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Neoliberalism and Inclusive Education

A Critical Ethnographic Case Study of Inclusive Education at an Urban Charter School

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Article abstract

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Abstract

At a time when the United States Department of Education openly advocates for neoliberal, free market policies, exploration of these efforts is needed. Investigation into one such effort, charter schools, can help provide insight into complicated questions surrounding the value and impact of these schools, especially on the marginalized populations they often serve. In this study, I explored how these neoliberal principles impacted the experiences of special education students at a small, urban charter school in Southern California. Three broad themes emerged from the data: 1) school size in the competitive education marketplace, 2) the illusion of choice and quality in a school of choice, and 3) the unrealized promise of inclusion in a neoliberal environment. Implications of neoliberalism on the experiences of poor, disabled students are discussed. Future research directions include case studies and ethnographies situated at the intersection of special education, neoliberalism, and inclusion in the United States.

Introduction

School reform initiatives in the United States increasingly reflect neoliberal ideology, which include deregulation and increased autonomy, efficiency, and cost-cutting to increase profits (Bacon, 2019; Bale & Knopp, 2012; Giroux, 2012). Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as, "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). Proponents of neoliberal, market-based school reforms believe that the introduction of free market principles into the public school sphere, such as increasing competition between schools to promote innovation, will lead to better schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Walberg & Bast, 2003).

Although they were not always associated with neoliberal principles, charter schools now represent both the most debated and the most common neoliberal educational reform effort (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Giroux, 2012; Waitoller, 2020). Previously, progressive educators in the 1980s championed charter schools as a means to creating educational alternatives in poor communities of color. It wasn't long, however, before these efforts were "appropriated and reengineered by philanthropic, corporate, hedge-fund, and real estate interests" (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 2). As Waitoller (2020) notes, "the idea of charter schools has been co-opted to expand a market agenda that prioritizes market values and capital expansion at the expense of students and families that are deemed disposable" (p. 151). Additionally, the introduction of neoliberal principles resulted in a shift in the goals of public education. Previously, education sought to create more democratic societies through the creation of more informed citizenry (Bartlett et al., 2002), but market-based education aims to prepare students to be productive workers, as well as consumers, in the global economy (Rizvi, 2013; Saltman, 2014; Wiseman & Waluyo, 2018). Thus, students are expected to represent a neoliberal ideal, conceptualized as one who can thrive in the meritocratic and competitive educational marketplace (Liasidou & Symeou, 2018).

Research demonstrates that students with disabilities are underrepresented in charter schools (Barnard-Brak et al., 2018; Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Hehir, 2010; Mead & Eckes, 2018; Waitoller et al., 2017; Winters, 2015a). Studies also reveal specific under-enrollment of students with more severe disabilities (Guarino & Chau, 2003; National Education Association, 2017). In recent years, charter enrollment of students with disabilities has slowly increased to 10% of the school population, but it still lags behind enrollment at traditional public schools, which now stands at 12% (Rhim & Kothari, 2018).

Because charter schools operate as public schools and must follow federal laws that prohibit the denial of education to students with disabilities while also remaining competitive in the education marketplace, they have found ways to circumvent this requirement though processes such as "counseling out" or "steering away" parents of students with disabilities during the admissions process (Garda, 2012; GAO, 2012; Stern et al., 2015; Waitoller & Super, 2017), meaning that they are gently discouraged from enrolling by suggesting that the students' needs may be better met at a different school. Waitoller (2020) documents a variety "pushout practices" that serve to "filter for inclusion." These practices include "(1) inflexible and rigorous academic and disciplinary practices, (2) delay and/or denial of special education services, (3) lack of adequately trained personnel, and (4) suggesting that parents and children 'choose' another school" (Waitoller, 2020, p. 70 – 71). Waitoller (2020) further argues that "a braid of neoliberalism, ableism, and racism" (p. 136) work together to make these practices work against some students while benefitting others.

Although charter schools tend to underenroll students with disabilities, once enrolled, the number of these students spending more than 80% of the school day in the general education classroom is higher in charter schools than traditional public schools (GAO, 2012). However, given that charter schools tend to have higher rates of teacher turnover, fewer certified teachers, and more inexperienced teachers (Buerger & Harris, 2017; National Education Association, 2017; Saltman, 2014), it is not clear how well supported students with disabilities are in the general education classroom, especially given that some charter schools advise parents of limited resources for these students. Existing data demonstrates that there is no clear evidence that charter schools perform, on average, better than traditional public schools (Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2013; Wang et. al., 2019) or that school choice provides greater equity (Bacon, 2019).

Charter schools also disproportionately suspend students with disabilities, particularly when it comes to Black males (GAO, 2018; Losen et al., 2016). An analysis of 5,250 charter schools, found that "235 charter schools suspended more than 50% of their enrolled students with disabilities" (Losen et al., 2016, p. 6). The same report also found that "in 1,093 charter schools, for example, students with disabilities were suspended at a rate at least 10 percentage points higher than their non-disabled peers" (Losen et al., 2016, p. 6). The report authors warn that "it is important to remember that, like non-charter schools, most charter schools are not high-suspending" (Losen et al., 2016, p. 7).

Studies examining the nexus of disability in charter and other school choice environments have revealed discriminatory practices, from enrollment to daily practice, that align with the statistics noted above. Students with disabilities, particularly ones with more complex support needs who are perceived as difficult to educate, are discouraged from enrolling or not chosen for admission in cities across the United States where school choice has been popular, including New York City (Bacon, 2019), New Orleans (Collins, 2014), and Chicago (Waitoller, 2020). Bacon (2019) documents how school choice policies in New York City creates unwanted students who are rejected by newer, smaller schools, perpetuating deficit thinking of students with disabilities. Waitoller and Super (2017) examine the "politics of desperation" in which Black and Latinx parents engage when searching for school for their children in urban Chicago where no good options exist due to historical racism and ableism. Even when students are enrolled in schools of choice, they face other practices that force them out, such as withholding of services and severe disciplinary practices (Collins, 2014). Nevertheless, Waitoller (2020) explores how parents fight to keep their children in charter schools despite the hostile environment.

Theoretical Framework

I utilized a disability studies framework which examines disability as a historical, political, social, and cultural construct that advantages or disadvantages students who are labeled as abled or disabled. Critical disability theorists argue that disability "has no essential nature. Rather, depending on what is valued (perhaps overvalued) at certain socio-political conjunctures, specific personal characteristics are understood as defects as, as a result, persons are *manufactured* as disabled" (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 5). Accordingly, disability studies is critical of traditional special education and the role it plays in separating, excluding, and limiting students with disabilities due to its deficit-driven paradigm that pathologizes difference (Gomez & McKee, 2020).

In order to examine the intersection between neoliberalism and inclusive education, I utilize Waitoller and Kozleski's (2013) conceptualization of inclusion that considers more than classroom placement for students with disabilities. They describe inclusive education in this way:

> inclusive education is a continuous struggle toward (a) redistribution of quality opportunities to learn and participate in educational programs, (b) the recognition and value of differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools, and (c) the opportunities for marginalized groups to represent themselves in decision-making processes that advance and define claims of exclusion and the respective solutions that affect their children's educational futures. (p. 35)

Waitoller and Kozelski (2013) recognize that physical placement in the general education classroom alone does not result in educational equity. Rather, the fight to be inclusive cannot merely be a technical fix; it should be approached as "a struggle in economic, cultural and political domains (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2015, p. 25). Although I rely on this conceptualization of inclusive education, the participants in this study utilize the term "inclusion" or "push in" to indicate the placement of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. They used "special education" broadly to refer to the program that serves students with disabilities, corresponding staff and classroom. This paper explores the limitations of conceptualizing inclusion as a program to be carried out by a few individuals. When describing the school in this study, I have followed their lead and used the terms as they used them.

Method

This critical ethnographic case study took place over the course of one school year at Colina Cedro Charter High School (all names and locations are pseudonyms) which is a small, urban charter school which served students in grades nine - twelve in a working-class neighborhood in California. The research questions guiding the study included: (1) What is the classroom environment and school culture for students with disabilities at a small, urban charter school?, and (2) How are neoliberal education reforms shaping the experiences of students with disabilities at this school?

Critical Ethnography

Because I sought to explore multiple systems at work (special education, neoliberal market-based school reforms, and one particular school in a larger system of schools), I chose to conduct ethnographic work which provided the opportunity to investigate these systems in a particular school culture. Critical ethnographic work focuses on social inequalities, the nature of social structure, and power to work towards positive social change (Carspecken, 1996), making it an appropriate methodology for this study. Carspecken (1996) argues that critical ethnographic methodologies work to "refine social theory rather than to merely describe social life" (p. 3). I sought to do more than simply describe social life for students at Colina Cedro; I sought to uncover how neoliberal educational reforms shape life for students with disabilities.

Participants

Participants within this study included three students enrolled in special education, the special education teacher, the special education teaching assistant, a general education algebra teacher, the school principal, and the two school founders, for a total of nine participants (see Table

Table 1
Participant Demographics/Description

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Role at School	Distinguishing Characteristics
Isabel	Latina	Special Education Student	"Pushed in" to general education courses and also attended study skills class; sophomore; disability label of Other Health Impaired (OHI)
Santiago	Latino	Special Education Student	"Pushed in" to general education courses and also attended study skills class; senior; disability label Specific Learning Disability (SLD)
Royce	Latino	Special Education Student	"Super Senior" (second year as a Senior); only attended school for two class periods – world history and study skills – needed for credit; disability label of EBD (Emotional and Behavioral Disorder)
Ms. Rutherford	White	Special Education Teacher	Hired in October after the previous teacher left unexpectedly
Ms. Castillo	Latina	Special Education Teaching Assistant	Hired in November after previous assistant left unexpectedly; bilingual in Spanish and English
Ms. Nowak	Polish	General Education Teacher	Taught both general education Algebra and Algebra Extended (remedial class that many special education students took)
Dr. James	White	Principal	Third year as Principal at Colina Cedro; bilingual in English and Spanish
Mr. Fanning	White	Founder, Former Principal	Founded a successful charter school before founding Colina Cedro and serving as Principal; left Colina Cedro after three years
Ms. Fanning	White	Founder, Former Teacher at Colina Cedro	Left Colina Cedro after three years

1). This diverse group of participants was designed to encompass as much of the school culture as possible. Colina Cedro Charter High School had a relatively high percentage of students with disabilities at 20%, compared to an average of 10% in charter schools nationwide, and declared a commitment to poor and underrepresented students in a highly rigorous, standards-based environment that focused on STEM education.

Participant Observation

I spent time at the school as a volunteer (three times a week) in the special education classroom, assisting students in both the general and special education classrooms. A few times, I was asked to substitute for the special education teacher or teaching assistant when they were absent. I observed in the special education classroom, as well as the general education classrooms, where students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were present. I attended an open house where parents met with the new special education teacher and observed a school-wide awards assembly. Lastly, I observed one student's IEP meeting. During these observations, I followed Carspecken's (1996) recommendation to maintain a notebook with thick description for observations, as well as a field journal with a "not-so-thick journalistic record of events" (p. 45) for occurrences seen and heard around the school property during my visits.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. These interviews lasted 30 minutes to an hour. Within a month of the interviews, I conducted a 30-minute member check, whereby the participant and I had an opportunity to read through the interview transcript to ask for clarification, modification, or deletion.

Document Analysis

I analyzed documents (O'Leary, 2014) from three types of documents, including public records (school- and district-level data regarding disability enrollment and diagnoses, standardized testing data, school charter, school employee handbook, school website), personal documents (student work, student IEPs, teacher checklists), and physical evidence (assignments, tests, and quizzes used in the general and special education classrooms, flyers). I searched for these documents and artifacts in a variety of ways. Public documents were available online or through the school office. I was given access to personal documents by participants. Lastly, physical evidence or artifacts were found during my time as a school volunteer and substitute teacher.

Data Analysis

Analysis and synthesis consisted of analyzing, going back for clarification, coding, and re-coding before it was synthesized. I used the strategies set forth by (Saldaña, 2009) and (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), which consisted on open and lump coding to generate empirical assertions. I used these assertions and analytic questions to create memos that later aided me in synthesizing my data into unified, meaningful work. I also located critical incidents in my data to make empirical assertions.

Author Positionality

I am a former special education teacher who taught in traditional public, non-inclusive classroom settings; therefore, like the participants in this study, I had no hands-on experience with inclusion or charter schools before coming to Colina Cedro. In other ways, I differ. I identify as an abled, heterosexual, Asian female. I have not experienced special education as a student. I played many roles at the school including volunteer as classroom assistant, occasional substitute teacher, and researcher, sometimes causing a blurring between roles. During my classroom observations, I sometimes felt compelled to assist the teacher or students, hindering my ability to observe and take notes without interference to the research context.

Results

Three broad themes emerged from the data including (1) school size in the competitive educational marketplace, (2) the illusion of choice and quality in a school of choice, and (3) the unrealized promise of inclusion in the neoliberal environment. These three themes revealed the conflict the school faced in desiring to execute a successful inclusion program while operating in a neoliberal context of a charter school in the educational marketplace. They also demonstrated the limitations of individual schools' good intentions in the broader neoliberal context in which they operate, as well as the persistence of school choice rhetoric despite evidence to the contrary.

School Size in the Competitive Education Marketplace

Neoliberal school reform calls for the creation of an educational marketplace whereby schools compete for students (or customers) by discerning and promoting their competitive advantage over other schools. While school choice proponents argue that this competition will result in better schools for all students, the increased competition means that disadvantaged students in historically under-resourced areas are forced to compete for already scarce resources brought on by austerity measures. This may create a gap between a small charter school's envisioned competitive advantage and what the reality of what they can actually afford to provide.

Colina Cedro saw their small size and personal nature as competitive advantages to the much larger schools in the neighborhood. The staff often compared the size of their school to Lincoln High School, the very large traditional public high school just down the street. Staff and students alike agreed that size was one of Colina Cedro's most desirable traits. For example, one student Royce, attended several high schools before coming to Colina Cedro, so many in fact, that he had trouble listing them all for me. He told me why he chose Colina Cedro, saying the school "has a reputation for being, like I said, small and filled with a lot of smart students." He stated, "I think the smaller the better because it's more of a family thing than having to have a big school, having to feel like, 'Oh, I don't know them.'"

Nevertheless, despite their small size, Colina Cedro faced the same divestment as area schools. This meant that the school was both small and underresourced, making their size a limiting factor, rather than a competitive advantage. As a result, they appeared to be *less* able to compete with larger schools because they provided *fewer* opportunities for their students. For example, since its inception, Colina Cedro did not have its own school site. The current site, its second since founding in 2007, was on the campus of a traditional public school, Julietta Middle School, in a fenced off area. Colina Cedro's campus consisted of six portable trailer buildings (referred to as "bungalows" by the school principal) and a large metal storage container in the center. As a result,

Colina Cedro lacked a media center, library, computer lab, gym, and a cafeteria / auditorium. Julietta staff prepared both breakfast and lunch in their cafeteria. Colina Cedro students picked up breakfast in giant trash bags and hauled them over to their side of the campus, where students ate in their first period classrooms. At lunch, students could either leave campus or cross the gate into Julietta to get a hot lunch from their cafeteria. After getting their lunch, students returned to the Colina Cedro campus, but with only two picnic tables, students often stood or found places outside the school fence to sit and eat. Colina Cedro also used Julietta's auditorium for events such as the Awards Assembly. During PE, the students used Julietta's soccer field.

The small enrollment and small staff (ten teachers total) also prohibited the school from offering courses promised in the school charter, such as theater arts, biotechnology, multimedia / advanced technology, internships / exploratory projects, yearbook, newspaper, and music, as well as a variety of AP level courses. Moreover, the school did not have a computer or science lab, despite being described in their charter and website as a STEM-focused school. Other opportunities, such as Band, Choir, sports, Yearbook or other clubs, simply were not available. A few seniors served on something of a student council and a few students helped the biology teacher with a small garden, but I never saw the presence of other clubs or activities. For athletics, the school only offered boys' soccer. One student, Santiago, stated that he wished the school had more sports that he could join. When speaking about the reputation of the school in the neighborhood, Ms. Nowak, the algebra teacher, commented that the lack of sports was a negative, stating, "at least we have some clubs, but there is still no sports, especially for girls. And I know some girls are going back to other schools because they want to play sports." Accordingly, students at Colina Cedro actually had less access to basic school resources and educational opportunities than they would have had they remained at a traditional public school, leading to the school becoming less desirable to some because of its small size.

Ironically, the school also used their named competitive advantage, small school size and individualized attention, as a reason *against* the enrollment of students with disabilities. Special education teacher Ms. Rutherford insisted that they would never turn any student away (because federal law prohibits this in public schools), but she and the principal also let families know during the admission interview that special education services were extremely limited at Colina Cedro. She stated:

> I know when students interview, um, we meet with them and we talk about the services, if they have occupational therapy or speech or...and we talk about bringing in outside providers for, um, it's not that we would ever turn away a student like that and we, Dr. James [principal] and office staff and myself, they would never turn anyone away. I know when he [Dr. James] interviews some of the families, he tells them, like, uh, we might have to bring in these outside providers, so maybe because we don't have a full time occupational therapist on campus, you know what I mean, five days a week or whatever, it *might* discourage some people.

Staff at Colina Cedro voiced the belief that being a small school was an advantage for students who would benefit from lots of individualized attention, but the small size seemed to exclude those who could use that extra attention the most. This also raises the question of what supports and services were available for students with disabilities who chose to enroll at Colina Cedro.

Proponents of school choice argue that competition will increase quality educational opportunities, especially for historically marginalized students. For students in the Eastwick

neighborhood, however, the addition of Colina Cedro to the education marketplace did not result in better or more innovative opportunities. Instead, students had less access to resources and opportunities than they would have had in a traditional public school. Additionally, by warning families that specialized services may not be available for students with disabilities, the staff appeared to use the competitive advantage as a means of steering particular students away, thereby leaving families with the same limited resources and opportunities that existed without Colina Cedro.

In the end, it was actually Colina Cedro's named competitive advantage that led to its downfall, instead of its success. Some students chose to return to other area schools, while others appeared to have been gently steered elsewhere. This could be one factor to explain Colina Cedro's declining enrollment trend. During the time of the case study, Colina Cedro enrolled 146 students; enrollment continued to decrease to a low of 107 at the time of their closure. In their denial to renew Colina Cedro's charter, the school board cited "historical enrollment decline" as a key finding that the school was "demonstrably unlikely to successfully implement the program described in the petition."

The Illusion of Choice and Quality in a School of Choice

School choice rhetoric usually leads with the idea that simply being able to choose, or "shop" in the educational marketplace, makes something better. The staff at Colina Cedro frequently used this rhetoric. For example, Ms. Rutherford stated, "it's more personal, um, you know, it's more of a choice than just being dumped in your neighborhood [school]...it feels like more choices in terms of shopping around, what kind of school you're looking for." The principal, Dr. James, said,

> one of the main reasons they [the founders] even had the idea to start it was to provide an alternative for parents in Eastwick, other than Julietta Middle School and Lincoln High School. Just to have another small, um, successful academic program that they could choose, if they wanted to and not have to go to the big, big schools.

As schools of choice, charters are often automatically seen as a better alternative because families can choose for their student to attend. Interestingly, this illusion of choice persisted at Colina Cedro, despite the dearth of resources for students. For example, special education assistant Ms. Castillo stated that, "they [students] just have so many options and the attention and I don't know. It's, it's incredible to me, like I'm still amazed." In a school of such limited resources, it was difficult to conceive what these options would be.

It was certainly true that parents chose Colina Cedro as an alternative choice for their student; this was the case for all three students interviewed for this case study. Several other students, though, came to the school as a result of expulsion or suspension from neighborhood schools. A student in algebra extended told me very plainly that he only enrolled at Colina Cedro after being expelled from a neighborhood school. He was not the only one, as I saw other students joining throughout the school year at different times, including a pregnant student who had missed school too frequently at her previous school. A general education teacher complained of having to remediate incoming freshmen who had failed out of their middle schools and were not prepared for high school level curriculum. Thus, some of students did not freely choose Colina Cedro but had no other option.

School choice rhetoric also promotes the idea of quality when being able to choose the school. The students in this case study reported choosing Colina Cedro primarily for the small size, which they believed would lend itself to a higher quality of education. However, my observations and student interviews led me to question whether or not students actually received a better quality of education. One student, Santiago, stated that he chose Colina Cedro over Lincoln because he had heard that "they help you a lot and the students in class, they were less...and I like that 'cause I need help." However, in the same interview, Santiago also described not receiving much help Ms. Rutherford, stating, "I liked my last year [special education] teacher 'cause...she helped me more than anyone. Like, doing my work, she'd be there...instead of sitting down in the desk." When asked if he liked coming to the special education class, Santiago replied, "Sometimes, because sometimes they help me, like, good; sometimes they don't." In the special education classroom, during 6th period study skills, I observed that Santiago frequently napped, laid his head down on the table or joked and talked with his peers the whole class period. Mr. Elroy, Santiago's chemistry teacher, had said that Santiago could go to his classroom during 6th period for extra help, but I never observed anyone asking Santiago to do that, even though he was failing chemistry. This seemed to be a pattern of inconsistent support with Santiago, as he was not even recognized as a special education student when he first came to Colina Cedro, despite being labeled so in junior high. According to his file, he did not receive special education services from Colina Cedro until nearly the end of his first year of high school.

It did not seem that Santiago's case was unique. Royce was a Super Senior, meaning that he only attended school for two periods a day, first and second period, in order to make up classes he previously failed so that he would have enough credits to graduate. He took government and then attended study skills during second period (with only one other student) to make up U.S. history and English. During this time, he worked independently on U.S. history packets (a collection of worksheets and exams from the teacher for which Royce would be given credit upon completion). If he had questions, Ms. Rutherford usually directed him to the Internet. Unfortunately, even after a second year as a Senior, he did not graduate at the end of the school year. He had to attend summer school to make up for his failing grades before he finally graduated.

Colina Cedro was not always able to provide better, higher quality educational opportunities to the families of Eastwick, despite being a school of choice. Nevertheless, the school maintained the illusion of choice and quality simply, it seemed, by virtue of being called a school of choice. It seemed that, for some, being able to choose to be there was enough to make up for the fact that the school did not appear to provide better or more choices or quality than any other school. Students and staff alike repeated the claim that choice led to better education despite evidence to the contrary: Santiago and Royce were both allowed to fail while extolling the merits of a small school of choice that could provide individualized attention. For other students, it was not the illusion of choice and quality that drove them to enroll; rather, they enrolled because they had no other option. Because Colina Cedro accepted these students without the proper infrastructure to support them, the school appeared to serve as just as another place to warehouse "problem" students until graduation, rather than to provide them with higher quality educational opportunities.

The Unrealized Promise of Inclusion in the Neoliberal Environment

At Colina Cedro, the adherence to free market principles seemed to significantly impair the special education services they provided. Dr. James believed in both the free market principles

that govern the competitive educational marketplace and the principles of inclusive education. Prior to his arrival, Colina Cedro did not fully include students with disabilities in the general education classroom; rather, they utilized a "pull out" program in which students with disabilities were pulled out from the general education classroom during core subjects to receive instruction in the special education classroom. As a father of two children with disabilities, however, he disagreed with this approach and implemented a "push in" or inclusive program that pushed students with disabilities into all general education courses with additional support provided in an elective course called study skills. Unfortunately, the incompatibility of these two ideologies prevented Colina Cedro from realizing their desire to have a successful inclusive education program, as demonstrated by two key decisions: their choice of SELPA (Special Education Local Plan Areas) and staffing decisions.

SELPAs are consortiums that provide special education services. These SELPAs should be formed regionally and within each district, if the district is large enough. Charters may join local district SELPAs, whose members include traditional public schools and charter schools, or they may choose to join charter-only SELPAs. In order to join a charter-only SELPA, the charter must apply to be an independent LEA (Local Education Agency or Authority). In order to be an independent LEA, the charter school must prove it has the ability to provide the full continuum of special education services, from the least restrictive environment (general education classroom with monitoring or consulting) to the most restrictive (residential services), as well as related services such as physical therapy. The charter assumes full responsibility of special education. Charter-only SELPAs are attractive to charter schools because it gives the school even more autonomy, a hallmark of neoliberal education reform.

While originally a part of the local district's SELPA, Colina Cedro eventually joined a SELPA, Meade County SELPA, in another part of the state, almost 600 miles away. This specific SELPA was one of the few charter-only SELPAs. Principal Dr. James called the local district SELPA "extremely expensive" and stated that their services were "horrible." He eventually applied to be an independent LEA and switched SELPAs because "the cost was probably 60% less; services were, like, 80% better." He continued,

> they [the new SELPA] *reduce* our fees each year if we continue to have our people at training and things are going well and the administrator was involved and all that; they reduce, like, a percent each year, which is *great.*

I looked into this SELPA and according to information I found on their website, the fee was reduced twice, from 6% to 5%, and then remained at 4% as long as the school maintained all of the requirements. Additionally, new startup charters did not even receive funding from the SELPA its first year because funding is based on last year's enrollment. Lastly, the difference between the funding received from this SELPA and the state average was huge: $630 per ADA (Average Daily Attendance) vs. $1200. Their own website admitted that the funding "does not compare favorably."

Because Dr. James remained adamant that the quality of special education services was not only cheaper, but also better, I questioned the lack of special education services. As previously mentioned, the school tacitly discouraged the enrollment of students that require outside providers, which would ostensibly cost more money. As its own LEA, Colina Cedro took full responsibility for the school's special education. If Colina Cedro remained with the local district SELPA, the district would provide all special education services, including teachers, assistants, and various therapists. As the largest district in the area, Colfax ostensibly had many more resources that

Colina Cedro from which the school and its students could benefit. Rather, by eschewing the resources available from a large district, Colina Cedro was unable to provide for the needs of all its students, despite taking full responsibility for them as an independent LEA.

Staffing issues also prohibited Colina Cedro from successfully executing their inclusion program. As the only two special education staff, Ms. Rutherford and the instructional assistant Ms. Castillo often spoke of their frustration at not being able to accomplish everything, from complying with paperwork requirements to providing services to all students who required services. The well-intentioned but ill-conceived push-in model required Ms. Rutherford and Ms. Castillo to provide support in all the general education classes their students attended across campus, as well as provide supplemental support in the special education classroom three times a day during study skills classes. However, because they could not be in two places at once and because of the large number of students on their caseload, inevitably, some students were simply not serviced. As a rule, they tried to attend general education classes with the most number of special education students. In order to make this effective and efficient, they tried to schedule special education students in the same classes, lumping them all together. Students whose schedule did not allow this convenience were just out of luck and rarely received special education support in their general education class. Additionally, Ms. Rutherford never taught during study skills, using that time instead to catch up on paperwork, tracking down students with missing assignments, or preparing for IEP meetings. Without a set curriculum, students were expected to bring in homework or unfinished assignments in order to receive help in completing them.

Ms. Rutherford commented on the increasing number of students with disabilities in the upcoming school year and her anxiety about being able to support them all. She told me that they considered extending Ms. Castillo's hours, rather than hiring another staff member, as the number of students on IEPs rose to nearly 30. Unfortunately, Ms. Castillo was already there for the whole school day, but was not paid full-time, so this solution would neither increase the number of hours she was on campus or the number of students she could support, as evidenced by this exchange:

> Researcher: What do you mean extend her [Ms. Castillo's] hours?
>
> Ms. Rutherford: She's not full time right now.
>
> R: But she's here the whole school day right now, right?
>
> MR: Right, but she's not considered full time for whatever reason. I don't know that extending her hours would accomplish that goal.

Austerity measures and historical divestment in urban schools resulted in Colina Cedro having make difficult decisions on how to effectively support their students with disabilities. While they endeavored to run a successful inclusion program, the neoliberal landscape hindered that effort because they did not have the staff to support all of their students.

While the school had well-intentioned efforts to provide an inclusive education program, it could not succeed because of the neoliberal environment in which it existed. By utilizing free market principles in the public school sector, the principal made decisions that took away resources to provide a quality inclusive education program for students with disabilities. He also did not have the staff necessary to support the growing number of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. This resulted in the reduced services, as well as resources and staffing to make their ambitious push-in program successful. The data demonstrate that Colina Cedro's embrace of dueling ideologies resulted in an ineffective inclusion program: they cut SELPA

resources but wanted educate students with disabilities in a manner that required more staffing. This led to both incomplete support in both the general and special education classroom, as well as many students who did not receive services at all.

Discussion

Colina Cedro strove to implement a successful inclusion program while operating within a neoliberal environment; however, given that "neoliberalism encourages patterns of consumption, competition and a logic of individualism rather than collaboration or collegiality" (Hardy, 2012, p. 810), the model at Colina Cedro could not succeed, despite the staff's best intentions and no matter how hard they worked. I argue that the pervasive neoliberal environment presents the biggest hurdle to successful inclusive education, as imagined by Waitoller and Kozleski (2013) as not just classroom placement, but as the struggle towards the redistribution of quality opportunities, the recognition of differences, and opportunities for the representation of marginalized groups. This view of inclusive education fights against neoliberal ideology. Neoliberal ideology does not seek to redistribute opportunities for quality education; it requires schools, families, and students to compete for them. It does not value differences; it makes them a liability. It does not consider representation of marginalized groups in decision-making; it considers profits, efficiency, and standardization. This ideology creates a hostile environment towards students who learn differently, speak differently, or otherwise cannot conform to rigid constructions of normativity.

Redistribution of Quality Opportunities

Waitoller and Kozleski (2013) argue that opportunities must be redistributed such that those who traditionally been denied now have equal access. Colina Cedro aimed to be a small, intimate school that would provide more attention and individualized support for historically marginalized students, but it was so small that it was unable to provide basic resources and supports for the students. This meant that increasing competition between schools in Eastwick did not improve the quality of education or create new, innovative curriculum or programs. Adding more schools to compete for shrinking resources did nothing to disrupt the historic divestment in the community; on the contrary, students attended a school that did not have even the most basic resources and structures, let alone the specialized ones promised in the school charter. At Colina Cedro, the small school size meant that quality educational opportunities were not redistributed but remained out of reach for students. Without the redistribution of opportunities to learn and participate, reproduction of the same inequality as a result of unequal distribution is inevitable.

Schools (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) and special education (Tomlinson, 1982) have both long been a tool to sort and stratify students, and neoliberalism only worsens this mechanism. Tomlinson (1982) writes,

> …education systems and their parts do not develop spontaneously, or in an evolutionary manner, and they do not develop out of purely humanitarian motives. They develop because it is in the interests of particular groups in a society that they should develop, and that they should develop in particular ways (p. 27).

According to Tomlinson, the development of special education is rooted in particular interests, to the detriment of those considered different, deficient, and lacking. These particular interests do not benefit from a redistribution of opportunities. While special education has been unequal from its

inception, neoliberalism in schools has meant the "intensification of the 'sorting machine' at school, a process of separating out a small layer of youth who can move into white-collar, 'knowledge economy' jobs from the rest of the students" (Russom, 2012, p. 113). Colina Cedro's charter set an ambitious goal of increasing underrepresented groups in the STEM fields, but that goal could not be realized in a school that did not have its own property and space to have a computer or science lab, or have enough students to offer a rich variety of courses that would prepare students. In fact, it seemed the students may not even be competitive for entry into four-year colleges in California. For example, students would not be able to list extracurricular activities such as sports, honor society, or student council. Additionally, many students with disabilities were enrolled in algebra extended, or remedial algebra, rather than moving on to algebra II or geometry. Many of these students also used their elective credits to enroll in study skills. These students would not meet the A - G / College Entrance Requirements required for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems. These requirements outline which courses, as well as how many units are required to be "minimally eligible" for admission to UC and CSU system schools.

School choice proponents argue that competition in the education marketplace provides families with the chance to redistribute quality educational opportunities to those who have been disenfranchised by the traditional public school system. However, Colina Cedro's eventual closure demonstrates that the opposite can happen. School choice advocates argue that competitive forces worked as designed: by "weeding out" the "bad" schools that deserve to be closed and allowing the "good" schools to flourish. Research, however, indicates that school closures happen more often in marginalized communities (Croft et al., 2016) and that 45 percent of students of charters that closed were schools that primarily served Black students (National Education Association, 2017). Another report found that "low-performing schools with a larger share of Black and Hispanic students were more likely to be closed than similarly performing schools with a smaller share of disadvantaged minority students" (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2017, p. 4). For pro-choice advocates, the argument goes that these closures benefit students as they can attend a better school. However, research suggests that isn't the case. In fact, "a little less than half of displaced closure students landed in better schools…these findings resonate with a widely held concern that there is a shortage of better options for students displaced by school closures" (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2017, p. 4). This disruption also impedes students' learning (National Education Association, 2017).

Families and students chose Colina Cedro believing that the school represented better educational opportunities. In reality, all schools in Eastwick faced the same austerity measures that left them underfunded. As a result, even though students may have had more choices with the introduction of charter schools into their neighborhood, none of them were "good" choices. Families did not want to attend large traditional public schools that they perceived as cold and uncaring, but the other option was a school that could not provide even the basics of a cafeteria or extracurricular activities. Both Royce and Santiago chose the school for the smaller environment believing it would result in the individualized support and attention they knew they needed, but both students experienced inconsistent special education support while at Colina Cedro. Waitoller (2020) calls this a "double bind" as there are no "other viable educational option[s]" (p. 91) available. This illusion of choice masks the reality that structural inequalities cannot be solved by the introduction of market values or individual "good" schools and that quality educational choices are not redistributed at all.

Recognition and Value of Differences

Waitoller and Kozleski's (2013) second principle of inclusive education includes the recognition and value of differences. Neoliberalism makes this impossible as it has meant the advent of the standardization and accountability movement in education (Saltman, 2014). Wolf (2011) reasons that "charter schools function as market-driven entities with no incentive to welcome academically or behaviorally challenging students. Problematic students negatively affect academic outcomes and fiscal viability…functionally, the charter system has been disincentivized to include difficult and costly students" (p. 390). As charter schools compete with one another to maintain their competitive edge and livelihood in the education marketplace, students are sorted and weighed for their potential to sustain the school. As a result, historically marginalized students, who are often the intended target population for urban charter schools, remain on the periphery. Waitoller et al. (2019) note an interesting irony in which charter schools lure applicants with the image of rigor and high standards, but then they also use that rigor as a reason why that school may not be a "good fit" for particular students. This same irony present was at Colina Cedro: the school marketed the small, individualized environment but then used this same characteristic as a reason why Colina Cedro would *not* be a good fit for a particular student. Such students are both costlier to educate and are perceived to threaten the charter's obligation to produce superior academic achievement.

This culture of standards and accountability reform has "placed a premium on the heads of students who are difficult to teach" (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011, p. 269). In other words, diversity of all types is punished, rather than rewarded. Liasidou and Symeou (2018) argue that "rather than valorizing learner diversity as a positive aspect of the educational experience, learner diversity is regarded as being a major threat to standardized performance indicators" (p. 153). As a result, students who cannot or will not conform face serious consequences because those indicators "act as a symbol that pathologizes predominately Black and Latinx schools and their students, creating a hierarchy of achievement that justifies closing or turning around neighborhood schools in many Black neighborhoods" (Waitoller, 2020, p. 44). Additionally, White (2014) contends that students with disabilities are at a disadvantage because "standard- and competency-based curriculum has meant that education has become less flexible and less able to accommodate students who do not progress at standard rates" (p. 246). Meanwhile, historical divestment continues, meaning that "students with dis/abilities deemed as integrable are expected to comply with normative standards of learning, perform similarly to their peers, and be college ready in schools that are designed to exclude them" (Waitoller & Super, 2017, p. 9).

Though the school seemed well-intentioned in their efforts to include these students in the general education classroom, their efforts demonstrated a lack of appreciation for differences in learning. The only two special education staff were unable to attend all general education classes across campus where students with disabilities were pushed in. When they were present in the general education classroom, it was often in a passive role. Additionally, students often did not receive supplemental support in study skills either, where there was no set curriculum. Without in-person supports or consistent accommodations and modifications in the general education classroom, it seemed that efforts for students with disabilities to be successful were focused on students adapting to the curriculum, rather than the curriculum being adapted to meet the needs of the students. Thus, while Colina Cedro succeed in fully including all students with disabilities in general education, it was not truly inclusive because their inclusion program meant "including

children and youth with dis/abilities…without altering the institution's norms of belonging" (Waitoller & Super, 2017, p. 8).

Furthermore, the lack of pedagogy and content that reflects the diversity of learners is dangerous because "mono-dimensional perspectives on meeting students' needs might inadvertently place the onus on individual students to respond to educational modifications and interventions, without paying due attention to the intersectional relationship of disability with other sources of social disadvantage" (Liasidou, 2013, p. 305). Moreover, narratives about overcoming conveniently place the responsibility on the individual, rather than questioning structural inequalities; it also means the remedy will be focused on the individual, rather than on society. With increased neoliberal ideology in schools, the shift of responsibility onto the individual instead of onto the state grows even more (Grimaldi, 2012; Liasidou, 2012).

Representation of Marginalized Groups

The third pillar of Waitoller and Kozleski's (2013) reconceptualization of inclusive education is opportunities for those from marginalized groups to "represent themselves in decision-making processes that advance and define claims of exclusion and the respective solutions that affect their children's educational futures" (p. 35). Charter school proponents argue that the educational marketplace does just that by allowing parents and students to "shop" for the school that best suits the needs of their child. They also argue that shopping for schools "empowers" marginalized families and students. Participants in this study also ascribed to this belief. The data indicate, however, that simply being able to choose which school to attend did not automatically lead to higher quality education that had the ability to rectify historical disenfranchisement. In market terms, though, when parents are positioned as consumers and individual responsibility is paramount, this historical disenfranchisement is not to blame – their decision to place their student in a "bad" school is. As Waitoller (2020) argues, "parents are made fully responsible for their children's educational future, while charter schools are free of any responsibility to educate students with disabilities" (p. 90). Additionally, keeping in mind the "double bind" that parents face in choosing a school for their student, neoliberalism means that while it seems that parents are represented in the decision-making process regarding their child's education, their choices are often limited to only bad options. Waitoller (2020) contends this is because "parental school choice is not a psychological phenomenon based on a rational and individualistic decision, as school choice proponents may like to think" (p. 129). Instead, parents make their choice based on "several interacting factors imbued with structural racism and ableism, including educational and housing policies, practices, and discourses about areas of the city and their communities with a history of state-sanctioned residential and school racial segregation" (p. 132). Consequently, parental choice does not actually level the playing field for marginalized groups and in fact, places blame on them while obscuring structural inequality and alleviating responsibility for educational equity from marketized education reformers.

Limitations and Future Research

This study might have benefitted from a larger sample size. I was only able to interview one general education teacher, Ms. Nowak, although she had a high concentration of students with disabilities in her algebra extended class (about half). Only three students were interviewed for this study, all of which were students with disabilities who I knew through my service at the school.

In addition, the small number of clubs and extracurricular activities at Colina Cedro limited my observations to inside the classroom.

Researchers have yet to give proper attention to neoliberalism and how it shapes the experiences of students with disabilities in charter schools (Waitoller & Super, 2017). Future directions include more research that focuses on the intersection of special and inclusive education and neoliberalism in the United States. Much of special education research focuses on rehabilitation and technical fixes, as if the neoliberal environment will not inevitably impact those efforts in some way. Accordingly, discussions in the field of special education regarding various barriers to inclusion needs to include more than teacher attitudes or school infrastructure because as Liasidou (2013) argues, "exclusion on the basis of disability is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that needs to be tackled in politically informed ways that are not restricted to instructional interventions and modifications" (p. 305). At the same time, important works in critical pedagogy or neoliberal school reform seldom address disability or special education, as if special education is not a part of public schools. Giroux (2004) calls neoliberalism "one of the most dangerous ideologies of the 21st century" (p. ix), and because it is directly at odds with the tenets of inclusive school reform for students with disabilities (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Peters & Oliver, 2009; Stangvik, 2014; White, 2014), these two ideologies must be examined in conjunction so that we can imagine more equitable futures for students with disabilities in charter schools.

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