is a girl because she is then deemed as unfit to find a husband or to bear a child. In line with this idea, Shanaaz Majiet (personal communication, April 14, 2025) explains how the dominant narrative—that girls are a burden to their families because they must eventually be married off—remains influential in certain cultures. This is especially true in filial societies or cultures with strong intergenerational obligations. In that context, the pressure is incumbent on parents of disabled children, as the

stigma is transferred from their daughter onto them, explaining their reluctance to seek a diagnosis for their child. Even if each story of migration is unique, these cultural narratives can sometimes travel with diasporas, complicating the diagnosis of non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities.

Culture plays a significant role in shaping how disabilities are recognized, even outside of schools. France Martagex (personal communication, April 4, 2025), a French art therapist for children with non-apparent disabilities, emphasizes the role of culture in her work, as she is committed to deconstructing her own cultural biases while also navigating those of her patients. She explains the ways in which recognition of non-apparent disabilities among racialised children can be distorted by dominant cultural narratives and personal bias, from both sides. Many essential elements are often lost in translation when there are no interpreters—not just language translators, but individuals who understand the cultural codes of the patient, the therapist and the cultural context in which the therapy takes place. Hence, the dismissal of culture can significantly affect the diagnostic process for non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities. France Martagex shared an experience that highlighted this issue. She once worked with a deaf and autistic child of Malian descent. While she quickly recognized his autism, his mother, who spoke limited French, insisted that he was not autistic and instead described him as epileptic. In this confusing situation, the interpreter played a crucial role by explaining that, in the mother's culture, epilepsy was believed to be caused by a djinn entering the person's mind. The mother was trying to express that she thought her son had a djinn and did not necessarily believe in autism. This example underscores how cultural misunderstandings can hinder accurate diagnoses and the effectiveness of therapy, particularly for children from diverse backgrounds.

Finally, well before the issue of diagnosis access, it should be emphasized that the field of disability studies is primarily masculine and white, and so is disability research. Indeed, research focusing on non-apparent disabilities is primarily based on men's experiences of disability, when some of these disabilities, such as ADHD for example, operate in radically different ways depending on gender (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 4, 2025, 2025; M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025). This gap in non-apparent disability research drastically impacts how these disabilities can be recognized and supported, especially from an early age. For instance, according to McLeod (2023), late or incorrect autism diagnoses intersect with other dimensions of inequality and are more frequently observed in girls than in boys.

3. Systemic Inequalities in Education

3.1. The Exclusionary Design of the Educational System: How School Practices Reinforce Stigma

In recent times, educational institutions have been increasingly prioritizing performance over community. While classrooms too often become overcrowded, the pressure of getting through a syllabus has made schools truly impersonal environments with very little relationship-building. Teachers' trade unions have sometimes taken precedence over the larger communities of principals and parents who actively contributed to the school community (S. Majiet, personal communication, April, 2025).

This loss of community over results, performance, achievements has made most school designs in the West very discriminatory in practice. Indeed, as educators pay more attention to the top achievers, children who do not meet the performance expectations (S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025) generate concern or even fear among educators and parents. The inclusion of students who differ from the majority in terms of physical, socioemotional, or cognitive traits, or ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, is perceived as a potential "intrusion" (Leijen, 2021) or a threat to efficiency. This stratification is influenced by prominent broader systems and their accompanying neoliberal values such as our market-based economy that prioritise personal responsibility for success or failure. Within these broader systems, educational structures prioritize accountability and standardized curricula (McLeod, 2023), leaving little room for diverse learning approaches or for recognizing society's role in reproducing inequality. This hostile environment for diversity and difference further pushes children with disabilities to the margins. This holds especially true for non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities due to the following factors.

Children with learning disabilities tend to be perceived as less intelligent (McDonald et al., 2007). Children with other types of disabilities are generally more likely to have their intelligence misinterpreted and undervalued (Ysasi et al., 2018). This especially holds true in our case, as non-apparent disabilities create ambiguity and room for various interpretations. Because of the gendered expectations evoked earlier, disabilities are even more likely to be concealed among girls—if not diagnosed at all—resulting in further misinterpretation. Non-apparent disabilities, such as learning disabilities, are still sometimes difficult for people to understand, which can lead educators to question their existence or regard them as an excuse for poor performance (McDonald et al., 2007). Hence, girls with non-apparent disabilities navigate an educational system that does not acknowledge the strength their

disabilities could bring and evaluate them as less competent (McLeod, 2023). Moreover, the ableist stigma they face is compounded by racist expectations about abilities (or disabilities) that continue to permeate educational practices and structures today, albeit in more subtle ways (Annamma et al., 2012).

A 2021 research by Miller and Kurth showcases these discriminatory mindset and practices, exposing how certain U.S. schools would reproduce inequalities through access to learning tools and school geographies for disabled girls of color, mainly with cerebral disabilities. The research revealed that they were often accompanied by adults, but that although the adult presence was framed as support, it would significantly limit their autonomy and social interaction. The study also demonstrated that non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities had unequal access to learning tools compared to their peers. Many of their preferred writing tools were not provided by teachers, access to digital tools was delayed or restricted, and science tools were unavailable or rarely used (Miller & Kurth, 2021). This study exemplifies how school practices can amplify and reproduce marginalisation, but also how ableism, gender bias and racism can intersect and impact disabled girls of color's school experiences. Additionally, the research demonstrates how even when their disabilities are recognised and seemingly supported in educational systems, disabled girls of colour are still negatively impacted.

3.2. The Serious Repercussions of Prejudice in Educational Settings

The large-scale dominant systems based on neoliberal values that permeate schools, classrooms, and families strongly influence how children categorized as 'different' are treated by peers and educators, as well as how they perceive themselves. The expectations driven by neoliberal values often generate negative assumptions about children with non-apparent disabilities, which these children may internalize as part of their own identities (McLeod, 2023). This is especially true when multiple systems of oppression intersect. Non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities truly contrast with the rigidity and conformity of our Western exclusionary educational systems and therefore perfectly exemplify Goffman's *deviancy cycle* (1963). The deviancy cycle is defined as a harmful social pattern in which individuals marginalized by society internalize negative cultural narratives and begin to exhibit behaviors that align with the deviant label, further reinforcing societal biases. The productivity and market-based values that dominate society create negative expectations for children with non-apparent disabilities. These children often internalize these expectations into their identities (McLeod, 2023), making them more susceptible to the deviancy cycle.

Additionally, the prevalence of ableist assumptions in educational systems not only strengthens harmful cultural stereotypes about disability but also has long-term consequences on the life paths of non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities. In line with the deviancy cycle, these stereotypes lead to the criminalization of non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities. In a 2020 op-ed, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley, Professor Dr. Subini Ancy Annamma, and disability rights activist Vilissa Thompson highlighted systemic issues where Black girls with disabilities face harsher disciplinary actions in schools compared to their peers. The article emphasized how cultural stereotypes and behaviors associated with non-apparent disabilities, such as ADHD or sleep apnea, are often misinterpreted as misconduct, resulting in disproportionate punishments and criminalization (Pressley et al., 2020). While much of the focus is placed on the criminalization of disabled boys of color, it is crucial to acknowledge that disabled girls of color with non-apparent disabilities are also disproportionately affected—albeit in different, often overlooked, ways (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

Furthermore, it has been shown that cultural stereotypes against disabilities constitute a significant obstacle to employment for disabled children (Hehir, 2002). Indeed, when they become adults children with non-apparent disabilities are less likely to earn an undergraduate degree and to be employed. Even if they do find employment, they tend to earn less and face higher risks of living in poverty, particularly those already coming from low-income backgrounds (McLeod, 2023). Knowing the interdependence of racialisation and lower economic status in the West (Sønderlund et al., 2022), this is particularly evident for non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities.

"Finally, growing up in an ableist environment that fails to recognize their potential (McLeod, 2023) and questions the legitimacy of their disabilities (McDonald, 2007) can negatively impact the mental health of non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities. They may come to believe that something is inherently wrong with them, leading them either to overcompensate by striving to become high achievers to avoid stigmatization, or to develop very low self-esteem. Either way, the non-diagnosis and negative assumptions about disabilities result in poor mental health, reinforcing existing disabilities or becoming an additional disability (M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025). Moreover, as previously mentioned, non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities are also subject to racial stereotypes due to their racialized backgrounds, (whether hostile or seemingly positive), which negatively impact their mental health, potentially causing stress, anxiety, depression and a loss of cultural identity (Xiao, 2023).

In spite of this hostile environment and systemic oppression, there are possibilities of progress toward genuine inclusion—one that enables non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities to embrace the complexity of their identities within schools and to receive support from educational stakeholders.

4. Inclusive Pathways for Non-White Girls with Non-Apparent Disabilities

Drawing on both the literature and expert insights, this paper concludes that several concrete steps toward inclusion can be implemented across multiple levels.

4.1. Potential Policy Solutions

At the policy level, several interventions in favor of non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities should be implemented. From a broad perspective, it is essential to integrate intersectional frameworks addressing race, gender, and disability into policies to address the reality of marginalized communities that experience multiple forms of oppression (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 4, 2025; M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025). Policy actions across various sectors can contribute to the creation of an inclusive school environment that acknowledges the needs of these students while challenging harmful cultural narratives. While grassroots and community-based initiatives are crucial for building inclusive public spaces, structural transformation cannot be achieved without revising the overarching systems that govern education. Romana Shaikh, Chief Program Officer specializing in public education, mental health, and sexuality education, encourages us to rethink the educational definition of success, allowing children to recognize their own strengths (personal communication, April 21, 2025). Strong policy commitments can cultivate a school environment that recognizes students' unique strengths and needs while actively confronting cultural biases.

Key recommendations include:

- Ensuring disaggregated data collection (by race, gender, disability) in education and health systems (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 4, 2025);
- Funding research into gendered and racialized manifestations of non-apparent disabilities (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 4, 2025; M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025);

- Decentralizing education systems to give more autonomy to local communities and schools, allowing them to adapt to students' diverse needs (R. Shaikh, personal communication, April 21, 2025)
- Redefining success in education by valuing personal growth, creativity, and resilience over standardized performance metrics (R. Shaikh, personal communication, April 21, 2025);
- Build long-term goals for inclusion and learning reforms that allow for gradual, sustainable transformation rather than short-term results (R. Shaikh, personal communication, April 21, 2025);
- Mandating regular training for educators and diagnostic professionals on bias, intersectionality, and neurodiversity (M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025; F. Martagex, personal communication, April 4, 2025);
- Stopping the segregation of disabled students (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 4, 2025, 2025; UNESCO, 2004);
- Supporting principals and school leaders as transformative agents through training and visionary leadership programs (S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025);
- Recognizing cultural hybridity as an educational resource, to foster inclusion and avoid prejudice (F. Martagex, personal communication, April 4, 2025);
- Increasing the attractiveness of support roles (e.g. classroom aides) with better salaries and working conditions (M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025);
- Centering healing within inclusive education reforms, recognizing the impact of systemic trauma on marginalized students (R. Shaikh, personal communication, April 21, 2025);

Ensuring optimal learning environments for non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities begins with recognition. Policies that prioritize intersectionality in research are crucial, as we have established that non-apparent disabilities manifest differently across genders. Strong, comprehensive policies facilitating capacity building and training are necessary to create a trickle-down effect that will bring about real change within classrooms.

4.2. Possible Institutional Interventions

Classrooms and their broader educational institutions are often where exclusion is most visibly enacted. Providing recommendations for interventions at the institutional level offers concrete steps to dismantle cultural stereotypes and ensure that schools acquire the tools to support genuine inclusion in the long term. Educational systems are the primary site

of both harm and transformation. For that reason, this section has the most recommendations, offering actionable paths to inclusion for non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities. Interviews with experts revealed that what happens within school walls has a significant impact on children's life trajectories. The necessity to operate change at the institutional level also implies challenging health care institutions, to improve diagnosis access.

Core proposals consist of:

- Using culturally responsive diagnostic tools to avoid mis-diagnosis as disability is universal but experiences of disabilities are not (F. Martagex, personal communication, April 4, 2025; M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025);
- Training teachers to recognize how disabilities manifest across genders (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 4, 2025; M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025);
- Training teachers to reflect on their own implicit biases and preferences, encouraging them to build equitable, empathetic relationships with students who display non-normative behavior (McLeod, 2023);
- Using storytelling and narrative practices in the classroom to humanise disability and foster empathy (Acevedo et al., 2022);
- Observing students both in class and in informal settings (play, recess) to better understand their social interaction and their needs (UNESCO, 2004);
- Change the way time is structured in schools (e.g., organic schedules), aligning with what different bodies and minds need to thrive, and include time for somatic learning and reflection (R. Shaikh, personal communication, April 21, 2025);
- Including body education (mental health, nutrition, disability literacy etc.) in curricula to encourage children to become more accountable of their own bodies and needs from an early age, and facilitating communication with educators (M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025);
- Revising school curriculums and pedagogies to allow students to craft and share their own narratives (R. Shaikh, personal communication, April 21, 2025);
- Auditing textbooks and materials for bias, representation, and discriminatory narratives (UNESCO, 2004);

- Developing an actionable long term plan for inclusive, learning-friendly environments (ILFE) using tools such as UNESCO's *Toolkit for creating inclusive, learning-friendly environments* (2004);
- Supporting alliances between teachers and parents for mutual feedback and advocacy (S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025);
- Making education more introspective, focusing on students' self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and individual experiences.
- Building relationships beyond teacher/student roles, encouraging collective growth and mentorship (S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025; McDonald, 2025);
- Recognizing disability as a form of culture and fostering school climates that value multiple ways of being and knowing to prevent prejudice (F. Martagex, personal communication, April 4, 2025; Acevedo et. al, 2025);

Institutional responsibilities and teacher practices lie at the heart of the exclusion experienced by non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities. Principals, school leaders, and educational staff hold the authority and influence to act as key agents of change, with the potential to transform the intersectional realities of their students and promote equity (S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025). Moreover, educators can leverage their roles to foster community-building around schools, making inclusion initiatives both actionable and beneficial to all children.

4.3. Solutions at the Grassroots and Community Levels

The notion of belonging is central to children's development and self-esteem, and it is often challenged when they come from minority backgrounds. For this reason, it is crucial that transformative narratives, initiatives, and actions take place at the community level. Supportive communities are key in driving institutional change. While a trickle-down effect is important for implementing concrete steps toward inclusion, initiatives and narrative shifts outside of school settings are equally essential for fostering long-term social cohesion and cultural responsiveness. Nurturing and empowering diverse voices within the disabled community, while upholding varied ways of being and cultivating a shared ethic of care and compassion, is fundamental as we move forward. This is how one may practice *accessible kinship* (Acevedo, 2022).

Important recommendations are:

- Promoting positive family narratives that affirm children's uniqueness and agency (S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025);
- Encouraging parents as advocates and partners in education (S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025; M. R. Corneliu, personal communication, April 16, 2025);
- Building supportive communities so non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities do not feel isolated in their experiences (S. Schalk, personal communication, April 4, 2025);
- Creating spaces for personal narratives and shared storytelling within families and communities (Acevedo et al., 2022; McDonald, 2007);
- Build accessible kinship networks that honor the diversity within disability knowledge and care (Acevedo et al., 2022);
- Developing community-driven dialogue around disability and diverse cultural backgrounds (F. Martagex, personal communication, April 4, 2025);
- Encouraging collective learning and co-research across communities and schools to embrace intersectionality, diversity and to promote solidarity (Acevedo et al., 2022);

Building community and supporting empowering narratives should not be overlooked when addressing inclusion. Collectivity and storytelling have the power to dismantle harmful stereotypes and pave the way for more intersectional approaches to the experiences of disabled children. Non-apparent disabilities, although not always visible, are often amplified as a symbol of difference, when they should be celebrated, normalized, and acknowledged rather than hidden. Cooperation among the adults surrounding non-white girls is crucial to protect their self-esteem and ensure they have access to the same learning opportunities as other students.

Although these recommendations were collected in the context of non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities, it is essential to understand that their implementation could significantly improve learning environments in the West, acknowledging the diversity that exists among Western children and their experiences.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key Considerations

Cultural narratives and stereotypes thoroughly shape the recognition and support of non-apparent disabilities in education for non-white girls, as they carry the weight of ableism, racism, and gender bias. Non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities, being at the crossroads of multiple systems of oppression, represent a strong case of marginalisation within marginalisation. Beyond distorted medical diagnoses, the ambiguity created by the non-visibility of their disabilities and the projected narratives onto them leads to insidious stigma and classroom dynamics that add to the weight of gender stereotypes and racist expectations. The reinforcement of cultural stereotypes and ableism by exclusionary school practices, on top of being harmful, can significantly influence the future of these girls and have long-term negative impacts, thoroughly shaping their life courses.

5.2. Limitations

In this essay, one important social dimension of inequality/marginalisation has been voluntarily left out: sexuality. Future research on intersectionality within disability is highly encouraged to include this aspect, as ableism and heteropatriarchy are deeply intertwined. However, because this essay chose to focus on children, sexuality was not included as a dimension of systemic oppression—even though we completely recognise it as such, and acknowledge that it substantially impacts people's experiences from an early age. Indeed, although children are often aware of their sexuality from a young age, it can be difficult for them to vocalise or identify it due to homophobic narratives, but also because of their emotional youth. These dynamics thus make it challenging to collect accurate data on queerness and sexuality among them.

Additionally, it might be interesting for future research to look at the experiences of non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities in cultural contexts outside the West, as intersecting systems of oppression exist throughout the world and manifest in unique ways.

5.3. Broader Implications

Action must and can be taken at different levels to improve diagnosis access, accurate diagnosis, and the support of non-white girls with non-apparent disabilities. These interventions will not only benefit them, but all children, as they aim to reform Western school systems that are truly discriminatory in practice. Togetherness, empathy, and collaboration

will be our greatest allies in this process. According to Romana Shaikh, these principles will ensure reforms and reshaping that truly benefit all children—but also educators, who are often blamed when they do not have access to the proper resources, training, and agency to have a transformative impact on their schools (personal communication, April 21, 2025). Education must be reclaimed as a community endeavour, focusing not only on achievement but on holistic well-being (S. Majiet, personal communication, April 14, 2025). Educators should bear in mind the power of education to create a more inclusive future (R. Shaikh personal communication, April 21, 2025). Schools have the potential to empower children to create their own narratives and understand the ones of others, to expand their views. Education has the power to bridge different experiences and world views.

6. Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who supported me throughout the development of this work. Special thanks to Dominic Register and Valeriia Chernysh for their insightful feedback and encouragement, and to Salzburg Global for providing the space and resources necessary for this research. I am also deeply thankful to the experts I had the honor of interviewing: France Martagex, Sami Schalk, Shanaaz Majiet, Marina Roxana Corneliu, and Romana Shaikh. Thank you all for your enthusiasm and for generously sharing your wisdom with me.

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7.1. Personal Interviews

The following individuals generously offered their insights through personal interviews conducted by the author in 2025:

- France Martagex – Interview conducted on April 4, 2025
- Sami Schalk – Interview conducted on April 9, 2025
- Shanaaz Majiet – Interview conducted on April 14, 2025
- Marina Roxana Corneliu – Interview conducted on April 16, 2025
- Romana Shaikh – Interview conducted on April 21, 2025